

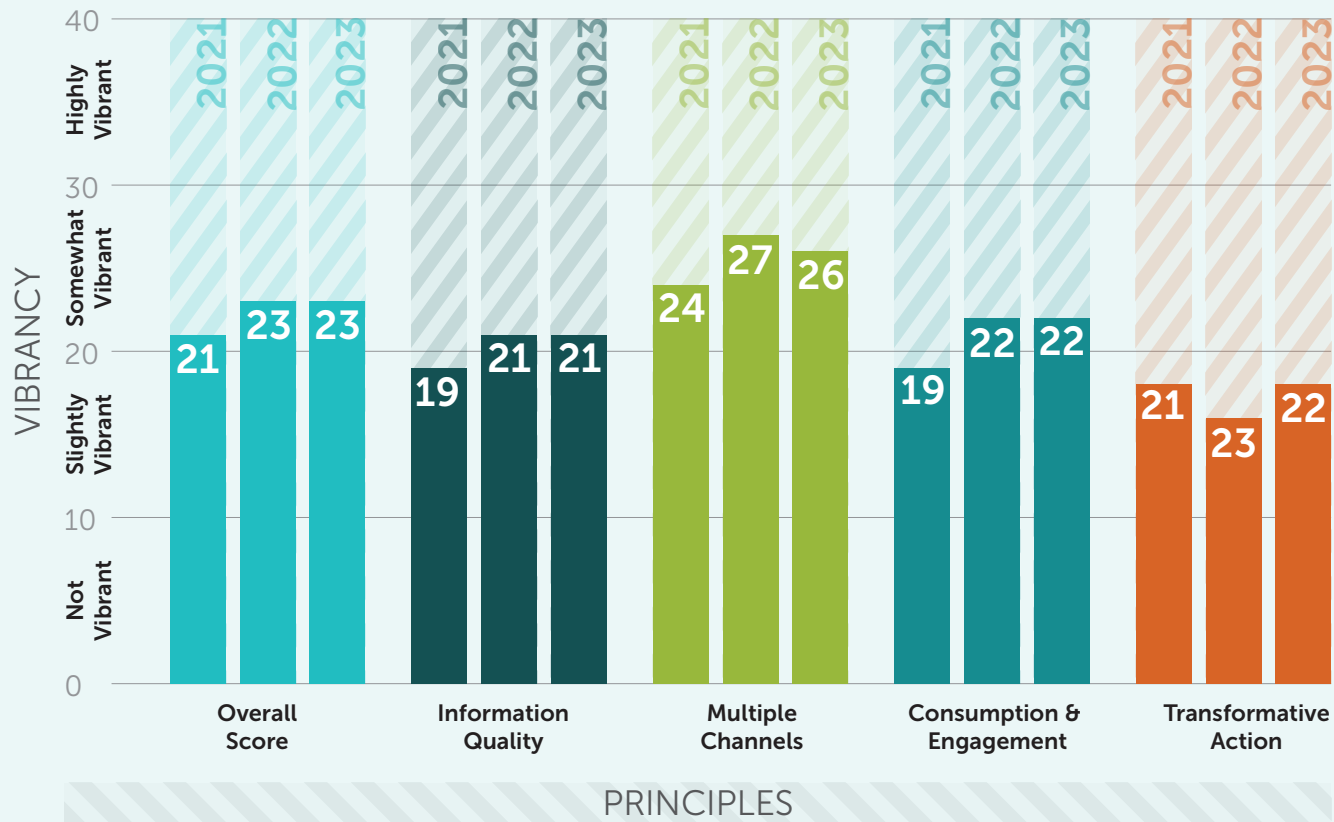
MONTENEGRO



Vibrant Information Barometer

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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

23

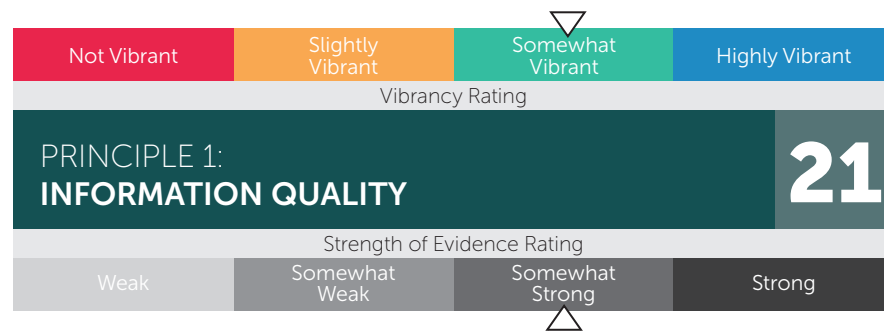
Since the last parliamentary elections held in August of 2020, Montenegro remains in a protracted political crisis. In April 2022, Montenegro voted in favor of a minority government, backed by the opposition, hoping to lead Montenegro into the European Union. Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic aims to stabilize the nation's internal political and economic turmoil, as well as help with its EU candidacy. However, in August 2022, Abazovic's government received a no-confidence vote after signing a basic agreement on relations between Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church, backed by the nationalistic regime of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.

The political turmoil of 2022 interrupted Montenegro's pro-European leanings and led the nation into an economic crisis. Inflation rose 17 percent, food costs increased by 29 percent, and real estate and rent skyrocketed by 30 percent during the year, according to official government statistics. Other government statistics for 2022 were equally concerning: Unemployment shot up 20 percent, and the nation's debt soared to more than €4 billion (\$4.3 billion) or 75 percent of its gross domestic product. Amidst this political and economic strife, some 26,000 Russians and Ukrainians immigrated to Montenegro, representing over 4 percent of the population.

Overall, the media sector remained unchanged, except that more TV stations are now under the direct control of pro-Serbian, pro-Putin supporters. Montenegro's media community is increasingly serving political interests and devolving into propagandistic discourse, eating away at

the professional and ethical role of the media. Moreover, online journalism is expanding and taking over traditional media. People increasingly obtain information from social media: 900,000 Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts are in use in Montenegro.

The 2023 VIBE study reveals that media quality falls short of the professional standards and norms that characterize a free press in a liberal democracy. Key reasons include political bias of newsrooms, misinformation and false news influencing the internet and social networks, the ongoing anti-Montenegrin and anti-European campaign from Serbia, and poor investigative and in-depth journalism due to limited funding. Although media laws mostly align with European and other international standards, the reality falls short. Professional media unions and trade unions provide uncertain protections for journalists, undermining media freedom and efforts to strengthen the media sector's standing within society. Poor media literacy skills provide fertile ground for propaganda and manipulation of public opinion. In practice, only traditional media, along with some local private media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), deliver quality information. Political entities and government bodies are prone to misrepresenting content and suppressing facts, limiting the growth of democratic thinking.



The panelists gave average marks to the quality of information in Montenegro. Society is flooded with numerous information streams, and while traditional media present reliable information, nonprofessional content producers on social media sites do not. Social networks and numerous websites often share disinformation. In recent years, several NGOs are striving to reveal fake media content by fact checking. Despite this, panelists notice a rise in fake news and hate speech on the internet, catalyzed by Montenegro's political crisis and the Ukraine war.

Panelists expect the government to become more active in prohibiting the dissemination of disinformation, though attempts have failed to stop the distribution of fake news. Outlets do not sanction journalists for violations. The media sector does not experience censorship except when journalists withhold information that could harm them professionally, given the lack of protections for journalists and the rise in unresolved cases of physical attacks on them. Media platforms are not sanctioned for publishing unsubstantiated information, and panelists expressed the general opinion that Montenegro has significant room for improvement on information quality.

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

The media landscape in Montenegro is growing, with 200 different media outlets employing some 1,800 staff, providing comprehensive foreign and national reporting, broadcast, for their content production. The

country has special education centers run by professional associations, such as the Montenegro Media Institute. NGOs provide journalism training in reporting and ethics. Mainly traditional national and local media participate in trainings, and other media, particularly online platforms, are less likely to. As a result, panelists said this lack of training leads to poor quality media content. However, media do cover a range of topics, including political, economic, cultural, and social issues, although the country still has not developed specialized journalism. When covering public officials, the media focus on accountability.

Olivera Nikolić, acting director of the Montenegro Media Institute, noted the media sector has adequate infrastructure, including print, broadcast and digital. However, the content of some media is highly politicized, influencing citizens in favor of media owners' own interests. Four out of five TV stations that offer national coverage are owned by native Serbians, showcasing pro-Serbian viewpoints. Much of their content is produced outside the country, limiting the public's range of opinions and information about national issues. In addition, Nikolić said editorial teams lack self-regulatory practices, and no collective self-regulatory body exists to impartially protect professional standards.

The panelists agreed that misinformation on social networks decreased over the past two years. However, some sites still manipulate public opinion. Many media sites are in political centers in Serbia and therefore, not independent. Despite the existing infrastructure, according to Jelena Martinovic, journalist and editor of the daily *Pobjeda*, many journalists cannot travel outside the country. This makes it difficult to apply new, multidisciplinary and contemporary reporting tools to collect information, using digital and foreign sources. "Montenegro's media does not have full journalistic independence and media policy is influenced by editors and owners", she added.

Sixty-five percent of Montenegro's journalists say editors have extreme, significant, or partial influence on reporting, and 40 percent claim media owners have influence, according to the 2021 report, "Socio-economic Positions of Media Professionals in Montenegro," funded by the Balkan Trust for Democracy Fund (a project of the German Marshall Fund) and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A 2021 Digital Forensic Center

(DFC) survey on media literacy, corona virus and citizens of Montenegro - 2021 – 2021 found 41 percent of 922 citizens surveyed think the media reports differently on the same event, and almost 40 percent claim the media omits important elements from the news, or ignore certain events.

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

The panelists held the general view that traditional media are trying to publish fact-based information. Professional content producers create accurate information and do not intentionally attempt to disseminate false information. Nonprofessional content producers typically do not engage in fact-checking and often produce dubious or outright false reports or politically motivated propaganda.

During 2022, the media criticized government bodies for producing false information or outright government propaganda. The panelists agreed that the media are trying to fact-check government information or public officials' statements, and to debunk statements identified as disinformation. The fight against disinformation is a daily challenge in Montenegro, and specialized NGOs are the best sources to disprove fake news. An abundance of online information –on websites, portals, and social media– helps fact-check news. “However, established, professional media in Montenegro are not the source of disinformation, nor do they publish [fake news] intentionally,” according to Nikolić. A serious source of disinformation are tabloids from neighboring countries, especially Serbia, and some of them are among the most popular in Montenegro, she added. IN4S, a popular pro-Serbia right-wing online newspaper, is a major source of disinformation. These media are not registered in Montenegro, even though they operate here. Surveys and monitoring of established media

Panelists note that foreign governments, particularly Serbia and Russia, are disseminating disinformation and hate speech through media outlets they control, which have editorial policies aimed at undermining Montenegrin sovereignty and pro-Europe foreign policy.

show that these outlets do not take responsibility for their accounts on social networks, which are often a primary source of disputed information, Nikolić pointed out.

“Dissemination of fake news and disinformation through various media channels and social platforms is at an all-time high,” noted Samir Rastoder, editor-in-chief of Radio Petnjica, a local news platform. Despite laws pertaining to disinformation, sanctions for fake news are not enforced, and journalists are witnessing a trend where serious lies, manipulations, and accusations are being disseminated by top public officials, he said. “There are fact-checking tools, but apart from being used for statistical purposes, they are useless,” he lamented.

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

Panelists generally agreed that professional producers of media contents do not create information to intentionally hurt anyone. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for nonprofessional producers of media content, even though no clear evidence exists of coordinated activities among platforms disseminating toxic information. Panelists note that foreign governments, particularly Serbia and Russia, are disseminating disinformation and hate speech through media outlets they control, which have editorial policies aimed at undermining Montenegrin sovereignty and pro-Europe foreign policy.

Certain respectable NGOs are engaged in exposing foreign media disinformation. One such organization is the Center for Democratic Transition (Raskrinkavanje.me), which works in collaboration with the International Fact-Checking Network. Another is the Digital-Forensic Center, operating within the Atlantic Council of Montenegro.

The panelists observed that Prime Minister Abazovic often makes irresponsible and arbitrary statements. On several occasions he has threatened media companies, including City TV, and daily news site *Pobjeda*. His statements undermine the credibility of the current government, which, according to public opinion surveys, is supported by just 4 percent of the electorate.

The absence of a self-regulatory body of influential media is a great handicap. Self-regulation is decentralized due to decades-long disputes among major media companies. “In Montenegro we do have a professional code of journalists, but it does not apply to disinformation and misinformation, nor does it compel media outlets to take responsibility for moderating comments on their social networks accounts,” said Nikolić. For example, the popular web portal IN4S, which disseminates propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech, is not officially registered in Montenegro, and therefore bears no legal responsibility for the content it publishes, she noted. “Self-regulatory practices are not sufficiently developed,” Nikolić continued. “Ongoing legislative reform does not foresee a ban of unregistered media. However, it does discourage and even bans the public sector from advertising in unregistered media.”

“Foreign governments media are disseminating hate speech and disinformation against Montenegro,” added Martinovic. The most obvious ones are Serbian and Russian media outlets. As far as Montenegro outlets, web portals IN4S and Aktuelno, widely disseminate hate speech by journalists who do not adhere to professional ethics, even though they present themselves as legitimate media outlets and are popular across the country. However, Martinovic said professional media pay attention to information they disseminate and take responsibility for content.

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

News sources are generally inclusive and diverse, according to the panelists. Media disseminate information in all languages spoken in Montenegro. Different media provide information from a broad ideological and political spectrum, as well as from diverse experiences and opposing viewpoints. Panelists agreed the Roma community is underrepresented in media content. The professional media sector tries to cover activities of all ethnic and religious communities, and local media play a particularly important role in this respect. Gender diversity is present in both professional and non-professional media.

Poor representation of the Roma community was particularly problematic during the COVID health crisis, Nikolić noted. In the past, media presented more Roma-language content, but now few media outlets use the Roma language, including state-owned TV and Radio-RTCG. The only Roma-oriented content was reduced to a 30-minute weekly program on national TV, Nikolić said.

“Professional media are in the worst possible situation, because revenue sources from the local market are insufficient to cover the operations, even at the biggest media companies,” said Boris Darmanovic, CEO and founder of Media New Holdings.

Media does not cover many issues related to persons with disabilities. Youth-related issues are neglected as well. There are no media surveys on young people that explore issues such as where they get their information, what their topics of interests are, or whether the media meets their needs, Nikolic explained. The survey, “Media Through Gender Lenses,” by the Montenegro United Nations Development Program (UNDP), notes that women make up the majority of journalists in Montenegro. More women are anchors and editors of prime-time news; yet key managerial positions are still overwhelmingly male. The survey shows media outlets do not consider or promote gender equality, despite recommendations from numerous international reports and local regulations.

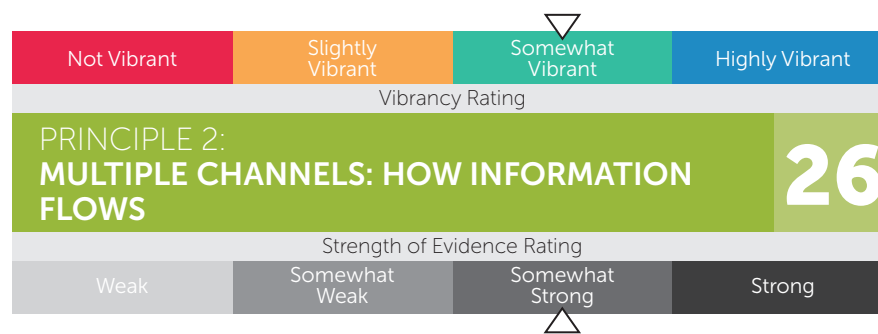
Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The lack of funding is a constant issue for all media content producers. The government funds some information projects through its Fund for Stimulating Media Pluralism and Diversity, which receives 0.09 percent of the current national budget. Publications have no subscriptions and national and local public media services depend on government subsidies, opening them to political influence.

Advertising makes up the main revenue for private media, which comes to about €11 million (\$12 million) a year, which is not enough to support a thriving media landscape, according to the panelists. Advertising revenues increase by approximately €2 million (\$2.2 million) during electoral campaigns. The government pays for media advertisements, raising objections over transparency and politicization of those ads. The exact amount of the government’s advertising budget is unknown. Journalists continue to struggle with low pay, with the average journalist’s salary estimated at €600 (\$648) per month. Low salaries are an important reason journalists move to public and public relations work in the private sector.

“Professional media are in the worst possible situation, because revenue sources from the local market are insufficient to cover the operations, even at the biggest media companies,” said Boris Darmanovic, CEO and founder of Media New Holdings, which produces newspapers across the country, “Some of them are funded from abroad, like, for example the daily newspaper *Vijesti*, while other media are forced to rely on the local market.” Often political institutions invest in small web portals and meme creators, or quasi-influencers, rather than in real media, since media still try to uphold professional standards. Darmanovic notes media companies pay large amounts in taxes and social networks do not, which is especially problematic. Media pay income taxes for advertisements with funds that come from Montenegro that target Montenegrin clients. Media also are responsible for payroll tax for their staff, while the social networks do not. Social networks have access to powerful tools, and software, while media companies do not have enough funds to pay professional programmers and engineers to develop competitive software.

“Every fourth journalist in Montenegro is earning between €500 and €600 net (\$540 to \$647) per month, and 73 percent of journalists do not receive any remuneration for overtime,” said Natasa Ruzic, political science professor at the University of Montenegro. The Center for Civic Education’s report, “Level the Playing Field for all the Media,” shows there has been progress recently for funding transparency, Ruzic noted.



Media regulations largely follow international journalistic and regulatory standards and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms. In 2020, Montenegro added two important laws: The Law on Media and the Law on National Public Service, which are currently enforced. Over the past two years, public debate has focused on revising media laws, including those two. The new Law on Media draft includes the definition of journalists as media professionals. It stipulates that any person engaged in the collection, processing, shaping, sorting, editing, or performing any other intervention on information for the sake of publishing, whether a freelance or full-time employee for national or international media outlets, is considered a journalist.

The panelists concurred that Montenegro has no political limitations in terms of creating, distributing, and using information. Furthermore, access to information channels is easy and unlimited, except for financial limitations, such as subscriptions to cable TV, mobile phones, and the internet. The government disseminates its information through all available media channels including social networks. Information and communication technology has progressed significantly in Montenegro. Both public and private media are now available in digital form, and

mobile telephones are omnipresent with four very competitive mobile operators in the country. Internet service is available in all urban centers and in larger rural regions.

Obtaining licenses for operating electronic media is problematic, due to issues around unfair competition in the electronic media market. Broadcasting foreign media through cable providers is threatening the operations and revenue of local TV stations. Panelists agreed that TV news channels are not independent, as their editorial policies are either politicized or under the strong influence of their owners. This seriously violates professional standards and the principle that media should act in the public interest. There is obvious political influence on the operations of the state-owned and local councils' public media, violating the democratic principle that publicly funded media should act in the general population's interest. Political parties are clearly interfering in the work of public media. In addition, publicly owned media engages in self-censorship, which significantly limits the development of high-quality and responsible journalism.

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

Montenegro's media regulations provide legal protection for free speech and freedom of press. Laws are enforced in principle, but issues remain as to how they are implemented. For example, in 2022 there were no recorded violations of freedom of press by the government, except when politicians gave an inappropriate statement. The public and media criticize these actions. Generally speaking, government agencies do not censor media. However, self-censorship exists, mostly in public service media than in the private media sector.

Libel was decriminalized years ago and is no longer a felony. Now libel claims end up in litigation before the courts as a civil matter. Physical violence against journalists was minimal this past year, but many disputable, unresolved, and controversial cases of attacks or pressures

on journalists remain from previous years. The laws protect information sources, but a controversial provision in the Law on Media states journalists are obliged to reveal a source when necessary to protect national security, the territorial integrity of the country, and public health. At the same time, the Law on Media broadly protects journalists' sources, with the exceptions noted above; with the decriminalization of libel, Montenegro does have something of a legal framework to protect the work of journalists.

Montenegro laws guarantee a free press and media freedom, but the current deep political crisis is impacting the media sector, according to

Nikolić. High profile officials are targeting journalists who criticize the government, and deep social divisions have also polarized the media and influenced a negative environment for journalists' work, she added. In addition, politicians are boycotting news outlets if they dislike its reporting. Journalists are under

pressure to do their job professionally; however, politicians, through their inappropriate statements, encourage citizens to express their dissatisfaction with social problems by making inflammatory statements that target the media. This is essentially an attack on media freedom, leading journalists to self-censor, she said.

"The Montenegrin Constitution and the Law on Media are protecting free speech, and media legislation, and the Montenegrin Code of Journalists are protecting the journalists, but only on paper," Ruzic pointed out. According to the Trade Union of Media of Montenegro, 2021 saw 54 active legal cases with charges of violation of individual rights. Journalist Nenad Zecevic of daily *Pobjeda* faced charges of disclosing classified information and was pressured to reveal his source. Freelance journalist Jovo Martinovic was sentenced to prison in 2021 under allegations of drug trafficking. Although rights groups have criticized Montenegro's government for lack of evidence in the case, the government pressed for a conviction.

Dusko Kovacevic, a blogger, commented on attacks against journalists:

“Obtaining licenses for operating traditional radio and television media is problematic, due to issues around unfair competition in the broadcast media market.”

“Recently, gruesome retributions against journalists and media assets have occurred, including the killing of an editor-in-chief; beatings and intimidations,” he said, “But today we basically have none of that. One can freely write and speak even about delicate and dangerous topics.” However, he noted that now Montenegro deals with problems surrounding self-censorship and the practice of loyal and apologetic journalism, due to personal interests or unprofessionalism.

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

Citizens enjoy adequate access to information channels, and to a range of communication devices. The information and communications technology infrastructure generally meets consumers’ needs and almost the entire nation has broad access to cable providers, internet, and mobile telephone services. Cable TV subscriptions and internet connections are generally affordable, giving citizens easy access to many information channels. Even socially vulnerable groups, and ethnic and religious minorities have access.

“A 2021 MONSTAT (Montenegrin Statistical Office) report on Montenegro’s technology infrastructure shows 81 percent of citizens had access to the internet,” noted Ruzic, “In terms of a breakdown, about 81 percent in the central region have internet access, 90 percent in the southern region and 73 percent in the northern region.”

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Montenegro’s Freedom of Information Act, adopted in 2012 and amended in 2017, provides access to information held by public authorities. The law is based on the principles of free information

access, public authority transparency, the public’s right to know, and equality. The government enforces the laws in line with standards from ratified international treaties on human rights and generally accepted rules of international law. According to this law, any national or foreign person, and lawyer, has the right to access information, without the need to state their reasons or explain the interest behind the request. Local NGOs widely use this law to request government information. No major positive trends were detected in the past two years in terms of government communication, although the populist-minded government decided to broadcast its parliamentary sessions live on national TV.

“Owner interference in media editorial policy varies from one outlet to the next. It’s also exercised through financial pressures, which impact media independence,” said Marijana Bojanic, chief executive officer of Vijesti.

“Government communication with journalists has improved in the last several years,” according to Damir Ramovic, editor-in-chief of public media outlet RTCG1, “On the other hand, government officials are trying to get as much media coverage as possible, so now we see the prime minister on TV all the time.” This encourages opposition officials to seek equal time. Public service media is attempting to have equal representation of all sides of the political

spectrum in its programs.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The 2010 Law on Electronic Media section on pluralism protection and broadcast media diversity regulates ownership transparency and media concentration into monopolies. The panelists noted that channels do not experience significant information flow restrictions. However, major challenges to ownership transparency occur among anonymous websites, along with insufficient sanctions or normative obstacles for their operations. Media distribution channels are not monopolized, and the process for establishing a media outlet is free, depending on financial, technical, and human resources.

“The Law on Media should insist on registration of all media platforms,

with a special focus on anonymous web portals, which are still not subjected to regulation,” said Milan Jovanovic with the Digital Forensic Centre, “No mechanisms presently force the web portals to register, so they cannot be subjected to any legal sanctions or other kind of restrictions.”

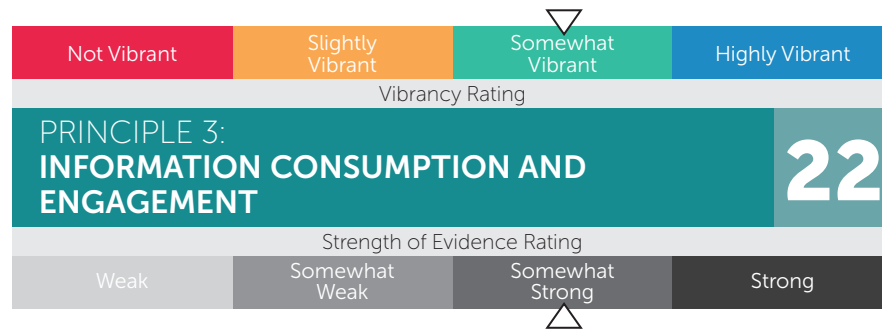
Public service media provide news and educational programs, although consumers continually debate the quality and scope of information offered. Internet providers do not discriminate based on consumers, content or destination addresses.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Panelists concurred that news outlets are essentially not independent due to constant interference from their owners, political groups, and large advertisers. Panelists noted that the government’s advertising policy favors media that do not criticize the government. A particular problem for public service media is pressure from politicians with their editorial policy, depending on who is currently in power.

Government regulatory bodies try to maintain professional independence but are criticized because of their political bias, their unwillingness to protect professional and media standards, and a failure to prevent foreign media activities that violate fundamental journalism principles. Public service media does not have privileged access to equipment, internet, or tax relief when compared to private media.

“Owner interference in media editorial policy varies from one outlet to the next. It’s also exercised through financial pressures, which impact media independence,” said Marijana Bojanic, chief executive officer of Vijesti. She added that her station is free from that negative influence.



Laws protecting privacy and digital security in Montenegro include the 2008 Law on Protection of Personal Data, and the 2010 Law on Information Security. A new law adopted at the end of 2022 replaced the 2008 Law on Electronic Documents to protect digital communication. The laws allow safe use of the internet, although citizens have a personal responsibility to protect their own communication channels.

A major problem in Montenegro is poor media literacy. With a large amount of information freely available, citizens, especially with poor education, are not protected from manipulation or fake or misleading information. The media illiterate population is especially prone to believe disinformation. Additionally, Montenegro’s government needs to implement better laws and be more responsive against persistent hate speech, especially on social networks, panelists said. For years, the media have not had adequate resources to conduct professional public opinion surveys to position their outlets for their target audiences. Instead, media mainly use data coming from NGO surveys. Panelists said local media are very much committed to keeping their local communities informed on issues that matter to them, which is the primary reason why their rating is relatively high.

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

The panelists noted that, in recent years, new laws are strengthening the protection of information privacy and digital communications, which has in turn improved online media. The media are much more

committed to their digital security and protection of their websites and portals because the country now has competent IT companies offering digital tools and services that protect against destructive digital attacks. However, the majority of citizens do not have basic knowledge or skills in protecting their electronic data, and most are not aware that social media algorithms are collecting and using their data.

Martinovic provided an overview of digital protection in the country: “The most recent attacks on Montenegro’s government servers show that, although there are protection systems and IT sectors in every government agency, cyber-attacks are possible. Servers and data, whether state owned or private, are never 100 percent safe, especially if someone is determined to breach them.” She added, “Experts concluded that there is an insufficient number of trained IT staff, and that is quite worrisome.” Citizens are aware of cyber threats but choose to ignore them—they do not normally make backups or use protection software. Media resolve cyber-attacks relatively quickly, and their websites are usually up and running again in no time.

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

The panelists unanimously said that media literacy is crucial to protecting the public from false and misleading news and increasingly manipulative political propaganda. A major problem the panelists identified is that the government has made no commitments to develop an adequate media literacy strategy or suitable positive practices within the country’s education system. Most citizens, except for a some highly educated people, often fall for ideological and political misinformation and fake news. Montenegro is among the worst countries in Europe for media literacy, the panelists noted.

Ruzic pointed to reports that show Montenegro’s level of media literacy. Specifically, the 2021 Digital Forensic Center survey showed that 73

percent of interviewees noticed ‘fake news’ in the media. Thirty-four percent said they saw disinformation in the media often or even on daily basis, and 37 percent said they would not do anything even if they did notice certain media disseminating disinformation.

Milan Jovanovic noted that there is a rising awareness of the need to address critical thinking in the media. “Our educational system is offering media literacy as an elective subject in senior high and, as of next year, it will be available in junior highs and primary schools as well,” he said. However, because media literacy is an elective and not a mandatory subject, very few students take the course. “Critical thinking—being able to analyze and summarize data and information, to perform research, to be able to express oneself creatively in different formats—are all crucial skills, not just for the area of media literacy but necessary for the 21st century, and therefore should be made a mandatory subject in schools,”

Jovanovic stated. He thought the government should play a bigger role in supporting media education, which until recently has been offered mostly by NGOs.

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

The panelists were split regarding citizens’ commitment to exercising freedom of speech and using available information. A significant number of media operate in the country with no legal restrictions on using foreign information channels, which are often used for political propaganda or to subvert Montenegro’s Euro-Atlantic goals. The unrestricted internet community provides a broad platform for online debates, comments, and individual views. However, the panelists said that the level of media culture and measured online debate is inadequate, and still dominated by partisan rhetoric instead of democratic principles. Another problem is anonymous, unregulated web portals, which are often used to spread

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political propaganda and disseminate disinformation and hate speech. The media have a positive and productive relationship with civil society organizations; however, most citizens are unaware of what a media ombudsperson is or what they do.

According to Nikolić, controversial hate speech in social networks increases in times of deep social crises in Montenegro. The media do not take responsibility for content posted on their social media accounts, and they do not have self-regulatory practices to manage debate in an ethical and professional manner. She thought the media also fail to offer guidance to help citizens file complaints, leaving the public to assume they can have no impact on what and how media report. The public service broadcaster appointed an ombudsperson in July 2021, but the role is still relatively unknown to the general public and management is not aware of how important an ombudsperson's role is in protecting viewers' rights.

Ramovic mentioned how many NGOs help people engage productively with media, but some organizations' spokespersons are more concerned with their own political and financial ambitions. They can be politically partisan, especially when serving as political analysts. In addition, some NGO activists only criticize the national public service broadcaster, because of the activists' close ties with commercial media.

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

Media companies have not improved their ability to conduct public opinion surveys and position themselves to target their audience. Instead, to respond to their audiences' interests, many media companies use market surveys, research and analysis conducted by international organizations and by NGOs, including the Montenegro Media Institute, the Media Center of Montenegro and the Center for Civic Education. Panelists agreed that Montenegro has positive cooperation between

the media and NGOs, although much depends on editorial policies. This cooperation is much more intensive and productive than among government agencies.

"The media share information with each other to give audiences stories they can't uncover by themselves," Martinovic noticed. However, she said that because of financial pressures, they do not generate their own public opinion surveys to find out what their target audience wants.

“ The public generally trusts its local media more than they do national outlets, whether they are private or public service media. Unfortunately, local media have a lack of funding to buy equipment and maintain their infrastructure.

Most media allow users to send letters to the editors to respond to an article, issue a denial, or spark debate, and in most cases these issues are resolved fairly and in a timely manner. However, comments posted on websites remain a major problem, because they are published in real-time and are only removed or moderated after they are posted. "Trust is built by reporting accurate information and using real bylines without hiding behind

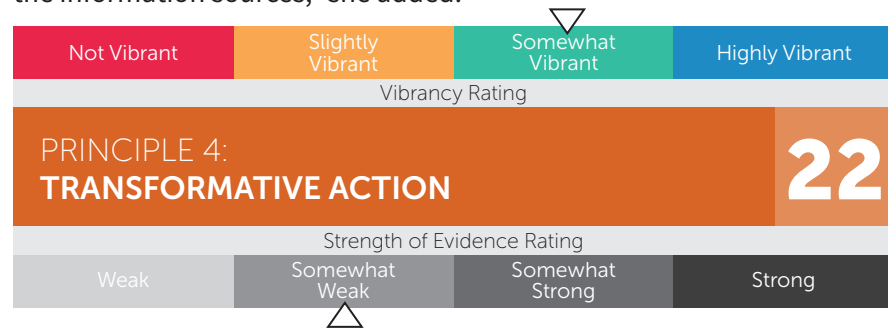
pseudonyms or editorial teams," Martinovic continued. The media are networking among themselves on political bases; as a result, Martinovic noted that "...this networking is as polarized as the media community itself, which is something that has been confirmed by numerous foreign organizations reports."

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

Montenegro does not have many community media outlets, as it is defined by the VIBE methodology; however, numerous local media operate provide similar coverage that community media outlet would. Most of the local private media are radio stations and regional web portals, while larger cities--like Podgorica, Budva, and Niksichave--have more public service media. Local media meets the informational, cultural, and entertainment needs of the local population to a much greater extent than the national media does, including organizing inclusive debates. This is why the public generally trusts its local media

more than they do national outlets, whether they are private or public service media. Unfortunately, local media have a lack of funding to buy equipment and maintain their infrastructure.

Ilmira Lika, executive director of TV Teuta based in Ulcinj, described the efforts of her outlet, which provides bilingual social, political, and economic news. She said that her station covers events in Ulcinj but also in other areas of Montenegro, and cooperates with several TV outlets from Podgorica, the nation’s capital. They share daily stories as needed and continually cover events in Ulcinj when other media ask for coverage. “We are very proud of the fact that we managed to gain the trust of our citizens for our accurate information,” she said, “We haven’t had a single accusation of broadcasting fake news—whatever our viewers see, it is based on accurate and verified information.” She also noted that some politicians or businesses try to pressure her station to change how they report news, especially if the groups do not like a certain report. So far, however, they have been unsuccessful in changing TV Teuta’s fact-based reporting. Lika explained that TV Teuta has close ties with their community to accurately report about their problems and is particularly proud of helping solve some local issues. “Local media are very important for the surrounding population, because they are close to the information sources,” she added.



Information sharing across ideological and political lines has risen significantly over the past year. Montenegro has had two failed governments since 2020, which has caused major political instability, coupled with institutional crises contributing to partisan bias in media reporting. Serbian and Russian nationalistic and propagandistic

narratives also contributed to a negative media environment along with promoting disinformation and disseminating hate speech. There are media outlets—including *Pobjeda*, independent radio station Antena M, and web portal Analitika—that are critical of the ruling parties while other media either supports the government or at least tries to minimize its problems. Even the national public service broadcaster (RTCG) favors government policies, although it maintains a neutral appearance. There is some solidarity between media that are on the opposite sides of the political spectrum, which results in a lack of quality public debate and social and political discourse. Panelists agreed that open and constructive debate between conflicting political and ideological stances is clearly missing.

Much of the public is vulnerable to misinformation and false news. This is an ongoing problem, and panelists said the media shares responsibility for not helping citizens recognize and confront disinformation. Montenegro has a number of strong and influential NGOs that are neutral actors in the county’s civil society sector—including some that work to debunk fake news—but there are also organizations that are aligned with the government. The panelists said the government does not sufficiently use quality information when creating public policy, which citizens notice and criticize. In general, quality information is not integrated into public government to exercise democratic principles and constitutional rights.

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

Formally, the media sector has nonpartisan media, but media outlets are ideologically colored and politicized. This is apparent when media outlets give different interpretations of the same events. The general public’s media choices are typically based on their political leanings even though they will read or watch a variety of different media. For example, the highest-rated private TV outlets, web portal and TV station *Vijesti*, and the public service broadcaster RTCG are pro-government. Montenegro is still under the grip of strong ideological and political

extremes, which means open public debate between conflicting points of view on TV and social networks is almost non-existent. Even information based on undisputable facts can be misinterpreted.

The 2021 Digital Forensic Center survey revealed that 24.2 percent of interviewees said the media does not comply with professional and ethical standards, and that media often present diverging viewpoints on the same event, noted Ruzic. “Citizen journalism is poorly developed, despite state-run outlets RTCG and PCNEN’s web offerings, which demonstrates the general public’s media passivity,” she observed.

“In Montenegro we have many web portals but few comments,” Nikolic said. Media outlets do not guide commentators in engaging in constructive social debate. Comments are often used almost as a campaign against opposing viewpoints and are often the sources of insults and hate speech, especially against religious, ethnic, gender minorities--and increasingly against women. The media do not take responsibility for comments posted on their social media, which are often just insults and hate-fueled diatribes, Nikolic added. Jovanovic agreed, adding that, “People do exchange information with those they disagree with on different digital platforms, but usually those debates quickly turn into confrontations. Because of a lack of moderators, these comments are not removed and are accessible to the public.”

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

The dominant opinion of the panelists was that citizens do not make good use of quality information, and many give in to misinformation and fake news, predominantly disseminated by non-traditional media on websites, social media, or influencers. Many are unable to distinguish between accurate and false news reports--even in the case

of undisputed facts—due to a lack of education and mistaken personal beliefs, especially when assessing healthcare news and foreign political influences. This problem affects the overall quality of political and social relations in Montenegro.

For example, Martinovic pointed out that during the COVID-19 pandemic people often disobeyed numerous official and scientific guidance, to the detriment of their health, based on misinformation and social network conspiracy theories. Online communications propagated anti-vaccination attitudes and spread unfounded claims about vaccine efficacy, content, and safety, she noted. As a result, post-COVID, not as many children have gotten the mumps, measles, and rubella vaccine as well as the HPV vaccine, even though the HPV vaccine has been proven to prevent cervical cancer, she observed. Montenegro now has one of the lowest immunization levels in Europe.

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

NGOs and trade unions tend to use quality news and information when presenting their missions, surveys, or positions on public policies. NGOs are also actively engaged in countering misinformation and disinformation. The media regularly publish NGO reports, and in that sense civil society has a level of positive and productive cooperation. However, religious communities do not have the same level of cooperation, particularly the Serbian Orthodox Church, which acts as para-political entity and an extension of the Serbian regime under Russian influence.

Montenegro has a strong and influential NGO sector, but some have become loyal to the new, right-wing government. Others--including the Center for Civic Education (CGO), an organization against corruption and organized crime MANS; the Center for Democratic Transition

“The media do not take responsibility for comments posted on their social media, which are often just insults and hate-fueled diatribes, Nikolic added. (Olivera Nikolić, acting director, Montenegro Media Institute)”

(CDT), the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM); Atlantic Council, Human Rights Action, and the Montenegro Media Institute--are influential in public discourse and recognized for their criticism of political structures. Some organizations, including CDT and its platform Raskrinkavanje.me, along with the Digital Forensic Center, are active in debunking fake news.

However, civil society organizations in Montenegro tend to be one-sided just as they were before Montenegro's 2020 regime change, according to Darmanovic. Before the new government, CSOs valued their status as opposition leaders and presented and received information from only that side of the political spectrum. "CSOs are very biased and very much afraid to cooperate with the media, because they consider the media to be tools for political actors," he said. He also pointed out that CSOs do not understand that difference of opinion and political activity are allowed and normal in Montenegro, as long as they are fairly presented. CSOs are under the influence of certain media circles and do not form their opinions independently, and it is clear that they tend to be too afraid of public opinion and the opinion of their donors, he added.

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

Panelists agreed that the previous government's practices were negative in terms of cooperation with civil society and its management of general political discourse. The current government has already been criticized for its poor communication with the media and the public, except for pro-government such as TV Vijesti and RTCG. Government officials often do not use quality information from civil society but instead select information in line with their political interests. The panelists also pointed to the government's tendency to disseminate disinformation,

with political preferences and ideological positions more important than facts.

"Government officials rarely hold press conferences—they did begin broadcasting sessions live, but journalists don't get to ask questions," said Nikolic, adding that the live sessions are just used to broadcast

government policy not for give and take with journalists. Officials are increasingly communicating through social media networks and answer journalists' questions during or after certain events that are organized either by the government or select actors. Government officials are not equally open and accessible to opposition media that criticize it, panelists observed. They tend to avoid difficult questions and debates, and politicians are generally boycotting and even targeting the media when they dislike certain reporting.

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Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The panelists were convinced that quality information is used neither for the purpose of holding the government accountable, nor to contribute to developing democratic norms. Panelists said the government claims it supports investigations into corruption, but their proclamations do not lead to effective results. Although there were examples of competent government agencies reacting to media coverage related to corruption or infringement of human rights, panelists claimed the government reacts with rhetoric rather than offering concrete actions.

Political confrontations and the need to discredit political opponents in public are often more important than taking suitable anti-corruption measures and actions. NGOs--including CDT, MANS, and CEMI--attempt to provide quality information to prevent violations of civil liberties and to ensure free and fair elections, which is a major contribution since voters often face threats by political parties.

Dragan Markesic, general manager of Direct Media, emphasized that a lack of funds limits the effectiveness of investigative journalism. He provided figures from his advertising agency on media finance: “The [total estimated] advertising budget for Montenegro in 2022 was about €10.5-11 million (\$11 million). Out of this, 50 percent goes to TV stations (Vijesti, RTCG, TV Prva, Nova M and PINK M take 95% of this amount); 20 percent goes to billboards and street advertising; seven percent to print media; and approximately 17 percent to online media and social media networks.”

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