

AZERBAIJAN

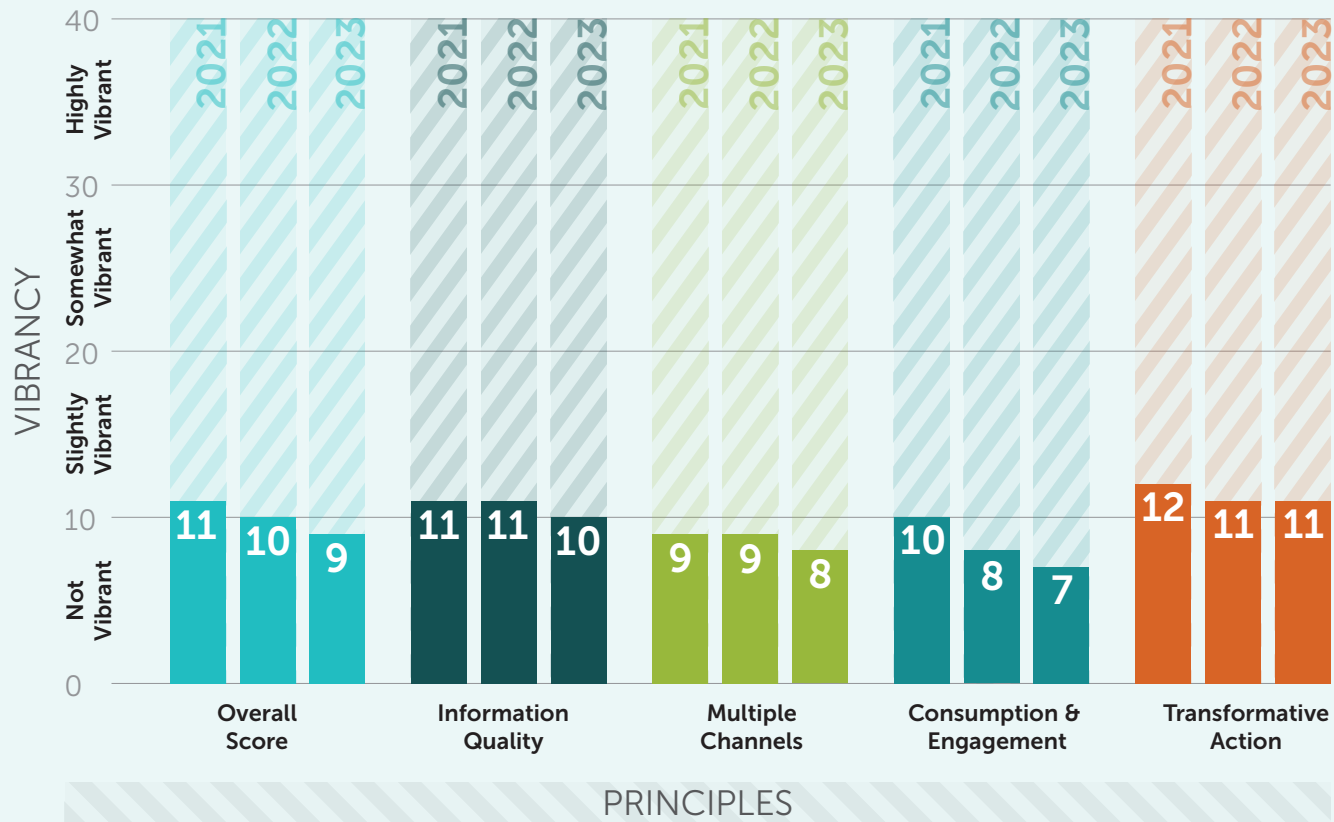
Vibrant Information Barometer

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Photo by Aziz Karimov





Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

9

As in previous VIBE reports, the Azerbaijan media and information sector saw no positive changes in 2022. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the border of Azerbaijan and Armenia continued throughout 2022, and the government used state media to spread propaganda about events in that area. The year was also marked by unrest due to inflation; political resignations; and individual arrests, including activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev for political opposition actions.

Media circumstances worsened because of a mandated journalist registry, part of the new Law on Media signed in February by Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev. As reported by [Eurasianet](#), the law and registry are designed to control independent online broadcast outlets and journalists, further preventing them from accessing information or attending official events. As part of the registration procedure, reporters must give authorities personal details such as addresses, bank account information, and work contracts. Critics of the law said the government is more easily able to track and potentially detain journalists in Azerbaijan.

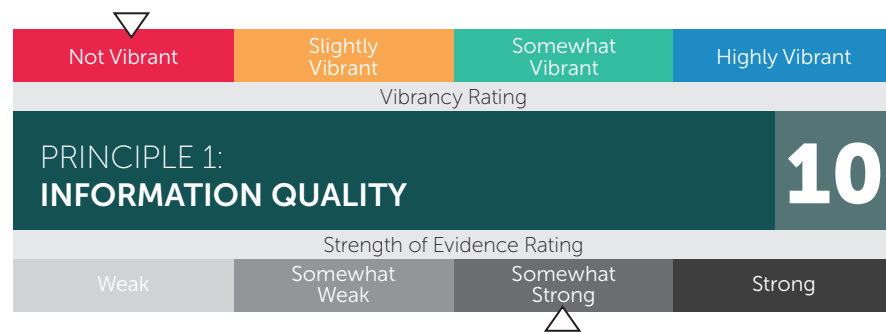
The government continues to block access to independent internet outlets and maintains a strong grip on the media, particularly in terms of coverage. VIBE panelists described the media sector as a dichotomy: small independent media, which include a few websites in Azerbaijan and some resources outside the country; and mainstream media inside the country, which include television, radio, print, and online. Independent media are small and constantly need funding and resources to survive. Still, they sufficiently rival government-ruled media, which have extensive resources because Azerbaijan is a rentier state run by a corrupt government.

Independent media outlets, which include some websites and several YouTube channels, face numerous financial

problems because of government-controlled advertising. Consequently, many media rely on international organizations as their main sources of income—even though obtaining such grants is illegal in Azerbaijan. Those which receive grants live in constant fear of being jailed or punished if discovered. Some independent media websites and social media accounts were hacked during the year, and according to the panelists, many media workers believe the government was behind these acts.

The government continues to dictate to the mainstream media which topics to publish and which not to discuss. Independent media still try to address or follow up on sensitive issues, such as LGBTQ+ topics and ethnic minorities. Citizens who speak to independent journalists face pressure, creating an atmosphere of fear.

The new, repressive law influenced scores in numerous indicators. Principle 1 (Information Quality) scores dropped a point from last year's study, with panelists agreeing that the nation's few independent online news outlets are the only media producing quality content. Principles 2 (Multiple Channels) and 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) scored particularly low, only earning an 8 and 7 respectively, or "not vibrant." Principle 2 dropped a point from the 2022 VIBE report, due to diminishing rights to create and consume information and inadequate access to channels of information. Additionally, internet access is still minimal for Azerbaijanis living in rural areas. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) scored the highest with a 11, "slightly vibrant." While this score is one point below last year's study, panelists recognized an uptick in viewership of independent internet news outlets.



The score for this principle dropped one point from last year. Panelists noted that the first indicator on quality information on a variety of topics remains a challenge for Azerbaijanis, with the government still tightly controlling the kind of information disseminated to citizens. In addition, some panelists expressed fear that the Azerbaijani mainstream media, pro-government outlets, and government media will soon become autocratic. Every morning, journalists from state-sponsored media outlets receive WhatsApp messages from the President’s office that dictate which topics they can or cannot address. Therefore, their content does not follow the main principles of journalism, and instead results in clear bias, unethical practices, and material full of propaganda.

Indicator 2 concerning content based on fact received low scores. Under great risk, only independent media ask questions to hold government representatives accountable. Azerbaijan does not have many fact-checking organizations, so independent journalists try to check facts and help people distinguish misinformation from the truth. Panelists said independent media outlets are exclusively online and represent the only opportunity for citizens to consume quality, ethical content. Radio, television, and print media remain staunchly nationalist and are dominated by pro-government or government media. These outlets serve the interest of the ruling elites by spreading government propaganda, especially on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They attack independent media under government orders, calling these outlets “foreign agents” if they cover problematic social issues.

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

Panelists said that journalists and media outlets in the country face obstruction of media activities, limited opportunities for independent media to function, and government control. Official media and media outlets under government influence are basically tools of agitation, and their news programs are full of propaganda. Only a few independent media outlets, such as Turan Information Agency, can provide quality, professional content to their audiences. Azerbaijan does not have a single independent printing house for media publication.

The [2022 Freedom House report on Azerbaijan](#) listed the nation as not free. “Constitutional guarantees for press freedom are routinely and systematically violated,” the report states, “as the government works to maintain a tight grip on the information landscape. Defamation remains a criminal offense. Journalists—and their relatives—face harassment, violence, and intimidation by authorities. Legal amendments passed in 2017 extended government control over online media, allowing blocking of websites without a court order if they are deemed to contain content that poses a danger to the state or society. Independent news sites are regularly blocked or struck with cyberattacks.”

As mentioned above, the government approved a new media law in February 2022 to regulate online and print media. According to the law, a person is considered a journalist if the individual has a labor contract, a tax identification number account, and tertiary education in the field of journalism. Many journalists and media outlets have already registered with the Media Development Agency, as required. However, some panelists expressed concern that this registration system resembles that of the State Security Service, which monitors public security in the country. If a media outlet is not registered within six months of a request, then the Media Development Agency may file a lawsuit to close the outlet. As a result of the law, 40 media outlets were refused accreditation and 20 journalists had their credentials removed.

Panelists disagreed over the quality of information produced by Azerbaijan’s independent and state media. Some panelists held the view

that the country has no quality information. Others said that quality information is available on various topics from independent outlets; oppositional media; and even state media, which are directly financed from the state budget or through state-affiliated officials. However, the government's dictating news coverage topics remains a major concern.

Media entities that receive funding directly or indirectly from the state operate based government directives sent through the WhatsApp group of the presidential administration. Other government agencies also use WhatsApp groups to control the media. The number of independent media outlets remains relatively small, and the main source of income for independent media entities is largely based on grants from international organizations--which are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain since foreign financing of the media body in the country is prohibited by law.

The government's blockage policy for independent internet media restricts access to information. The websites of Meydan TV, AbzasMedia, *Azadlig* newspaper, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty were blocked in the country in 2016, and they remained so in 2022.

While independent instructors teach international media standards, government training steers students toward maintaining the image of the authorities and states. Although the number of journalism-related training has increased, some journalists claim that the courses are poor quality. Trainers tend to be journalists and editors who spread fake information and give permission to print it, according to one panelist.

Officials tout the new Law on Media as progress, with its establishment of the Media Development Agency and the journalist registry. In reality, however, these entities create obstacles for independent media.

Some journalists on the panel who work in state media or media indirectly funded by the state believe that the media registry will support their livelihoods. They said they hope their stored information will allow the government to provide housing for financially strapped journalists as well as offer financial assistance at certain points. However, many panelists agreed that the registry is just a method to "shut up" journalists. The famous Azerbaijani saying "whoever gives the money,

they sound the trumpet" was the common opinion of the journalists that participated in the VIBE study.

Many panelists pointed out that government-oriented media have enough resources to produce information. Independent media, on the other hand, face resource challenges. The independent media sector "does not limit itself if the topic is not domestic politics," according to one panelist.

The Azerbaijan government does not regulate social media, so these forums are relatively freer to create quality content. But posters can also be punished if government officials do not like the content produced. Azerbaijan's internet troll factory still functions in spreading misinformation and hate speech. Social media are the main destinations where citizens find factual news content.

The spread of hate speech about those with a different sexual orientation, and violence toward LGBTQ+ journalists, remain major concerns. Professional and non-professional content creators alike continue to promote intentional hate speech against these journalists. In an extreme case, Avaz Hafizli, a LGBTQ+ journalist and employee of Channel 13, was murdered in February 2022 by his cousin, Amrulla Gulaliyev. Hafizli became an open target due hate speech about him spread by non-professional content producers. However, some attacks have changed to slightly milder forms, with journalists facing being scratched, their clothes torn, etc., during protests.

[Monitoring by QueeRadar](#), an Azerbaijani group that tracks hate speech, showed that as recently as 2021, 501 materials (news, articles, interviews) with words and terms related to LGBTQ were published online in 23 media bodies. While 37.5 percent of them were neutral content, 62.5 percent were anti-LGBTQ+ biased or inaccurate material. In comparison with 2020, the number of anti-LGBTQ+ articles clearly showed an increase of 89 articles.

As for quality information in the country, the Turan Information Agency has continued to produce quality and professional content, despite financial challenges. In addition, Toplum TV, an independent internet TV station, has expanded its investigative focus since journalist Khadija

Ismayil became editor-in-chief in May 2022. Ismayil is known for her investigative reporting, which has uncovered a wide range of corruption that benefited Azerbaijani officials and business leaders.

Journalists and media experts on the VIBE panel, representing independent as well as state media, said that state media have access to all information vetted and approved by the government for distribution.

In Azerbaijan, journalists call this “ironed” information. Ironed information also includes what the government wants to hide from the public.

One panelist described the challenges of press freedoms in Azerbaijan: “Public television gathers children and performs a political song against French President Macron,” he said. “Instead of protesting the use of children in politics, [citizens] write ‘well done’ under these social media videos. The media must realize its responsibility and work to inform and raise people’s awareness [that this is inappropriate].” This panelist concluded that regulation is not the answer since that would be censorship. But some online regulation and fact-checking tools could help raise awareness, as some media bodies are overstepping their bounds.

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

Azerbaijan media are generally divided into three camps, according to the panelists. State media are propaganda machines that disseminate what is dictated by the state. Independent media that claim to be independent but are not always objective or impartial in reporting. Third are the few international media left in Azerbaijan that strive to be independent and professional and that offer local-language content. Approximately 10 independent media outlets operate online in the country.

Panelists had mixed opinions regarding the government’s dissemination of false and inaccurate information. The Azerbaijan government does

spread false information and misinformation, but it also keeps silent and fails to give statements or explanations during critical events. Authorities also do not hold accountable the outlets that spread misinformation. After the 44-day Second Karabakh War in 2020, independent media outlets had trouble delivering the truth and disseminating anti-war information while state media barraged the public with propaganda.

“Official media and media outlets under government influence are basically tools of agitation, and their news programs are full of propaganda.”

“There are minimal cases of news being clarified and confirmed by at least two sources in the country,” according to one panelist. Panelists said that falsified and incorrect information is spread even by media that can be considered independent. However, some independent media outlets do question fake information and offer

expert opinions in counteraction.

Azerbaijan media usually violate the presumption of innocence. The names, places of residence, and photos of persons suspected of committing crimes are widely circulated.

The government conceals public information and demands that journalists write request letters to obtain information. The new Law on Media considers other media bodies and journalists outside the government media as illegal workers, disallowing the media to monitor the government. However, reporters are able to publicize factual information with the estimates and opinions of experts.

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

Panelists agreed that pro-government and non-professional media spread negative information and hate speech against certain people. Professional independent media do not intentionally produce misinformation or hate speech, and they strive to publish balanced materials about those who engage in hate speech practitioners.

Panelists observed that during the Second Karabakh war in 2020 and

continuing during the 2022 clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, anti-Armenian rhetoric has proved persistent in Azerbaijan, even in independent professional and non-professional media. People who express anti-war opinions become targets.

Azerbaijani laws, including the criminal code, prohibit hate speech based on religion and ethnicity, but these laws are not applied to those who engage in hate speech on orders from authorities. Also, this law does not mention LGBTQ+ or any other social group, so by default they are legally unprotected. In one notable example, after blogger Sevinj Huseynova published hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community, which was disseminated by some media, Channel 13 reporter Avaz Hafizli (who identified as gay) was killed by a relative in February 2022 because of his sexual orientation. Although social activists appealed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take action against the blogger, they were told that the blogger's words cannot be considered hate speech since the LGBTQ+ community is not protected under the law.

Because topics concerning LGBTQ+ citizens are taboo in Azerbaijan's mainstream media, traditional media (especially TV and radio) try to ignore the subject whenever possible. Mainstream media rarely develop an independent story, but if a law-enforcement agency makes a statement, they will publish it without any changes. The BBC's Azerbaijan language service, which continuously monitors and disseminates these topics in the country, is committed to maintaining standards and continues to be an objective source.

Media organizations and platforms do not have self-regulatory mechanisms or processes in place to monitor content in a way that would reduce misinformation or hate speech.

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

Given that the majority of the country is made up of ethnic Azerbaijanis,

panelists concluded that this group most likely does not face problems in getting news in Azerbaijani.

Panelists could not say whether ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan get enough information in their own language. Certain platforms are offered to Russian-speaking people. Several regional online newspapers are in Talish, along with YouTube channels (such as Cenub TV) in the southern region. However, few people are aware of these channels, and Azerbaijan has no public or private TV content in Talish.

With regard to inclusive information covering different ethnic, racial, or religious affiliations, panelists said it is practically nonexistent in television programming and is very scarce and unbalanced in other media. Groups reflect their thoughts on alternative platforms such as YouTube and social networks. Some smaller interest groups have YouTube channels where they can express themselves—such as FemUtopia for feminists.

“There are minimal cases of news being clarified and confirmed by at least two sources in the country,” according to one panelist.

The Azerbaijani government continues to punish those who speak out against its policies. In December 2022, political activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested on charges of “hooliganism,” which many observers said was a pretext to quash his anti-government activism. He began a hunger strike in January 2023. State agencies then released his private correspondence on social media, which resulted in humiliating claims about Hajiyev posted by media outlets loyal to state officials.

“Although I am not worried about the news language of some of the newly formed media that I follow, in general, the news language in Azerbaijani media is mostly either soulless and complicated or very unnecessarily sentimental,” one panelist noted, “In general, the working principle, manner of conduct, employment rules and methods of dealing with employees of existing editorial offices are carried out with the experience from the Soviet era.”

Additionally, phrases used in relation to vulnerable groups often have a disturbing and hurtful tone. Panelists have observed a problem with

the perception of sensitivity. For example, phrases used to refer to persons with disabilities are often outdated and troubling. Despite the statements of activists and persons with disabilities, media outlets seem reluctant to change their language. For example, a well-known and well-resourced website in the country, when writing news about persons with disabilities, calls such persons physically disabled.¹

The citizen journalist sector has gender parity. Women make up the majority of professional journalists, but most media company managers and owners are men.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

As in previous years, advertising was under political control in 2022. Placements come from the state budget or some state official, and advertising revenue comes from private advertising companies following government orders.

The revenue for the country's independent media comes from international organizations. Large companies within the country are owned by the Aliyev family, so they do not advertise in independent media. Instead, they buy advertising in media outlets that support their policies and disseminate their propaganda. Journalists in Azerbaijan have no other option but to be financed by international organizations if they wish to work independently.

“The advertising business in Azerbaijan is completely politicized,” and is not transparent, according to one panelist.

In 2022, media outlets funded by the state budget or affiliated with some state officials usually had no financial problems, and they did not produce information or content based on international media principles.

Alternative professional media in Azerbaijan often report financial shortages due to difficulties obtaining foreign funding. Such bodies also try to overcome their financial shortages through Patreon subscriptions and, in general, the financial support of viewers or readers. Independent journalists receive only a small income from foreign media donors.

1 <https://lent.az/xeber/iqtisadiyyat/fiziki-qusurlu-sexslerden-azeriqaza-muraciet-40553250>

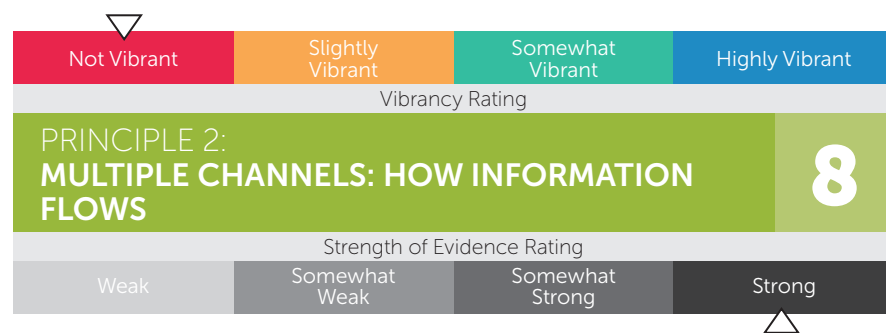
One issue with support for independent media is that providing money is difficult for international organizations, which often require data on independent media's clicks from their audiences to gauge reach of the content they support. “Moreover, there are specific topics such as sexual minorities, taboos, conflicts, etc., that you should write about only in order to obtain money from international organizations,” one panelist observed, “I believe that this policy is a wrong approach.”

Panelists from government media as well as independent media believe that in general, journalists are not compensated well. While several media employees financed from the state budget have relatively high incomes, most salaries do not meet the requirements of the labor market. Moreover, even though their incomes are relatively good, they are not free to report on what they want and are subject to censorship. Journalists trying to report objectively about what is happening in the country face difficult financial prospects. Given that professional journalists have limited places to work, they struggle to find positions--or if they have one, they have to work other jobs to make ends meet.

Media subscriptions in Azerbaijan have not developed significantly. Turan Information Agency is seen as the only media outlet that can generate income through subscriptions.

Another panelist highlighted that evaluating the Azerbaijan's media and information sector this year was harder than last year, because the media situation is increasingly challenging. She said it is much more difficult to give scores because the new media law is now in force, requiring journalists to register with the government and accept monitoring. Most panelists agreed that the law directly restricts journalists' activities, saying that while previous laws did not work in practice they did protect journalist rights on paper and did not have the current law's requirements that hinder journalistic activities.

In general, panelists agreed that Azerbaijan has not improved financial issues surrounding the media. As a result, citizens' right to information is violated; public television does not produce quality content; independent broadcasters are not licensed; and under the new law, people with criminal convictions of any sort cannot start a media entity.



This principle score dropped one point from last year, due to many panelists' concerns over state pressures on journalists in 2022. The new media law and other legislative changes restored direct, legal, and state control over media activities. Indicator 6 on rights to create and share information scored particularly low, with panelists citing that many journalists have been physically attacked for their work. Information channels are not independent, and journalists are persecuted not only for their activities but also for their posts on social media. Their phones are monitored, and police either threaten or interrogate them. Harassment is constant and no journalist is immune. Indicator 8 on appropriate channels for government information also scored low because obtaining information from authorities remains difficult and fraught, with most citizens worried about retaliation if they dare question institutions and officials.

Indicators 9 and 10--on diverse channels for information flow and the independence of information channels, respectively--received the lowest scores of Principle 2, reflecting the government's hold on the country's media environment.

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

In 2022, many journalists experienced violence, had belongings destroyed, and were prevented from producing content. Except for one journalist who worked many years for government media, panelists thought the score for this indicator should be closer to zero.

In April, the Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Promotion of the Safety of Journalists of the Council of Europe released its annual report, "Protection of press freedom in times of tension and conflict."² The report stated that indirect government control over private media has not decreased in Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia, and that "the 'model' they designed is adopted in other member states such as Hungary and Poland." Although the Azerbaijani government declares that media freedom is ensured in the country, blocking independent media and the new Law on Media undermines that declaration, the report observed.

For example, the media law legislation contradicts Article 10 of the European Convention, which says, "everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers." The same concept is confirmed by Article 50 of the Azerbaijan's constitution, but the articles are not equitably implemented in the country.

In March, Jamil Mammadli, a regional freelance reporter covering stories from northern Azerbaijan, was found guilty of defamation and slander under Azerbaijan's criminal code. The executive head of the Guba District filed the case, claiming that Mammadli gave false information and tarnished the official's reputation. The journalist wrote about the official's embezzlement of funds that transferred 200 people's salaries by falsely naming them as employees. As a result, Mammadli was sentenced to one year and six months of correctional labor and was forced to transfer 20 percent of his earnings to the state budget every month during his imprisonment.

In July, journalist Abid Gafarov, the host of KIM.TV's YouTube channel, was found guilty under Articles 147 (slander) and 148 (insult) of the criminal code and arrested³ when veterans of the second Karabakh war complained that he insulted them. Gafarov was sentenced to a year in prison. However, before his arrest, the journalist told reporters he was

² <https://rm.coe.int/platform-protection-of-journalists-annual-report-2022/1680a64fe1>

³ <https://qafqazinfo.az/news/detail/abid-qafarov-hebs-edildi-369709>

really being punished for his investigations into the Tartar events.

In May and June, two other Azerbaijani journalists were either threatened or encountered police violence for their reporting. In May, another journalist, Aytan Mammadova, was attacked by an unknown person in the entrance of her building. “He told me not to write about the court case. He threatened my daughter, but he didn’t mention which court case he threatened me about,” the journalist expressed in an interview with the media. Journalist Aytan Mammadova has been covering the trial of Ilkin Suleymanov for several years, a suspect in the murder of 10-year-old Narmin Guliyeva, who was killed in the western region of Azerbaijan. In June, journalist Nargiz Absalamova encountered police harassment in Baku and her license was confiscated. According to her, the incident happened in Baku, near a city subway station.

Journalists are often targeted in other ways for their work. In July, the Prosecutor General’s Office warned several website managers and citizens that some social media users were spreading false information to damage the Azerbaijani army’s reputation, create artificial agitation among citizens, and overshadow the efforts to strengthen the state’s defense capabilities. Those who committed such actions were invited to the Prosecutor General’s Office, were intimidated by authorities, and warned not to allow such negative situations in the future.

Currently, the media registry’s process continues. At least 20 media staff and journalists were refused entry into the registry. Moreover, panelists noted that these rejections are not legal. “After the formation of the registry, pressures on media and freedom of expression will be more noticeable,” panelists said. Obstacles at every step for those who are not in the registry will probably be one of the most noteworthy issues in the coming year, they added.

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

Although cities have no issues accessing the internet and broadcasting, access remains a very serious problem in remote villages or underdeveloped regions. Either telephone lines do not exist or electricity is not constant and only provided for a few hours a day. Moreover, many consumers in isolated parts of the country also cannot afford to install an internet line. Panelists said journalists find it impossible to use mobile communication services while reporting in the regions.

The availability and speed of internet services and the state of telecommunications vary from region to region. One regional journalist noticed that “compared to previous years, there is a slight increase in internet speed. But in general, Azerbaijani citizens are not provided with quality internet service for the price they pay.” Moreover, fast, reliable internet in the country is unavailable. In 2022, the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport announced that 70 percent of the population connects to the network with ADSL technology, not broadband.

In the event of an outage in telecommunications infrastructure (such as television), people in cities area can access other information systems or devices, such as the internet or radio, but not everyone outside major cities has such options. Many remote villages can only receive information through local TV channels.

In recent years, using the internet on mobile phones has become widespread, so people are able to access the internet and media services from outside city centers. However, many citizens are unaware of what the real news is, so they tend to believe whatever information they read. Lack of or poor internet service prevents consumers from accessing independent media.

The government often blocks media access during political upheaval. During the escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia in September

2022, the Azerbaijani government completely restricted access to TikTok. During the Second Karabakh War in 2020, authorities restricted the internet and blocked access to social networks so that citizens were only able to use social media and the internet with a VPN.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The press services of state institutions do not usually provide accurate information, and citizens do not trust whatever information the authorities provide. For instance, in December 2021, Azerbaijani political activist Tofiq Yagublu left a police station with bruises around his eyes, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced they did not beat him; rather, they contended, he injured himself.

In Azerbaijan, journalists have difficulty obtaining official answers from state institutions. In particular, it is impossible to find figures on state budget spending. The salaries of the country's ministers and the prime minister are treated as state secrets.

One panelist gave an example of attempting to secure information. This panelist's colleague sent an official request to a government body, which should have been answered within two weeks at most. One of the government bodies wrote a reply to the colleague, saying "we have received your request" after the two weeks had passed. After an additional two weeks, officials sent an answer that did not contain any satisfactory information, the panelist noted.

Panelists posited that this case is typical. However, some state institutions, such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Defense and the Association for Management of Medical Territorial Units, are open to journalist queries.

Azerbaijani citizens do have mechanisms and tools to access public policy and decision-making information. These include announcements

by government bodies, such as the first readings of bills posted on the Azerbaijan National Assembly (*Milli Majlis*) website. However, most Azerbaijanis are unaware of this website, and many who are aware are not interested in its information. In the panelists' view, Azerbaijani citizens have lost confidence in their ability to influence the country's politics. The apathy is evident in low participation in elections, as reported by local international organizations and social networks. Finally, there is a lack of trust in government spokespeople.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

In 2005, Azerbaijan established a public television station, Ictimai TV (ITV), to meet its Council of Europe admission commitment. But the channel does not function according to its name and mission. Its programs are similar to those found in state television or government-controlled television stations.

As a rule, ITV does not highlight the major problems in society, such as corruption, abuse of power, and the low quality of public education. Some time ago, it briefly touched on social problems, but then shifted to the current status quo of offering programming that avoids looking at social issues. "Sabaha Saxlamayaq" is the only ITV program that broadcasts relatively harmless opposition viewpoints. Panelists agreed that the rest of the debates organized on ITV support the government's ideology and spread its propaganda. Additionally, citizens from all kinds of groups and their opinions are not represented on ITV.

The government strictly controls the allocation of TV and radio frequencies, and the process has no transparency. Therefore, no independent television channel has been established in the last 21 years. Panelists said that the new media law's requirements will further aggravate the situation. Although three new FM radio stations opened in the country in 2022, none of them air serious talk shows or debates. Laws allow the real owners of these media outlets to remain hidden from the public. No independent and foreign

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media in the country can obtain a license for satellite broadcasting.

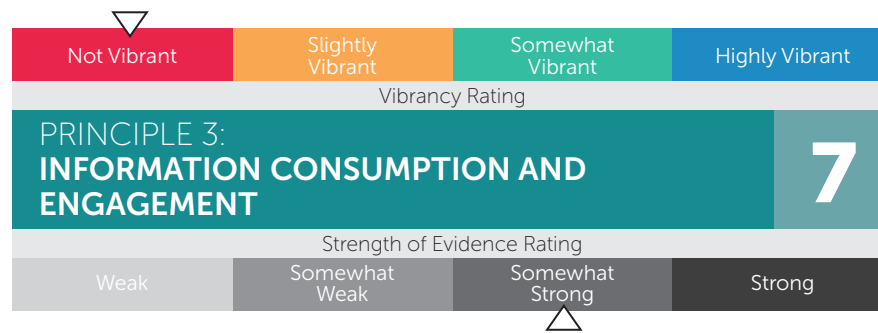
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Mainstream media outlets are clearly influenced by their funders or owners, and panelists claimed that funding of these outlets is comes from government and government-friendly entities. Editorial offices have no creative freedom. Media that do not repeat the government’s viewpoints cannot benefit from subsidies or funds. The independent and oppositional media collect the information they can from opposition party members in addition to the government. These media try to circulate more detailed, comprehensive, balanced, and unbiased information.

The government gives journalists free apartments, forming the image of a “journalist who stands by the state,” but, this benefit forces them to self-censor.

Media outlets funded by foreign donors must put their activities in a certain framework because donors allocate more money to certain topics such as women’s rights, human rights, and vulnerable groups. In the panelists’ view, the media should be able to cover everything that is of interest to society. However, grant-funded media are forced to focus on particular topics, while other topics are neglected.

Before the COVID emergency, citizens had dynamic public forums for discussion. Since having to move to the internet, public debates are now only held online, and panelists question how effective they are. The government closed activist and blogger Bakhtiyar Hajiyev’s Caspian Platform, where many different discussions were held, after Hajiyev’s arrest in December 2022.



The 2023 Principle 3 score declined one point from what it received in last year’s study. Panelists agreed that a major issue is citizens having no digital security, and thus gave a low score to Indicator 11 on privacy protection and security. The score for Indicator 12 on media literacy was the lowest in this principle: consumers have no resources to learn basic digital and information literacy, and do not have the skills or tools necessary to understand digital technology or how to digitally protect themselves. Media literacy training is not offered in universities or editorial offices. Freedom of assembly and expression is not protected in the country. In Azerbaijan, either a news site or a social network can be a victim of cybercrimes.

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

Digital security is not protected in Azerbaijan, and media can fall victim to cyber-attacks and surveillance at any time. An obvious example is the “Pegasus case” in 2021, when the government tracked journalists and activists using Pegasus spyware. Investigations showed that citizens’ personal phones had been illegally tapped since 2019. In particular, the government tapped the phones of ordinary people who communicate with social and political activists and journalists. Personal correspondence of feminist activist Narmin Shahmarzade was intercepted and shared. A few days after activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev’s December arrest, the government released audio recordings of his personal correspondence. Authorities took no legal action in either case.

The government can easily hack any websites with content that certain circles do not appreciate. Social media pages are commonly hijacked through various methods and phishing. The latest case of such a breach occurred in September with the Facebook page of [Toplum TV](#), an Azerbaijani internet television station. The page was hacked, posts were deleted, and viewers were unfollowed.

No resources exist on basic digital and information literacy and skills.

A small segment of citizens who have been using the internet for years have some access to basic information, such as how digital technology works and how to protect their data and privacy. However, the general public lacks awareness of the algorithms that control social media, ad targeting mechanisms, and other ways in which personal data is used to target digital users.

In Azerbaijan, news sites and social networks are also victims of cyber-attacks. In 2022 and previous years, Turan.az, Radio Liberty, Meydan TV, and other news websites were attacked, and news was deleted.

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

Media literacy is one of the lowest-scoring indicators in this year's VIBE study: Panelists argued that Azerbaijan has no media literacy at all. In their view, the government is completely uninterested in increasing media literacy in the country. As a result, people believe that what they hear on television is the absolute truth. They do not question what they consume, because they do not understand the important role media play in civil society, panelists commented.

One panelist noted that most Azerbaijanis have no concept of what a journalist does. Many think media investigators have the power solve people's problems and do not realize that journalists make the public aware of what the problems are, but they have limited inherent power to actuate change.

Digital security is not protected in Azerbaijan, and media can fall victim to cyber-attacks and surveillance at any time.

Panelists agreed that Azerbaijan is in desperate need of fact-checking sites with a large audience, so people can be taught about media literacy. "A question arises here, will people be interested in such sites?" one of the panelists asked. Azerbaijan's only fact-checking website is "Fact Check," and media experts and journalists denounce this as not enough for an entire nation.

The educational state of media, information literacy, and critical thinking is virtually nonexistent, and the situation is getting worse, panelists said. Azerbaijanis mostly do not use tools or websites to check facts, correct errors, or detect misinformation. A small number of citizens who follow technological innovations do check facts.

News of disinformation and propaganda are spread almost every day in Azerbaijan. People have little ability to distinguish between true and false news. Schools do not teach media literacy, television does not explain it, and universities do not care or know what will happen if they offer courses on the topic.

As a result, most Azerbaijanis do not fully understand the importance of the role of media in providing information, presenting facts, researching a topic, or being critical. "Even though some programs include a little questioning of the political events, the absolute majority of the population prefers the programs that prioritize family and household issues," said one panelist who works for pro-government media, "This is clearly proven by the 80 percent or higher ratings for those programs."

Many editorial offices do not have staff that specialize in the field of media to talk about media literacy topics. Journalists that write about crime are also asked to write about politics or culture as well. In addition, since the pro-government media are the majority and are controlled by the president's administration, these outlets can convey false news to the audience as real news.

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

Some journalists and public representatives use their freedom of speech and right to information, but many are threatened or detained if they do. As in previous years, in 2022 the government used police force to stall peaceful rallies from opposition forces, feminist activists, animal rights groups, and independent journalists.

Citizens are hesitant to consume information about corruption cases related to the president and his family, to share this information on social networks, and to express their opinions. For example, Azerbaijani activist Mahir Babayev made a video appeal to President Ilham Aliyev asking when the national child allowance will be paid. As a result, authorities arrested and detained him for 30 days, and he subsequently received a 30-day administrative prison sentence for filming a political satire video about the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.⁴

In Baku, some citizens can express their opinions, albeit with difficulty. People in the districts and villages are generally afraid to express negative opinions to journalists, because authorities from local executive power departments or the village municipality will pressure that person the next morning or create bureaucratic obstacles.

Previously, Baku had two special places for holding public discussions, but they were later closed. Ordinary people conduct public discussions amongst themselves in cafes and teahouses, but only in small groups.

Citizens have no public discussion platforms, and media outlets cannot function as such. Panelists described the recent launch of a campaign by a group of independent journalists, who were protesting the new media law and demanding the right to hold public debates as part of this campaign. The journalists spent several days looking for a home to sponsor hearings, and only one publishing house agreed to give office

“ Schools do not teach media literacy, television does not explain it, and universities do not care or know what will happen if they offer courses on the topic.

space for this type of activity. The journalists noted that during the search, they received objections from many public outlets that feared repercussions.

Pro-government media have labeled journalists supporting the anti-media law campaign as foreign or Iranian spies or supporters of Ruben Vardanyan, a former state minister of the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Additionally, pro-government media have started initiatives to prevent public hearings, so journalist activists need to keep the locations and dates of public forums covert.

The use of public discussion platforms, such as town halls; academic debates on government or politics; and call-in shows remains as low as in previous years. Exchanges such as academic debates or call-in shows are impossible in city halls or other official institutional buildings. The country has only a few small spaces, physical buildings, or public places where independent-minded people can gather and exchange ideas. One internet spot was the Caspian Platform, where Hajiyev led many different discussions until it was closed in 2022, upon Hajiyev's arrest. Conferences and discussions are now only held online, and panelists questioned the effectiveness of these forums.

“We want those discussions to be brought to the masses, to be discussed by them, but this is not possible in today's conditions,” expressed one journalist-editor on the panel.

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

Relations between independent media and NGOs or independent institutions are reasonable. “Although the media were not very interested in their audience before,” one panelist observed, “the young media that have emerged in recent years understand that in order to succeed in social media, you need to know the audience.”

⁴ <https://abzas.org/2022/9/gnc-faln-ilham-liyevl-bagfc0af774-f/>

Some independent media outlets value comments and feedback on videos or articles. Often they can create new content using those comments. An example of this is the BBC Azerbaijan Service, which collects public comments to better prepare programs that gain viewers.

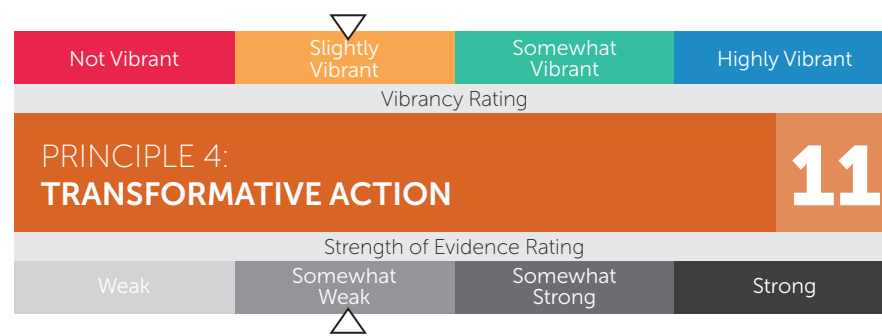
Indicator 15: Community media provide information relevant for community engagement.

Azerbaijan has small number of community media outlets, including QueeRadar, Femmekan, QiyVaar, Minority Azerbaijan, and the ethnic minority newspaper *Tolishi Sedo*. Although most of them are not considered professional media, they mainly conduct activities through social media, and their content is rich. The programs are educational and draw attention to problems. “I think what they do is important and essential,” one panelist stated.

One journalist on the panel noted that community media in Azerbaijan used to receive grants and were able to operate independently. “But after 2015, many of them went out of business because the government made it difficult to receive grants from abroad,” she explained, “There was Southern News, Mingachevir Lights, a media center in Ganja, and so on. Instead of these, media bodies of other communities appeared, mainly as platforms for activists working on gender issues, producing professional content that adequately represent their interests, and are sufficiently supported by that community.” She summarized, “There aren’t many of these outfits—but the quality of their work is high.”

The complete destruction of community media in Azerbaijan’s far-flung regions has silenced voices and issues from those regions. One panelist argued that community media outlets in Azerbaijan “only prepare programs that have no news value. You can’t see serious discussions or news on public issues here.”

Independent community media are believed not to disseminate information aimed at harming individuals, groups, people, or the public interest, according to the panelists.



The 2023 VIBE survey participants noted that the situation with this principle roughly equaled 2022, although the score rose one point from last year’s report due to online independent news outlets gaining a bit more of an audience. Civil society members still cannot fully present major issues in the country, so they are not able to use any tools to improve communities. Indicator 17 on using quality information to inform actions scored low, given how people form their views more with misinformation than with quality information, and how their political and social knowledge varies. Panelists observed no particularly positive change in consumers’ ability to differentiate between quality news and misinformation, so this indicator remains at a low level.

Indicator 20 on good governance and democratic rights received the lowest score in this principle

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

VIBE panelists noted that the conditions around this indicator were essentially the same as last year. They emphasized the value of some impartial news and information sources in the country, although they are few compared to pro-government, propaganda-based media. Since neutral, factual sources are on the internet, panelists thought that these types of media outlets have a sufficient audience. For many years, media-literate individuals, who are in the minority in Azerbaijan, engaged in open and constructive discussions through quality news and

information. Panelists agreed that citizens who do not hear about real events on local television mostly read, share, and discuss news using social media and online outlets.

“Around 10 years ago, there were more discussions and debates,” one panelist said, “People now tend to create discussions on social media, but if we analyze the quality and context of those talks, most times they are nonsense.”

In the absence of in-person forums and discussions, social media platforms offer the only opportunities for citizens to freely participate in exchanging information alongside people with whom they disagree. These forums include Facebook and YouTube comments sections. Authorities still use their troll “army” to shatter the trust in independent journalists and attack their critics on social media.

Audiences’ primary sources of information are the mainstream media from Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey.

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

Disinformation on political and other topics remains high, and many people in the provinces and in Baku do not consume news critically. Most citizens think national television channels and the officials on them tell the unassailable truth, while the facts show the opposite, panelists lamented.

Given that alternative independent media have been cornered, Azerbaijanis are highly likely to be easily misled on political and social issues. Additionally, the absence of any democratic processes for more than two decades has caused widespread political apathy. Quality information hardly influences the outcome of nationwide elections, panelists commented.

Since people have little access to real news, they prefer government-generated disinformation on TV, according to the panelists. Whether TV

reports on an election or any event, TV and government media can alter it very easily.

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

Panelists agreed that since many NGO activities in the country were recently called into question, their work with the media and transmission of their information to the media has become a secondary issue.

“Some NGOs are [act like] they are working for civil society,” one panelist noted, “The issues they talk about are not based on any research. They are mainly used as a means of pressure on others in the hands of the government. Just like now they are standing on the Lachin Road and getting cold,” he said, referring to a road leading to the contentious Nagorno-Karabakh territory where activists have held protests.

Very few organizations are engaged in NGO activities in the country. Years ago, several NGOs operated in different fields, but now just a couple of NGOs function among all fields.

“Now the issue is not the relationship and work of these NGOs with the media, but whether they exist or not,” said one panelist. “Today, NGOs have declined to the point of non-existence in Azerbaijan, she noted, “The few remaining organizations work very hard, and we see it and it’s mainly young initiative groups and platforms that work transparently. They encourage citizens to participate in government decisions. In addition, they provide an analysis of current events and reports. But the government creates obstacles for their registration and free activity in the country.”

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

State bodies invite only “friendly” pro-government or government media outlets to press conferences; they are closed to independent media.

Authorities still use their troll “army” to shatter the trust in independent journalists and attack their critics on social media.

A photojournalist on the panel recounted his experiences. “For example, although I received official approval from the UEFA Championship League to shoot the international football match between Chelsea and Arsenal held in Azerbaijan in 2020, my accreditation was canceled by the government,” he said, “After receiving official accreditation for two years for the competition, they refused to approve me for the third year, claiming I was with ‘oppositional media.’”

In 2022, officials ordered Toplum TV journalist Farid Ismayilov to leave a press conference organized by the Ministry of Defense, after September tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The spread of disinformation and propaganda is a daily issue in the country. Self-respecting and independent media entities do not report the news without verification. “But it seems to me there are dozens of websites that spread untrue information,” noted one panelist, “and they have hundreds of thousands of followers who are not worried that the information they provide could cause a problem for someone’s life and safety.”

This panelist also said that these website operators do not have any grounding in journalism, so they do not think some sentences they have written, or will write, create responsibility for them. Since the judicial system in Azerbaijan does not work properly, even if website writers are sued for defamation, they will somehow win in court, according to this panelist.

Independent outlets Meydan TV, Abzas media, Toplum TV, and Mikroskop Media attempt to get comments from experts and officials, but often cannot. A group of Azerbaijani journalists are trying to discourage viewers from believing everything the government says, but these attempts, too, have not been successful. One panelist pointed out that since the Azerbaijani government has tied the hands of the media with the new media registry, authorities are now suggesting banning some social media platforms as well.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The government has not penalized any officials as a result of fact-based media investigations, and instead has sometimes granted them promotions. Of course, some officials were deprived of their duties and punished. According to the panelists, those removals happened not because the persons engaged in corruption and violated the law, but because they did not play by the rules of the president.

State bodies invite only “friendly” pro-government or government media outlets to press conferences; they are closed to independent media.

Independent fact-checkers constantly expose untruths. However, if a journalist uncovers corruption and shares it in any media outlet, problems and pressures await. Citizens want to express their problems, but they are afraid. Alternatively, when the media cover an issue someone has discussed, the interviewee later denies

what they said because officials exert pressure on that person to stop talking.

Panelists lamented that the government has not taken adequate steps to remedy issues arising from journalistic investigations last year, even though the Abzas.net site has conducted a whole series.

“Unfortunately, due to the lack of a free and fair judicial system in the country, court decisions regarding the restoration of violated human rights are at a low level,” said one panelist, “Although it doesn’t happen frequently, the repeated dissemination of quality information on a topic goes some way to preventing or reducing human rights violations by national or local governments. But I think it is possible that quality information can prevent or reduce violations of freedom rights by national or local administrations, even if it is small.”

All panelists agreed that even quality information in Azerbaijan cannot help the nation conduct free and fair elections at the local or national level. They concurred that every election day, the same situation is repeated in the country, where pro-government candidates are elected.

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

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