NORTH MACEDONIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer
2 0 2 1

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX

OVERALL SCORE

21

North Macedonia's government has only been in office since 2017. However, that has been enough time for the ruling coalition to launch long-promised reforms to the country's ailing media ecosystem. However, that reform process has been delayed, most recently in 2020 because of elections, the government's focus on its protracted and difficult European Union (EU) candidacy, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which touched all areas of social and political life and further eroded the shaky fiscal foundation of the country's media and information industries.

The parliamentary elections held on July 15 resulted in a new four-year term for the incumbent cabinet led by the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia and the Democratic Union for Integration (the leading party of Albanians). Traditional media covered the campaign in a more or less balanced way, while online media and social networks were more partisan and sources of misinformation. Of importance to the media system was the election law decision to finance campaign political advertising solely from the state budget. The allocation was based on the total number of registered voters in the country, predefined prices for advertising time and space, and it amounted to almost 15 percent of the country's advertising market.

In 2020, North Macedonia was again blocked on its path to EU membership, this time by neighboring Bulgaria disputing several important aspects of Macedonian identity, insisting that Macedonian language and Macedonian identity have Bulgarian roots, and that Macedonian history is appropriating large chunks of Bulgarian history. On a positive note, the country became NATO's 30th member in March.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic had a huge effect on North Macedonia's social, economic, and political life. The so-called infodemic did not spare the country either, with the government and the opposition exchanging blows and accusations over infection and mortality rates, preparedness of the health-care system, and failed efforts to procure vaccines. The pandemic hit North Macedonia's economy hard: gross domestic product shrank by 14.9 percent in the second quarter alone, although the contraction slowed to 3.3 percent in the third quarter of 2020. The government implemented several programs of economic assistance – amounting to a total of €1.2 billion ($1.4 billion) -- mostly in the form of salary subsidies but also including capital investment projects.

The media were covered by those emergency economic assistance programs, and broadcast media were also relieved of the obligation to pay annual fees for the use of frequencies and broadcasting permits.

The overall country score reflected the panelists' position that the quality of information is falling due to extreme polarization along political, ethnic, and religious lines and a growing tendency to avoid doing original or enterprise reporting. The panel concluded that while there are multiple channels for information and many information providers, the numbers alone do not ensure true media and information pluralism; habits of information consumption and engagement remain at the mercy of political actors; and the chances for transformative action based on accurate information remain remote given the divisions in the country.

The country ranked 92nd in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index for 2020, up slightly from 95th in 2019.

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
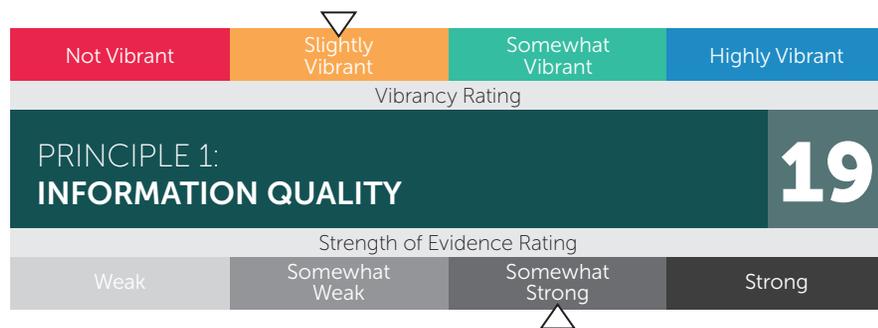
The quality of information in North Macedonia is in steady decline. Panelists were particularly concerned about information from online sources and the abundance of fact-based information produced for the sole purpose of weaponizing it against political or business opponents. Panelists said news organizations' financial instability in an overcrowded market has resulted in seriously understaffed editorial offices. Only a handful of media outlets have enough journalists to provide somewhat complete coverage. Panelists also agreed that the main financing model, advertising sales revenue supplemented by donor funds and some subsidies (for the print media), will remain, perpetuating the current economic crisis in the media and information industry.

The 24-hour news cycle and the insistence on being first with a story and getting the most clicks mean that few media rely on well-researched and sourced stories. Indeed, panelists gave Indicator 5—whether content is sufficiently resourced—their lowest mark of this principle. The most highly scored indicator in this principle was overall inclusivity and diversity of content.

North Macedonia has the infrastructure to allow content producers to cover all topics of interest to the public, in all geographic areas, and in multiple languages. Forty-five television stations and 68 radio stations broadcast at the national, regional, or local levels, in addition to the five TV channels and four radio stations of the public service broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT). While radio is dominated by music stations (only one of the four national radio stations produces its own news), all TV stations air a mix of entertainment and information programming and place a huge emphasis on news and political talk

shows (largely because they cannot afford to produce or broadcast quality entertainment, such as popular sports or high-end drama). Panelists said broadcast media, especially local and regional TV stations, rely on outdated equipment.

The four dailies and 17 weekly and other print periodicals, hundreds of online news websites, and amateur producers of content all have easy access to the necessary technical equipment, broadband Internet, transmission capacities, printing presses, and distribution networks.

Panelists said a key problem is the media's tendency to regurgitate the same quick-hit stories rather than doing enterprise reporting. Sead Dzigal, a lecturer at the International Balkan University in Skopje, said he and his colleagues worked with Foundation NGO Infocenter Skopje (NGO Infocenter) to monitor media coverage of the 2020 parliamentary elections. "We found that the media, instead of producing one proper, well-researched article, would publish 10 short, instant news articles. Of course, those 10 articles will be of low quality," he said. Equally important, panelists said, is the growing trend of uniformity of information, with all newscasts of the leading national broadcasters, for example, offering the same reports, sometimes in the same order.

Panelists agreed that traditional print and broadcast media are more likely to disseminate reliable information and quality content than online media, which are far more likely to spread misinformation and disinformation, especially on social media. "Traditional mainstream media do have some form of regulation and standards that they mostly adhere to. Online media remain a gray area," said Vesna Nikodinovska, a program director for the Macedonian Institute for the Media (MIM). On the other hand, in a poll by the institute, 25 percent of respondents said political parties and political elites are the main sources of disinformation, while 22 percent said all journalists and media spread disinformation.

Panelists noted that few media can invest in proper fact-checking departments and that speed trumps accuracy. Slobodanka Jovanovska, from the Nezavisen.mk news website, noted that her newsroom does not have the staff or money to spare for fact-checking. "We're guided by

our experience and our instincts to recognize information that may be a problem," she said.

As for disinformation, no systematized data is available, but the CriThink and Vistinomer.mk (truthometer) fact-checking operations, run by the Metamorphosis Foundation, report that about two-thirds of the articles they debunked in 2020 were related to COVID-19. Some of the most prominent sustained disinformation efforts tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, panelists noted, were localized versions of global conspiracy theories, such as Bill Gates's alleged plan to implant microchips in people through COVID-19 vaccines and the role of 5G technology as a source and vector for the spread of the virus.

Rather than a sustained disinformation campaign focused on a single topic, however, the country's two main political camps used their armies of trolls and bots to challenge as disinformation and "fake news" every utterance or move by the other side, almost exclusively via social media. "Back in the day, party activists were expected to put up campaign posters. Now, they sit at their computers and churn out party-generated disinformation," Dzigal said.

Panelists also agreed that there was a significant increase in hate speech and other harmful content online. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights said the amount of hate speech in the country's public discourse had doubled in the past year, but some panelists thought that went too far. "People are too quick to call every insulting, libelous, or disagreeable piece of content hate speech, when upon scrutiny and by the legal definition of hate speech, it wouldn't really warrant that," said Sefer Tahiri, a professor at the South East European (SEE) University in Tetovo.

The European Parliament has noted the problem of hate speech and harmful speech in foreign-owned media in the country, especially a group of media owned by Hungarian investors close to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government. On the other hand, little evidence of much-discussed Russian interference, including the clandestine funding of media, has turned up.

Panelists said foreign relations are also a source of hate speech. Bulgaria's recent insistence that North Macedonia acknowledge its majority language and ethnicity as truly Bulgarian "resulted in a flood of hate speech in the media in both countries," said Goran Gavrilov, general manager of Kanal 77 Radio, a national broadcaster in the eastern city of Stip.

Panelists said that except for nonprofit media supported by content-production grants from foreign donors, media coverage dedicated to minority, vulnerable, or marginalized groups is largely absent from the mainstream media.

Panelists also bemoaned media segregation on linguistic or ethnic grounds. "We now have Macedonian television, in the Macedonian language, for ethnic Macedonians and Albanian-language television for Albanians. Similarly, Turks watch Turkish TV, Bosniaks watch Bosnian TV channels available on cable. That's a very negative development," Dzigal said. Panelists noted with worry that the same trend is happening in public broadcasting, which has established separate language services for all major ethnic and linguistic communities in North Macedonia, losing its role as an agent of social cohesion.

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.

Another effect of this segregation, panelists said, is that media ignore the problems and issues faced by other ethnic communities. "Journalists and editors share the blame here," said Urim Hasipi, a journalist from Tetovo, noting that reporters from Alsat, the Albanian-language TV channel, and Sitel, the leading Macedonian-language TV channel, rarely venture to report from outside their primary ethnically and linguistically defined audiences.

Panelists noted that regular surveys of the structure of

workforce in broadcast media conducted by the audiovisual media regulator indicated that there is gender balance in the newsrooms and in the ranks of journalists and reporters, but that there are few women who hold senior editorial or managerial positions. "It is an unwritten rule that the owners, managers, editors-in-chief are men. The same principle pervades all types of media", said Nikodinovska from MIM. She also noted that female journalists and reporters are more likely to be targeted by hate-speech and threats against their personal integrity.

Panelists were unanimous that the country's information industry cannot sustain itself on the total available advertising spending of €25 million to €30 million ($30 million to $36 million). Notably, after a law passed before last year's parliamentary elections allowed campaign political advertising to be funded only with subsidies from the state budget, a total of €3.5 million ($4.2 million) was spent, amounting to about 13 percent of the total advertising spending in the country. The media also received emergency relief funds from the government, and broadcasters did not have to pay their annual transmission and broadcasting licensing fees, the second of which amounted to about €1.18 million (approximately $1.28 million).

In the economic crisis that accompanied the pandemic, advertisers cut their ad spending by about 20 percent, less than advertising industry insiders had projected. They also shifted some funds from traditional media ads to digital outlets, particularly to social media.

Sales of advertising space remain the main source of financing for the information industry, but some have found a nice niche as nonprofits. Relying solely on foreign funding, they tend to produce the most accurate and unbiased news and information. As for local media, those panelists said they do not have advertisers but rather "sponsors and supporters," reflecting the practice of bigger companies in their local economy to buy ad space against any financial logic.

> **We found that the media, instead of producing one proper, well-researched article, would publish 10 short, instant news articles. Of course, those 10 articles will be of low quality," said Dzigal.**

There is little interest in and few resources for testing alternative sources of income. Panelists said some new models of funding for quality journalism are simply not available in the country, typically for legal or technical reasons. "If a journalist wants to go to Substack, Facebook, Google, Patreon, and supplement his earnings, he or she can't do that, and that option is not available here since they can't legally collect such earnings," said Darko Buldiovski, a blogger and podcaster who manages the NewMedia.mk digital advertising agency.

Under those circumstances, public funds and subsidy programs take on added importance. Faced with declining circulation and ad revenue, along with the failure of the few paywall trials, print media survive almost completely on indirect subsidies, by carrying the government's mandatory public notices, and direct aid, in which half of their printing and distribution costs are picked up by the government. Those are worth approximately $750,000 combined.

In 2020, some broadcasters demanded that the government create subsidy programs for them. While not opposed to the idea altogether, panelists said oversight should ensure that public money is distributed impartially and not primarily to media friendly to the government and that it is spent to promote the public interest and help the most vulnerable types of media, especially local reporting and information.

There were voices of dissent among the panelists though. "I believe, regarding the subsidies, that we have to make a clean break once and for all. We need to reach an agreement that we should eliminate state interventionism altogether," said Tahiri from the SEE University in Tetovo. Even the public broadcaster should be independent, he said, alluding to a fiscal crunch and questions of credibility that have resulted from funding the service from the government budget.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	25

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
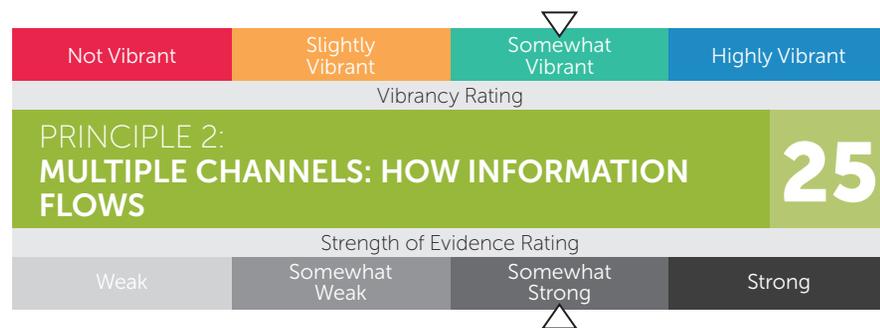
Existing laws and regulations offer strong protections for citizens and journalists to freely express their opinions or engage in the production of information. The Constitution of North Macedonia guarantees freedom of expression and the right to access information. The country is also party to international agreements that guarantee these rights, such as the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Except for North Macedonia's Law on audiovisual media services (regulating broadcast media), which needs a serious overhaul, its media and information rules are sound. There are excellent freedom of information (FOI) legislation and strong regulations against media concentration. The problem, rather, is in the implementation of these laws and regulations.

The state does not openly try to censor the media, although panelists noted that all political parties have their "armies of bots" poised to dispute and discredit on social media any information and news unfavorable to them.

Panelists gave their highest marks to Indicator 7 for people's adequate access to channels of information; they gave their lowest marks to Indicator 10 on the independence of information channels.

Journalists are generally free from overt and direct pressure by political or corporate interests, and panelists agreed that the environment is much better than during the previous government's tenure. But panelists said journalists are not completely free from pressure—especially

financial pressure—to self-censor. In the industry's ongoing financial crisis, control over advertising spending, which is often politically motivated, even for private companies, gives corporations and the government huge sway.

"We have no money, which means we're no longer the so-called fourth estate. We all keep silent because we all need to get money from somewhere. Threats to our physical integrity, judicial pressure, we don't see that type of pressure really," Jovanovska, from Nezavisen.mk, said.

Attacks or threats against journalists—including physical assaults or verbal attacks, insults, and humiliation—are in decline. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia counted 14 attacks on journalists and the media in the course of their duties in 2020, compared with 24 in 2019. Long-standing concerns about impunity for those who attack or threaten journalists persist, but 2020 did see some progress here: a civil servant was sentenced to 18 months in prison for threatening two reporters, telling one he would "create a funeral" for her.

The number of defamation lawsuits and, therefore, the threat of abusive defamation actions continue to drop.

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.

The very ownership structure of most influential national media creates pressure on journalists to self-censor or to choose carefully which topics to cover and how to cover them. Media owners are usually businesspeople with diverse portfolios who use their media as leverage to secure lucrative government contracts or as a blunt weapon against their competitors. "Not one owner of a television station is a journalist. They invest in media only to protect and defend their other businesses from the state

and politics," said Hasipi, the journalist from Tetovo who collaborates with several national and local media and works as a correspondent for a daily newspaper in Kosovo.

Although all print media get their share of government subsidies, some panelists see this money as corrupting. "If a media fund is created, self-censorship will get even worse. I don't know if we could even consider them journalists and media or simple channels for disseminating information from the government or the political parties," said Tahiri, the SEE University professor.

The citizens of North Macedonia have access to proper ICT infrastructure, and Internet penetration in the country is near 80 percent. The country is well covered by broadband Internet, and all urban and major rural areas are covered by cable network operators that offer, in addition to television, Internet connection and, in some cases, landline or mobile telephone services. Such bundled services are offered at affordable prices. Panelists did note that in smaller urban and rural areas, usually, just one cable company operates (in addition to the major national telecommunications companies and mobile operators), making those areas more vulnerable to service disruptions or delays.

Some panelists noted that new foreign "over-the-top" services, which offer programming via the Internet and bypass traditional broadcast or cable providers, are so far unregulated. "Packages of 200 free channels are offered. It's not regulated how use will be measured or charged or how we'll prevent or sanction if they offer content that's not acceptable here," said Liljana Pecova-Ilievska, director of the IMPETUS Center for Internet, Development, and Good Governance in Skopje.

Broadcasting and transmission capacities are regulated. Two digital multiplexes are reserved for the public service broadcaster, and two are allocated for commercial users. Commercial radio is regulated by the broadcasting and electronic communications regulators. Despite several changes to the way members are appointed to the governing bodies of the broadcasting and communications regulators, suspicions persist that these boards make political calculations or politically motivated decisions.

Some panelists commented that rural or poorer citizens of North Macedonia have far fewer options for access to ICT infrastructure. The turn to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that many elementary and high school students, especially in rural or poorer areas, do not have access to a reliable Internet connection or the devices they need to attend class. "My score here is lower because I think vulnerable groups remain marginalized, and the media don't invest in instruments that would enable them to access news and information," said Nikodinovska, from the MIM. Panelists also noted that some vulnerable groups, especially young women and girls in more conservative communities, may have limited or no access to technology or online content because of established gender roles in those communities.

The Commission on Freedom to Access Public Information was paralyzed by vacancies in 2018, and hundreds of cases piled up while the organization waited for Parliament to appoint new members. That disaster, as well as complaints about lengthy response deadlines, added momentum to a movement to change the law. Among the notable amendments to pass was a requirement that political parties provide requesters with information on their revenues and expenses. In general, panelists noted that after a period of constant improvements in FOI legislation implementation in 2018 and 2019, 2020 saw some backsliding.

Panelists said no opinion polls or other research has been done to see how often citizens use the law to request information. Officials' public statements or remarks in various forums indicate that most FOI requests come from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and journalists, said Biljana Bejkova, executive director of NGO Infocenter in Skopje.

The current government, in power since 2017, has promised to pursue a

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policy of radical transparency, but panelists said it often amounts to lip service. "They'd create some transparency tool, get it online, and then stop updating the data. Also, I think they manipulate the information published there and don't give us the real data," Jovanovska said.

In polarized North Macedonia, public statements by government spokespeople and officials are inevitably filtered through a political or ideological lens. Some panelists said spokespeople generally provide reliable and truthful information, but others said they suspected the information is manipulated.

Panelists said requests for information are handled differently depending on who they come from. Pecova-Ilievska said an FOI request from IMPETUS, her organization, was ignored, but when a news organization made the same request, it got a prompt response. Similarly, Hasipi said, "I've been sitting at a political party office for eight hours, waiting for a statement after an important meeting, only to learn that they've already given the information to other media close to them."

North Macedonia's tight rules against media concentration have prevented the creation of powerful media groups that could sway public opinion, but they are outdated and do not recognize the new abundance of transmission channels (digital broadcasting, cable, satellite, Internet protocol television, etc.), nor do they allow for consolidation of the media market. The result is a fragmented, overcrowded scene that does nothing to ensure the quality of information available to citizens. The law is applied fairly and correctly, but those whom it prohibits from owning broadcasting companies--such as political party leaders, members of Parliament, or other officeholders--easily get around it by using proxy owners. The media law also grants authority to the broadcast regulator to keep a registry of print media and to monitor whether print media companies keep their obligations to be transparent about their ownership, management, and annual financial results.

Over the past year, the public service broadcaster has launched a 24-hour service in Albanian and special channel for programming in other minority languages, as well as sports/entertainment and children's channels. Its funding stream has switched from a fee levied on

households with televisions to the state budget, putting it in an even tighter squeeze. It receives only about two-thirds of the prescribed funding (determined by a formula in the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services) and remains underappreciated. Panelists said the move to finance the service from the state budget makes it more vulnerable to government pressure, even if the current government seems to take a hands-off approach.

Panelists agreed that the public broadcaster provides sufficiently objective and impartial news and information programs but complained that it focuses on pure reporting, with no substantial investigative journalism. "The newsrooms are badly understaffed, and the public service rarely covers local communities and doesn't have a proper correspondent network," said Snezana Trpevska, a researcher at Research Institute for Social Development (RESIS).

Some panelists said the government seems increasingly to use the state news agency, MIA, as a mouthpiece for its policies. They pointed out that its management and steering structures are appointed by the government and not selected in a public competition. "The government places stories there. If there are questions that the public needs answered, [officials] go to be interviewed by MIA, knowing they won't be asked any unpleasant questions," Jovanovska said.

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
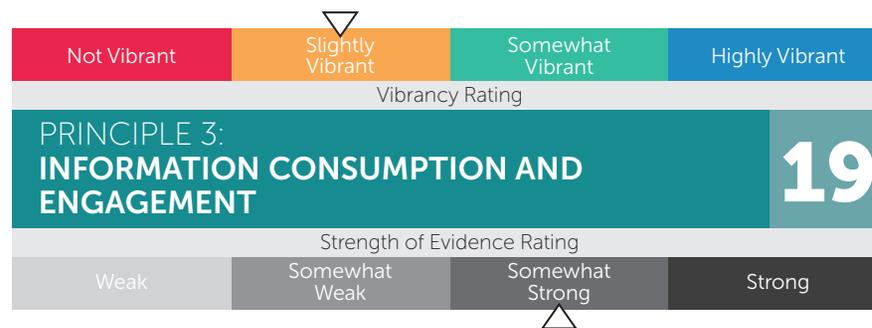
How people consume and engage with information has long been a source of concern for North Macedonia's media community, in line with global trends. The emergence of amateur content providers, such as bloggers and influencers, along with social networks' propensity to spew

falsehoods and hate speech alongside legitimate news and information have given new urgency to issues such as media and digital literacy.

At the same time, periodic revelations about the abuse and misuse of social media users' personal information, leading to serious violations of privacy, and cyberattacks on news and government websites demonstrate the need for increased awareness about digital security.[1]

Further, in a society divided by ethnicity, language, and religion, the uses and abuses of information, especially in elections and the government's decision-making processes, are critical issues.

The score of 19 for this principle reflects those concerns, with Indicator 15—community media provides information relevant for community engagement—carrying the highest average score, while Indicator 12—people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate—received the lowest average score.

North Macedonian legislation on privacy and protection of personal data is fine and was amended in 2020 to harmonize with the EU's new General Data Protection Regulation, which the country is obligated to do as a candidate for EU membership. Given North Macedonia's penchant for inconsistent implementation, however, panelists said the jury is still out on how well the newly amended law will function.

Panelists said some media outlets have published information that could help identify people in their stories, against the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, even when they are in vulnerable positions and need anonymity. An ethics code that permits such disclosures only when in the public interest offers insufficient guidance. "I believe media outlets, just like all other public or corporate entities, should prepare and implement proper rules and procedures on collection and safekeeping of personal data," said Pecova-Ilievska from IMPETUS.

Panelists also agreed that while digital security tools are widely

available, knowledge and awareness of the issue, or of the way social networks' algorithms and targeted marketing work, are scarce. "We lack proper digital literacy skills, which is clear from the fact that everything we do is a reaction after the fact. From top to bottom, people don't know how systems work," said Buldiovski of the NewMedia.mk agency. He said North Macedonia also does not require that all entities that collect and manage citizens' data have a registered representative in the country.

The media in North Macedonia occasionally report that they were subject to distributed denial of service (DDoS) and other hacker attacks. Among the several reported victims on Election Day 2020 were the State Elections Commission, news aggregator Time.mk, several news organizations, and the Interior Ministry. The attacks prevented timely reporting of results. At the time of writing, no culprit or motive has been identified.

Media literacy has been a focus for the media and civil society. The broadcasting regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS), which is charged with promoting and fostering media literacy, organized its second annual series of workshops, debates, and conferences on the subject in October and November.

Panelists agreed that the level of media literacy among citizens of North Macedonia depends in part on their social background, economic status, and level of education. Media literacy is not part of the education system, although schoolchildren learn about media culture, which MIM's Nikodinovska said amounts to superficial lessons about various media and their roles but does not

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.

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1   Panelists repeatedly referred to the scandal over the "Public Room," an all-male group on Telegram that shared explicit images, videos, and contact information of women and girls who were allegedly available for sexual encounters. Similar scandals have erupted periodically involving Facebook and other messaging services. There have been calls to criminalize those and similar offenses.

involve critical thinking. Panelists said existing school programs on information literacy are inadequate, although they acknowledged that the current government seems serious about incorporating media literacy into an ongoing reform of elementary education.

Panelists praised civil society efforts on media literacy, including a collaboration of the public service broadcaster MRT and the MIM on educational and promotional videos that aired weekly on the MRT1 channel. They also noted groups that hold workshops on media literacy, including a series of local programs for schoolchildren under the larger CriThink project by the Metamorphosis Foundation and the Eurothink Center for European Strategies.

On the other hand, panelists said most of these programs are for high school students, and they rarely address adults or senior citizens. Some doubted if media literacy programs would even work on adults. "I think it's an illusion to think you can change the mindset and the way adults think. It may be possible for a fraction of them, but it's difficult to change established thinking patterns," Trpevska from RESIS said.

Fact-checking organizations in North Macedonia do not keep track of how many people use their services, but panelists said the fact-checkers do not tend to be impartial and objective anyway. "We have a bunch of fact-checkers who aren't neutral or balanced. For instance, they'd go so far as to analyze political jokes making fun of the government, while they ignore some issues and don't do stuff that they should," said Dzigal from the International Balkan University.

Similarly, panelists doubted that appeals to the public to double-check the news with multiple sources do much good. "Political and ideological orientation plays a role in that regard," Nikodinovska said, arguing that even if someone goes through the trouble of checking other sources, they will likely be sources aligned with their own thinking.

" You invite the two opposite poles of a story, and they don't come to find some common ground. They're there to present their positions and leave… If society doesn't promote it, you can't expect true debate in traditional media, in Parliament, or online," said Buldiovski.

She said she is not sure if people can tell the difference between professional journalism and quality news and what gets posted on many online platforms.

Panelists also doubted that journalists and civil society activists working with marginalized groups can fully exercise their freedom of expression. "They face a lot of hate speech and verbal attacks. It ultimately erodes their free-speech rights," Trpevska said.

In a 2020 study, 76 percent of respondents told researchers from RESIS that they had gotten their information from television the previous day, and an identical 76 percent said they had gotten their information online. Twenty percent said they had listened to the radio, and 17 percent said they had read print media. Those results are encouraging if, as panelists assumed, professional media still offer professional and objective information.

The same poll found significant differences in media choices by age groups: 15- to 49-year-olds reported using the Internet every day (with 15- to 29-year-olds getting their information exclusively from the Internet), while those 50 and older rely primarily on television (with two-thirds of them never online).

Some panelists said that, far from facing any consequences for exercising their freedom of speech, people in North Macedonia are sometimes too free to say anything. "The first issue is that there are no consequences whatsoever for those who violate even the most basic rules of what is acceptable expression. The second issue is the communication noise. So much is being said that it's difficult to separate the important from the banal and the mundane," Dzigal said.

Other panelists disagreed. They said the country's polarization and party politics' domination of the public sphere keep a lot of people from expressing their views in public. "Many people believe they or members

of their families may suffer consequences because they expressed their opinion," said Ljupco Murgoski, owner and editor in chief of *Zenit*, a weekly newspaper in Prilep. "Even pensioners fear for the safety of their relatives' jobs."

Panelists said there are many platforms for public debate but questioned their inclusiveness and the usefulness of the debate that goes on, whether in the traditional media or on social networks. Several panelists said that, thanks to North Macedonia's polarization, most people work in echo chambers and tend to enter discussions only with the like-minded. They bemoaned the absence of a culture in which a change of position or opinion is possible. "You invite the two opposite poles of a story, and they don't come to find some common ground. They're there to present their positions and leave," Buldiovski said. "If society doesn't promote it, you can't expect true debate in traditional media, in Parliament, or online."

The media in North Macedonia, panelists agreed, have few resources to invest in researching their audience and its needs, even as technological solutions and instruments continue to multiply. There is only anecdotal evidence that the leading national broadcasters invest in market and audience research.

Often, some panelists argued, media do not realize the opportunities offered by the new tools, and the ties between the media and their audiences have been severed. "The traditional media here, both the commercial and, unfortunately, the public broadcasting service, approach the audience as consumers, as a market, and not as citizens," Trpevska said. "The public broadcasting service is in the process of adopting a five-year strategy, and the whole document mentions the word 'audience' only once. They don't view the diverse groups in society as publics, as audiences that PBS should talk to in order to define its editorial policy and design its programming."

Panelists also said the media ignore the difference between the public interest and what the public is interested in and wants to view or read. "It's the media that create the audiences, not the other way around, and the audiences have little influence on the media's decisions on which

types of content they offer. The media are interested in numbers of clicks and viewers and have no interest in building, creating a critical and aware audience," Dzigal said.

Formally, North Macedonia has few community (or nonprofit) broadcast media—just three student radio stations and one Catholic radio station in the southeast. But it has plenty of websites—especially those operated by NGOs that work with specific social groups—that function as community media. Panelists agreed that they do an excellent job serving their communities and, importantly, do not spread misinformation. Similarly, several online media outlets have become nonprofits, and they do the best journalism in the country, especially in investigative reporting.

The general public and even members of the media are not very familiar with the concept of community media as grassroots, public service outlets (as defined by VIBE), which might explain the panelists' focus on local commercial media, defined geographically, in this part of the discussion. "The local media are in decline, first, because of the fragmentation and inability to survive in such a fragmented market, and, second, the social networks have largely replaced them in terms of serving the needs of different communities," Dzigal said.

Panelists said there's a lot of room for growth in community/nonprofit media, but it needs more comprehensive regulation. "That sector of nonprofit broadcasting needs to be stimulated and developed," Trpevska said. "The regulator has some policies, but I don't think they're adequate. Funding remains the main problem. We need to consider some form of public funding for community media, knowing that community media, especially community radio, can satisfy very specific needs of very specific communities."

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: **TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**	**21**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong △	Strong
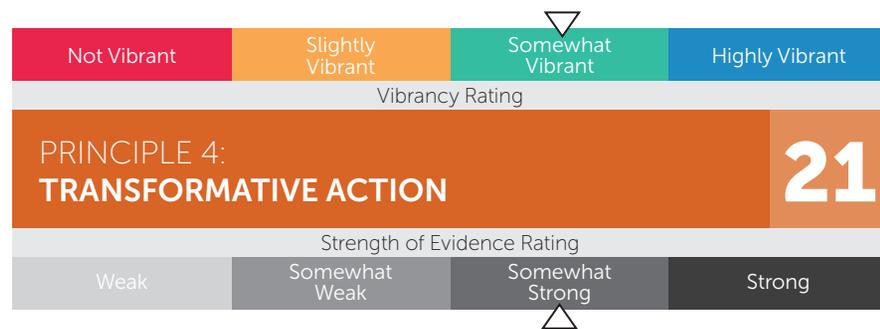
In a society where people are dug into their political, religious, linguistic, and ethnic identities, reporting and other content stand little chance of bringing about transformative change. Instead, despite a core of serious, impartial, and objective media that try to bridge those gaps, the information scene in North Macedonia is a world of echo chambers and severely strapped producers and distributors of information of deteriorating quality.

Amid this media segregation, panelists said, audiences and different groups believe the information they get is objective and accurate, while the information offered by and to the other side is biased and partisan.

The score for this principle, 21, seems to reflect that division almost perfectly. The most highly scored indicator in this principle examined civil society's use of quality information to improve communities, while the indicator on individuals use quality information to inform their actions carried the lowest score in this principle.

"There is the worrying trend of segregation, of people not wanting to hear what the other side has to say—they find it disturbing and unpleasant," Dzigal said. "They do go on the social networks to have heated arguments, but when they receive information, they accept only what they like. We now have echo chambers, even on TV."

Panelists agreed that there are nonpartisan sources of news and information but worry about their reach and influence. Nikodinovska from MIM said media that were widely considered objective and critical under the previous government seem to have become tame since the

Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) party lost power in 2017. There are a few media that operate without links to political parties or other centers of power, she said, but "the problem is that they don't command large audiences." Nikodinovska said media that are clearly ideologically aligned wield much more clout.

Television channels, especially national terrestrial broadcasters, make reasonable efforts to include representatives of all sides of a given issue on their many political talk shows. Usually, that means inviting members of the two major political parties or experts associated with those parties.

There is some evidence, including the RESIS study mentioned earlier, that people follow various types of media. Dimitar Micev, the general manager of the TV VIS regional broadcaster in the southeast, said that 55 percent of people who have responded so far to its ongoing online survey said television is their most trusted news source, followed by the Internet, at 25 percent. "In practice, that might mean that people get their information first from the Internet, but then go to traditional media to check it," he said.

Panelists were not convinced that people base their decisions and choices on quality information, whether it's deciding whom to vote for or how to protect themselves in the pandemic. Panelists said growing disinformation campaigns have helped conspiracy theories take deep root, and Dzigal 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.

mainstream media have been unwitting accomplices to that when they have "deplatformed" certain subjects and effectively pushed them into the shadows.

Some panelists offered their own experiences during the COVID-19 epidemic to illustrate the point but also to point out the lack of quality of the public discussion in North Macedonian society. Trpevska said she wandered into an echo chamber and was pounced on when she responded to an online comment by an anti-masker. "I tried to say something about it, and I was immediately subjected to serious attacks," she said.

Other panelists said whether people base their decisions and actions on properly researched information or disinformation also depends on their education and the people around them. "What I find important in that regard is the general erosion of trust in institutions, which has been building for decades. It's not new, but it seems to escalate in times of crisis like this epidemic. The flood of disinformation, the 'misinfodemics' of last year resulted in people being unable to discern true information from false," Nikodinovska said.

While panelists said they were disappointed that some prominent figures in civil society had taken jobs in the new government, they agreed that civil society groups base their work and decisions on sound information. "After all, there are people there who worked with the media, people who have completed trainings in public communication," Trpevska said.

The panelists also agreed that civic groups in general disseminate quality information and do not spread disinformation. Those organizations are also ready and willing to regularly engage with the media. Hasipi, the Tetovo journalist, said in his region, civil society groups are "very active in the area of environmental protection and prevention of pollution. They always cooperate with the media in efforts to increase awareness and inform the public about their respective area of interest. They're also available if you need an opinion or explanation and don't hesitate to speak in public." Panelists also agreed that civic groups actively

> **When the pressure of public opinion and the media grows unbearable, only then do the government and other authorities take concrete actions," said Bejkova.**

fight disinformation and try hard to increase their advocacy efforts to promote policy and legislative initiatives.

As far as the government's procedures for informing the public, the panelists agreed that, if anything, they are too robust. Officials from the president's office to the smallest city halls are so intent on controlling the public conversation that, in addition to traditional methods such as press conferences and media and public appearances, they invest heavily in producing their own content, which they then distribute to the media. "A team from my station went to an event, and suddenly there are cameras and microphones with the logo of the municipality that organized it," said Gavrilov of the Kanal 77 radio station in Stip. "I immediately told them to leave in protest and not cover the event."

State and local government agencies produce livestreams, photographs, and video footage from their events and public appearances, which the media usually use because it saves them money, staff time, and the use of their own equipment. "I don't want to criticize the journalists, but the trend is bad. It's the government and the political parties that set their agendas, providing them with ready-to-use information and content. Why would anyone refuse to use professionally produced information and content that's already there?" Dzigal said.

Some panelists said officials offer this surfeit of slickly produced material instead of real information. "I think they just create an illusion of transparency with the information they provide," said Jovanovska from the Nezavisen.mk website. "Only rarely do they hold real briefings where you can ask really subtle questions on sensitive topics. I call it empty talk."

Jovanovska recalled an event organized by the government and streamed on three Facebook profiles—of the government, of a junior partner in the ruling coalition, and of the president—with each stream

showing only the segments when their representatives spoke. "That's not transparency," she said. "They suffocate us with empty talk. On the other hand, you try to get some actual important information, ask an important question, they're nowhere to be found."

Panelists agreed that all participants in the country's political discourse, in government and in opposition, marshal facts, statistics, and other evidence to support their positions on various issues. No panelist would judge the role misinformation plays in the public discourse, reiterating that newsrooms are so understaffed, and the media so lacking in resources, that they have little means to hold politicians accountable. Panelists said the watchdog role is increasingly left to specialized investigative journalism operations that are usually financed by foreign donors.

Official corruption at all levels remains a major problem in North Macedonia, which recently received its lowest ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index since the organization started ranking countries in 2012. Officials had tried to downplay the country's miserable 111th-place finish out of 180 spots by noting that the index measures perceptions, not necessarily reality, but panelists were not having it. "One of the basic rules of public relations is that perception is as important as reality," Dzigal said, "People vote on the basis of perceptions."

Panelists agreed, though, that graft has lessened and that the government reacts publicly to reports of corruption, even if it often goes no further than a public condemnation or a pledge to take action. "The government reacts with declarations of intent, but its institutions need to act promptly, in accordance with the law," Pecova-Ilievska said.

"I don't think corruption is punished enough, and there seems to be no sense of moral responsibility for officials and public personalities, which is a problem we've seen go on for years," Nikodinovska said.

In late 2020, a court in Skopje dismissed claims from seven journalists who sued the government over attacks they suffered when a mob stormed Parliament in 2017. The court rejected their argument that the state and its institutions failed to keep them safe while performing their professional duties, and in the case of one plaintiff, said, "The claimant is not a journalist because he comes from an online media outlet." The reporters' appeal of the decision is pending.

Panelists took a similar view of officials' abuses of office or authorities' violations of people's democratic rights. While not as inert as they used to be, officials still talk loud and carry a little stick about such abuses, unless there is a public uproar. "When the pressure of public opinion and the media grows unbearable, only then do the government and other authorities take concrete actions," said Bejkova from NGO Infocenter.

Panelists could not think of a clear-cut case of the government using disinformation, but they did express doubts about its decision-making processes. Pecova-Ilievska noted that the government squanders its visibility and its opportunity to channel public discourse in positive ways; instead, it wastes time on press conferences that do not inform and rebuts statements from the opposition. In its efforts to control the conversation, "it underachieves in its communications with the general public," she said.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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