GEORGIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2021

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

19

Turbulence from the COVID-19 pandemic and parliamentary elections rocked the Georgian media and information system in 2020. Misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda swamped the information space, while the government tightened control over the media—leading to a deterioration of media freedom in the country.

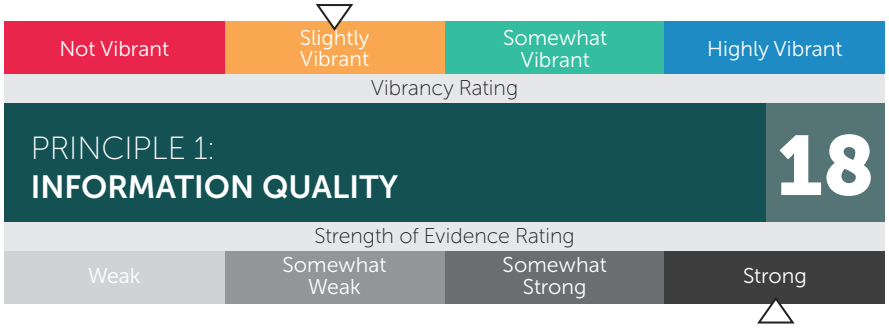
COVID-19's adverse impact on Georgia's media showed in the treatment of journalists. First, the country's leading public health authorities shunned major media outlets for asking critical questions. Second, journalists' access to public information, already constrained before COVID-19, worsened. Finally, the upended economy damaged the overall media sector's financial health.

VIBE panelists criticized the government's inability to protect journalists through the parliamentary elections and their aftermath. Several journalists were injured and attacked during protests against allegedly rigged elections. Authorities also filed legal cases against journalists, charging Mtavari TV journalists, for example, with "sabotage" for allegedly misinforming people and discrediting the government.

The tension-filled pre-election period kept national broadcasters split along political lines. Only a few small, mostly online outlets provided unbiased, impartial news about political processes and candidates to help their audiences make informed choices. Political rivals spread propaganda in social media to discredit each other, denigrate critical media, and promote their own goals. Ruling party representatives commonly resort to smear campaigns and cynical, derogatory statements toward critical and independent media, making it clear that the government does not expect to be held accountable by the media. Russian disinformation further polluted the information landscape. Conspiracy theories, fake news, anti-Western propaganda, and divisive narratives favoring pro-Russian politicians poured through social media to manipulate public opinion and obfuscate the truth.

Despite slight improvements, poor media literacy among citizens continues to be a challenge; public initiative and engagement with quality information are yet not sufficiently entrenched in the local culture. However, civil society is strong, working to promote a culture of diversity and inclusion and pushing the government toward democratic policies.

The first principle, on information quality, received the lowest score of 18. Principles 2 (multiple channels of information) and 3 (consumption and engagement) both received 19. The fourth principle (transformative action) received a slightly higher score of 20.



Overall, this principle was scored the lowest of all VIBE principles in the Georgia study. Sub-indicators on mal-information and funding received lower scores compared to other sub-indicators. Despite an abundance of information created by both professional and non-professional content producers, a plethora of misinformation spreads through print and broadcast media, digital media, and social networks. Mal-information and hate speech permeate social networks. Pro-Russian actors, as well as social networks, spread Russian disinformation.

Two major events—the COVID-19 pandemic and parliamentary elections—made the situation worse. Still, a handful of small, independent, mostly online outlets, including Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, on.ge, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Georgian Service, and Publika.ge, manage to produce fact-based, well-sourced, quality content for their readers.

Most panelists agreed the infrastructure for the creation and distribution of information is more or less adequate for most media. However, small broadcasters, print, and online media outlets suffer from supply shortages and a lack of quality equipment and infrastructure. Gela Mtivlishvili, director of Information Centers Network (ICN) and editor of online websites Mtisambebi.ge and Reginfo.ge, mentioned that poor Internet access is a perennial headache for his staff. Most high-performance publishing houses are centered in Tbilisi, which made access particularly difficult for the media outside the capital during the spring's pandemic lockdown, according to Ia Mamaladze, publisher of the newspaper *Guria News* in western Georgia.

The pandemic's negative impact on the education system, which led the government to close schools and universities and switch to online learning, reduced the amount and quality of practical training for journalists, too. Nata Dzvelishvili, director of Indigo Publishing, also teaches journalism at Black Sea University; she described the challenge of teaching online practical journalism classes, which normally rely on intensive fieldwork: "Such courses, in fact, failed in 2020."

Apart from these setbacks, the majority of panelists agree that there are ample opportunities for students, new graduates, and professional journalists to study. There are about 15 universities that offer journalism degrees, and there are no obstacles to enrollment. However, regional media schools are not usually equipped with high-quality instructors or technical facilities to ensure the preparation of skilled journalists. Media support organizations, such as Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSFG), Internews, and IREX, continue to provide various training and consultancy programs to national and regional media outlets.

Kamila Mamedova, founder of a community radio station in an ethnic Azerbaijani-populated region, said that language barriers hinder the participation of ethnic minority journalists in training programs. "The only exception is the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs Media Lab, which conducts trainings in the Azerbaijani language for local communities," she noted.

Panelists agreed that quality information that adheres to professional standards and ethical norms is available for the public, but the number of content producers who generate such content is relatively small. At the other end of the spectrum, politically biased mainstream broadcast or online media churn out a large amount of information that often blurs the lines between reality and manipulation. Nino Jangirashvili, director of Kavkasia TV, summed it up bluntly: "Most legacy and online media are not interested in facts anymore."

Dzvelishvili stressed that although the role of the mainstream television broadcasters in uncovering truth and revealing hidden facts is instrumental, "recently, it has become a common tendency for journalists to extend their opinions as facts.… Ultimately, this harms everyone. The public loses trust in media."

Journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting, the panelists generally agreed; however, they diverged on whether professional consequences stir any improvement of media performance. Natia Kuprashvili, director of the Journalism Resource Center, said that self-regulation mechanisms of some mainstream broadcasters have improved—with the exception of pro-government outlets. According to Dzvelishvili, individuals usually drive any positive steps taken by broadcasters, and they are not reflected in the long-term approaches of the outlets.

Citizens tend to direct complaints about perceived reporting errors to the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (GCJE), which Tamar Kintsurashvili, director of Media Development Foundation (MDF), traces to the public's insufficient knowledge of how broadcast self-regulation mechanisms work. Citizen appeals accounted for 56 of 96 complaints submitted to the GCJE in 2020; the majority of these complaints concerned reporting accuracy.

Mainstream media content mostly focuses on the coverage of crucial national events, including political and social issues. Mamuka Andguladze, a media program manager at Transparency Georgia, said that media often fail to cover events in Georgia's occupied territories (Abkhazeti and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia) properly. The mainstream media also tends to neglect issues that "do not have political flavor," such as citizens' discontent over illegal construction in the center of Batumi, the second-largest city in Georgia, according to Sofia Zhgenti, head of online service at Ajara Public Broadcaster.

Media cover foreign events, although the reporting is usually fragmented. For a few years, Netgazeti.ge, an online outlet, has reported about the South Caucasus countries. There are several other online outlets with a regional focus aimed mostly at informing foreign audiences, such as Jam-news.net, OC-Media.ge, ChaiKhana.org, eurasianet.org, and a few others. Maia Mikashavidze, program director at Internews Georgia, notes that a couple of new programs—Politikis Formula (The Formula of Politics) on Formula TV and Mtavari Msoplioshi (Mtavari in the World) on Mtavari TV helped narrow the gap in foreign coverage by national broadcasters. In addition, Euronews started broadcasting in Georgian providing local, regional and international news to its audiences.

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.

Generally, the panelists agreed that journalists hold the government accountable for its actions, but they said it does not always yield positive results. Jangirashvili pointed to the unanswered media inquiry into government spending during the pandemic as an example.

Different actors circulate misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda through traditional media and social networks. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 and the run-up to the October parliamentary election amplified the problem. Some panelists claimed that it can be hard to distinguish between misinformation and mal-information, but most agree that pro-government media trampled objectivity. Hatia Jinjikhadze, media program director at Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), cited pro-governmental Imedi TV's coverage of the case of David Gareji, a monastery complex close to the disputed Georgian-Azerbaijani border territory, as a true example of disinformation[1]—designed to reinforce the government's claims rather than inform the public. The coverage aimed to discredit the United National Movement (UNM) party, the largest opposition party, accusing it of handing over the disputed territory to Azerbaijan and blaming two cartographers, the panelists explained. During the pre-election period, Imedi TV promoted the slogan "Gareji is Georgia," which other pro-government outlets quickly adopted, said Nino Danelia, an Ilia State University media professor.

1 Kincha, Shota. "Georgia Blames Former 'Senior Officials' for Davit Gareji Border Dispute," OC Media. January 21, 2020. https://oc-media.org/georgia-blames-former-senior-officials-for-davit-gareja-border-dispute/.

Most panelists expressed concern about objectivity and impartiality in mainstream broadcasters, referred to either as critical or pro-opposition media. Kuprashvili recalled a statement by the director of Mtavari TV: "Emotions are more important than facts," which she said exemplifies the outlet's editorial agenda. Dzvelishvili sees a growing trend of media failing to search for facts, "They already have formed attitudes, and they try to strengthen those attitudes in their reports."

Government and opposition political forces encourage the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media, the panelists agree, with the government spending more resources on the activity and having a bigger sway over public opinion. In May and October 2020, Facebook announced plans to remove Facebook accounts, pages, groups, and Instagram accounts as part of a Georgia-focused network linked to the ruling Georgian Dream party, the UNM, Alliance of Patriots, and Georgian Choice. Outlets that traditionally spread pro-Russian propaganda, such as News Front, GeWorld.ge, Sakinformi.ge, and others, were also active in 2020; Facebook removed News Front from its platform in April.

> **"Recently, it has become a common tendency for journalists to extend their opinions as facts... Ultimately, this harms everyone. The public loses trust in media," said Dzvelishvili.**

Panelists believe that mal-information and hate speech spread through social networks and different platforms is harming the information space. Saba Chikhladze, social media manager at the RFE/RL Georgian Service, reviews content in social media to try to prevent the spread of misinformation. He said he sifts through at least 40,000 comments monthly, adding that it is especially difficult to moderate comments to live content. He said that it is not always trolls and bots that he has to tackle, but rather comments from regular people, which also should be examined carefully.

Most of the mal-information and hate speech in social media can be traced to Russian disinformation and propaganda efforts, although local media outlets with an anti-Western agenda and political actors with pro-Kremlin preferences contribute, too. The infodemic that followed the COVID-19 pandemic brought out a plethora of harmful content. Russian sources spread conspiracy theories and disinformation about the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research in Tbilisi, which for a time was the only place testing COVID-19 patients. In Tskhinvali, the pro-Russian de facto authorities accused Georgians of attempting to bring COVID-19 to Tskhinvali from the Lugar laboratory[2] and accused the lab of pursuing biowarfare programs. Another widely circulated conspiracy theory disputed the existence of the virus that causes COVID-19. Disinformation involving vaccines, meanwhile, fed on rather strong anti-vaccine sentiment in Georgia.

Several organizations carry out fact-checking, such as Factcheck.ge, Mythdetector.ge, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Lab, and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED). These organizations cooperate with international fact-checking platforms and social networks, such as Facebook. A media critique platform run by GCJE, Mediachecker.ge, is aimed mostly at informing the professional media community and monitors ethical and professional journalism. ISFED's pre-election monitoring of social media revealed that in the lead-up to parliamentary elections, disinformation and discrediting content started to build up even more from Russian and domestic sources. One analysis of 900 pages (mostly on Facebook but also TikTok and Instagram) revealed 69 pages spreading value-based divisive narratives in favor of pro-Russian parties, 36 pages discrediting political opposition, 30 pages discrediting the ruling party and authorities, nine false media pages favoring the ruling party, 17 pages supporting the ruling officials, 18 pages supporting opposition parties, and 10 pages promoting the political party Alliance of Patriots.[3]

2 "What New Conspiracy Theories Does Tskhinvali KGB Spread about Lugar Lab?," Myth Detector. June 10, 2020. https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/what-new-conspiracy-theories-does-tskhinvali-kgb-spread-about-lugar-lab.

3 ISFED. "Social Media Monitoring, " ISFED. October 2020. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ODd5utOQoytK5UCpuLq9jGN-W4UZiTVG/view.

External pluralism and diversity exist in the Georgian information system; Jinjikhadze said that even though one cannot always expect to familiarize oneself with multiple perspectives from a single media outlet, it is possible to obtain a full story by following different media.

More media have stepped up their coverage of minority communities, but many outlets fall short of diversity. Mainstream media coverage of such topics is usually shallow, Danelia said, while certain groups (such as Roma) are invisible, according to Zhgenti. Jangirashvili sees some improvement in the coverage of the issues related to sexual minorities, however. She recalled an RFE/RL interview with a transgender woman who had attempted to burn herself in public to protest the deplorable state of rights of sexual minorities in the country. Other media quickly picked up the report, she noted.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster usually does not uphold its programming obligation to produce minority-oriented programs. During the COVID-19 lockdown in early spring, the broadcaster failed to deliver crucial information to Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in a timely manner, according to a Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center report.[4] That failure, along with poor communications by the local governments, is among the reasons for the virus's rapid spread in the Azerbaijani-populated Marneuli region.

Overall, minorities only tend to capture the interest of journalists during controversial circumstances or festivities, according to Dzvelishvili. Furthermore, while the Internet and social networks have provided marginalized groups the platforms for communication, information about their values and opinions is not usually shared with the wider public, Danelia said.

In terms of gender balance in the media, the panelists agreed both men and women work as journalists, editors, and producers, and there is a growing tendency for women to occupy top managerial positions. Ethnic diversity among media practitioners, however, is still an issue, failing to mirror the diversity of the country's population overall.

Financially, the media is suffering. Traditional funding streams are no longer sufficient, and professional content producers have to seek alternatives. Donors provide most of the funding for small independent media. Some media, especially online outlets, have tried to diversify their funding channels by adopting innovative approaches. For example, the online news outlet On.ge and *Indigo*, a niche print magazine that also produces online content, have tried native advertising, highly demanded by advertisers. Other online and print media provide services such as book and journal publishing to bring in extra income. However, since COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on business activities, many of these initiatives were suspended at *Indigo*. Mamaladze said that if not for the financial assistance from donors, her newspaper, *Guria News,* would not have survived.

Social networks have become major competitors for the media, siphoning off ads from small businesses. In June 2020, a group of Georgian media outlets and civil society organizations appealed to Facebook to make information about pre-election political advertising from Georgia publicly available to ensure transparency. Facebook reported total spending of $1,106,424 on ads related to social issues, elections, or politics in the country since August 2020.[5]

Some media outlets adopted monetization opportunities offered by social networks. For example, the online Mtisambebi.ge, along with reginfo.ge and its YouTube channel RegTV, produce a large number of multimedia products and has benefited from monetization on YouTube in 2019, Mtivlishvili shared.

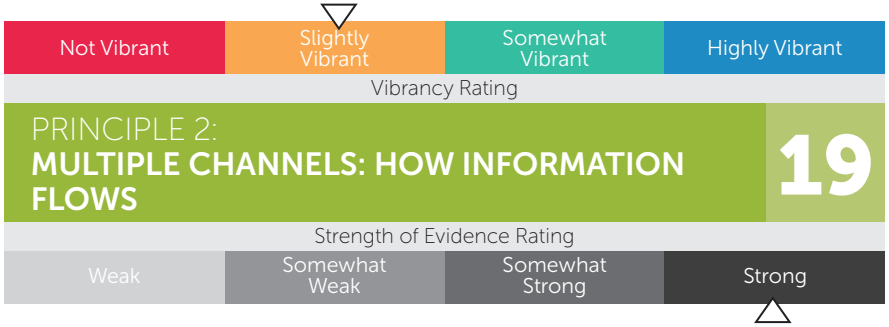
Government spending for the provision of information services, such as public service announcements, constitutes one crucial revenue source for the media. The government tends to reward media for loyalty, however. Kuprashvili and Kintsurashvili slammed the allocation of these funds as selective and biased and said that a quick glance at the state consolidated tender shows that pro-government media outlets enjoy privileged treatment. Additionally, some businesses that are affiliated with the government refuse to bring advertising to critical media.

4 Kavtaradze, Lasha. "The Needs of Ethnic Minorities, Public Broadcaster and Pandemics." EMC. July 21, 2020. https://bit.ly/3b5uZ8w.

5 Facebook. "Facebook Ad Library Report, Georgia." 2021. https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/?source=archive-landing-page&country=GE

Kintsurashvili added that the government started contracting online media to share posts on social media, giving some online media an unfair advantage, too. During the pre-election period, the Georgian Dream party also blacklisted several outlets, including Reginfo.ge and Mtisambebi.ge, which Mtivlishvili connects to their critical positions on certain sociopolitical events in the regions.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster, mainly funded by the state, is the country's best-resourced outlet; it received GEL 68.7 million ($20.78 million) from the state budget in 2020.[6] According to the OSCE, that equaled the advertising revenues of all commercial television stations combined in the country.[7] "The GNCC financial map shows that only the public broadcaster's financial resources are increasing," said Dzvelishvili. Adjara Public Broadcaster's resources are moderate in spite of its annual GEL 8 million ($2.42 million) funding, Zhgenti noted, as "approximately 80 percent of its funding is spent on salaries."



Georgia has laws that protect freedom of speech and freedom of the press. However, those freedoms are under threat, panelists said, pointing to attempts to tighten laws and file more legal charges against the journalists from media outlets that have been critical of the government in the last year.

Mtavari TV, for example, was under investigation on suspicion of "sabotage," an article of Georgia's criminal code, accused of misinforming audiences and discrediting the government. Jangirashvili said that legal cases from 2019 against Zuka Gumbaridze, now director of Formula TV, and Giorgi Gabunia and Nika Gvaramia, representatives of Mtavari TV, are disguised behind various laws, but in reality, they are brought on by the channel's critical editorial stance. While the government does not exercise direct censorship, panelists see a worrying tendency by the government and the allegedly pro-governmental Communications Commission to amend and interpret laws in a way that oppresses the media and restricts editorial freedom.

An amendment to the Law on Broadcasting entered into force in September 2020 imposes additional obligations on media outlets to protect children from harmful information and sets strict punishments for violations, including possible license revocation. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) appealed the amendment, which was introduced alongside the Code on the Rights of the Child in the Constitutional Court, pointing to vague areas in both laws. Panelists underscored the danger this amendment carries by granting the Communications Commission the right to determine what information is or is not harmful to children, thus censoring content and information flow. They also worry that the amendment might contribute to self-censorship among the media, driving some journalists to be overly cautious to avoid inviting scrutiny by the commission. The panelists view the Communications Commission's attempt to regulate obscene content as another declaration of intent to interfere and control media content and suppress freedom of expression.

Law enforcement also stepped up pressure on journalists to reveal sources of their information, which the panelists called out as a violation of local and international laws and another driving force of self-censorship among journalists. They pointed to Davit Kashiashvili, a journalist from Formula TV, who was questioned over his story involving the death of a young woman. "There are many brave journalists who will withstand such pressure, but not everyone can do it. One might rethink and abstain from covering controversial stories to avoid questioning," Andguladze said.

6 Pertaia, Luka. "The Budget of the Public Broadcaster Has Increased up to GEL 69 Million," Netgazeti.ge. December 4, , 2019. https://netgazeti.ge/news/411527/
IDFI: "The Funding and the Ratings of Georgian Public Broadcaster after Three Years of Announced Reform." September 9, 2020, https://idfi.ge/public/upload/GG/Public_Broadcaster_Expenses.pdf

7 OSCE. "International Election Observation." https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/a/469020.pdf.

The deputy director of Adjara Public Broadcaster resigned under pressure in early 2020 after she accused a government-friendly director of the television station of pressing for a change in editorial policy following a tumultuous shake-up of leadership and staff in 2019. The panelists described these moves as examples of outright government meddling with media's editorial policy.

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.

Journalists endured attacks and mistreatment as they tried to carry out their professional duties during the election season. Journalists and crew members of several media outlets--including Mtavari TV, TV Pirveli, Georgian Public Broadcaster, and Publika.ge--were harassed and physically attacked. At least seven journalists were injured after the police used water cannons against the protesters in front of the Election Administration of Georgia on November 8. The Ministry of the Interior launched investigations into the cases, which were still ongoing when the VIBE panel convened.

In July, the Communications Commission attempted to introduce amendments to the Law on Electronic Communications and the Law on Broadcasting that would enable it to establish "a special manager" of telecom operators, which include broadcasters. After civil society organizations fought the measure, however, the original draft was rescinded, and a modified version was adopted.

The panelists gave poor marks to the government's communication with media; they noted alarming attempts across state bodies to discredit critical and independent media and professional organizations supporting media, such as the GCJE. The panelists said that the commission used the media critique platform Mediacritic.ge, launched under the umbrella of the Communications Commission with a declared goal of examining media content quality, as a tool for censorship. The name of the platform, Mediacritic.ge, mimics the name of Mediachecker.ge run by the GCJE and replicates its activities—"an attempt to create the Charter's parallel institution," Kintsurashvili noted. Mediacritic.ge discredited the independent media by accusing quality news portals like Netgazeti.ge and On.ge of publishing "fake news." Instead of disclosing Russian propaganda, disinformation, and fake news, the platform goes after the quality media, panelists cautioned.

Laws on rights to information exist in the country and conform to international standards, but the panelists pointed to regression on the implementation side. The General Administrative Code of Georgia, adopted in 1999, regulates journalists' and citizen's access to public information. Still, many government and public institutions do not cooperate with the media in a timely manner, providing requested materials so belatedly that the information loses relevance for journalists and the public.

The panelists also gave poor marks to the government's communication with media during periods of crisis, preventing journalists and media actors from accessing official information. Access to public information was limited the entire year, Mikashavidze noted, because of the pandemic. "Initially, briefings were held very well," Dzvelishvili said, but eventually the press office began limiting the information flow. Danelia added that officials discouraged critical questions regarding the pandemic and its handling by the government under the pretense that it could increase public anxiety. The panelists point to this regression as evidence of the government's lack of accountability toward media and civil society and say that pro-government media, including the public broadcaster, always enjoy first and sometimes exclusive access to public information. For some panelists, the fact that government representatives almost never participate in debates or programs on critical channels--appearing only on Imedi TV, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), and Rustavi 2--combined with their cynical treatment of critical media, further shows the government's selective approach, limiting access to public information and escalating the country's political and media polarization. According to the Institute

for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)[8] report in 2020, the average compliance rate of proactive accessibility of public information was 55 percent.

Overall, the panelists agreed that people still have access to information through various channels; they lauded the fact that the Internet became a constitutional right in Georgia in 2017. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia's July 2020 survey,[9] 83.8 percent of Georgian households have Internet access through fixed lines, and 94.7 percent of the population accesses the Internet through mobile devices. However, access to the Internet has become a problem not only in rural areas but also in big cities because of economic hardship brought on by the pandemic.

> "We have two extremes here. There are the media that try to have as much paid and sponsored content as possible, and there are those that defend their editorial policy to the point of refusing vital funding," said Dzvelishvili.

"Infrastructure may exist, but people cannot pay for Internet services," Kuprashvili said. The government-mandated switch to online education during the pandemic exposed "how big the problem is in the regions, leaving many children without education," noted Dzvelishvili. Fixed Internet services are not available or are of low quality in rural areas, and while people use mobile Internet as an alternative, it is comparatively pricey—eventually affecting viewership, particularly of online television. Frequent electricity shortages also limit public access to channels of information, especially in the regions and mountainous parts of the country.

Most panelists believe that licensing and spectrum allocation procedures for broadcast media, which used to be simple enough to enable anyone with citizenship to establish a media organization, have grown more complex. Mariam Gogosashvili, executive director of GCJE, said the Communications Commission's approach to authorization procedures has changed in the last two years. Now, among other documents, the commission requires audit reports on a company's financial sustainability. Mtivlishvili, who applied for authorization to launch an online community radio in Svaneti, a mountainous region of Georgia, and was denied, describes the procedures as complex and unfair. "Audit reports are expensive. The commission requested proof of financial sustainability, and we had donor funds. But if I were to voluntarily launch the radio? Why should this be complicated?" said Mtivlishvili, who lodged a complaint against the commission's decision in court.

The laws that regulate transparency in media ownership and funding apply to broadcast media but not print and online media. The panelists agree that distribution channels are not monopolized but gave low scores for the public media, particularly the GPB, for failing to properly cover and create public awareness, particularly around issues related to minorities and disinformation. They name the critically acclaimed *Realuri Sivrtse* as the GPB's only quality program. The panelists also criticized the editorial agenda of Adjara Public Broadcaster in 2020, following the management change when the pro-ruling party candidate took over in fall 2019. Monitoring of Adjara Public Broadcaster by GCJE documented imbalance, bias, and news programs mostly devoid of any critical content, as Transparency International reports—[10] a marked backsliding after several years of earning recognition for its balanced and impartial programming by local and international monitors.

National broadcasters tend to be influenced by their owners—and that influence is easily detected in their editorial policies and programming,

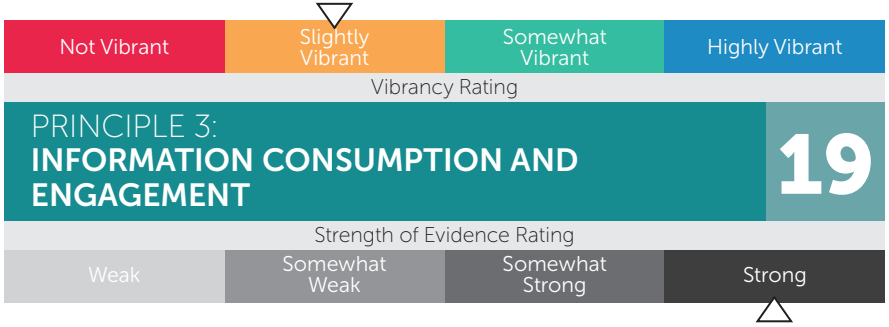
8 Avalishvili, Levan, Kldiashvili, Giorgia, Tushurashvili, Goga, and Topuria, Keti. "Proactive Disclosure of Public Information on Georgian Public Institution Websites," IDFI. June 2020. https://bit.ly/3rY63GR.

9 National Statistics Office of Georgia. "Indicators of Using Information and Communication Technologies in Households," National Statistics Office of Georgia. September 11, 2020. https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households.

10 Transparency International. "Georgian Media Environment in 2016–2020," Transparency International. October 22, 2020. https://transparency.ge/ge/post/sakartvelos-mediagaremo-2016-2020-clebshi.

the panelists said. Comparatively, "smaller media organizations are free from ownership impact," according to Jinjikhadze. Business and commercial interests also impact editorial policy, the panelists said. "We have two extremes here. There are the media that try to have as much paid and sponsored content as possible, and there are those that defend their editorial policy to the point of refusing vital funding," said Dzvelishvili.

Most panelists believe that government subsidies and advertising contracts are allocated to outlets that are loyal to the government and that there is a direct correlation between the winners of the government tenders on advertising and pro-government stances. Kvemo Kartli TV, which operates in an Azerbaijani-populated region, was named as an example of a nonstate TV outlet subsidized by the government, along with the English language online magazine Agenda.ge—founded by the government to influence English-language readers interested in the country's news.



There are laws and tools that allow for safe information use and engagement. The Internet and social media are freely available, but privacy and security on the web can be questionable. The state cybersecurity system remains weak, and citizen's media literacy levels are still low, despite some progress noted by panelists. The overall score for this principle was 19.

Georgia has laws that protect privacy and access to the Internet, which is partially supervised by the Communications Commission. In 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled against the commission's right to identify and order the removal of "inadmissible content" (as determined solely by the parliament). Privacy is mainly regulated by the July 2013 Law on Personal Data Protection. However, the panelists said that the law is frequently misused by state and public bodies to withhold information from the media. Mtivlishvili recalled that he appealed to a Ministry of Interior subunit, requesting the job title of one of its employees, but his request was turned down on the pretense of privacy. Another area where the right to privacy can be infringed upon is when the details of individuals' private lives are disclosed by law enforcement, such as recordings of private conversations under the guise of high public interest. Journalists know to be cautious about discussing certain issues over their phones because of the fear of eavesdropping by security services. Mariam Gogosashvili and Levan Avalishvili, who is a program director and founder of IDFI, said that the current legislation pertinent to secret surveillance, under hearing at the Constitutional Court, fails to set strict guarantees for the protection of privacy.

In October, Irakli Kobakhidze, a Georgian Dream party leader, publicly summarized the dialogue that purportedly occurred between a journalist of TV Pirveli and one of the leaders of the UNM in Ozurgeti (Guria region). The journalist, whose name was mentioned, confirmed having a phone conversation with a party representative and the content of the conversation; the Media Advocacy Coalition appealed to the government, requesting an appropriate reaction to the alleged surveillance. Danelia recalled an experiment carried out by the civic activist movement *Sirtskhvilia* (Shame) to test surveillance of their private conversations. The police acted upon their phone call, confirming that law enforcement indeed was eavesdropping.

Cybersecurity is mainly protected under the Law on Information Security adopted in 2012. At the end of 2019, a Georgian Dream member of parliament (MP) initiated a draft bill of amendments to the law, which civil society organizations said created a risk of unbridled control over Georgia's information system by the state security services. The draft bill was ultimately voted down during the fall 2020 parliamentary hearings.

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 are training programs, courses, and open-access resources available to both professional and nonprofessional content producers about digital security, digital hygiene, and general issues of safety on the net. These trainings and courses are usually offered by private, nongovernmental, and media support organizations. For example, GCJE published guidelines for journalists on how to ensure cybersecurity and technical support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kintsurashvili said that many journalists are not aware of the importance of security online, flagging it as an area in need of more work. The trainings offered by IREX's Securing Access to Free Expression (SAFE) program seem to be the most widely used among the media community. Zura Vardiashvili, editor of online Publika.ge, mentioned that prior to setting up the outlet's website at the end of 2019, he and his team members benefited from training sessions and guidance offered by the IREX SAFE staff. Regional media also benefited from those trainings and integrated what they learned into their daily practices, according to Mamedova. Chikhladze noted that the tools for cyber hygiene are widely available for download.

Citizens' knowledge of algorithms driving social media and targeted advertising differs by age, experience, and location. Even though there are very few studies that cast light on the media literacy levels of the Georgian citizens, Kintsurashvili sees some improvement in how citizens treat such information. Dzvelishvili still sees many people on Facebook, especially the elderly generation, who share fake news and bizarre advertising announcements without hesitation, however.

Although media literacy is included in school curricula, Danelia said that the quality of education in most schools is unsatisfactory because teachers lack the knowledge and experience needed to adequately incorporate competency within the curriculum. There are many media literacy programs, resources, and trainings available to citizens offered by NGOs. Often, these programs and courses target children and students but rarely older adults, Danelia added.

The Communications Commission, charged with leading media literacy strategy in Georgia, is also mandated to carry out projects aimed at raising media literacy levels in the country. The regulator has been criticized for its inability to adequately address the urgency of the media literacy needs among Georgian citizens. Moreover, Kintsurashvili and Danelia noted that the regulator's media critic platform (Mediacritic.ge), a media literacy tool by definition, is propagandistic in nature and was set up as a censorship tool—not to ensure the media literacy of citizens. Kuprashvili, who served as a committee member of the contest "True or Invented" administered by the media literacy unit of the Communications Commission, said the game itself is interesting to schoolchildren and students, but she feels it would have been better if the activity were carried out solely by the Ministry of Education.

Panelists said that platforms similar to town halls exist. Dzvelishvili said that journalists and civil activists productively exercise their rights, but the people do not actively participate. There are public councils within city districts and in regional self-governance units, which are mandated to engage citizens in public debates on a variety of matters. Some panelists evaluated these public councils as pro forma. Many of those councils are staffed by the people who work for public organizations, Mtivlishvili noted, thus violating their mandates. Mamaladze explained that one reason people are reluctant to participate in public debates at local public councils is a lack of tangible results from such initiatives. The Public Defender of Georgia oversees the observance of human rights and freedoms in Georgia and is the platform citizens can address when they feel their rights are violated. There are also Civic Engagement Centers established with the support of USAID that offer a safe space for all to meet and discuss issues.

It is not uncommon for the government to set up targeted online platforms with the aim of artificially intervening in public debate, Kintsurashvili said, pointing to the online platform STV.ge funded from the state budget, which mostly shared news about the Georgian Dream candidate Irakli Chikovani in the run-up to the 2020 election.

The panelists see citizens playing a greater role in reporting misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech, actively filtering and debunking such practices. Kintsurashvili, whose organization is focused on media literacy levels among Georgians, has seen examples of citizens reporting suspicious content on social media too.

> **"It is not uncommon for the government to set up targeted online platforms with the aim of artificially intervening in public debate," said Kintsurashvili.**

There is very little qualitative research that would let the media delve deeper and understand its audience's needs. Quantitative data are mostly available for national television broadcasters from TVMR and Kantar Media Group. Regional broadcasters are not usually measured within the regions they operate. Kuprashvili mentioned that the combined audience for all media that are members of the Alliance of Broadcasters placed them among the top 15 by audience size in the country. Online media use traditional web statistics and analytics tools, such as Google Analytics and Facebook Analytics. Dzvelishvili confirmed that it is very expensive for most small media to commission a study of its audiences. However, several large radio stations carry the measurement of their own audiences, although those data are usually privately owned. Measurement for print media is nonexistent. The audience surveys carried out by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) are crucial to obtain information about audience preference and media use patterns.

The government uses different tools and platforms to share information with journalists, including social media tools such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp—but Gogosashvili said the government shares information that is of interest to authorities, and there is no reciprocity there. As soon as journalists ask follow-up questions, Vardiashvili said, representatives of state and public communication offices "vanish from those chats and groups."

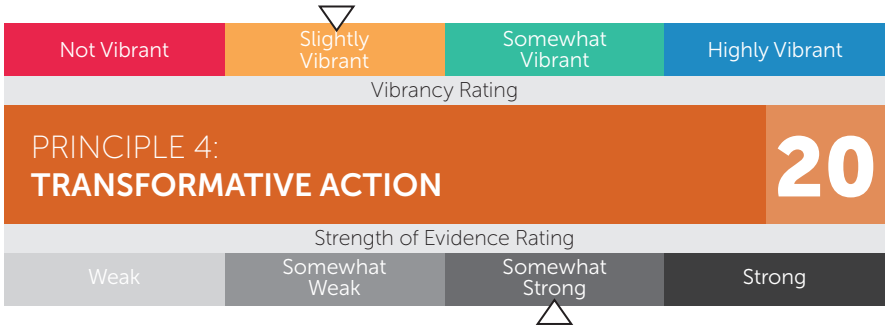
Panelists expressed concern that journalists who ask critical questions are labeled as opposition political party members and liars. Tbilisi's mayor, a leading figure in the ruling Georgian Dream party, held a campaign against the spread of disinformation and fake news accompanied by a poster with the logos of the three television stations—Mtavari TV, TV Pirveli, and Formula TV. However, the names of these stations were altered to include the word "sitsrue," which means "a lie."[11] On a separate occasion, one of the leaders of the Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze, likened Mtavari TV and TV Pirveli to Russian outlets. Panelists assessed these as smear campaigns against critical media aimed at discrediting and denigrating them in the public eyes.

Community media exist in Georgia and are viewed as progressive and promising by the professional community. There are several community radios in the country that broadcast in the minority populated communities: Radio Nor broadcasting in the Armenian-populated town of Ninotsminda; Radio Pankisi, which broadcasts in the region predominantly populated by Kists; and Radio Marneuli, which operates in the Azerbaijani-populated region of Marneuli. For some time now, the founders of Radio Ivrisi in Iormughanlo have been pursuing authorization from the Communications Commission. More recently, Radio Lile in Svaneti, set up online with OSFG support, sought Communications Commission authorization.

Mamedova said that community media have been instrumental in opening up debate about important issues for local communities and that community radio outlets have "contributed to the development of activist culture locally." Mtivlishvili—whose organization, Information Centers Network, manages another community media, Radio Pankisi—said that locals often come to the station to share their concerns and usually end up holding a program of their own.

11 Civil.ge. "Tbilisi Mayor Campaigns to Counter 'Fake News,'" Civil.ge. June 26, 2020. https://civil.ge/archives/357286.

In the summer of 2020, protesters organized rallies to try to shut down Pankisi Community Radio and its founder in the village of Duisi. Pankisi Radio representatives alleged that the Georgian Dream and the state security services backed the turmoil over the outlet's critical stance in relation to the government's and state security service's activities in the region. The situation is stable for now.



The score for this principle was 20. Indicators examining individuals' use of information and government's use of quality information were scored the lowest. The Georgian media landscape is diverse when it comes to ownership and different political ideologies across the spectrum; however, there is limited diversity related to political opinions and societal voices within each outlet. Civil society organizations contribute to positive developments among different communities. However, the panelists did not give high marks to the government on the use of quality information to make public policy decisions.

The panelists said that there are a few small quality media organizations that steer clear of political bias, but they do not reach a large number of people or have substantial influence over public opinion.

Georgia's public is television centric. According to NDI/CRRC opinion polls, 84 percent of the respondents cited television as their main source of news about the pandemic in 2020.[12] However, younger people rely heavily on the Internet and Facebook for their news. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat.ge), 54.9 percent of people aged 15 and older went online for news sites/newspapers/news magazines in 2020, and 90.6 percent used the Internet to access social networks.[13]

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.

Some panelists claim that the demand for partisan content filled with radicalized narratives is high. According to the CRRC 2020 survey, the two partisan media led on the chart for the most trusted sources of information: the pro-government Imedi TV occupied first place (28 percent) and pro-opposition Mtavari TV took second place (14 percent). A smaller number of citizens trusted allegedly pro-governmental Rustavi 2 TV (10 percent), while only 7 percent of the respondents stated they trusted TV Pirveli. Dzvelishvili noted that it is civil society that uses quality media and different sources of information; "as for the political actors, they lean toward loyal media."

Georgian society is clearly polarized across different political and social lines, creating a challenging climate for robust debate informed by quality news. This is especially evident when sensitive political issues are discussed in social media or in comment sections of web-based media. Kintsurashvili said that activists of political parties mobilize mostly in news comments sections, "reading news of Radio Liberty and Mtavari TV not to balance sources, but to substantiate their narrative."

12 CRCC Georgia. "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of June 2020 Survey," CRCC Georgia. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results_June_2020_Final%20Version_ENG.pdf

13 National Statistics Office of Georgia. "Information and Communication Technologies Usage in Households," National Statistics Office of Georgia. https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households.

Most people do not rely on quality information to guide their behaviors; many, Dzvelishvili said, do not filter information and share whatever pops up in their newsfeed. Jangirashvili sees a lack of quality discourse in the polarized society, adding that nobody checks the sources of the information they share: "Some praise Bidzina Ivanishvili for building an international university, or Mikheil Saakashvili for earning us the vaccine, and nobody checks the validity of the information." People also display prejudiced thinking and predispositions toward certain topics, which hold them back from understanding information appropriately—as the pandemic revealed—with the propensity to buy into dangerous myths. Regarding the election outcomes, governmental and opposition trolls and bots manipulated public opinion with slanted information regarding pro-governmental and pro-opposition parties and candidates.

> **"Watchdog activism often yields positive results as the government is compelled to respond in one way or another," noted Jinjikhadze.**

Panelists assess civil society's role much more favorably. They praise the significant role NGOs play in building healthy democratic processes in the country by carrying out research, fighting Russian disinformation, providing the public with training programs to raise awareness, and engaging with the government on various matters. Recalling the case of ISFED, the panel noted that NGOs should carry out rigorous research and should be very accurate with the sources they use to protect their image and credibility. ISFED, a powerful watchdog organization, admitted to making a mistake in a parallel vote tabulation for the 2020 parliamentary elections of Georgia, which damaged the organization's reputation. The panelists singled out several powerful NGOs operating in the country: the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, Transparency International, the IDFI, the GCJE, the ISFED, Georgian Democracy Initiative, MDF, and Democracy Research Institute. They also mentioned home-grown government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) as being detrimental to the idea of the nongovernmental sector; GONGOs, they say, are aimed at managing domestic politics and creating counternarratives against genuine NGOs.

Mechanisms for the government's engagement with the civil society and media are in place—usually press briefings, websites, and social media pages of different state and public organizations—and more or less satisfactory. Yet the government rarely explains its policy decisions and political discourse, and it rarely uses fact-based evidence and information derived from research, according to the panelists.

When assessing whether media information supports good governance and democratic rights, the panelists generally agree that this is sometimes true. In Dzvelishvili's view, "The ruling party communicates with only loyal-to-government media, which means that it does not accept criticism from critical media or NGOs; moreover, it tries to marginalize these actors; hence, we have a low level of government accountability." However, Jinjikhadze noted that "watchdog activism often yields positive results as the government is compelled to respond in one way or another." It was not enough, though, to keep misinformation and mal-information—spread not only by government institutions but also by people acting upon their predispositions—from polluting the election-year discourse.

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