

AZERBAIJAN



Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

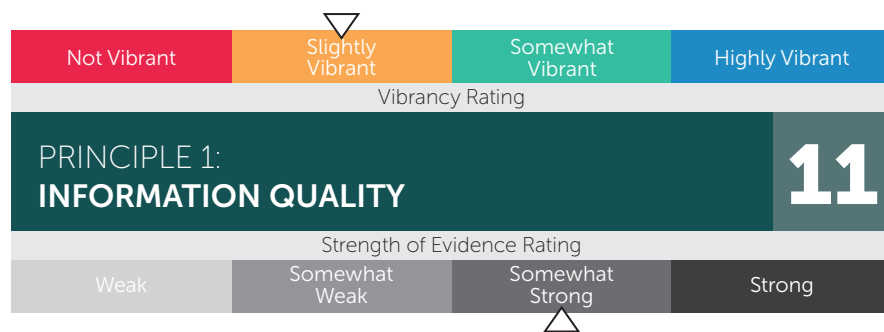
OVERALL SCORE
11

Throughout 2020, media in Azerbaijan have either stagnated or deteriorated because of COVID-19-related restrictions beginning in March, followed by the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh toward the end of the year. At this time, Internet speeds were regulated for security reasons, limiting access to news; media critical of the government were also blocked. Social media platforms remain the only space where freedom of expression can be observed; however, there is a high degree of self-censorship to avoid punishment on sensitive topics. Low media literacy, hate speech, and/or extreme nationalism clashing with the handful of progressive/liberal views still exist.

There is a wide gap between the infrastructure of Baku-based media and the media in the provinces. In any case, it is the government—or oligarch-owned media—that has a good infrastructure. However, this does not guarantee editorial independence or result in the production of quality content. Working for state-owned or controlled media does not translate into decent salaries for journalists.

Fact-based information is rare, and misinformation is rampant. The handful of independent media exist mostly online and have very limited staff and funds to create objective information. No business is allowed to advertise with local independent media; thus, their lifeline for decent financial independence is entirely cut off. Their outreach can be large, but because of existing barriers (e.g., blocking), virtual private networks (VPNs) are needed to access the websites, thereby excluding most of the older generation.

The war with Armenia in the fall of 2020 increased the viewership of state-owned television stations, as people wanted to avoid fake news on social media; however, mal-information and dehumanization of the enemy still existed. News production in Azerbaijani and Russian is common, but the same cannot be said about minority languages. Independent journalism remains an extremely high-risk profession, with constant intrusions of privacy, intimidation, or harassment by police or special forces. It is also extremely difficult or impossible for independent journalists to get the information they need from government ministries. At one point, media-related national laws were progressive, on par with Europe, but these laws and their implementation have been deteriorating each year.



Quality content production and its audience remain a major challenge in Azerbaijan. There are quality content producers--especially by Azerbaijani language services of international media like BBC, RFE/RL and VOA-- as well as few small online local media. However, their ability to expand their audiences have been limited by administrative measures of the authorities from year-to-year. The remaining independent media in Azerbaijan also lacks production equipment. In the meantime, state and oligarch-backed media outlets—which typically are much better equipped, have sustained online presences, and have more powerful transmission signals--have deep reach within Azerbaijan. However, their audiences are also selective on what to believe and what not to believe, creating information bubbles. Mal-information and misinformation are rampant under these conditions. On issues such as the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and rhetoric about the enemy, audiences in general trust these state and oligarch-back media. However, on topics like internal policies and national budget spending, their audiences do not trust them. Revenues of independent media operating within Azerbaijan are also controlled by authorities pressuring small- and medium-sized businesses on where they can and cannot advertise.

Media infrastructure in the provinces is almost nonexistent, and any such infrastructure is owned by an oligarch, leading to a lack of frequent news coverage from the regions of Azerbaijan. Provincial governors also put extra pressure or surveillance on local journalists, as they do not want any negative news about their provinces aired to the national audience.

There are several independent courses on journalism funded by

international donors, but they suffered greatly during 2020 because of the pandemic and war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. At the two state-owned universities where journalism faculty members are allowed (Baku State University and Baku Slavic Languages University), the education quality is not up to modern standards. The majority of graduates go elsewhere to find jobs.

Baku-based journalists, who compose the majority of the fleet, have not been able to travel during 2020 because of pandemic restrictions and were censored when reporting on the war. These two major events have also required journalists to be impartial and follow high journalistic standards. However, mainstream media have published materials full of hate during the war, and no one has been disciplined for this.

Although there are ethics standards set by the Press Council of Azerbaijan, they are not implemented or taken seriously. Television and radio stations sometimes have stricter standards than online or print media, but there is no outside regulator or professional ethics standard.

Baku may be flourishing with content, but the majority of this content is false or harmful news produced by unprofessional journalists. Even then, the content can be a copy and paste or unauthorized translation from other resources. Some of the copy and paste is from social media posts with no fact-checking involved.

Media that are financed by the state and by oligarchs and have staff may produce original content around nonpolitical, insignificant topics and blow them out of context. The majority of capital-based media outlets produce news that is sensational rather than contextual. The media owners' financial resources make such news more popular than that of professional media. A lack of local alternatives forces people in the provinces to buy propaganda masquerading as news.

Digital media that is aired in Azerbaijan and in the Azerbaijani language can be divided into two groups: diaspora media that is aired from outside of the country over the Internet (some of which are blocked and can only be accessed through a VPN) and media that is produced from within the country. This diaspora media gives the majority of the public its more-or-less impartial information. RFE/RL, BBC, and Voice

of America (VOA) contribute to the diversity of news and balanced journalism, but despite this, none of them are in the top 10.¹

Television and radio stations, popular websites, and most newspapers are primarily owned by the ruling elites, with the only exception being (the independent) Turan Information Agency. There are also a small number of independent news outlets online, as well as those run by the opposition. Not all of them have physical offices, making it difficult to produce quality content. Getting information from government officials is another challenge.

During the past decade, no serious critiques have been allowed in the media; any interviews cover only nonsensitive topics, and no government criticism takes place. One of the longest-running newspapers, *Azadliq*, stopped functioning in 2016. Subsequently, there are no independent newspapers still being printed, but podcasts featuring independent voices are still available.

The traditional media do not have an independent editorial team, as they are supposed to do what their owners tell them. When breaking news happens, reporting may be several hours late because of reporters not receiving instructions from above or from the central censor on how to cover the incident.

During the war, fake news and glorification of war crimes were produced by nonstate media to get more views. Because of the pandemic, journalists have to have a special permit to leave their houses during lockdown. Independent small media have not received such permits, as they are often critical of the government. Government officials never hesitate to pressure or sue journalists they do not like and to use their own media to blackmail and attack these journalists.

Journalists used to be able to cross-check or verify facts, but the government has taken steps to restrict this access. Misinformation or

disinformation is shared by online yellow media, and when the truth surfaces, they never apologize or remove their fake news. The Ministry of Interior has announced that it reprimanded 15 individuals for spreading misinformation during the pandemic, three of whom received jail terms, but there is no transparency regarding these arrests.

Officials fill the media with incorrect information or exaggerated statistics. There are minor initiatives to fight false/misleading information in media, such as Fakt Yoxla (Check Facts). However, officials are never held accountable for the misinformation they spread, even if such information is found to be false by fact-checkers. The main reason for the spread of misinformation in media is that editors take the official news as truth and copy it to their websites without verifying or cross-checking with other sources.

It is hard to say that the government does not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm. In previous years, the media has published content that included mal-information discriminating against religion, gender, and ethnicity. A local media resource, QueeRadar, monitors all Azerbaijani media and reports. There is hardly any positive coverage by state and oligarch-backed media of the LGBTQ community or their issues; however, the Azerbaijani language services of international media (BBC and RFE) and independent media like Abzas.net do cover LGBTQ issues appropriately.

During the war, using hate speech was normal in Azerbaijani media. Generalizations are common for Azerbaijani media; in general, European media and social media users who try to preserve their neutrality or who sympathize with non-military, ordinary Armenians also face hate speech, mostly from Azerbaijani social media users. In addition to the mal-information on ethnicity, harmful language (such as criminal, terrorist) is used about detainees, violating their rights of being innocent until proven guilty in court.

Some panelists believed that the reason for the widespread use of mal-

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1 Amazon, "Top Sites in Azerbaijan," Alexa.com. Undated. <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/AZ>.

information is that even knowledgeable employees of the government-controlled media are under pressure and closely surveilled. As a result, they only express their criticism against political opponents of the government and against Armenians, since these targets will not put those journalists on the radar of the authorities. No news has surfaced about foreign governments or their proxies creating or disseminating content that is intended to harm in 2020.

There is news and information in Azerbaijani and in the second-most commonly used language, Russian. Azerbaijan is a small country, but there are villages that have never seen a real journalist. The state-controlled mainstream media rarely highlight the social and economic problems of these communities. Many people do not know how to use the Internet or social media. One of the country's largest minorities—the Talysh, who live in the south—have a newspaper (*Tolisho Sado*) in their language, but two editors-in-chief from this newspaper have served prison terms for various charges in previous years (one of them died in prison).

Other ethnic minorities mainly do not have any barriers to promote their culture but neither do they get much support. National TV channels and programs may occasionally cover their traditions or religious rituals. Some religious communities have resources of their own; if they are loyal to the authorities, their news may be aired on TV. However, sexual minorities are subject to propaganda or prejudice. National TV channels and media will almost never report from LGBTQ or feminist protests or events since they are seen as a threat to the political system.

In many instances, communities whose viewpoints are excluded and marginalized groups who are not represented in the mainstream media use social media to express their views. It is only the diaspora or international media in Azerbaijani that highlight the problems of these groups—if the viewer can bypass the blocking through a VPN. The lack of open communication with marginalized groups deprives the entire society of learning about their issues and building stronger ties.

The majority of journalists are women. While some may be in a managerial role, most of the media is owned by men. Journalists cannot

declare their different gender/sexual identity and work in the media openly, although presenters can act, dress, or talk differently than their formal gender identity at some TV channels.

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.

There are no independent financial resources that guarantee the independent functioning of Azerbaijani media. *Azadliq* newspaper's print version completely died, and it switched to an online version. Other small-to-medium independent media outlets, such as Meydan TV and Arqument, are struggling to make ends meet and must ask their viewers to help them financially. The older generation relies on—and purchases—only print versions of newspapers.

In previous years, the government has issued free apartments to journalists loyal to it. Fortunately, there are still a few small media outlets and news agencies like *Turan* that have rejected such “deals.”

Currently, independent media, bloggers, and other media celebrities get revenue from social media; however, it is forbidden for media, journalists, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to get outside grants without a prior (and seemingly formidable) four-stage approval by the government.

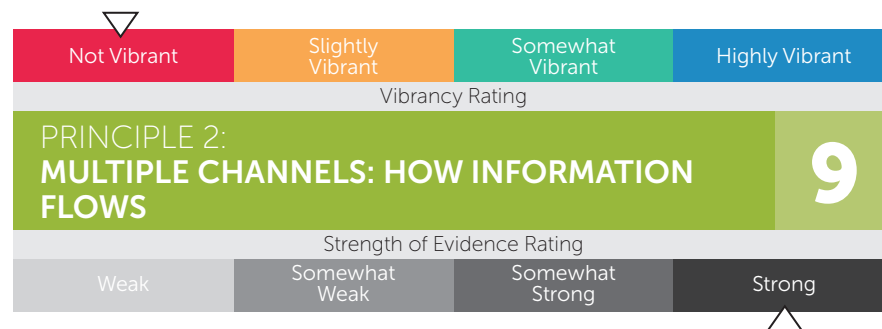
The Media Development Agency, founded by the president in January 2021, says that it will ensure the media's freedom and funding. However, it will be governed by the president, who also approves its board members. The agency's predecessor is the State Support Fund for Mass Media Development, whose funds were mishandled.

Financial resources for media outlets are not declared anywhere; the

only exception is for Azerbaijan's public television, as it is part of the budget approval process each year. There are also no resources in the country to identify the cost of advertising, and so small businesses use Google and Facebook advertising.

Journalists are generally poor and underpaid. Even salaries at the best-paying media outlets are low. Salaries at state-owned newspapers are higher, but they hardly produce any valuable content. The financial situation of journalists who work for independent media outlets are even worse. They do not have the luxury of changing their jobs for a better salary unless they betray their ideals to work for the opposite side. Their only solution is to have more than one job.

Advertising is politicized and fully controlled. In Azerbaijan, criticism and advertising are mutually exclusive: The more criticism of the government that is published, the less advertising revenue that is received. Thus, the majority of advertising goes to state-affiliated TVs, radios, and their websites. According to one panelist, the current annual advertising market is around AZN 7–8 million (\$4.1 million - \$4.7 million); another panelist believed that Azerbaijan's independent media will continue to rely on international donors for this reason.



Almost all panelists agreed that information flow is restricted through various administrative and legal measures. Laws have been amended to mask ownership of media that have been greenlit by the authorities. Moreover, these owners exercise editorial control of their media. Independent journalists seeking government information either face delay or denial. If they manage to uncover this information and publish

material that is critical of the authorities, they risk being targeted systematically or randomly with arrests and police brutality during reporting from rallies and other protests. As part of the culture and governmental bureaucratic hurdles, information in minority languages is scarce or limited to official news.

Despite Azerbaijan guaranteeing freedom of the press both in its constitution and by joining international conventions, this is not the case when it comes to media freedom and journalist safety. In many cases, the censorship rules and the methods of punishment are informal. Journalists are punished on made-up charges far more frequently than for libel. This situation in turn frightens the next generation of journalists.

Several social media personalities have been detained or fined for criticizing the government's quarantine policies and actions. While filming a protest against election fraud in front of the Central Election Commission on February 11, journalists were met with police brutality and were interrogated along with everyone else for hours. None of the state-affiliated media reported this incident.

Currently, two journalists—Polad Aslanov and Afghan Sadygov—are said to be serving prison terms for political reasons and are holding hunger strikes to protest their unfair trials. Laws are drafted and adopted so that journalists who show independence can be prosecuted. Such laws can be adopted at any time by a fraudulently elected parliament. These changes serve to further limit freedom of press. Mobile phones have been smashed and cameras confiscated during—and because of—reporting on controversial subjects. Journalists are not only harassed for doing their jobs but also are cornered by officials and law enforcement agencies.

For example, one panelist narrated how they traveled to Mingachevir to report on war-shelled houses and their surviving residents. On the way back, their car was stopped, and the crew was taken to the police department. Although this journalist had a press card and travel permit, their recording was erased from the camera, and they were ordered to leave the city. The explanation given was that they did not have “a permit from the presidential administration.” A similar incident

happened to a journalist during their travel to Gandja, another war-torn town during the 2020 clash. The crew was stopped, and they were told that they could film only if a call came from the presidential administration. Unfortunately, independent journalists do not have the luxury of asking for permission from the administration: Given the background of journalists who criticize the government, it is unlikely they would get it.

Information and communication technology infrastructure are in place in urban places and mostly meet the information needs of the people, but citizens with disabilities cannot fully use the infrastructure. There have been issues with Internet speed in recent years. The speed is even lower in rural places where fiber-optic, high-speed Internet is not available, and plans to expand it into the regions have been delayed. The cost of having Internet access is not affordable, given the income level of the population. This may explain why the majority of people still get their news from rabbit-ear or roof-antennae TVs. In general, state-owned channels have better signals throughout the country. Cable TV stations are only available in major cities, not in rural areas. There is no closed captioning for news programs; only the state TV (AzTV1) has this.

Issuing licenses for new television or radio frequencies (those you can get with a regular home antenna) is under strict control of the government. The government also controls Internet providers, and through them it can control content and block websites it considers unpleasant or uncomfortable, such as Meydan TV and Azadliq radio (RFE/RL).

The Internet was cut or its speed was controlled throughout the war with Armenia. The download/upload speed was especially slow at the frontline regions. Users quickly learned VPN technology to access blocked resources. Despite the calls of human rights activists and journalists, the Internet was not restored until after the war was over on November 9. This has affected not only media users but also schoolchildren who had to study from home because of pandemic restrictions.

It has been quite a challenge for journalists to get information to produce the news, even with Azerbaijan's 2005 Law on Access to

Information. When the law was adopted, it was the most progressive law in Azerbaijan, even meeting European standards. However, each subsequent year, the most advanced sections of this law were removed or changed. Simultaneously, significant changes were made to the Law on Mass Media and to the Law on Information and Protection of Information to give the government more influence and control over the media. For example, the changes made to the latter law make it easy to block news websites.

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.

Journalist inquiries to government offices either remain unanswered or only partially answered. Officials avoid contact with independent journalists, avoid their questions, or never answer them. Another trick is to give false or exaggerated information to journalists. While every ministry has a website, they are not updated regularly, possibly on purpose to avoid giving information to journalists. To impede journalist investigations, the government shut down the state tax registry a

few years ago so that journalists cannot easily find companies owned by the ruling family or affiliated individuals.

Sometimes court cases to access government information pile up, and if one is lucky, the court will decide in one's favor in a short period of time. Turan Information Agency is a leader in filing such cases. But not all of these offices follow the letter of the law and may not implement the court's verdict ordering them to give information. Public officials at ministries often do not answer their phones, or if they do, they are rude to journalists. One panelist shared that the Ministry of Emergency Situations refused to give information on the national budget's allocation for housing renovations after the major 2012 earthquake in Zagarala, calling this information "for internal use only." Journalists

think that, given the massive corruption in government, the culture of secrecy is natural to them.

The ombudsman's office that normally would help journalists get information is nonfunctional. The office has taken no administrative action to help journalists get information, has never sued any government office, and does not deny it.²

There are no laws in place that require transparency in media ownership, and information on ownership is considered a state secret. The list of TV and radio licenses are closely controlled by the government, and new ones are issued to individuals or companies within the circle of the ruling elites. Licenses are issued by the National Television and Radio Council, but the procedure is not transparent. There is a list of documents that should be submitted to request a license, but such a request is unlikely to pass the first stage. Thus, it is easier for most content producers to launch YouTube-based TV channels.

There is a strict state monopoly for issuing frequencies for FM radio and TV stations. Any attempt to establish an independent or professional radio/TV channel by a local or a foreigner is doomed to fail. There are no truly independent TV or radio channels in the country. Public Television and Radio, as well as the state-owned AzTV, are under the strict control of the government.

Some progress is seen both in quality of content and innovation in some recent shows on Public Television. For example, the popular *3D* show has a fictional host interviewing opposition figures (who would not be invited to other channels) and some government officials on subjects that are banned or that would not be discussed in other state-controlled TV and media. The YouTube or Facebook viewership of these clips is between 100 and 800, depending on the interview. The channel reaches the homes of more than five million people. One relatively recent and

progressive show on Public Television is *Sabaha saxlamayaaq* (Let's not keep it until tomorrow) that discusses issues women face. However, Public Television also produces and airs radical shows that reflect the views of the hierarchies. For example, *Halbuki* is a literal translation of *Odnako*, a similar show on the Russian government's Channel One that aims to reveal foreign enemies and defend domestic values to distract public opinion from current issues.

Public Television follows the lead of other mainstream, government-controlled media for news. In the best-case scenario, it criticizes some minor officials or social problems but would turn into a propaganda tool for the country, if necessary, during crucial times. The Institute for Democratic Initiatives has monitored nine media outlets prior to and during the parliamentary elections, with the results showing that all information broadcast on Public Television was in favor of the government and its supporters.

Major issues—such as an assassination attempt against the governor of Gandja, protests around the trial of suspects whose bullying against a schoolgirl drove her to commit suicide, and the trial of politician Tofiq Yagublu—are never on the news on state-controlled electronic media.

Internet service providers control the Internet and download/upload speeds. Providers also block access to undesired news and information websites, some of which has been identified through internal regulations and motions. Both in-country and out-country news resources were blocked in earlier years—such as Meydan TV, Turan TV (website), Azerbaijan Saati (website), and local resources such as *Azadliq*. Internet service providers also discriminate against their clients, disconnecting Internet or cutting power to prevent Internet access when necessary.³

Criticisms of the ruling party, the president, and the vice president are

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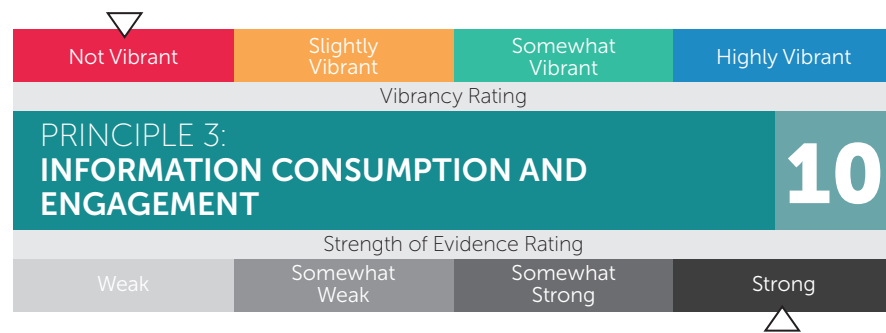
2 Azadliq Radiosu, "Dövlət orqanları 100 sorğudan 25-nə cavab verir." January 11, 2021. <https://www.azadliq.org/a/31041930.html>.

3 FaktYoxla, "Əli Kərimli qanunsuz olaraq informasiya blokadasına salınıb." April 27, 2020. <https://faktyoxla.info/articles/Eli-Kerimli-qanunsuz-olaraq-informasiya-blokadasina-salinib>; Khadija Ismayil, Facebook post. February 6, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/khadija.ismayil/posts/10206483935775731>.

not aired on state, public-service, or any TV and radio stations. Only their critics get criticized on these channels, proving that media financing is politicized. The major media outlets are entirely funded by the state or from assets stolen by people who are in the government.

Governmental regulatory bodies that oversee frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services are not independent nor politically neutral; they all serve the president, and the situation has only gotten worse with each passing decade. Major media outlets are financed by officials who hold senior positions in the executive or legislative government, and they do influence content.

Any businesses that advertise in media associated with the opposition or that criticize the government will automatically be confronted by the authorities. Advertising has always been under strict government inspection, ensuring that only government friendly media gets advertising. Whoever breaks this rule gets punished by administrative measures.



The year of 2020 was another awful year for the digital security of independent or opposition media journalists, website blocking, and distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks of critical resources. Media literacy has not been promoted by the government, and thus, a new generation is being brought up to accept the official narrative as truth. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, remain the only platforms for public debate, although not everyone dares to express themselves on sensitive topics often identified by authorities as “political” or “politicized”—such as holding the government accountable and official

corruption. Only a few media outlets are aware of the importance of audience analysis and have the skills to do it. With a few exceptions identified during the discussion, community media outlets are very few and do not have broad audiences. The same can be said about media for vulnerable/marginalized groups.

Freedom of expression has not improved from previous years, and people get detained or arrested on bogus charges—and face lengthy prison sentences—if they dare to attend an unsanctioned rally, despite it being included as a constitutional right. Some panelists noted some improvements in Public TV, which has given a voice to politicians and critics who were previously banned from appearing on its broadcasts; however, other panelists felt that this space is only for softer critics of the regime.

Very few media professionals or content producers are familiar with digital threats or how to use digital tools to protect themselves. Many still use Russian domain email addresses. Some learned how to use a VPN during the war when the Internet access was restricted. However, many citizens, especially older and middle-aged people, remain uninformed during this period due to lower technology skills preventing use of VPNs.

Local media do not attempt to train their staff. Only when such training is offered by a third party can media accept them. These trainings are not accessible for all. The majority of content creators are also unaware of basic digital and data literacy skills, including data optimization.

There are DDOS and other attacks to dissident media, including hacking of their media accounts. However, compared to four or five years ago, news resources that are at risk have better website protections, but that does not mean they are safe. In 2020, a DDOS attack was carried out against the “Movement” election bloc.

Digital threats include hacking into personal email, cell phone, and social media accounts of journalists and stealing journalists’ information and photos to use them for blackmail. The government monitors and controls social media accounts such as Facebook, Telegram, and so on. According to some claims, mobile phone operators have helped with the

hacking by providing two-step authentication codes to the hackers.

There are laws in place that should protect everyone from cybercrimes. However, given how law enforcement agencies have limitless power, these laws are useless.

Media literacy is at a very low level among the ordinary citizens and journalists. No effort is directed toward improving the situation, since critical thinking is not encouraged by the authorities. In many cases, viewers cannot differentiate fake news from real news, and they share fake news frequently. Generally, this happens on social media where the fake information is shared by young people multiple times. One panelist noted that ordinary users—non-journalists—have gradually started to differentiate high-quality news and content from low-quality ones.

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.

There is a little information about media and information through Həyat Bilgisi (Knowledge of Nature) teaching in elementary schools. But since teachers' media literacy is not at the desired level, the children are not properly educated. Firudin Gurbanov, the deputy minister of education, has discussed the importance of increasing media literacy courses in schools, but the reality is that in education—from elementary school to high school—pupils learn from textbooks that propagate loyalty to the ruling party. Expectations of loyalty to the regime include the example of a foreign journalist who asked a question

of the president during a press conference right after the war ended. The president blamed the journalist for judging him and society, and even some practicing journalists criticized the foreign journalist for asking

tough questions—indicating that the majority in Azerbaijan do not understand what the media is supposed to do.

The media skills of some journalists are undeveloped; therefore, the journalists do not know how to produce content professionally—never mind understand the legal and ethical ramifications of unprofessional content. The majority of state or oligarchic news coverage is mostly one-sided, and those who are accused or blamed are never interviewed. Journalism classes at colleges are carried out by those who have no practical skills in media. Only a small portion of the population and journalists know how to check facts, recognize disinformation, and distinguish high-quality news from poor-quality news.

Freedom of speech and the right to information remain problematic. If citizens practice these “rights,” it is done at their own risk. Anyone can be fraudulently arrested for speaking out and can be treated brutally by the police, as was the case on International Women's Day (March 8) or following the parliamentary elections. The most prominent case has been the arrest of a leading opposition party member, outspoken activist Tofiq Yagublu, who was arrested for hooliganism after a staged car accident. In protest, Yagublu started a hunger strike. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House demanded his immediate release, and Yagublu was released on September 18, 2020.

Only independent or surrogate media—such as Turan Information Agency, Toplum TV, Meydan TV, RFE/RL, VOA, and BBC—can claim to have established virtual platforms for public debate. State-affiliated TV stations such as Public Television have made some changes in their behavior by inviting some people banned by the state, but these attempts are still tentative, as only certain subjects that are okay to discuss are chosen. Hard-core opposition is still left out, and sensitive topics are omitted.

Editors-in-chief of the media outlets that have published critical pieces about authorities have been invited to the Office of the Public Prosecutor and have received warnings to stop publishing such pieces and to remove such online materials immediately. These outlets have been blocked if the response was negative. Journalists critical of authorities

are not even admitted into press conferences held by the Management Union of Medical Territorial Units (TABIB), a government body that administers COVID-19–related measures. Citizens who live in suburbs and send complaints to the president often get punished with bogus, unrelated charges by either local or central authorities for daring to do so.

Ordinary citizens cannot host free town hall meetings, especially in public places. The same goes for political parties that have offices. Only the Musavat Party sometimes hosts town hall meetings on crucial issues; however, these meetings are closely monitored by the police, who interfere if necessary.

Some social media users (e.g., Facebook users) exercise their freedom of speech or post some objective fact-based information. Such users are faced with an army of trolls, who are said to be sponsored by authorities and who distort the subjects discussed or sensationalize insignificant subjects. Authorities have fined or imprisoned government-criticizing journalists who have performed their duties in public for violating the COVID-19 quarantine.

YouTube-based Azerbaijani channels whose hosts live outside of the country manage to get high views and discuss issues that would be too sensitive to consider within Azerbaijan.

Mainstream media that create sensationalist news or propaganda do not find out what the audience needs but decide for the audience what can or cannot be discussed. The truth is kept hidden, or it could be presented in an exaggerated format. These media outlets' social media pages delete comments with criticism and block or troll such users. Many of these websites are closed to comments. There is no option to write to the editor; the chief editor's name is not published. The exceptions to this are some independent media, including the Azerbaijani-language services of media such as RFE/RL and VOA, where comments can be published under articles.

Freedom of speech and the right to information remain problematic. If citizens practice these “rights,” it is done at their own risk.

There is a union for editors-in-chief of a few relatively independent media outlets. The union meets and discusses what has happened recently, but their influence is very limited.

Some government agencies have recently responded to criticism through social media. This is a new and positive trend, considering that a few years ago they were ignored.

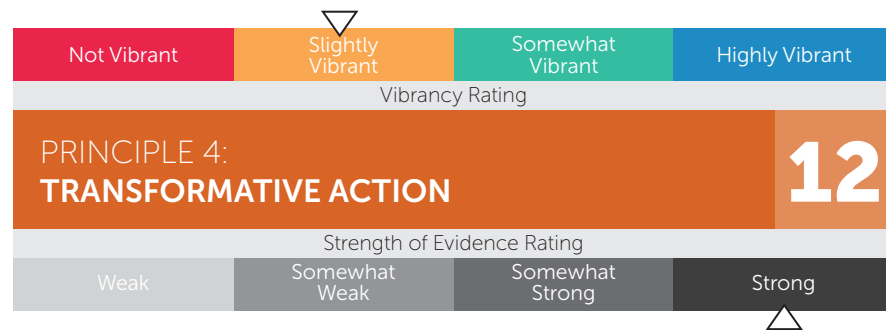
Since mainstream media's agendas come directly from the government, they do not care what the audience wants. The only shows that may follow audience interest are entertainment programs, such as soap operas, lifestyle talk shows, and so on.

Many panelists did not have good examples of community media, but some notable examples include Maştağa TV (now Bakı Kəndləri) on YouTube or Salyan Xəbərləri (Salyan News) on Telegram. Such channels mainly cover social or cultural matters about their community rather than serious or political matters than might compromise their freedom.

Some other provinces have community media dedicated to their towns or regions, such as Mingəçevir işıqları (Mingachevir Lights) in Mingachevir or Cənub xəbərləri (Southern News) for Masally and surrounding areas. Their viewership is not significant. They are also under significant pressure from local authorities or the governor's office. Some districts have town newspapers—a hard-copy version, as well as a remnant of the Soviet Union—and it cannot be called real community media. And these media are, of course, still owned or operated by the local authorities or the governor's office.

A relatively new example of community media is Arabacı TV (which means several things in the Azerbaijani language, including “wheelchair driver”). It operates entirely on social media and dedicates itself to issues regarding physical disabilities. While the outlet does not want to have problems with the government, it has been quite outspoken lately about the problems of physically disabled veterans of the recent war.

Another example is the feminist YouTube channel Fem-Utopia. It covers topics that no other channel or media discuss. Minority Azerbaijan is another media outlet that covers issues of the Azerbaijani LGBTQ community. It is also active on social media, including Facebook. These two have never been observed to spread false information. Both of their respective communities provide support to these media through volunteering their time or providing donations.



A handful non-partisan media exist, and they aim to stand on their feet and expand their presence. Independent civil society organizations in Azerbaijan, which suffered during a 2013-2014 purge, are trying to make a comeback and re-establish their footprints. Access to high-speed internet in rural areas is still rare, which in turn limits population’s access to more quality news and information. Given this lack of access, panelists noted that people are more susceptible to believe in conspiracy theories and hesitate to get vaccinated (with whatever is available in the country).

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist, such as the independent media previously discussed here. Other new additions are the recently revived Baku Press Club, a union of prominent and old-school editors, and Açıq Azərbaycan (Open Azerbaijan). Some of them (such as Meydan TV) have or used to have an extensive audience, and they do have digital information exchanges with audiences through social media platforms

“The government is choking independent media so that they do not show corruption or election fraud; websites are blocked (except for YouTube) or journalists are arrested.”

such as Facebook. There are plenty of partisan media that include fake news, and this news is broadly discussed on social media as well. Any exchanges of information or constructive discussions happen almost entirely on social media.

There are no constructive discussions on or around the content created by TV channels. Many of their audiences are fans of entertainment shows such as *Səni axtarıram* (Looking for You, a show that searches for missing family members or friends), whose fraudulent episodes have been disproven during fact-checking.

People who live in rural areas cannot feasibly verify the information they hear or view given their poor, or nonexistent, Internet connections. As a result, these people draw conclusions or make up their minds about certain opposition politicians or popular activists based on blackmail-type coverage or mal-information from state-controlled TV stations. Those who are active Internet and social media users are in a better position to cross-check their information with other sources or make a judgment for themselves. However, this information often has no value. For example, more information does not change the outcome of fraudulent information.

One panelist believed that a delay in sharing accurate information by the government-controlled media causes an exponential spread of disinformation in the public, sometimes with anecdotal consequences. One such rumor artificially increased the price of ginger to a record high (10 times more than regular price), as it was believed to be a cure for COVID-19. Each time citizens discover disinformation or mal-information, they lose trust in any official news or information. This was crucially important during 2020 when the leadership—using professional medical information—tried to convince people to wear masks, obey quarantine measures, and vaccinate, but the majority have not believed it and violated the measures. Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 being a tool to control or exterminate populations spread much more successfully thanks to

Russian- and Turkish-language fake news published via WhatsApp and other apps. Some of this disinformation—such as spraying disinfectant over the entire city of Baku from helicopters or planes—was created in Azerbaijan.

Civil society still exists even after the raids of 2013–2014; however, their views are ignored by the authorities. In the past 10 years, repressive changes have been made to laws that once were considered progressive. These changes have seriously harmed the interests of citizens and civil society, and they have limited the activities of NGOs. Currently, the majority of NGOs are under close government surveillance, and this has also affected their independence. These NGOs function under harsh conditions but attempt to present the real situation with their research and comparative studies. Independent journalists use these NGOs' expertise in preparing their reports.

There are also plenty of government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) in the country. GONGOs do exactly the opposite of NGOs and produce poor-quality reports that are not usable by independent media. While NGOs are struggling to get funding—especially from abroad given that there are no local funds available to them, as their bank accounts have been frozen since 2014—GONGOs are relatively better off with funding from the state-controlled Council on State Support to NGOs.

In addition to NGOs, civic activists try to introduce the public to quality information and universal values.

Government officials rarely hold press conferences or meetings with NGOs. If such meetings are held, then it is pro-government media and GONGOs that are invited to these meetings or press conferences, as the officials know that these organizations support them or will not ask the wrong questions. These officials distort facts and present disinformation as truth. This includes information about economic indicators, the unemployment level, population income, and socioeconomic conditions.

In 2020, in the 17th year of his presidency, Ilham Aliyev—who had only given interviews to Russian media (in Russia)—for the first time gave an

interview to local media. He also gave multiple interviews and broadcast live during the war with Armenia. The year 2020 has also been significant as the newly appointed presidential aide Hikmat Hajiyev and the newly appointed Minister of Education Emin Amrullayev have been giving interviews and holding open press conferences in a more progressive way than their predecessors. Throughout the year, the old guard minister of health did not appear on TV shows or interviews. Instead, the Cabinet of Minister's Operations Headquarters and the newly created public body TABIB and their team were organizing press conferences to provide updates to the public on the pandemic. It has appeared that the government has been forced to be accountable because of COVID-19, but not all (especially independent) journalists were allowed to attend these press conferences. Some of the excluded journalists published their questions online so that the journalists who were present at these

press conferences could ask the questions for them.

In a strong society where there is government accountability, independent media's information about the violations of human rights and freedoms should influence change—or at least the outcome of elections. However, one panelist observed that this does not happen in Azerbaijan because the strong government does not care about these reports on corruption, excessive force, and election fraud, and the weak society cannot do much about it even if it were well informed. There are several journalists who have used modern ways to reveal huge corruption within the government. Their reports have been published in Organized

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.

Crime and Corruption Reporting Project papers. The government denies these facts, even in the most obvious cases—for example, responding to videos from election day that show ballot stuffing by saying it did not happen or affect overall outcome. The only recourse the candidates whose rights are violated have is to submit their cases to the European Court of Human Rights a few years later and possibly receive monetary compensation; however, this does not change the fact that their parliamentary seats were stolen from them. It is for these reasons that the government is choking independent media so that they do not show corruption or election fraud; websites are blocked (except for YouTube) or journalists are arrested.

Another panelist observed that when approximately six governors (whose public arrests were shown on primetime news and on multiple channels) were detained or committee chairs were dismissed with corruption charges in 2020, the official media or security services filmed and showcased their unexplained vast wealth—multiple villas, expensive cars, and cash or jewelry—which was a result of internecine clashes between opposing factions within the government.

Because of the restrictive media environment, participants in the Azerbaijan study will remain anonymous. An Azerbaijani journalist developed this chapter after a series of structured interviews with colleagues who have firsthand knowledge of the media and information sector.

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