ARMENIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer
2 0 2 2

VIBRANCY

PRINCIPLES

Overall Score
2021: 23
2022: 22

Information Quality
2021: 21
2022: 19

Multiple Channels
2021: 28
2022: 26

Consumption & Engagement
2021: 21
2022: 19

Transformative Action
2021: 23
2022: 22

Y-axis categories (top to bottom): Highly Vibrant (40), Somewhat Vibrant (30), Slightly Vibrant (20), Not Vibrant (10, 0)
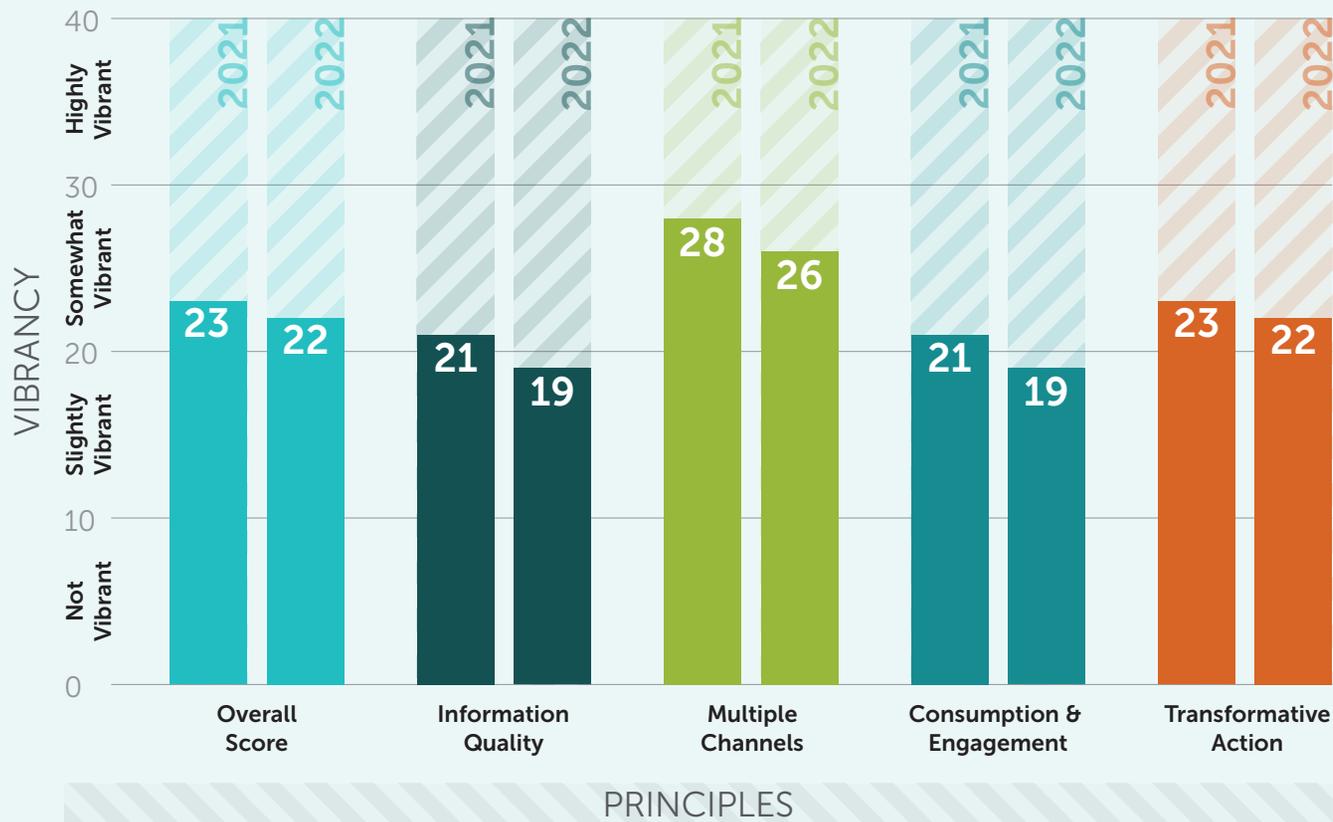
Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

22

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

The political, social, and economic situations were tense throughout 2021 due to developments after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. This conflict led to thousands of residents being displaced and Armenian prisoners of war (POW) not being returned as mandated by the POW provision in the November 9, 2020 cease-fire agreement. The agreement, brokered by Russia and stipulating significant territorial concessions to Azerbaijan, also triggered snap parliamentary elections. In addition, postwar Armenia has been plagued by border issues, while the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination hurdles remain among the top news stories.

At first Armenians resisted the snap elections, but later the opposition took part, through two major alliances: the Hayastan (Armenia) alliance, led by the second Armenian president Robert Kocharyan; and the Pativ Unem alliance, affiliated with ex-president Serzh Sargsyan. Nikol Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party won with 53.91 percent of the vote, while the two other alliances received parliament seats and 21.9 percent and 5.22 percent of votes, respectively. Observers noted that the elections were well managed but featured intense polarization and inflammatory rhetoric. The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) panelists reaffirmed that Armenians have seen an abundance of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, with peaks coming at election periods.

The country's overall score is slightly lower than last year's score. Because of the extreme realities imposed by the war and the pandemic during 2020, the country's media had forgiven government constraints on its overall freedoms and freedom of expression.

However, the local and international media communities have been flabbergasted by recent legislative changes they consider to be restrictive. Such changes include amendments that threaten to curtail media freedom and freedom of expression by significantly increasing fines for defamation. Article 137.1 of the criminal code, added July 30, 2021, allows fines of "grave insult" to public officials and public figures (including journalists) starting from AMD 500,000 ($1,016) and includes up to a three-month prison sentence, depending on the circumstances. Amendment opponents have expressed concerns that officials might use the law to stifle criticism of the government.

Transparency of media ownership remains an unsettled issue; and media literacy, digital literacy, media hygiene, and digital hygiene are all still at low levels.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	19

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
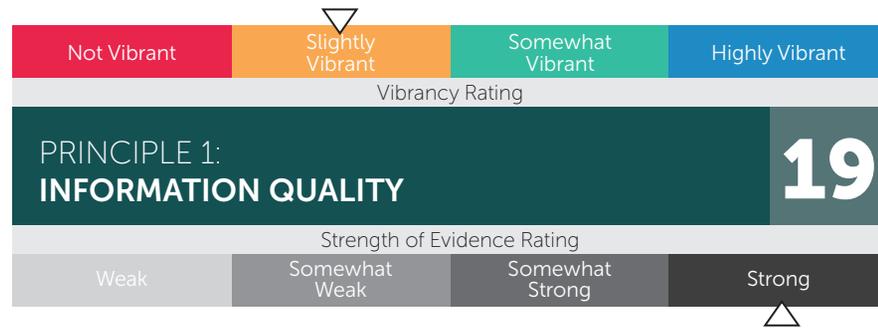
Misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have not seen any dramatic reductions, which is a major reason that panelists scored this principle low. Little has changed regarding adequate training for content producers on how to create ethical, evidence-based, and coherent material. Although some content producers act with ethics and accountability, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth, these professionals are in the minority.

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

According to political analyst and researcher Edgar Vardanyan, the abundance of professional and nonprofessional news sources indicates that Armenian media have adequate infrastructure to produce varied content. However, he said that he does not "see a variety and diversity of content coming from marzes [administrative regions]. Perhaps because outside of [Yerevan], there are certain problems with infrastructure."

Armenia lacks quality journalism schools for providing practical, relevant, and up-to-date training to working and aspiring journalists. Attempts to adjust the curricula to modern needs are ongoing but are not sufficient. Schools have too little equipment, labs, instructors, and reporters. "When the new grads come to a media outlet, their knowledge is outdated, and they don't have enough up-to-date practical skills to start working," said Anahit Baghdasaryan, a reporter for Mediapoint.am and program officer at Goris Press Club.

International media organizations provide education that is mostly short-term and dependent on donor funding. International media organizations, journalism schools, and content producers organize many training opportunities outside of Armenia. "Today, if you want to learn—and in most cases that's free of charge—you can find ample opportunities to do so. The only thing is that you need to know [foreign] languages," Baghdasaryan explained.

Shant TV journalist Artyom Yerkanyan observed that training programs might be good and journalists might return equipped with knowledge of quality journalism and ethics, but these improvements do not matter if editors are not looking for quality journalism. "Often, their enhanced qualifications are not in demand at the news outlet they work for [because of the outlet's political agenda]. When they want to implement the knowledge they just acquired and say, 'this is the right way to do this or that,' their editor says, 'you know what, just keep whatever you've learned to yourself and do as I say or leave," he said.

"The media field is highly polarized and politicized," Vardanyan maintained. "Media outlets are mostly [in service] to their politically [and] entrepreneurially affiliated funders/owners and represent their narrow business/political/clan interests, [overriding] all types of ethical standards."

According to the panelists, media members face hardly any professional ramifications for producing poor quality content. Nelli Babayan, a reporter for Aravot.am, said that the journalistic community should be the first to condemn unethical behavior, unprofessional reporting, and mal-information, but unfortunately this is not the case in Armenia.

The media's overall body of content covers a range of topics— more political and social issues but less specialized and thematic reporting. "There is variety, but it is disproportionate; for example, vulnerable groups, various minorities, don't get a lot of coverage of their issues," observed Vardanyan. Some journalists constantly try to hold government actors accountable, but their they are often aligned with opposition circles and their priorities do not include professional journalism practices, panelists said.

Overall, regional, national, and international news are available and accessible. However, consumers have difficulty finding national coverage for regional news, aside from border issues and major elections. News from hot spots—Syunik or Gegharkunik marzes, for example—is often polarized, depending on the political affiliation of certain media outlets. "You can watch stories from the same location, produced by two different outlets, and see completely different pictures—neither of which reflect[s] reality [or includes] multiple viewpoints," explained Baghdasaryan. He also said that any objective information that competent outlets produce is so scarce that it is often lost in the preponderance of low-quality content. Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief of *Sevan*, said that newspapers previously stationed local correspondents in different towns and marzes, but since many newspapers have disappeared this kind of local coverage has declined.

International news is still underproduced and comes into the country indirectly—mostly through translations from international sources—and is often taken out of context since it is not presented with background or analysis. Suren Deheryan, chair of Journalists for the Future, said that the translations of quality content and important regional and international issues have given way to clickbait—sensational, "disposable" pieces of news for fast consumption.

News content is seldom editorially independent. Gayane Mkrtchyan, a freelance reporter, expressed the belief that media are controlled by forces that dictate their editorial policies. Nvard Hovhannisyan of Visual Innovation Studio said, "Even in cases where there are no political interests the editors have to 'accommodate,' there are certain interests [of the news outlet] of which the reporters are aware." However, Melik Baghdasaryan, the owner of Photolur, had an example of editorial independence: "I have my own political views, but I never impose those on our photographers, and I never interfere with their content." Babayan added, "My experience is that I have never been told to cover a story

> " You can watch stories from the same location, produced by two different outlets, and see completely different pictures—neither of which reflect[s] reality [or includes] multiple viewpoints," explained Baghdasaryan.

from a certain angle."

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is a rarity rather than the norm. The reason is that media organizations are unwilling to adhere to professional media standards, and instead follow the specific political agendas that their benefactors endorse. Professional and nonprofessional content producers commonly and intentionally create disseminate false or misleading information. According to Babayan, "Misinformation is prevalent, and unfortunately, our media outlets do not have this culture of fact-checking [or] checking from multiple sources," However, Vardanyan expressed optimism: "The outlets with [the biggest] audience are hardly likely to spread misinformation."

With regard to the government creating false or misleading information, Gegham Vardanyan of the Media Initiatives Center commented, "The mere fact that Taron Chakhoyan—whose merit was in posting pro-government posts on Facebook, which in some cases [was] manipulative [and] in some, false—was appointed deputy chief of the prime minister's staff is telling."

The government also commonly spreads manipulated information. According to the fact-checking platform fip.am, to show impressive growth in something like an economic index, authorities have often compared 2021 data with data from 2020 and not with the previous "normal" year of 2019, before the global pandemic. In another instance, Pashinyan claimed that more prisoners of war and captives have been returned to Armenia after November 9, 2020, than in any preceding period since Armenian independence. For a true comparison, Media.am collected data from the International Committee of the Red Cross's database on the repatriation of persons detained in Azerbaijan. Analysis of the data revealed that Pashinyan's statement was not accurate.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.

Hate speech was especially prolific during the pre-election period of this year's parliamentary snap elections. Through its Twitter forum, Freedom House expressed concern over the violent rhetoric that Armenian politicians used during the election. Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman) Arman Tatoyan urged all political forces to refrain from any rhetoric related to hatred and violence. Transparency International's interim report on the elections also recorded hate speech during the pre-election campaign, with the Civil Contract party and the Armenia Alliance standing out. Impolite language, swear words, and degrading and humiliating vocabulary have been used extensively, including by persons holding public office or those running for seats in the National Assembly. In addition to threats against political rivals, the Armenia Alliance has repeatedly disseminated hate speech against nongovernmental organizations, labeling them as "proponents of George Soros" and directly threatening to restrict or ban activities that these international institutions have funded.

> 66 **Misinformation is prevalent, and unfortunately, our media outlets do not have this culture of fact-checking [or] checking from multiple sources," said Babayan.**

Mal-information, spread mostly by nonprofessional content producers, has been especially prevalent regarding COVID-19 and particularly vaccination. Conspiracy theories about vaccination have also been proliferating.

Consumers are benefiting from a new meta fact-checking platform implemented by FactCheck Georgia, in cooperation with its Armenian counterpart Media Initiatives Center. Since June 1, 2021, this third-party watchdog has been operating in Armenia and helps to counteract the spread of misinformation on Facebook and Instagram.

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

Generally, media create information in the languages and formats in which people need. Although seemingly the media expose the majority of citizens to an array of ideologies and perspectives, Vardanyan maintained that the information quality is often poor and thereby does not provide true diversity.

Traditional mainstream media inadequately cover viewpoints of all genders, according to the panelists. "The media has failed [in] its role of a humanitarian profession as an institution that should educate and support people," said Vardanyan. "But there's a small number of media outlets that present the issues of these groups in an appropriate way so as to correct attitudes and break stereotypes." Deheryan observed, "When creating stories on education, health care, and politics, we journalists tend to [call on] male experts [more] than female experts."

Marginalized groups that are not represented in the mainstream media have alternate platforms for expressing their views. Public Radio of Armenia airs programs in Assyrian, Greek, Kurdish, Russian, Yezidi, and Georgian. However, mainstream media underreport the pressing issues of these groups. As with years before, gender balance in media outlets remains mostly the same—the media sector has more journalist women, but at the level of media management, men dominate.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Broadcast outlets—TV in particular—find coping with advertising migration increasingly difficult. According to the panelists, each year is worse, with streams of funding already limited, and advertising dollars migrating to social networks. Media companies are becoming more and more challenged to earn adequate revenue from the market. The impacts of this growing revenue shortage range from completely shutting down outlets to producing less content to incorporating more and more clickbait-type content.

"Often, high-quality professional content producers cannot survive

without international donor funding," Babayan explained. Otherwise, she said, they have to rely on other sources of funding that tend to be politically affiliated.

Babayan also described media outlets that require minimal financial resources to operate. "There are professional content producers—just websites, that employ anywhere from one to four people and they produce content—[where] the same person produces, edits, posts the stories."

Advertising placement is less politicized. According to the panelists, this aspect of the media market is much better than previously reported.

Government subsidies for regional print media (of around AMD 500,000 or approximately $1,000) were discontinued in 2019. They, however, were sustained for minority-language print media. The relatively small advertising budgets of the government cannot distort the market dramatically. However, the government advertising that does exist is distributed among top-rated commercial outlets and more recently public television.

Media outlets are trying alternative financing models, but it is tough: while some alternative sources of income (for example, crowdfunding) might work for small online outlets, they are insufficient for resource-heavy broadcast outlets. Subscription-based revenue generation models and or the culture of paying for content is still underdeveloped in Armenia. However, while it can generate some revenue, it cannot support the operations of medium- to large-size outlets. Journalists' incomes are, at best are stagnant; Newsrooms are cutting back reporting positions, journalists move to other media that can still foot the bills, or they transition to completely unrelated sectors.

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
		△	
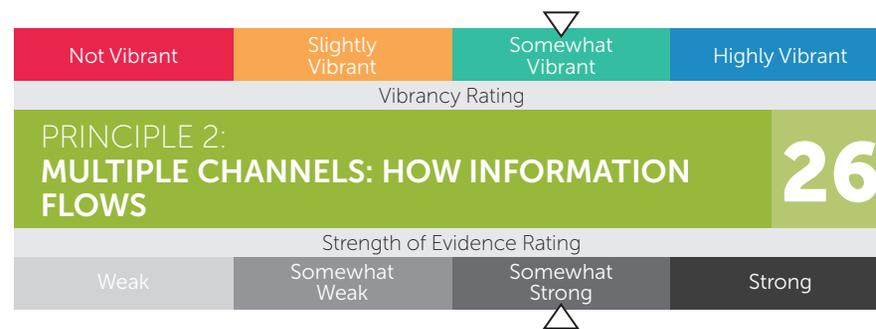
Down by two points from last year's study, this principle has been impacted due to some controversial legislative amendments, most of which have been criticized by local and international media organizations. Armenia has had legal protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press for decades, since its independence from the Soviet Union.

Armenia has right-to-information laws, and overall they conform to international standards. In many cases, authorities implement laws in a timely and comprehensive manner, but laws are deficient in ways that can affect the quality of produced content.

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

On March 24, the National Assembly adopted "On Making Amendments to the RA [Republic of Armenia] Civil Legislation," tripling the maximum penalties for insult and defamation. The bill was adopted without regard to the views of the Ministry of Justice and the Human Rights Defender's Office, and the voiced opposition of civil society organizations (CSOs) and media organizations. The president sent the law to the Constitutional Court for review, but the court ruled in favor of the bill. "[This decision] does not take into consideration the recommendations of the Council of Europe and the requirements of a number of precedent decisions of the European Court of Human Rights [ECHR]. Moreover, this document adopted by the Constitutional Court clearly contradicts several provisions and the general spirit of the November 15, 2011

Decision No. 997 of the same court," the October 5, 2021, statement from the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia reads.

Following Armenia's adoption of this article 137.1, Freedom House issued a press release on March 26, 2021, qualifying it as a threat to freedom of the media and freedom of expression. Marc Behrendt of Freedom House wrote: "It is unfortunate that the Armenian government is supporting fines that will stifle free expression and threaten the financial viability of media outlets in the country." More than 10 established local media organizations issued similar statements.

"At face value, it's not correct to consider this as restricting freedom of speech," asserted Vardanyan, "If I speak not as a reporter but as a person who consumes news, I want to understand why media shouldn't be held responsible for disseminating libel." However, Vardanyan noted that "criminalizing insult is disturbing, because according to various ECHR verdicts, public officials should be less protected—the threshold of criticism toward them can be higher than toward regular citizens."

" I think the self-censorship works automatically when a journalist starts working for a certain outlet; [they] know who the owner is [and avoid negative content], even if ownership is not transparent for the public at large," Babayan observed.

According to article 137.1, seriously insulting a person—cursing or insulting their dignity in an "extremely indecent" way—shall be punishable with a fine up to AMD 500,000 ($1,016). Serious insult to public figures shall be punishable with a fine up to AMD 1 million ($2,032). Committing grave insult against the same person regularly shall be punishable with a fine up to AMD 3 million ($6,097) or by imprisonment for a term of one to three months.

In an October 6, 2021, interview with VOA, Behrendt of Freedom House commented, "This is a big setback. . . A democratic society should have the opportunity to criticize government officials [and] to do so publicly." On August 2, the opening session of the National Assembly was accompanied by strict restrictions regarding the movement of media representatives. Journalists and photojournalists were not allowed into the new parliamentary building—among them certain lobbies where reporters would hold interviews and take comments from members of parliament (MPs).

A dozen media advocacy organizations issued a critical joint statement[1] that reads "the above restrictions were imposed in the parliament without any prior discussions and informing the media in advance of the changes in their working conditions. . . We condemn such arbitrariness [as they] are aimed at creating unnecessary obstacles in obstruction of professional journalistic activity."

Vardanyan had his own, differing perspective: "I don't think it restricts a journalist specifically working in the National Assembly from doing [their] job."

On August 11, following an intense exchange among MPs, National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan ordered a discontinuation of the live broadcast. And on August 24, when heated polemic among MPs turned into a brawl, the security officers forcibly removed media representatives from the parliament, preventing them from continuing to film the incident. A similar incident was repeated on August 25. Again, media organizations harshly condemned these incidents.

"During the last brawl at the National Assembly, there were no journalists in their designated chambers [they had been taken out by security] to cover what was going on with the MPs elected by the people, and the public could follow the developments only through the MPs' phones from inside either as live streams or videos posted at a later point. So, is this restriction good or bad? For me it's bad," Babayan said.

Self-censorship is evident, for example, when journalists will not produce a negative story about their company's owners or benefactors. "I think

---

1   Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression et al., "Statement," Khosq.am, August 3, 2021, https://khosq.am/en/2021/08/03/statement-85/.

the self-censorship works automatically when a journalist starts working for a certain outlet; [they] know who the owner is [and avoid negative content], even if ownership is not transparent for the public at large," Babayan observed.

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

The panelists agreed that information communication technology infrastructure overall meets most people's needs. Telecommunication and internet infrastructures extend to all geographic areas—urban as well as rural. According to panelists from the marzes, internet quality, speed, and price are generally acceptable. However, service certainly lags behind that in Yerevan, where consumers have more options in terms of price and quality. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space provides open and equal access to users and content producers.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Every year, the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia (FOICA) hosts the Golden Key and Rusty Lock awards ceremony to nominate the best and worst institutions based on their openness. According to FOICA President Shushan Doydoyan, the award ceremony is a way to encourage activities that are open to the public and to ensure government transparency and accountability. More than 70 media outlets nominated candidates for the 2021 awards.[2]

In 2021, the Rusty Lock was awarded to the National Assembly (category: a state agency threatening the freedom of information as a result of

> ❝ Most of the time [agencies] try to provide information in accordance with the provisions of the law; however, [there] are often cases when the answers are not to the point, and you have to go back and forth to get the information you need," observed Baghdasaryan.

developing and adopting new legal regulations restricting the rights of journalists without participatory decision-making processes) and the Ministry of Defense and Yerevan municipality (category: a state agency violating citizens' right to information).

"Most of the time [agencies] try to provide information in accordance with the provisions of the law; however, [there] are often cases when the answers are not to the point, and you have to go back and forth to get the information you need," observed Baghdasaryan.

Often, different state bodies violate the right to information access. Information requests to public officials often get no response, even after months of inquiries, and some public officials refuse to provide information for biographies. Queries to National Assembly deputies regarding the status of legislative initiatives have remained unanswered. Government spokespersons might be untrained for their job, be poor communicators, or be missing the information needed to answer questions. Sometimes these officials disappear when they are needed for their duties.

Armenians have tools to help access public governmental policy and decision-making information, but regular citizens rarely use them. Reporters and researchers use the tools more often, while important draft laws deemed essential to regular citizens are widely disseminated through media.

Most panelists agreed that that the trustworthiness of government information has eroded, in particular due to the avalanche of misinformation during 2020, and the effects persist. "Especially after the war, the words of government officials are not perceived as creditworthy," said Baghdasaryan. Babayan also explained, "When media outlets spread information about border incidents, and government officials [and] spokespeople either are silent or give vague,

---

2   Freedom of Information Center of Armenia, "Golden Key and Rusty Lock 2021," FOI.com, October 20, 2021, http://www.foi.am/en/news/item/2104/.

blurred answers—or say that it's false and then, at a later point, this information is proven—it is hard to trust them."

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Internet service providers treat all communications equally and do not discriminate based on user, content, or source/destination. Media ownership transparency, however, has been a long-standing issue for Armenian media. The owners and directors are mostly known, but the political or business circles with which they are affiliated often remain obscure. "In terms of legislation [on transparency in media ownership that would reveal the owners], Armenia is either moving very slowly or is not moving at all," Vardanyan observed.

The panelists agreed that over the years, public service media—particularly public television—have significantly improved both in quality and politically. In the past, public television had so-called blacklists, whereby certain figures were supposedly banned from appearing based on their political views, but that has been changing since the 2018 revolution and more varied political voices are heard on public service media.

Public service media provide news and information and informative, educational, and entertaining programming on art, science, music, and sports for different demographic groups. However, stating that it has become nonpartisan and started serving all members of the public would not be completely accurate. It still has a considerable way to go to become free from any political influence, according to the panelists. "If we compare public TV before [the] 2018 [revolution] and today—it's a lot more 'public.' It enables representatives of different political circles to present their viewpoints during prime time without censorship. On the other hand, when something is covered [in the news], the government viewpoint prevails," Vardanyan maintained.

There are some restrictions on foreign ownership within Armenia's media sector: under the law on audiovisual media, foreign national shareholdings are limited to less than 50 percent in television and radio companies as well as private multiplexers. People can freely establish

media, just as any other type of commercial companies; however, for broadcast outlets they would need a license, which is within the domain of the Commission on Radio and Television (CTR). This commission awards frequencies and licenses to television and radio stations in Armenia through a competitive process. Previously, half of its eight members were appointed by the president and half were elected by the parliament. At present, the number of members has been reduced to seven, and they are all elected by the parliament, where the "My Step" faction enjoys the majority of seats. The panelists mostly agreed that licensing procedures are applied in a fair and apolitical manner. The private multiplex that would enable all regional outlets to stay on air never became a reality.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media organizations are heavily influenced by their ownership, and little has changed in this regard over a number of years. Most owners have set up these media outlets solely for serving their political or business needs and interests. News department heads and reporters tend to be chosen for their political or business value rather than on merit.

Public television, aside from being funded by the state budget, is again allowed to air commercial advertising. The placements continue despite being abolished by law in 2014 and with opposition from media organizations. These critics consider the ads unacceptable, given how they undermine advertising revenue for private outlets and distort the advertising market. Editorially, panelists expressed concerned about the apparent eroding independence of public television. Vardanyan noted that over the course of several months the public television's news department saw an influx of several former employees of *Haykakan Zhamanak*, which is affiliated with Prime Minister Pashinyan's family.

The Fact investigation platform, [fip.am](fip.am), has identified several such cases,[3] summarizing that public television, and in particular, its "Lurer" (News) daily newscast--covers the incidents that took place in the National Assembly selectively, does not observe the principle of

---

3   https://fip.am/16716

impartiality, and does not provide diversity of opinions. For example, when covering a brawl in the National Assembly between the ruling Civil Contract faction and the opposition, "Lurer" presented the story from an angle favorable to the ruling party. Hovhannisyan stressed that "the director of Public TV is the former head of 'Public Relations and Information Center' [state non-commercial organization, or SNCO] operating under the Office of the Prime Minister, which also raises questions."

Access to the Internet, or subscriptions to international news services, are not lower for state media than for other media. Public media does not have sole access to certain information; however, speed and depth at which public outlets versus commercial outlets get access to government information sources may vary in certain situations in favor of the public outlets.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	19

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
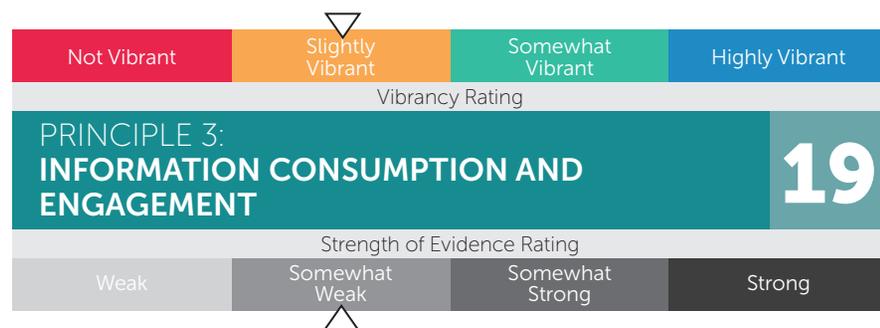
Overall, media outlets and other professional content producers have access to technology and training in digital security. However, few media members take advantage of these learning opportunities or protections.

The panelists agreed that government leadership seems to advocate media literacy, but specific and systematic steps toward this end are quite sluggish. School instruction only rarely includes civics or media and information literacy; these topics are mostly covered in optional and limited training programs. The population at large has very minimal digital and data literacy skills. Often media consumers have little idea of how digital technology works, or how to keep themselves digitally secure.

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

In Babayan's view, media professionals have opportunities to use digital security resources to protect themselves. "Of course, content producers [and] journalists have access to digital security training and tools, but the question is: how intensively are they looking for these [trainings and tools], where are they looking for these, and are they finding them or not. We're in the age of the internet. You can look up and find everything there—read, learn, acquire new skills and tools," she said.

Cyberhub.am is one organization that provides information technology support and training to journalists and independent media, human rights defenders, activists, and CSOs. This organization also serves as a computer emergency response team by collecting, analyzing, and (where appropriate) anonymously sharing incident data and indicators with the global threat intelligence community.

"It would be good to have such [digital security] experts on staff on an ongoing basis because it is something that needs constant attention and vigilance," said Deheryan, "In general, we journalists are shamefully inconsistent—even in the process of searching for information we can catch a [computer] 'virus.' It's a real problem, and one of the [reasons] is we don't allocate budgets for this purpose, [and] we consider it redundant, whereas it should be among the priorities."

Overall, legal protections are enforced in a way that does not impinge on personal freedoms and in a way that does not prevent the release of public information.

Media outlets' digital hygiene practices leave much to be desired and are far from being strong. Most outlets have learned how to cope with distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks.

Individuals can freely access technology-based tools that help protect their privacy and security; however, the majority of them do not have any idea about these tools and very few use them. The population has minimal basic digital and data literacy skills, including the basics of how

digital technology works and how to keep themselves digitally secure. Only the very savvy portion of the population is aware of the algorithms driving social media, the mechanics of advertisement targeting, and other ways in which personal information is utilized to target digital users.

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

Media organizations and CSOs provide much of Armenia's media literacy training and education. One of the most active in this field is the Media Initiatives Center (MIC). MIC's *Media Literacy Teacher's Guide* teaches young people how the media work, how to orient oneself in current information flows, and how to critically consume media. There are a few foreign-donor initiatives that work on media literacy for adults to help combat the effects of disinformation in Armenia. Since 2017, MIC has also organized Media Literacy Week in Armenia, an annual event led by UNESCO. Schools hold open lessons on media literacy; watch videos and films; and organize discussions, educational games, and meetings with journalists and editors. MIC also cooperates with educational organizations, libraries, and museums to spread media literacy skills and to help develop educational programs. Some examples of successful cooperation are the Media Literacy regional branches of the Children of Armenia Foundation, along with World Vision Armenia's and Infotun's regional programs with local partners.

> 66 **When we see what type of news sources are often cited by colleagues [and] friends, by the convenience-store sales assistants, in social networks, I realize that people are more prone to follow the fake [or low quality] sources, perhaps because it's lighter [information to consume]," Babayan said.**

Consumers seldom use tools or websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing disinformation. Most people do not even know these tools exist, according to the panelists. Individuals are generally unable to discern high-quality news and information from poor-quality news and information. Babayan described her experience with news consumers.

"When we see what type of news sources are often cited by colleagues [and] friends, by the convenience-store sales assistants, in social networks, I realize that people are more prone to follow the fake [or low quality] sources, perhaps because it's lighter [information to consume]," she said.

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

There are no negative consequences for exercising freedom of speech and right to information. The platforms for public debate--such as town halls, academic discussions about on the government or its policies, or call-in shows--are underutilized and are not part of Armenian culture yet.

Journalists and CSOs are mainly those who use their rights to information, whereas the general population seldom do so by their own initiative. According to the panelists, few people know about their rights and how to exercise them, and public information authorities often violate these rights. From January to September 2021, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression recorded 67 violations of the right to receive information.

Most public debate takes place on Facebook. For example, the Facebook briefing by Azatutyun.am, in which anyone can send a question for the host to read to the guest speaker, is similar to a call-in show. However, many Facebook forums are full of hate speech, mal-information, and disinformation.

Regular citizens rarely turn to ombudsmen when they come across misinformation, mal-information, or hate speech. Consumers are more likely to notify platform moderators about such content. But according to Babayan, neither action is common, given that many consumers do not know about reporting mechanisms or are aware that problems exist.

"Very many people cannot even identify the hate speech, let alone report it," she said.

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

The main tools most media and content producers use to collect quantitative (and sometimes even qualitative) data are Google analytics data, Facebook views, "likes," "shares," comments, and YouTube views and comments. These are among the only tools used by most media outlets to understand the size, access, habits, and scope of their audience or market. Community events are less of a culture currently. Journalistic media, content producers, and civil society organizations collaborate and network together for productive information sharing, but it is yet not a common practice for the media at large.

Media outlets rarely hire third-party research organizations to conduct qualitative and quantitative research for their decision making or to understand their potential audience's needs and interests. This absence of data has persisted for decades, partly due to the prohibitive costs for such research and partly because many outlets follow their own agendas and have no use for audience data. Those who do need to know their audiences' interests mostly rely on Google Analytics and Facebook data metrics.

Babayan explained her outlet's responses to consumer input. "We receive letters from readers through Facebook where they share their problems and ask [us] to cover those. [When] appropriate we do so, [and when] not, we direct them to the appropriate places where they can turn to for their problems. This way, we keep the feedback with our audience."

> ❝ It would be good to have such [digital security] experts on staff on an ongoing basis because it is something that needs constant attention and vigilance," said Deheryan, "In general, we journalists are shamefully inconsistent—even in the process of searching for information we can catch a [computer] 'virus.'

Yerkanyan commented on his evaluation of tracking data. "I also check the views of the posts with my stories to keep track of the topics which are in higher demand," he said. "But we should be careful with this, because sometimes the stories with 500,000 views I consider [to be] of less importance and value than those with higher value but garnering, say, 50,000 [views]."

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

The panelists generally agreed that Armenia does not have community media, as classically defined, and Armenian law makes no special provisions for it. While this type of media is a minimal part of the media sphere, there are local independent, commercial newspapers and radio stations that, according to some panelists, fulfill the functions of community media outlets.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: **TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**	**22**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
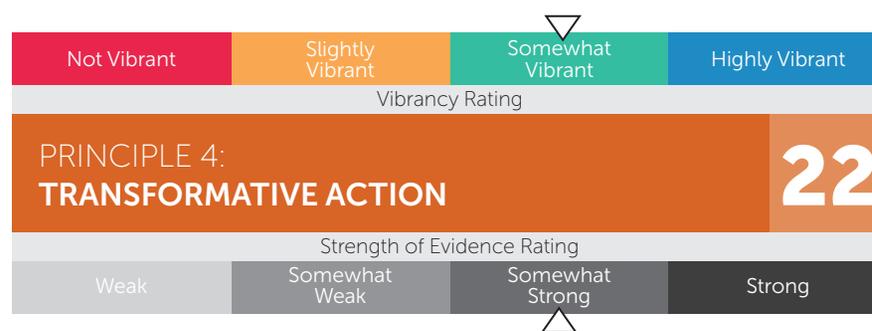
As described earlier, Armenia does have nonpartisan news and information sources, but they are rare, and often their audiences are limited. People's views on political or social issues are shaped more by misinformation rather than by quality information, according to the

panelists. Election periods are especially rife with misinformation, hate speech, insults, and threats.

Citizens rarely follow fact-based health and safety recommendations. More commonly, people act in ways detrimental to their health due to misinformation. One such example is the failed COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

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

Vardanyan commented on nonpartisan news sources and the belief that they must have small audiences. "It's not like these news sources do not exist," he said. "For example, do we consider Azatutyun.am as such? It has a large audience, and that's a fact proven by different research studies. It hasn't been 'caught' spreading explicit misinformation [and] mal-information, so in this case, it's safe to say that we do have such a radio/TV organization which also enjoys large audience."

According to the panelists, most consumers do not usually read or view multiple types of media with varied viewpoints. Rather, they stick to those that resonate with already-established beliefs and political views.

Open and constructive discussions informed by quality news and information are quite rare, and are more commonly based on misinformation and mal-information.

Information exchange through debate and discussion is mostly on Facebook. A less used but more aggressive and vulgar discussion can be found in YouTube comments. Comment sections for web-based media are rarely used for debates, with readers instead using the comment sections for the same article on Facebook. Often these discussions, too, deviate from civilized discourse; and as usual, these debates exacerbate the more intense election periods.

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

People are more prone to believe all types of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and mal-information than scientific data. In particular, this tendency has resulted in low vaccination numbers and higher COVID-19 cases and, unfortunately, higher COVID-19 death rates. "Based on what we have already mentioned earlier—that there are outlets with large audiences which provide reliable, quality information free of misinformation—we can state that citizens use quality information for their decision making; on the other hand, the behavior of citizens regarding COVID-19, the low vaccination numbers, [and] their belief in conspiracy theories may indicate that perhaps a big number of people—we cannot say how big—in fact have been guided by mis- and mal-information," said Vardanyan.

Babayan suggested that this problem is also due to government communication deficiencies, as officials do not actively respond to misinformation. "Mal-information producers probably don't even sleep at night, and while we [journalists] or the government [are] sleeping peacefully, they are producing mal-information, and when we open our eyes in the morning we see a new piece of mal-information which has already managed to garner hundreds of thousands of views."

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

CSOs are instrumental in working to reduce the spread of misinformation or mal-information and in shaping the overall landscape of civil liberties. Organizations rely on quality news and information when describing their objectives. They share quality information with the public, and they do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information. In fact, many CSOs actively reduce the spread of misinformation by providing fact-checking tools and resources. Vardanyan described CSO's efforts and reach. "Media.am, Boon.tv, the Union of Informed Citizens, Ampop. am, and a number of other CSOs are doing this on a daily basis. But unfortunately, this doesn't influence very large audiences; these have limited coverage and influence on select audiences."

Media outlets engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues. Civic participation in key discussions—such as policy formation and legislative change—is very instrumental. But as detailed earlier, many such initiatives get minimal integration, or often their recommendations are left out from legislative changes or decision making. Also, CSOs are increasingly not consulted or are even ignored before policy changes are enacted.

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

In August – October 2021, the government introduced restrictions for unvaccinated employees. These staff had to take polymerase chain reaction tests every two weeks and present negative certificates to prove that they could safely report to work. However, the panelists said that many doubted the effectiveness, intentions, and goals of this measure, citing the crowded lines in front of testing centers that favored conditions for spreading the virus.

Moreover, laboratories have become overloaded and backlogged, which defeats the purpose of taking timely tests. Test results were being provided days later, but employees still had to report to work.

The public also resisted the push for test waivers for vaccinated citizens. Although less likely, even the fully vaccinated run the risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Not to mention the issue of those with only the first dose being exempt from the test— these individuals could present the corresponding negative certificate. For these reasons, many citizens viewed the waivers as a formality, as an opportunity for more fines, and as a way for test centers to generate unprecedented proceeds.

> 66 **Mal-information producers probably don't even sleep at night, and while we [journalists] or the government [are] sleeping peacefully, they are producing mal-information, and when we open our eyes in the morning we see a new piece of mal-information which has already managed to garner hundreds of thousands of views," suggested Babayan.**

The distrust was also fueled by the media's dissemination of a photograph and video featuring the Armenian president at a crowded reception. Almost none of the attendees were wearing a mask in the closed venue, not even the health minister herself—who days before, amid rising COVID-19 numbers, stressed the importance of wearing masks in confined spaces. In response to this media reproach, the government issued a statement explaining that this was a reception, and that the government has no regulation requiring people to wear masks at that type of gathering. However, the backlash and damage to the public trust was irreparable.

Deheryan lamented, "They [the government] promote vaccination through various information channels [and] awareness programs, but on the other hand, through their public events they demonstrate that the rules that are mandatory for public are not mandatory for members of the government. The fact that they called it a 'reception' to legitimize not wearing masks is manipulation in itself. Let's organize receptions in the subway, too, and waive the requirement for the passengers. . . Even if they [the authorities] don't lie, they don't work in a coordinated manner [so] as to make sure what they say isn't in contradiction with what they do."

There are mechanisms in place for government actors to engage with civil society and media, ad-hoc press-conferences, Q&As after government meetings, and so on. Political discourse or debate sometimes includes reference to evidence and facts. However, it is based on mis- and mal-information--sometimes even fake, unverified news—and hearsay as well as speculation and accusation. Government actors often fail to explain their decisions in a convincing way; sometimes, however, there is little or no explanation at all.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

In late 2021, more than18 CSOs issued a rebuking statement on the violation of citizens' rights to peaceful assembly. The statement was regarding opposition to construction in the area adjacent to the Institute of Physics (the so-called "Fizgorodok"). Residents of the neighborhood had been fighting for months against the allegedly illegal construction in the green area, which would have infringed on their right to live in a healthy living environment. According to area residents and their lawyer, the land was illegally privatized in 2005. It was later resold several times, delaying the planned construction. On July 29, 2021, the current owner received a construction permit from the municipality of Yerevan and immediately started construction of a high-rise building. Adults and children from the neighborhood area came out to protest through a peaceful gathering, trying to draw the attention of the Yerevan municipal government.

According to the statement, on August 20 and 21, 2021, special police units used disproportionate force against citizens, seriously injuring children and elderly people—two of whom were taken to hospital. The police also violated the rights of the detained citizens. Some protesters were forcibly taken to a police station using disproportionate measures and illegal procedures, and a 19-year-old man was beaten in a police precinct. The authorities have initiated several criminal cases against these citizens. "We strongly condemn the brutal behavior and arbitrariness of the [Republic of Armenia] police [whose] its mission should have been to prevent illegalities and protect public order. The ruling political force continues to erode the faith and trust of the people day by day [and] is fraught with highly undesirable consequences," the CSO statement says.[4]

> ❝ **Deheryan lamented, "They [the government] promote vaccination through various information channels [and] awareness programs, but on the other hand, through their public events they demonstrate that the rules that are mandatory for public are not mandatory for members of the government."**

On November 11, 2021, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) issued its findings[5] on Armenia. The committee's experts expressed concern about undue legal restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly, unjustifiable police interference in peaceful demonstrations, and arbitrary and prolonged detention of demonstrators. They recommended that Armenia reduce police presence at demonstrations and investigate all allegations of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrest, and arbitrary detention by state agents during any protests. The UNHRC also called on Armenia to ensure that domestic laws on the use of force are in full compliance with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Guidance on the Use of Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement.

"We haven't had clear official responses of the government to such incidents—for example, someone [representing government] could stand up and say that according to this or that article of law, [the] police [were] allowed to apply force," Babayan said. Vardanyan also observed, "The government doesn't provide [any] adequate explanation of its stance on incidents causing public outcry."

The panelists gave an example of media attempting to expose corruption. When journalists have questioned Simonyan, the speaker of the National Assembly, he has said[6] that he does not see any conflict in the fact that companies led by his brother won asphalting tenders. Simonyan clarified that his brother is not the owner but is the director. The company recently won two government contracts for rural road construction worth a combined $1.4 million, raising suspicions of a

4   "Մի շարք ՀԿ-ներ պահանջում են վերանայել «Ֆիզգորոդոկ»-ում հողամասի սեփականաշնորհման և շինթույլտվության որոշումը," Hetq.am, August 23, 2021, https://hetq.am/hy/article/134860.

5   UN Human Rights Council, "UN Human Rights Committee Issues Findings on Germany, Ukraine, Armenia and Botswana," news release, November 11, 2021, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27798&LangID=E.

6   Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Corruption, Nepotism and Alen Simonyan's Definition," Media.am, October 13, 2021, https://media.am/en/verified/2021/10/13/30074/.

conflict of interest in addition to corruption. Deputy Prime Minister Suren Papikian assured Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Armenian Service that this was the result of transparent and fair tenders, rather than government connections.[7] Simonyan has often referred to such inquiries as "yellow press."

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Nelli Babayan, reporter, *Aravot.am,* Yerevan

Anahit Baghdasaryan, reporter, [mediapoint.am](); program officer, *Goris Press Club,* Goris

Melik Baghdasaryan, owner, *Photolur,* Yerevan

Suren Deheryan, chair*, Journalists for the Future,* Yerevan

Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief, *Sevan*, Sevan

Nvard Hovhannisyan, cofounde*r, Visual Innovation Studio,* Yerevan

Gayane Mkrtchyan, reporter, *Jam-news.am, Iwpr.net,* Yerevan

Anahit Nahapetyan, owner and editor-in-chie*f, Artiknews.com,* Artik

Edgar Vardanyan, political analyst and researcher, Yerevan

Gegham Vardanyan, editor, [media.am](), *Media Initiatives Center,* Yerevan

Artyom Yerkanyan, journalist, *Shant TV,* Yerevan

MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

Artashes Parsadanyan, independent media consultant, Yerevan

7   Naira Nalbandian, "More Questions Arise About Firms Run by Armenian Speaker's Brother," Azatutyan.am, October 15, 2021, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31512088.html.