

TAJIKISTAN



Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE
13

As in many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic drove many of Tajikistan’s social and political events in 2021, even though the government closed the borders and officially claims the lowest death and illness rates in Central Asia.

While many of the trials of Tajikistan’s media last year were ongoing, the pandemic turned the screws a bit tighter: As incomes fell, so did purchases of print media, and some publications went online to survive. That was a natural choice, considering that audiences in Tajikistan tend to favor online information and social media. New websites--such as YOUR.tj, Tochka Zreniya (Point of View) at nuqta.tj, Zira Media, and Halva (halva.tj)--launched in 2019–2020 with funding from donors USAID and Internews and have quickly caught on. They cover cultural and social topics, including stories about celebrities and successful businesspeople.

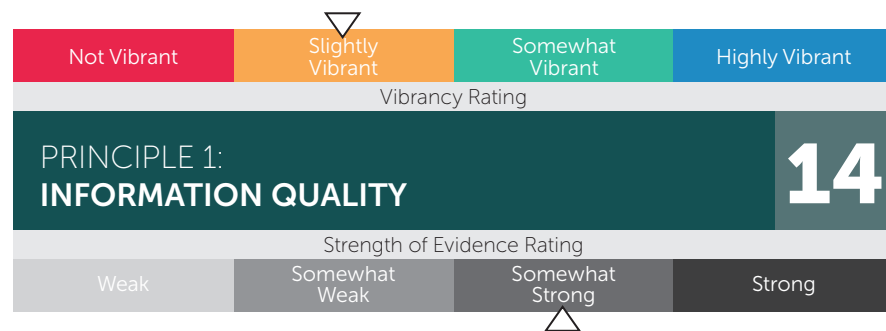
Despite a relatively stable economy, last year put the country’s professed democratic values—freedom of speech, movement, choice, and religion—to the test, as journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, and members of opposition political parties were persecuted.

Tajikistan’s security services, represented by the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), constantly monitor the phones, email, and social media profiles of independent journalists and accredited foreign journalists. Social media users can be prosecuted for extremism for liking posts by opposition politicians, especially those who are abroad (the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and Group-24 are both banned in Tajikistan as terrorists and extremists). In addition to the SCNS, the Interior

Ministry’s directorate for combating organized crime (UBOP) has been prosecuting “undesirables.” It regularly summons journalists who cover the news truthfully, or it talks to their editors. Fearing retaliation, lawyers have become reluctant to represent journalists, newspapers, and media (or media professionals) accused of tax fraud.

Middle-aged and older people favor serious publications for their news and economic and political analyses, while young people gravitate toward the so-called yellow press, the internet, and social networks, the most popular of which are Instagram and TikTok. Social media have become an effective way for people to raise issues and prod officials to take action.

Panelists gave Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) the lowest score of all VIBE principles (10), driven by the pressure that journalists and media face from the government and Tajikistan’s overall worsening operating environment. Principle 4 (transformative action) received the highest score of 15, bolstered by the work of civil society organizations; however, the indicator on information supporting good governance and democratic rights received one of the lowest scores of this year’s country study, reflecting the significant role corruption plays. Panelists gave Principles 1 (information quality) and 2 (multiple channels) scores of 14 and 13, respectively--driven in part by stronger assessments of the quality of information; access to information; and channels for government information. However, the panelists gave indicators on sufficient resources and independence of information channels lower scores.



In Tajikistan, journalists and media executives are under increasing pressure from the authorities. State-owned media print no critical material, except at the behest of the government itself. There are professional ramifications for producing content that does not meet these criteria. Every year, it becomes more difficult for independent media to get broadcasting licenses from the state-controlled commission that issues them. It is also difficult to obtain information about the activities of the government, even upon official request.

Information quality in Tajikistan is undermined by journalists who pursue sensational stories often violating the code of ethics.

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

The existing infrastructure allows journalists to produce a variety of content (print, broadcast, and digital), but some media outlets' technical facilities and their employees' production skills leave much to be desired, said Nuriddin Karshiboev, director of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT), who also complained of a surfeit of flattering coverage of government figures and programs.

"The content has expanded, there's a lot of information, there's a lot of it in social networks, but it's not always of high quality," said Lola Khalikjanova, an editor for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), "There are new media formats, for example, podcasts."

Zinatullo Ismoilzoda, chairman of the country's journalists' union, said Tajikistan formally has suitable conditions for content production, but independent TV and radio stations face significant hurdles in getting a broadcast license, as do their print and online counterparts in getting cleared by the SCNS, so they then can do the required registration with the Ministry of Culture. In addition, licenses given to independent broadcast and print media usually expire sooner than those given to government-controlled media, so the frequent renewals become "a permanent lever of pressure on independent publications," Ismoilzoda said.

As for quality of content, Zebo Tadjibayeva, a blogger and director of the YOUR.tj news website observed that journalists' sins are many, ranging from calling people in their articles insulting names to treating them as criminals before they have been tried to publishing photos of children or graphic scenes to revealing the names of harassment victims.

"Because of this often deliberately false or biased information, the relatives of these people have been subjected to harassment by relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances, and child victims of violence have been bullied by classmates and peers," said Rano Babadjanova, a journalism lecturer at Tajik National University.

Such infractions carry no consequences, and they bring little protest from other journalists or the general public, although Khurshed Niyozov, director of the Center for Journalistic Investigations and editor-in-chief of the *Faraj* newspaper, said it has undermined the public's trust in many media. Nabi Yusupov, director and editor-in-chief of the nuqta.tj website, observed that Tajikistan's media code of ethics is under review.

Journalists in Tajikistan can get quality training, but not at universities, where the facilities and the teachers' qualifications are obsolete. Instead, nongovernmental or international organizations provide instruction that meets the demands of the times, Karshiboev said.

All panelists said the government is largely unaccountable. Journalists cover the work of state bodies rather poorly, primarily because they have virtually no access to information. "News outlets are few, and they broadcast news often based on press releases that they use verbatim. No

one thinks about how it's written, whether it's understandable to readers. They just want to fill space," Jamila Huseynova, editor of the independent *USSR* newspaper, said. The state media usually rely on information published by the only state-run news agency, Khovar.

Panelists agreed that the media cover a narrow range of issues because they enjoy little editorial independence. "Topics are significantly narrowed due to the constant pressure on independent media; there's a certain circle of topics that almost everyone tries to avoid, in particular about the president, his relatives, and those close to him," Tadjibayeva said. In addition, Niyozov said coverage of Tajikistani dissidents living abroad is also tacitly banned.

Many journalists self-censor, and journalism lecturer Nosirjon Mamurzoda said privately held outlets cover what is in their owners' business interests, regardless of its news value.

In much of the country, local news is also lacking. Panelists observed that the media audience knows more about events in Africa, for example, than what is happening around Tajikistan, which Bakhtiyor Rakhmonov, a correspondent for the *Hakikati Kulob* newspaper in Kulyab, blamed on a lack of regional reporters. Compounding the problem, he said, is that newspapers in Dushanbe rarely reprint pieces from their regional counterparts. Independent journalist and blogger Negmatullo Mirsaidov said little information from the eastern Garm district and Gorno-Badakhshan, an autonomous region also in the east, reaches the capital. Mirsaidov, who is from the northern city of Khujand, said the only news from the east that gets reported elsewhere is usually about political events, such as a visit by the president.

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

Panelists said many journalists in Tajikistan have been trained in fact-checking, but publishers have continued to spread unverified information, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government also disseminates false information, which independent publishers almost never take the trouble to verify.

Some journalists are schooled in fact-checking methods, and Tajikistan has two websites that teach them.¹ "Not all journalists have been trained, although most local media are very cautious about disseminating information in general," Tadjibayeva said

Khalikjanova, of IWPR, said Tajikistan has no domestic resources, including online, to verify facts, and "almost no one uses foreign resources. That was especially obvious with the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, when journalists repeatedly reprinted unverified assertions about the disease itself and about vaccines, despite the fact that it was quite simple to verify the data in the original source."

Even though disseminating false information is illegal, government agencies sometimes use a mix of propaganda and defamation to smear opposition leaders, Karshiboev said. Huseynova stated that agents of the special services or the Interior Ministry's organized crime division often come to independent newsrooms and

demand publication of articles they have written that defame opposition politicians and journalists. "If you refuse, they can make it so that there will be inspections by the tax authorities, revocation of your license, and other repressive measures," she said.

Yusupov said no publication in Tajikistan has adequate management and moderation to prevent the spread of false information. "The only link that

¹ <https://factcheck.tj/ru/glavnaya/>.

moderates what will be published is the editor, and everything depends on the level of their professionalism and vigilance," he said.

In some cases, such as the armed conflicts on the border with Kyrgyzstan, the authorities provide no information at all. As a result, losses on the Tajikistan side last year were reported by foreign media.²

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

Tajikistan's strict laws against inciting hatred have helped keep digital platforms largely free of erroneous or deliberately false and inflammatory content aimed at specific groups. In the rare instances when professional content producers create or disseminate disinformation or hate speech, it is usually the work of an errant employee and not editorial policy. Any such content that pops up on high-profile sites usually gets reported to law enforcement. Moreover, panelists said government media do not create content aimed at inciting ethnic hatred, even during the recent border conflicts. "Those events weren't covered on television at all, and the Khovar state news agency only printed press releases from the Tajik Border Service," Huseynova said. But Khalikjanova said the government instead turned to independent media to write critical articles about Kyrgyzstan's security forces and authorities.

The government does, however, pressure media to vilify opposition figures living outside Tajikistan. All government websites, including those of universities and social networking groups, publish false, defamatory, and degrading material about specific people or groups at odds with the security forces. Almost no one in the country's media can opt out, lest they lose their job or have their outlet shut down.

Most foreign media do not disseminate disinformation, and they report the facts. No foreign diplomatic missions or plenipotentiaries have deliberately disseminated false information to incite national hatred, although other governments have given misinformation to the press or

² Central Asian Bureau for Political Reporting. "How the Media and Social Networks Covered the Conflict on the Border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan." May 8, 2021. <https://cabar.asia/ru/kak-smi-i-sotsseti-osveshali-konflikt-na-granitse-kyrgyzstana-i-tadzhikistana>.

politicians have made inaccurate statements.

Among social media, meaningful content moderation happens only on Facebook, where a complaint can get content deleted or an author blocked. The online Asia-Plus news agency also moderates comments, Niyozov said.

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

Panelists said Tajikistan's media scene is not ideologically diverse. The only ideology, some said, is whatever the state says, and the media, including independent publications, must embrace it. Departures are treated as dissent.

There is some ethnic diversity, however: Publications in Tajikistan come out in Russian, Tajik, and, much less often, Uzbek. The dominant language is Tajik, mirroring the country's ethnic makeup, which is 84 percent Tajik.

Despite the fact that more than 98 percent of the population in Tajikistan follows Islam, the media often write about various religious denominations, such as Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Adventists, and Hare Krishnas. "But lately, they write only about the Christian Church, as they have official registration, six churches, and a metropolitan in Tajikistan," Babadjanova said. The other faiths, Rakhmonov said, get press mainly when they get banned from the country for activities that do not correspond to the goals and objectives they indicated when registering.

Niyozov said coverage of marginalized groups--such as homeless people, substance abusers, sexual minorities, and sex workers--is absent from traditional or alternative media.

Fearing an audience backlash, the media generally avoid covering sexual minorities, Karshiboev said. As for gender issues, Babadjanova said Tajikistan technically welcomes women into public and political life, with, for example, a quota for the number of women legislators. But Tadjibayeva, the YOUR.tj director, said government agencies usually send

the message that women should be in the kitchen or raising children. As an example, Huseynova said the Interior Ministry's press releases on the detention of women use blatantly sexist epithets, such as a "cuckoo woman," meaning one who has abandoned her child. She said almost all publications in Tajikistan, including independent media, follow suit.

Citizens get a variety of information from social networks and the internet, but there is no diversity in the state media. Only a few media organizations broadcast or publish in Russian, Uzbek, or Kyrgyz, along

with niche media, such as the *Din va Chomea* (Religion and Society), *Zan va Oila* (Women and Family), *Bonuvoni Tojikiston* (Women of Tajikistan), and *Firuz* (Turquoise) magazines, and publications by cultural centers and communities of Uzbeks, Russians, Kazakhs, Turkmen, and Karluks, Mamurzoda said. But he said these

media and organizations do not reflect the lives and views of these ethnic groups in a comprehensive way.

Panelists said more women than men work in the media, especially at state-run outlets, which Babadjanova attributed to state media's "stable salary, various bonuses, and stable eight-hour workday." Khalikjanova said only four women in Tajikistan own media outlets. In addition to Tadjibayeva, with YOUR.tj, there is Mukhae Nozimova (Zira Media), Nargis Kasimova (Dast ba dast), and Gulnora Amiroshva (Vecherka.tj).

Nonprofessional content producers tend to be men, but they have a variety of backgrounds, including workers, students, the unemployed, and nonprofit staff. Tadjibayeva said Tajikistan has very few women bloggers, who tend to prefer TikTok and Instagram.

Mirsaidov, the blogger in Khujand, said the language of information materials mostly meets people's needs. However, he noted that many of the two million Uzbeks who, by official statistics, live in Tajikistan think there is not enough broadcast and print media in their language. At the same time, the Russian-language space is shrinking, to the dismay of not only ethnic Russians but also Tajiks and Uzbeks who speak that language.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Tajikistan's independent media have always relied on grants from international donors—such as the European Union, the OSCE, and USAID—to survive, and the pandemic made matters worse, as economic pressures caused businesses to cut their advertising spending.

Even in better times, however, the "advertising market is monopolized and politicized," with contracts typically going to publications loyal to

the government or powerful groups, said Ismoilzoda, the union leader. In addition, government agencies advertise only in state-owned media. That leaves mostly just international organizations or branches of international banks to advertise in private, independent media.

In general, business owners do not want to advertise. Small- and medium-sized companies in Tajikistan largely ignore local publications and opt to advertise on social networks. As a result, while state media receive subsidies and other government support, Huseynova observed that independent media "are on the verge of bankruptcy."

Mamurzoda said that of the 50-plus print and electronic media in the southwestern Khatlon region, only three—the Kurgonteppa and Mavchi Ozod television channels and the *Paik* newspaper—are considered independent. The rest get government subsidies.

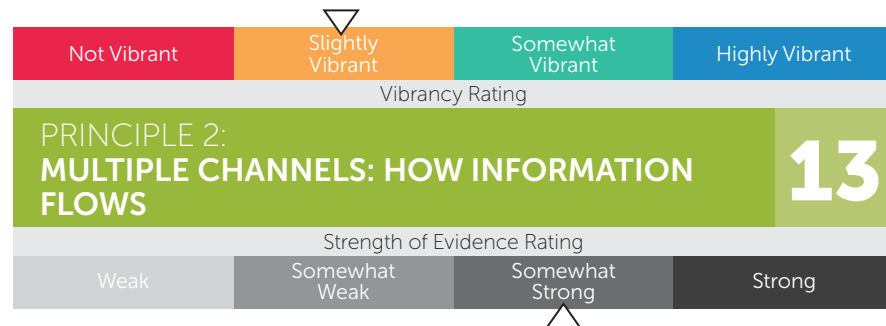
Scarce resources keep journalists' pay low and make it difficult to produce quality content. In Dushanbe, journalists at private media earn an average of 1,500 to 3,500 somoni (\$132 to \$307), and in the regions, they earn 650 to 1,000 somoni (\$57 to \$88) per month. At the same time, reporters and editors get paltry expense reimbursements, and they often pay out of their own pockets to replace obsolete newsroom equipment. Ismoilzoda said the state TV and radio company is standardizing its journalists' patchwork of salaries, but Babadjanova noted that even they are expected to travel to the remotest areas of this sprawling country with puny travel allowances.

“The only link that moderates what will be published is the editor, and everything depends on the level of their professionalism and vigilance,” said Yusupov.

“Independent publishers very often have to skimp on content creation, so there are no investigative, data-journalism articles, and there are very few videos or illustrations, which are considered costly formats,” Yusupov said.

In this environment, many journalists work multiple jobs or leave the profession, and finding skilled ones to replace them is challenging. Khalikjanova cited a study by IWPR that found that university applicants in Tajikistan who do not make the cut for more prestigious programs, such as medicine, law, and economics, turn to journalism departments.

Panelists said some publishers have begun covering only topics funded by grants from international donors, while other struggling outlets are vulnerable in other ways. “Virtually no independent publishers in Tajikistan have their own premises. They have to rent, and this is one way of putting pressure on the media,” Tadjibayeva said. She cited the case of the respected Asia-Plus news agency, which was evicted from the floor it rented in a building owned by the president’s office to another floor that was ill-suited for running a news operation.



Journalists in Tajikistan can become the targets of the security services and big businesses, which can exploit the country’s frequently invoked law on terrorism against them.

Panelists agreed that pressure has increased both on the media as a whole and on individual journalists. Domains are confiscated, and journalists’ online activities are monitored, their emails and messages are hacked, and sometimes their phones are tapped. In such circumstances,

there is no real freedom of speech. The lowest scores in this principle were given to access to the internet for the media, lack of freedom to comment on social networks, and print media’s access to printing houses.

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

Tajikistan has laws on freedom of speech and media that meet international standards, but they are poorly implemented. In addition, journalists themselves do not actively exercise their professional rights, Karshi-boev said. New legislation that its sponsors say will protect the rights and interests of journalists and media employees is under discussion, Babadjanova said.

In June 2020, Tajikistan’s parliament established significant fines for spreading “inaccurate” and “false” information about the pandemic in the media and on social media, or “untrustworthy” information via mobile messaging apps.³ The legislation also gave law enforcement agencies the power to examine private correspondence, including emails and messages. Those who claimed on social media to have contracted COVID-19 were required to have a doctor certify their diagnosis or face prosecution for spreading false information. These measures led almost all media to stop reporting information about the coronavirus that differed from the official line.

The legislation also allows 13 government agencies to request that the Communications Service, which controls internet access throughout Tajikistan, block websites, bypassing judicial review. The result has had a chilling effect on content producers, Yusupov said.

Aside from legal repercussions, Tadjibayeva said journalists are targeted in other ways, “though they’ve diminished and become less obvious and more sophisticated. They can take such forms as a ‘preventive conversa-

³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. “RSF Warns New Tajik Legislation Could Hamper Coronavirus Coverage.” June 14, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/rsf-warns-new-tajik-legislation-could-hamper-coronavirus-coverage/30669825.html>.

tion,' with a summons to the prosecutor's office, physical assault by unknown attackers, and damage to property by the police."

Authorities view any attempt to hold them accountable for their actions as an attempt to smear them in the international arena, and they come down hard on the offending media, said Rajab Mirzo, director of the Akhbor baroi afkor (Food for Thought) Facebook group.⁴

Dissident journalists' names go on a list of people involved in terrorism or extremism that is posted on the website of the national bank. Some news organizations that have covered extremism or terrorism have suddenly found unexplained cash transfers in their accounts from countries where vocal government critics live, which the bank uses as a pretext to shut down the outlets.

Karshiboev said the special services constantly pressure journalists to denounce their colleagues as security threats. He said NANSMIT sees a steady stream of journalists who complain that they have been threatened indirectly with dismissal if they do not comply, and the result is increasing self-censorship. At the same time, Karshiboev said the security services "take advantage of the fact that journalists attend receptions at embassies, participate in international conferences, seminars, and training sessions, and require them to report what happened there, what was said, who was present—that is, they make the journalists do their job for them."

Karshiboev said journalists deemed troublesome can be imprisoned. For example, as reported on nansmit.tj, independent journalist Daler Sharifi served about a year in prison on an extremism conviction after publishing an analysis of Islamic theology that included quotes from the Muslim Brotherhood, which is banned in Tajikistan.

Mirzo said government critics are tracked down via their IP addresses and punished, citing the case of Junaidullo Khudoyorov, a blogger who had criticized local officials on social media and in 2018 was sentenced

to five years in prison on specious charges of belonging to a banned religious group. He has since been released.

In another example, in June, lawyer and human rights activist Abdulmajid Rizoiev was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison for posting on Facebook what prosecutors said were "hidden public calls for extremist activities that could destabilize the national security," his lawyer told reporters. Prosecutors specifically cited an aphorism Rizoiev had posted: "A wise government fights the roots of protest, an ignorant government fights the protesters."⁵

Organized crime investigators have begun to interfere in the media, reminding journalists of what they can and cannot cover, Huseynova said. Panelists said many journalists summoned by UBOP, the Interior Ministry's organized crime division, have said their phones were confiscated for several days.

To avoid such harassment and punishment, activists, journalists, and members of civic organizations increasingly hold their tongues, even in personal social networks. For example, as reported on nansmit.tj, Abduljamid Rizoiev, a lawyer who has worked in the human rights field and has provided legal advice to citizens, was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison under allegations of hiding public calls for extremist activities on his Facebook page.

Panelists said officials use accreditation renewal as leverage against foreign journalists, checking on their coverage of government figures before making a decision. The Foreign Ministry has repeatedly revoked accreditations from Radio Free Europe's Radio Ozodi journalists, or granted only three-month credentials, in retaliation for their coverage of opposition activists abroad.

One panelist said the SCNS pressured Radio Ozodi correspondent Masum Mukhammadrajab in Sughd Province, first revoking his accreditation

4 Mamadshoev, Marat. "Freedom of Speech in Tajikistan: Don't Seek, Don't Ask, Don't Tell," Central Asian Bureau for Analytic Reporting. December 20, 2019. <https://cabar.asia/ru/svoboda-slova-v-tadzhikistane-ne-ishhi-ne-sprashivaj-ne-govori>.

5 Ruhullo, Sarvinoz and Shahlo Abdullo. "Released Activist: 'The Authorities Put Me Behind Bars Instead of Fixing the Problems,'" Radio Ozodi. November 9, 2019. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30253633.html>.

from the Foreign Ministry, then threatening mistreatment of his mentally ill, incapacitated son. UBOP told another Ozodi correspondent, Farzon Mukhammadi, that if he worked for that outlet, he would receive no information, or his credentials would be revoked.

Another lever of control, Ismoilzoda said, is the requirement that printers, like publishers, get permission from the State Committee on National Security to register. Those that buck law enforcement decrees on coverage can see that permission denied in the future.

Panelists said the government no longer needs to go through internet service providers to block sites, doing it instead at the Unified Switching Center, which is subordinate to the Communications Service and through which all independent providers work. For example, Ahbor.com, run out of Prague by journalist Mirzo Salimpur, was blocked in 2020, although it is still accessible via virtual private networks. Internet service providers must buy internet traffic only from the state provider, Tajiktelecom, Niyozov said.

The Asia-Plus news organization has been a particular target. Its multiple websites have been blocked and unblocked, and its domain name system was sabotaged to send users to an error page, all with no legal basis and no claim of responsibility from the government. It now operates online via a domain registered in Russia.⁶

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

In recent years, Tajikistan has built a decent information and communications infrastructure that serves most people's needs. However, telephone communication, both mobile and landline, frequently fails, and the internet can be unstable and slow, especially

outside the cities.

Most people in Tajikistan can afford radios and televisions. "Things are more difficult for newspapers, which are less in demand because they don't appear as often," and by the time they reach the farther-flung regions, they are often out of date, Yusupov observed, further saying, "Those who can afford modern gadgets can also use the internet."

But even the internet can be an unreliable channel of information, given the government's control of the central communications center and its ability to block websites or even shut down the internet.⁷

“There are no TV channels in minority languages in Tajikistan, only news in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English,” said Ismoilzoda.

Mamurzoda noted that regular fall and winter power rationing means cell towers sometimes go dark, playing havoc with mobile phone signals. In addition, the country has the most expensive internet service in Central Asia, putting it out of reach for some. "In rural areas, when the

power isn't cut off, the only sources of information are the state TV channels and radio. There are no national public television channels in Tajikistan," Rakhmonov said.

Mirsaidov said there are independent internet publications and private TV and radio companies in northern Tajikistan. The south, where the vast majority of the country's residents live, and the east have no independent radio and TV stations, but residents there can use the internet for alternative sources of information.

Babadjanova said the mobile network is widely available, and mobile versions of social networks are nearly universally used for communication, as "every family has someone who is a labor migrant." On the other hand, she said, TV still does not fully cover the regions, in particular in the border areas with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where stations lack the equipment needed for the country's switch to digital broadcasting.

6 Mamadshoev, "Freedom of Speech." <https://cabar.asia/ru/svoboda-slova-v-tadzhikistane-ne-ishhi-ne-sprashivaj-ne-govori>.

7 Nadirov, Bahmaner. "Access to Social Networks Is Again Restricted in Tajikistan," Asia-Plus. April 24, 2019. <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20190424/v-tadzhikistane-vnov-ogranichen-dostup-k-sotsialnim-setyam>.

Ismoilzoda said residents of the regions bordering Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan watch those countries' TV channels. "There are no TV channels in minority languages in Tajikistan, only news in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English," he said.

Television stations were required to make the expensive switch from analog to digital broadcasting in 2021, which panelists said could drive some strapped private regional stations out of business. State television, on the other hand, gets public funds and will easily manage the transition, Ismoilzoda said.

People with hearing disabilities can turn to only one channel, the state-run Jahonnamo, for programming with sign-language interpreters.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The right of access to public information is enshrined in several laws and regulations, but in practice, access is limited. Media representatives rarely push their right to information, lest they spoil relationships with government agencies and sources.

Every year, monitoring services count hundreds of information requests from journalists that are denied or delayed beyond the legally required three-day response time. The responses that do come contain little useful information or data, Tadjibayeva said. Departments and ministries often incorrectly cite regulations that conflict with freedom-of-information laws to justify their refusal to give out information.

In their struggle for information, journalists often "use personal connections in ministries and departments," Yusupov said and added, "There is prejudice and subjectivity in the presentation of information from government agencies. Some media outlets and journalists are answered quickly, some aren't answered at all, especially if they've ever published critical material about them."

"In addition, there are no public hearings, with the exception of several draft laws that have been discussed recently, such as the new tax code," Karshiboev said. But even those discussions included only

"representatives of public organizations loyal to the authorities," who refused to comment on the proceedings to the media, he observed.

Press secretaries often avoid answering questions, including at the Ministry of Health during the pandemic, Huseynova said.

Virtually all ministries and departments have websites, but they are rarely updated, and then only with press releases that "don't cover the real activities of government agencies," Mirzo said.

Babadjanova said government agencies have recently taken a more professional attitude toward media representatives, adding specialists in journalism and public relations to their press offices, but the quality of the information provided is still lacking. "Officials are often afraid to provide information, either because they're not competent or they're afraid to say too much. The media often use anonymous sources in government agencies. But citizens still think the information provided by officials is trustworthy," Mamurzoda said.

Once every six months, all government agencies in Tajikistan must report on their activities at press conferences, which are practically the only chance for journalists to see the leadership of ministries and departments and ask questions. Usually, however, these officials read out a statement and then, citing a heavy workload, ignore journalists' questions and leave. Journalists who ask tough questions risk being banned from these events. Despite their shortcomings, these press conferences can be a useful tool for interaction among government agencies, civil society, and the media, some journalists say.

During the border clashes that resulted in fatalities, officials in Tajikistan held no press conferences, even as their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan regularly met with the press. As a result, journalists in Tajikistan were forced to cite information from unofficial sources that could not be verified, while officials blamed them for losing the information war to Kyrgyzstan.

Whatever limited success journalists have with getting information or reporting truthfully, civic activists have less, as most officials are not particularly informed about citizens' rights to access to information and

ignore their requests.

Niyozov said civil society groups and the media sometimes exchange information, usually at the impetus of civil society, but government officials almost never join in.

Few citizens seem to know how to get information on the work of government agencies, but even if they did, Niyozov said, most people “have little interest in the activities of government agencies.”

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

No laws forbid a concentration in media ownership in Tajikistan, nor do they require the disclosure of media owners. However, foreign companies cannot own media properties in the country.

“As far as independent media, distribution channels aren’t monopolized and don’t belong to a small number of media conglomerates,” Tadjibayeva said.

Ismoilzoda said all TV and radio frequencies are distributed by the state-run Teleradiocom.

“The procedure for obtaining a TV license is quite complicated,” Khalikjanova said. She noted that in the past five years, no independent or public television station has been able to get a license from the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, “which is essentially a competitor.”

Yusupov said license terms for radio stations are very short, plus beginning in 2021, all radio stations are made to “work within the state information policy” and coordinate with the broadcasting committee on all content not in the Tajik language. Private broadcasters must also give 1 percent of their profits to the committee in addition to taxes. Meanwhile, Tajik authorities have raised the cost of a broadcasting license by as much as 20 times—up to about \$1,200 per year.

“**No media outlet in Tajikistan has a division between the commercial department and the editorial office,” Huseynova said.**

Launching a private media outlet is complex and costly, and permits mostly go to those who are loyal to the government or pose no political threat.

There is no law on public media in Tajikistan, and no public media has ever existed in the country. Although the government is prohibited from holding more than half of any media outlet, it fully owns six television channels and five radio stations.

New online media and printing houses must be approved by the SCNS, which can throw up obstacles, and then registered with the Culture Ministry, Tadjibayeva said.

Several independent cable and internet protocol television (IPTV) channels broadcast Russian-, Uzbek-, and Persian-language stations; however, they do not create their own content.

There are no independent internet service providers. Mirzo noted that during a September summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Dushanbe, officials unblocked “undesirable” sites, such as Asia-Plus, the Avesta information agency, and Radio Ozodi, only to bring the curtain back down afterward.

Citizens have the right to start their own media, but in practice, security checks, registration, short licensing periods, an opaque licensing process, unpredictable journalist accreditation, onerous paperwork, and corruption create a high barrier.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Panelists said Tajikistan has few serious media outlets left. Media owners, including the state, control editorial policy. Even international donors sometimes demand final approval of articles about projects they fund, Khalikjanova said.

Journalists quickly come to know which topics to avoid. Niyozov said

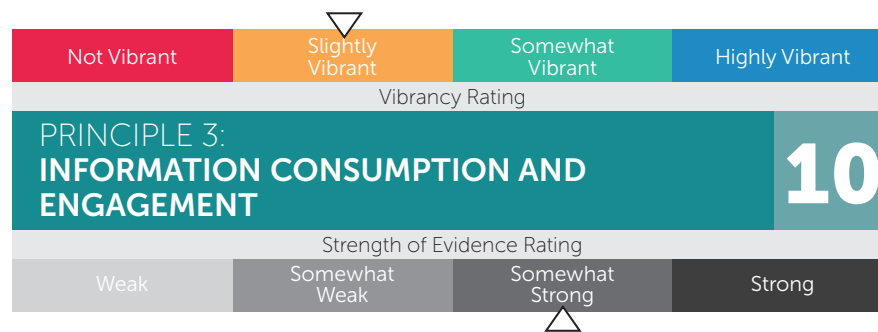
journalists are given a list of so-called forbidden issues, presumably by their supervisors, but reporters can also be summoned by the security services for a reminder--or they can simply choose to stick with "safe" topics.

At the same time, because private media depend heavily on their advertisers, Mirzo said they do not run critical articles about advertisers, and they carefully filter readers' comments. However, Yusupov said such behavior depends on the size of the advertising contract. Additionally, companies dictate ad placement and seek to quash simultaneous spots in the same publication from competitors.

"No media outlet in Tajikistan has a division between the commercial department and the editorial office," Huseynova said, "Journalists who write editorial materials also prepare commercial materials." She said journalists get commissions for attracting advertisers "so their content often depends on advertisers, too. There are many cases of hidden advertising."

The government bodies responsible for frequency allocation, media licensing, and telecommunications services are appointed by the SCNS, and they reward loyal media. Ismoilzoda said the heads of regulatory bodies who supervise media or distribution channels rarely treat independent media objectively.

Independent media in Tajikistan receive no financial support from the government, while state media get subsidies, a monopoly on government advertising, favorable rent terms, help with utilities, assistance with subscriptions, exclusive access to officials, and more, Niyozov said.



Foreign media do not interfere in the foreign policy and internal actions of the government of Tajikistan because they know that they can be deprived of accreditation by the country's Foreign Ministry and, therefore, the opportunity to work. Accreditation, as an instrument of pressure, is used in relation to the journalists of Radio Liberty, who sometimes dare to criticize the authorities and give the floor to the position living in the West.

It is very rare for professional content producers to allow the creation and dissemination of disinformation or hate speech. This happens, of course, due to lack of capacity among employees, and not because of intentional policy of the editorial board. At the same time, among non-professional content producers, there are often individuals (usually writing under pseudonyms) who create and disseminate misinformation or information aimed at inciting hatred.

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

Tajikistan has a law on the protection of personal data, but it is largely toothless.

Panelists said that since Tajikistan established the Unified Switching Center, government officials control and monitor all internet traffic on the pretext of fighting terrorism and extremism. "But in fact, all dissent and criticism of the authorities are suppressed," Karshiboev noted, adding that there is evidence that officials are wiretapping and surveilling personal data online.

Babadjanova said people in Tajikistan have no digital literacy. They do not know how to secure their personal data, and they are easily fooled by fake news on social media. Fraud cases with electronic wallets and bank cards have become more common as users have unwittingly handed over sensitive information, Mirsaidov said.

Tadjibayeva said distributed denial of service attacks on the media have stopped since the government gained full control over internet access through the universal switching center, but given the lack of IT staff, media outlets remain vulnerable. Panelists said journalists' personal accounts on social media continue to be hacked, with disinformation posted under the target's name or personal correspondence released. Attackers also post surreptitious video recordings of activists, including intimate footage of a woman who had petitioned the president not to raise internet costs. The police were no help to her. "[This] practice is used very often against activists," Karshiboev said.

Not all media and other professional content producers have access to digital security education programs and digital security tools. "There are not many such educational programs, and not all members of the media understand how necessary it is to participate in them, so the media often neglect reliable ways to ensure digital hygiene and reliable site protection," Yusupov said. Even the media that offer donor-funded training for their employees cannot afford to hire specialists in information security, Khalikjanova observed. Rakhmonov said many regional media sites are not protected because founders and editors in chief do not take protection seriously, and they do not want to spend money on it. Moreover, ordinary citizens also lack an understanding of the need for free access to technology and tools that help protect their personal data and security.

"Unfortunately, from what we've seen, not only the population of the republic but also a lot of professional journalists know little about digital security," Mamurzoda said.

“Unfortunately, from what we've seen, not only the population of the republic but also a lot of professional journalists know little about digital security,” said Mamurzoda.

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

While government officials in Tajikistan do not talk to citizens about the importance of media literacy, some members of parliament have had courses in it that they deemed useful, Babadjanova said.

Recent research has shown an abysmal level of basic information and digital literacy among the public, including knowledge and skills in digital and information security. "The level of media literacy depends heavily on the level of education; an educated person easily navigates social networks in search of the content he or she needs and can distinguish the level of its objectivity and accuracy," Mirsaidov said. About one-quarter of Tajikistan's population has graduated from high school and has some higher education.

City dwellers with access to the internet and social networks are more or less informed about fake news and fact-checking, but most in Tajikistan believe anything posted on the internet. "It's easy to post [doctored images or falsified text] on social networks, and the users of social networks often repost fake information," Tadjibayeva said.

Panelists said that far from inviting any backlash, unprofessional and harmful content, especially when posted online, attracts an audience. "On the contrary, the number of clicks increases; there are reposts. Consumers have stopped thinking critically. They literally swallow everything

that's published, especially on social networks," Mirzo said.

"Improving people's media literacy is a pressing matter," Mamurzoda said. The little media literacy training offered—by outlets themselves or, usually, by Internews and Tajikistan's association of independent media, NANSMIT—have made no discernible headway among the general

public or even among journalists.⁸ Schoolchildren get no instruction in thinking critically about the journalism or social media posts they see. Khalikjanova said two well-known journalists have written a textbook on teaching media literacy, which will be incorporated into the curriculum of university journalism departments.

Journalists also often broadcast false information, because they are unable to verify it.

On the other hand, Yusupov said people can find any online course or content and learn if they want.

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

The only venues in Tajikistan where citizens can relatively freely express their opinions are social media platforms, which are practically unmoderated and circumvent a cautious and censored media scene. However, genuine discussions on these forums are rare, and only debates on social issues that steer clear of politics tend to get results from the government, Karshiboev said. On political issues, a public outcry is mostly useless, he said, and criticism of the authorities comes only from Tajikistanis who live abroad. For people living within the country, speaking out on political issues can be met with arrest and potential imprisonment.

Niyozov said platforms for public discussions, such as roundtables, conferences, or talk shows, have been kept to a minimum during the pandemic, and they have avoided particularly sensitive topics.

Aside from social media, Tajikistan has no forum for public debate.

8 Asia-Plus, Media Literacy School Special Project, <https://asiaplustj.info/projects/shkolamediamotnosti>; Mediasavod.tj, <http://mediasavod.tj/>.

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

Panelists said Tajikistan media have made little effort to research audience needs, especially in television and radio, and lack the tools to do so.⁹ Leading media and content producers use qualitative research to get a picture of their audiences' size, geographic reach, access to media, ethnicity, gender, age, and wealth.

Tadjibayeva noted that online media have their own methods of measuring their audiences and gauging their engagement and interests, but she said only a few use them. "Whenever possible, independent online publications try to meet the needs of their audiences, but, of course, not all media and producers have access to this kind of research and have to rely on personal surveys of their consumers." Even free Google Analytics is available only to those organizations with reliable high-speed internet service.

Mamurzoda said regional media cannot afford to conduct sociological research and to sound out their audiences. Additionally, even less-ambitious outreach efforts are rare. "There are no open meetings of readers, subscribers with authors, with editorial boards in Tajikistan," Huseynova said, "But print media actively publish their readers' letters."

Similarly, Rakhmonov said online publications offer comments sections, but all comments are carefully screened.

"Tajikistan's media still use marketing poorly, most often not knowing who their target audiences are, and poorly tracking feedback," Tadjibayeva said. She further observed that only two or three media organizations actively use social media marketing and monitor feedback, al-

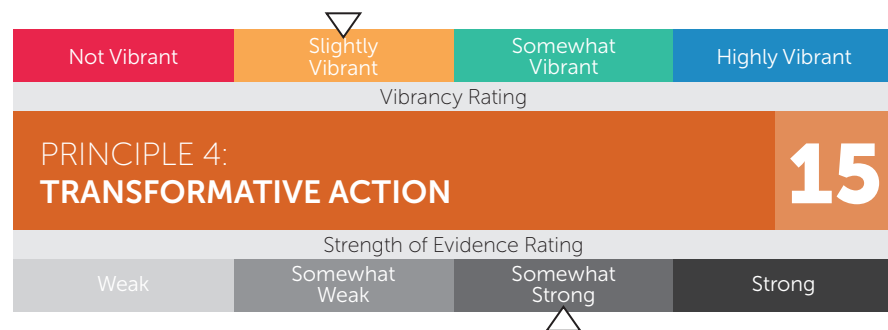
“It’s easy to post [doctored images or falsified text] on social networks, and the users of social networks often repost fake information,” said Tadjibayeva.

9 Gaisina, Lilia. "Media in Tajikistan Have Parted Ways with Their Audience," New Reporter. July 15, 2019, <https://newreporter.org/2019/07/15/media-v-tadzhikistane-razoshlis-so-svoej-auditoriej/>; Zerkalo Center, Media Audiences in Tajikistan 2019, <http://zerkalo.tj/news/105-auditorii-smi-tadzhikistana-2019.html>.

though Karshiboev said media outlets present on social media do monitor feedback.

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

Although current media laws allow for it, there is no local community media in Tajikistan. A plan to create private local radio stations 10 to 15 years ago in areas outside the cities failed when officials said there were not enough frequencies and refused to issue broadcasting licenses.



Except for a few independent outlets, media in Tajikistan do not offer a wide range of opinions and ideologies. Because state media have the largest reach, the government’s viewpoint dominates the information space. There is no exchange of information between state and independent media, because the level of reporting is too different and state media is completely under the control of the government, only expressing official opinions and policies.

Despite the government’s insistence to the contrary, there is gender inequality in Tajikistan. In addition, the media avoid covering the issues of sexual minorities, who face scorn and discrimination. There is also little coverage of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, which the media assume would not interest their audience. Women are well represented among media workers, although nonprofessional content producers tend to be men.

With the exception of a few independent media, the Tajik media do not

offer a wide range of opinions and ideologies. Civil society certainly uses quality information to develop and raise awareness. The government uses information from independent media when it comes to high-profile crimes involving murder, violence, independent reporting on human rights and freedom of speech.

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

Tajikistan’s ideological spectrum is narrow, as panelists said only the ruling and pro-government parties remain. Pro-government parties rarely speak out openly in the media, on social networks, or on TV, and then they support the position of the authorities.

Most media in Tajikistan concentrate on social and economic issues and avoid politics. “Everyone in the country is used to the idea that covering political issues is dangerous, both for the media and for readers,” Yusupov said. Those who criticize, or even air criticism of, powerful politicians can be charged under articles on overthrowing the constitutional order or aiding and abetting terrorism, he added.

A few new news and information sites—including Limu.tj, Halva.tj, and Zira Media—have declared that they will not cover politics to avoid tangling with the authorities, Yusupov said.

There is evidence that people consume a variety of media with political content, albeit in limited quantities, Karshiboev said. People participate in general discussions on social media but speaking out against government officials can get them into trouble.

However, Rakhmonov said, “People participate in an open and constructive discussion of quality news and information, at both offline events and social networks.”

Khalikjanova said apolitical print media seem content with a limited audience. For online news sources, the situation is reversed, with apolitical media, blogs, and social media pages enjoying larger audiences than those that cover politics. Most independent radio

stations in the country broadcast infotainment and among the most popular newspapers are tabloids that focus on entertainment news, such as *Oila* (Family), *Mukhabbat va Oila* (Love and Family), and *Crosswords*.

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

In Tajikistan, almost all media have stopped producing quality content that can shape public opinion, and newsrooms routinely self-censor. This problem was especially obvious during the pandemic, when it became illegal to disseminate unofficial estimates of COVID-19 infections, on pain of fines. Instead, media were forced to use the Health Ministry's information, which reported no or very few cases.

On the basis of this false information, Babadjanova said, people "exposed their own lives and their loved ones to the risk of infection." Others who were skeptical of government information sought treatments that were ineffective or potentially dangerous, Khalikjanova added.

Although some publications did try to use alternative statistics, Tadjibayeva said many editors began to censor their own content significantly.

Most people in Tajikistan are not politically active, but they use quality information to form their opinions on political and social issues and in meetings with their elected members of parliament. Unfortunately, that's of little use, as parliamentary elections "mostly go the way the authorities want them to, thanks largely to administrative resources," Mirzo said.

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

Panelists said the government in Tajikistan is strangling and sidelining civil society. From 2015, when the government began requiring non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to register with the Justice Ministry, until 2020, 228 groups shut down, Karshiboev said, and in 2020, these

remaining organizations received a fraction of the funding they got in 2013.

Yusupov said the media and NGOs cooperate on issues that pose no risk for the organizations and the media, which are selective in their coverage of human rights violations.

"At the same time, the bits of alternative and objective information published by Tajikistan's media can be used by NGOs to develop their strategic plans," Niyozov said.

Panelists mentioned the Coalition Against Torture among the NGOs that have journalists on their staff, actively work with the media, and produce high-quality, investigative materials. "Over the past 10 years, NGOs have learned how to interact with the media, and they include a media component in their projects. This is very useful because in NGOs, you can get high-quality and alternative information about certain problems in the country," IWPR's Khalikjanova said.

“Everyone in the country is used to the idea that covering political issues is dangerous, both for the media and for readers,” said Yusupov.

Government agencies hold tightly controlled press conferences for media and civil society groups that amount to a report on their latest work. Huseynova said they are somewhat useful.

Yusupov said civil society groups, especially those with public relations specialists, use quality news and information materials that communicate their mission or goals. He said he has never witnessed an NGO in Tajikistan disseminate inaccurate or deliberately false information. "On the contrary, more often than not, NGOs try to combat the dissemination of inaccurate and deliberately false information, for example, on human rights, domestic violence, and corruption," he said.¹⁰ For their part, the media actively work with NGOs on projects on socially important topics.

¹⁰ At least two media NGOs, Ravzana and RasonanigoR, have emerged in Tajikistan to counter the spread of false and inaccurate information.

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

Tadjibayeva noted that there is no evidence that government agencies consult the work or research of NGOs when making decisions. Instead, they typically rely on their own data or, as in the pandemic, on data from international organizations. On the rare occasions that NGOs are involved, they are those loyal to the government.

Government officials often take into account content from the media or social networks when making decisions, except in matters of human rights. And, of course, they have their own empirical data. However, when weighing decisions that benefit the authorities or lobbyists, officials usually put aside facts and data. Widespread corruption, cronyism, and regionalism impose their own unique decision-making criteria on government agencies.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Tajikistan's endemic corruption is a major obstacle to better governance and more robust democratic rights.¹¹ But in covering malfeasance, journalists rely on information from government agencies, particularly the anti-corruption agency.

Investigative journalism is rare, with almost none done in the past year. Investigations are conducted only by individual journalists and are published in international forums, such as the website of Radio Ozodi. But there is no reaction from the authorities or the public.

When an instance of wrongdoing makes headlines, officials usually hide

or fudge the facts, and in particularly important cases, they do not even hold press conferences.

“Over the past 10 years, NGOs have learned how to interact with the media, and they include a media component in their projects. This is very useful because in NGOs, you can get high-quality and alternative information about certain problems in the country,” said Khalikjanov.

People in Tajikistan usually turn to social media to post about violations of their rights. The authorities react only to minor violations, such as insults on the street or harassment of girls. On larger issues, such as harassment in the workplace, they turn a blind eye.

In Tajikistan's most recent parliamentary and presidential elections, in 2020, candidates put out no literature, held no major public events, and placed no ads in print

media. The population also showed no interest.

¹¹ Transparency International Tajikistan page, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/tajikistan>.

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