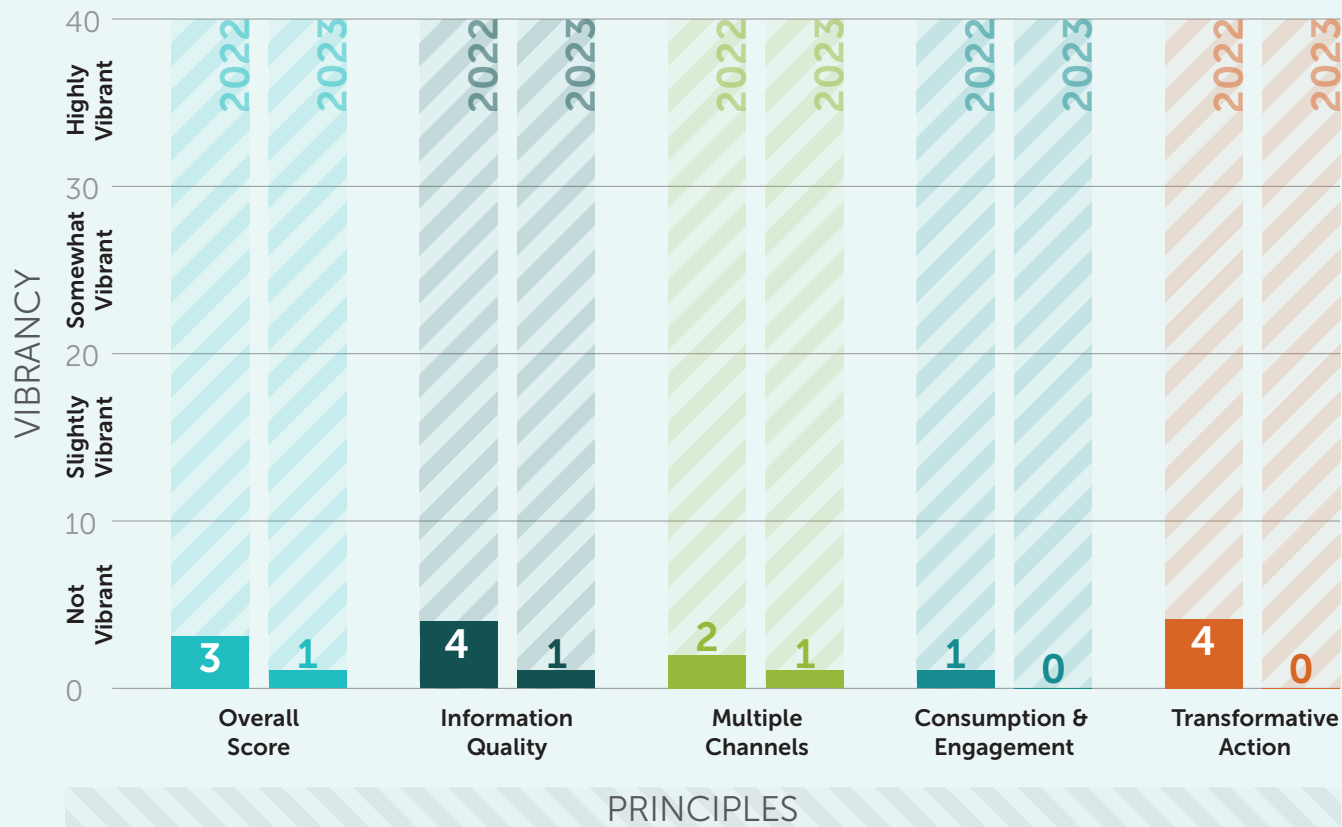


TURKMENISTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 3





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**1**

Turkmenistan's authoritarian government that uses an effective domestic security apparatus to maintain control over all facets of society commonly draws comparisons with North Korea. Socio-economic problems have been continually worsening over a number of years. The difference between the Turkmenistan portrayed by state media and the actual living conditions for most of the country's citizens widened in 2022.

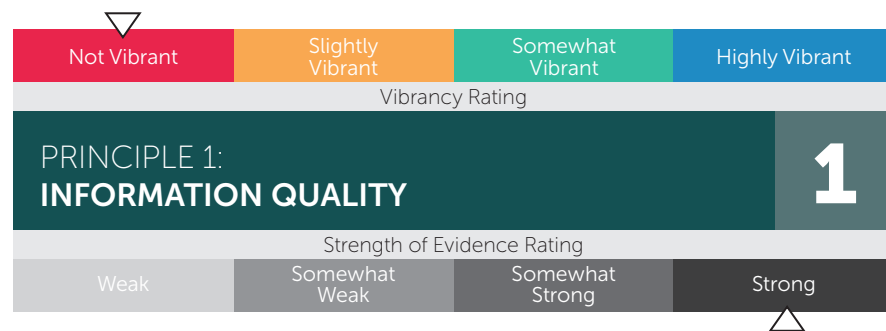
State media is the only media operating within Turkmenistan. The Ministry for National Security (MNS) works to block all foreign websites with content that conflicts with the state's narrative that there are no problems in Turkmenistan - assertions that are far from the truth. As a result, Turkmenistan's people are uninformed about events outside their country and misinformed about what is happening inside. Panelists noted that state media's main purpose is to spread propaganda about alleged achievements of the government and the president.

During 2022, there were protests that turned deadly in three Central Asian countries, two of which - Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - border Turkmenistan, Russia launched a full-scale war in Ukraine, and the Taliban consolidated power in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan's neighbor to the south. Inside Turkmenistan, an informal campaign was launched on women's appearances, which was accompanied by an increase in gender-based and domestic violence; basic goods such as flour, sugar, or cooking oil became even more difficult for most people to obtain; and jobs continued to be hard to find. Problems with reliable supplies of heating, electricity, and water seemed to grow worse. State media did not cover any of these foreign or domestic topics.

Instead, the president continues to dominate state media

coverage, but a new president was elected in March 2022: A transfer of power from father to son, as President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, in power since late 2006, stepped down from that post, and shortly after, his son, Serdar, won the snap presidential election. State media has to divide its reporting between the new president and his father, as the latter retained his position as chairman of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council), the upper house of parliament.

Turkmenistan's overall country score dropped two points, from 3 in the 2022 VIBE study to 1 in this year's. Given the chokehold the government has on the information flow within the country, Principles 1 (Information Quality) and 2 (Multiple Channels) each received a score of 1 each, while Principles 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and 4 (Transformative Action) each received scores of 0. While it remains possible for mobile phone owners to use VPNs to get around state censors, police can check people's phones on the streets, workplaces, and educational facilities. Those found to have visited Turkmen opposition websites operating outside the country or liking material deemed by authorities to be counter Turkmenistan's interests could face charges of treason. In such a media environment, it is impossible to share information across any platform unless it is first vetted by censors, leaving Turkmenistan's people without the means to independently verify or balance what state media tells them. State media's task is to praise the leadership and portray the president, and now also his father the former president, as making decisions that are moving the country forward, socially, economically, and politically, even though Turkmen citizens see their socio-economic situations are becoming worse.



The quality of information in Turkmenistan remains extremely low. State media is the only media that operates within Turkmenistan. Its purpose is not to report the news or inform the public, but to project the image of Turkmenistan as a happy and prosperous country, led by the wise president, and prior to 2022 his wise father. State media says Turkmenistan is leading country in terms of economy, technology, and innovation. To create such an image, which is so clearly at odds with reality, state media embellishes, distorts, and often invents information to fit the government narrative. State media do not report on the long lines for limited amounts of bread forming outside state-subsidized stores hours before opening time, or about people rummaging through garbage bins searching for something they might be able to sell, or increasingly for scraps of food to eat. The MNS watches over content disseminated by domestic media and works to block information penetrating the country from outside, leaving the government with total control over information available to the country's people.

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

It has never been possible to obtain quality information on a variety of topics in Turkmenistan. The technology and materials exist, and media outlets--whether print, radio, television, or Turkmen media websites--have access to them. However, panelists explained that the state censor watches over every article that state media reports, and the MNS works to prevent citizens from gaining access to information originating from outside Turkmenistan.

There are Turkmenistani universities that have journalism courses, and at times western organizations working in Turkmenistan conduct training seminars. However, the space for practicing journalism is so restricted that journalists must conform to state-approved topics and methods of coverage. Some of the more promising journalists might get hired at one of Turkmenistan's media outlets that is dedicated to broadcasting outside the country, usually in Russia, and there are Turkmen websites and satellite television channels that report in English, French, Chinese, and Arabic. However, the scope of reporting at these outlets largely conforms with policies for domestic media.

The panelists all noted that journalism training is not the problem. One panelist said, "Journalists know they must engage in propaganda." In January 2018, then-President Berdimuhamedov signed a law banning sex, violence, and bad habits in films and TV programs. The law obliges stations to report on constructive developments in Turkmenistan and show programs that create a positive image of the country. MNS censors ensure this occurs in all media reports.

Journalists keep their jobs by reporting the government's narrative of Turkmenistan as a prosperous country, led by a wise leader, and inhabited by happy people. Those deviating from the state-approved version of events face ramifications, so reporting on social or economic problems, or even natural disasters, is forbidden.

State media does regularly cover government meetings chaired by the president, but the activities of ministers or members of the parliament do not often feature in reports. Local, national, regional, or international news is not covered unless Serdar or Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov are somehow involved. Although Serdar is regularly included in media reports, he seems not as comfortable in front of the camera as his father was and still is.

State media did not cover any of the major international stories of 2022. Those in Turkmenistan dependent on state media for information would not have known about widespread unrest in neighboring Kazakhstan in January 2022, the first-ever deployment of troops from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Kazakhstan to

help restore order, Russia launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, or violence in neighboring Uzbekistan's western Karakalpak Republic on July 1. State media has not reported on the Taliban's return to power in neighboring Afghanistan, or about Beijing's campaign against Muslims in China's western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Journalists cannot hold government officials accountable. There are few press conferences, and those happen only occasionally when a foreign head of state visits Turkmenistan. Officials, with the exceptions of the president or the Halk Maslahaty chairman, shun the media and journalists are not encouraged to seek out local, regional, or provincial officials for comments.

As a result, there is no possibility for editorially independent media in Turkmenistan. Topics for coverage need approval, and censors check content before information is released to the public. Media outlets and journalists are aware of the restrictions on what is reported and craft their coverage to meet the state-approved standards. There is no attempt to contextualize news and events for the audience. Media outlets are specifically tasked with providing positive coverage of Turkmenistan and that often involves exaggeration or outright invention to portray the country in a positive light. There is no attempt to explain the news stories; people are simply expected to believe what they see, hear, or read, even though depictions in state media often contradict the grim reality of life most people in the country experience daily.

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

The norm for information from state media is that its veracity is often questionable. The purpose of Turkmen media is to make state policies look good, which is challenging in a country with declining living standards and limited future prospects. State media often distorts the truth and at times simply invents information that is unproven or patently false. One panelist explained, "No facts and evidence are provided. Journalists simply do not write information that does not fit the interests of the authorities."

Turkmenistan has no non-professional content producers. Only state media has permission to disseminate information inside the country, so there is no possibility for non-professional content producers within the country to disseminate false or misleading information.

The government creates false information, and it is the task of state media to disseminate this information to the public. For example, state media reports on planting and harvesting of crops without explaining to the public why there are shortages of flour--or, as a [report](#) from

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Turkmen service claimed in November 2022, why flour that was part of the state ration package, the paik, in the Mary Province was unfit for human consumption.

State media shows the president visiting towns and cities, and there are nearly always groups of happy workers--usually dancing or singing, or both, and praising and thanking the president. These workers are reportedly forced to rehearse during their free time in preparation for the president's visit.

State media showed festive crowds in Ashgabat turning out for Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's birthday on June 29, 2022. Hronika Turkmenistan, an independent media outlet operated by exiled Turkmenistanis in Europe, [reported in June](#) that hospitals in Ashgabat were filled with "hundreds of students, employees of public institutions, artists and musicians involved in mass events in connection with the [birthday] of the ex-president" who were suffering from the effects of being outside with temperatures of 47 Celsius (116 Fahrenheit). State media reported the celebrations but not the hospitalizations.

There are no ramifications for creating or spreading false news. According to one expert on the panel, this is because state media reporting "is not intended to describe news events or incidents, there is no liability for substandard or false material."

It is nearly impossible for Turkmen citizens to verify whether information provided by state media is correct or not. The internet inside Turkmenistan is no help. The sole internet provider in Turkmenistan is

Turkmen Telecom and its subsidiaries, and part of their duties is to block foreign news and information websites. A [report](#) from turkmen.news in October said Turkmenistan successfully blocked some 1.2 billion IP addresses, roughly one-third of the IP addresses worldwide.

Internet speed inside Turkmenistan is among the slowest in the world, trailing countries such as Yemen or Afghanistan. The World Bank reported fewer than one-third of Turkmenistanis have an internet connection in their homes.

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

There has never been any information that foreign governments or their proxies have attempted to create or disseminate information inside Turkmenistan that was intended to cause harm. Given the efforts that Turkmenistan's MNS has put into blocking information from entering Turkmenistan from outside the country, it would be a difficult feat for a foreign or foreign-backed party to spread malicious information inside Turkmenistan. In any case, no government or non-state actor, with the possible exception of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province in Afghanistan, has ever shown any interest in targeting Turkmenistan.

The Turkmen government and state media do not engage in hate speech. Authorities certainly would not allow hate speech directed at groups inside Turkmenistan as that would shatter the image of social harmony authorities and state media have worked for decades to build. Nothing in state media promotes hatred of any particular group or country.

The information the government disseminates is often inaccurate and intended to glorify the president or chairman of the Halk Maslahaty, but it is not directly intended to harm. However, omissions in reporting can cause harm, such as when it fails to inform about the public about

contagions or environmental problems, such as drought or the methane gas leaks that [NASA reported](#) in October 2022.

Those selecting topics for media coverage are aware of the restrictions on reporting and conform with the state-approved style for preparing and disseminating information. As long as media outlets and journalists work within this tightly regulated framework, they face no repercussions for their reporting.

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

Nearly all information from domestic sources inside Turkmenistan is in the Turkmen language, though some print media, including government websites, use Russian. Domestic media and state media are not available in other languages, and state media does not report on the situations of ethnic minorities—such as Uzbeks, Russians, and Kazakhs—in the country.

Panelists agreed that all information from media in Turkmenistan is propaganda aimed at promoting the good image of the state. There has never been any attempt to present any information, alternative views, or suggestions that there is more to be known than what is presented by state media.

People in different regions and cities of Turkmenistan gain very little information from state media about what is happening in their own region or other areas of the country. While state media does not cover ethnic or religious minorities, these groups reportedly communicate about non-political topics, such as community events, in chat groups on social networks.

State media also does not cover the activities of urban, rural, or regional groups or organizations except when these groups are participating in some government function.

Journalists keep their jobs by reporting the government's narrative of Turkmenistan as a prosperous country, led by a wise leader, and inhabited by happy people.

Gender issues are not discussed in state media. Turkmenistan's media did not cover unofficial regulations on women's appearance and clothing in 2022. Shortly after Serdar Berdimukhammedov became president, independent media outlets covering Turkmenistan from outside the country reported that beauty salons around the country were being warned against providing cosmetic services to women, such as Botox or collagen injections, lip tattoos, or artificial fingernails. Business owners who disregarded the unpublicized ban risked fines or being put in jail for up to 15 days.

In mid-April reports came out on rus.azathabar.com of beauty salons closing in some areas of the country, along with information on an informal ban on women wearing jeans or tight-fitting clothing. Men were also prohibited from wearing shorts, and nightclubs began closing.

Reports in rus.azathabar.com also arose on authorities sending inspectors to workplaces, including hospitals and schools, in the capital Ashgabat, and in Lebap and Mary provinces, to check if female employees were wearing makeup or showed signs of a recent visit to a beauty parlor. Women faced dismissal from their jobs if they violated these prohibitions. In Mary Province, female state employees had to attend lectures about "natural beauty."

A June 19, 2022, [podcast](#) by Radio Free Europe's Majlis series reveals misogyny is frequent on internal social networks, along with questions about why gender-based abuse is allowed to continue in a country where the internet is closely monitored by the security service.

After the informal policies on women's dress and appearance started to be enforced, violence against women increased. A [video](#) posted on the internet in August showed a man, reportedly a woman's husband, bursting into a beauty salon in Ashgabat and beating a woman in front of the salon's employees and customers. There was no information about whether police investigated the incident.

Some panelists said friends and family still in Turkmenistan told them the problem of violence against women became worse after the informal rules on women's appearance started being enforced.

None of this has been reported by state media.

No data exists on the ethnicity of owners, management, editorial staff, journalists, and other content producers. Given the majority of Turkmenistan's population are ethnic Turkmen, and that vetting processes for top positions include a genealogical check--in some cases back seven generations to establish the purity of Turkmen lineage--it is likely nearly all, if not all, of the owners and management are ethnic Turkmen. Although there is also no available data on gender balance, anecdotal evidence indicates that women are employed in the media sector.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Since all media in Turkmenistan is state media, the government provides funding for all media outlets. This financing is adequate for television, radio, print, and internet outlets. Funding for print media is also supplemented by subscriptions, though how subscription revenue is used is opaque and it is similarly unclear how that money is divided and distributed. In 2022, citizens complained they had been forced to subscribe to newspapers and magazines, according to a [May report by RFE/RL Turkmen Service](#), and also that managers often simply withhold money from paychecks as money towards subscriptions.

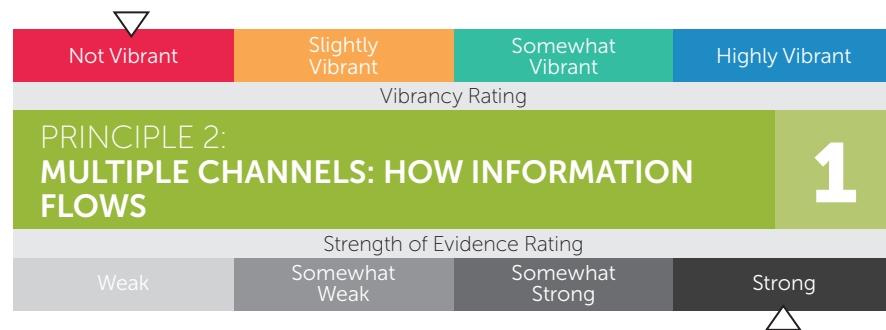
While content producers have sufficient financing and equipment, they are still subject to the restrictions state censors put on all state media. Topic of reports and how those reports are presented first need review and approval to ensure information contained in reports conforms with the government's narrative of events.

There is no option and really no possibility of seeking alternative or private funding for media outlets. Media outlets must be registered with the state, and authorities would never register an outlet that was not wholly dependent on the government for its operations.

Turkmenistan's media does carry advertisements of domestically produced goods; however, the process for advertisers is not clear. With such strong control over media, the government likely selects which

companies and which products are advertised. It is also uncertain if advertisers pay to have their products appear in media and, if so, what the rates for advertising are.

None of the panelists could say if journalists' salaries are sufficient, though one panelist said wages are "not high," and another noted anecdotal evidence that suggested salaries were so low that some journalists needed to take another job.



Turkmenistan's constitution and laws on the media and internet use do provide for the unfettered ability of the country's citizens to receive and impart information, but in practice this has never been true. State media is the sole source of information in Turkmenistan and the information state media disseminates is dictated by the government and overseen by the MNS. As one panelist explained, "Despite the law on freedom of the media and freedom of speech, it is impossible in Turkmenistan to speak one's opinion, let alone publish it."

“It is impossible to register an independent media outlet in Turkmenistan.”

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

Nothing is published or broadcast in Turkmenistan until MNS censors have checked and approved it. Authorities do not respect freedom of speech, and people who openly challenge the government narrative or criticize the state risk losing their jobs, being fined, or being imprisoned.

Citizens who have installed virtual private networks (VPNs) on their mobile phones and are caught accessing Turkmen opposition YouTube channels--such as TurkmenYurt, Erkin Turkmenistan, the Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan, or independent media outlets outside Turkmenistan such as Turkmen.news or RFE/RL's Turkmen service--face fines or even charges of treason. Turkmenistan's authorities have warned people caught with VPNs on their phones that accessing prohibited websites from outside Turkmenistan could carry severe consequences.

In late January 2022, the MNS checked the phones of students at the Turkmen State Architecture and Construction Institute to see if any had been looking at banned websites and warned the students they would be expelled if they were caught accessing banned websites or social networks. A [January 27 article](#) on the RFE/RL website shows Turkmen students caught accessing such sites were offered a choice of cooperating with the MNS in identifying other students who were accessing such sites.

Panelists remarked that journalists working in Turkmenistan understand the boundaries of news coverage and exercise self-censorship. The cost of straying from the government narrative when reporting is at least dismissal with no chance of ever working in state media again.

Media outlets reporting from outside Turkmenistan that do carry alternative views to the state coverage inside Turkmenistan have stringers or sources who provide information. However, these people must exercise extreme caution and avoid being uncovered by the authorities, as penalties for providing information that runs counter to the state narrative carry severe punishments. Such journalists have in the past been imprisoned, and one was even beaten to death shortly after being put in prison.

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

The government actively works to ensure the people cannot access

channels of information except for state media.

The country's information and communication technology infrastructure remains rudimentary with the exception of mobile phones. While many citizens of Turkmenistan own televisions, there are only a few channels, and they all show news and cultural programming. There is no data for how many people own computers; however, given the overall operating environment the percentage could not be high. Those who do own computers find many foreign websites blocked, leaving them with the domestic websites that only offer government-approved content.

Rural areas are poorly connected to the telecommunications and internet infrastructure, and in the case of the internet, there appear to be only a handful of people in some remote districts that have access. Again, mobile phones are the exception, as a large percentage of Turkmenistan's people have them.

There is no information about the authorities making efforts to meet the information needs of vulnerable groups, such as the disabled. Additionally, no effort is made to address the information needs of people who speak languages other than Turkmen or, in some cases, Russian.

As mentioned, most people do have televisions; however, state television programming does not provide necessary information to communities. State television does not warn people of emergencies--such as impending storms or high winds--and, post-disaster, does not provide communities with information on whom to contact or what steps can be taken to alleviate their situation.

No evidence exists that entire communities or groups of people are precluded from accessing information due to social norms. Like all citizens in Turkmenistan, they are limited in accessing sites the authorities have deemed potentially threatening to the regime or the government's narrative of events. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space are strict. It is nearly impossible for users and content producers to access the internet without state approval.

It is unclear what would happen if there were a disruption to the telecommunications system in Turkmenistan. There appears to be no backup plan for reestablishing communications with the population, other than sending officials to check on the situation and relaying that information back to the proper authorities as has happened in the past when natural disasters cut communications to areas. The media plays no role in this since the task of state media is to report positive information and, as a result, there are no reports about the effects of the disasters on communities.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

On paper, the right to information exists. There are media laws and guarantees in Turkmenistan's constitution that do conform with international standards. However, these rights are completely ignored by officials. In the opinion of one panelist, "There are no free media in Turkmenistan, and no independent journalists whom the people would trust."

While citizens can access state website to learn about government policies, the decision-making process within the government is opaque and authorities offer no means for the public to question them about decisions. Government officials have no obligation to explain their decisions to the population. Turkmenistan's citizens do not ask questions as they do not wish to attract the government's attention. This long-established pattern has contributed to general political apathy among most of the population and acceptance of the status quo.

Only the president holds press conferences and even then, only when there is a visiting leader or other dignitary. Serdar Berdimukhammedov did not hold any press conferences in 2022 after he was elected president.

“The government actively works to ensure the people cannot access channels of information except for state media.”

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

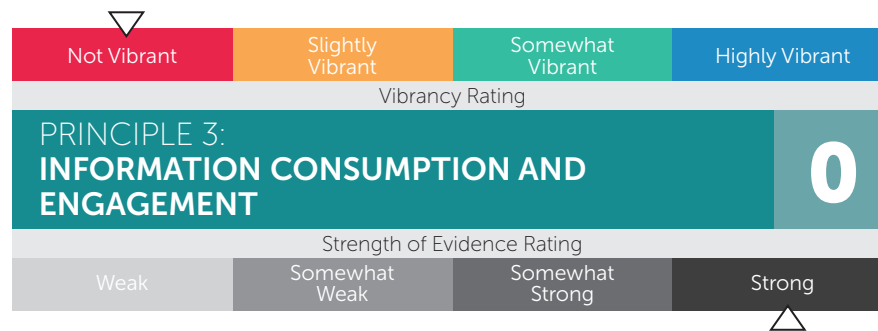
The concept of public service media does not exist in Turkmenistan. Media is meant to serve the leadership by spreading propaganda about alleged achievements and advancements taking place in the country.

Since there is only state media, there are no laws about foreign ownership of a media outlet, and foreign ownership of media is not permitted. There are also no laws requiring transparency in media ownership, except for information specifying the various ministries and unions that founded some of the country’s newspapers.

It is impossible to register an independent media outlet in Turkmenistan. There were attempts in the early months after independence in 1991 to register independent newspapers, but authorities were quick to reject registration and anyone trying to create an independent media outlet would face consequences. More than three decades have now passed, and no one has tried to register an independent media outlet.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

There are no independent information channels inside Turkmenistan. Authorities have made it clear that they will not register any independent media organizations. All media is state media, and as such it follows the orders of its owner, the government. There is no editorial independence. There are no apparent alternative sources of funding outside state funding, since advertising remittances are opaque—if they exist at all. State media has a monopoly on the information that is disseminated to the public, and there is no regulatory body that oversees the media except for the MNS and its censors.



Given the heavy hand that the MNS has in controlling Turkmenistan’s information space, panelists gave most of the VIBE indicators under this principle scores of zero. With lack of internet penetration throughout the country, limited bandwidth, and a dearth of computers, it is safe to assume many, if not most, of the country’s citizens do not have knowledge of online safety and security. Moreover, the government has essentially declared war on the use of VPNs in the country, using fear and intimidation to restrict their use. The government has no interest in supporting media literacy, and most of the information available in the country has little value to people’s daily lives.

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

It very difficult for foreigners to physically enter Turkmenistan, as Turkmen authorities grant very few visas to visit the country. It is equally difficult for information to enter Turkmenistan via the internet. There are numerous problems, from the MNS working to block foreign websites to Turkmenistan having the slowest internet speed in the world. The MNS closely monitors internet activity inside Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan’s people know this and avoid any political conversations on social networks; they are also wary of trying to open sites that might contain material the MNS could deem as being antigovernment content. One of the panelists summed up the situation saying, “Citizens cannot freely use social networks. Everything is under the control of the [MNS],” who are watching for anyone “opening an ‘unreliable’ site...”

While there are laws that guarantee citizens' right to privacy, including on the internet, the MNS does not abide by these laws. The MNS seeks out any suspicious conversations or even specific words on the internet.

Word spread in Turkmenistan that VPNs would help get around state censors, but after Turkmen authorities discovered the growing popularity of VPNs use, one campaign after another has been launched to shut down VPNs inside the country. The state's campaign to block VPNs picked up pace in 2022. There were reports in early January of increased efforts to block VPNs in the northern Dashoguz Province after widespread protests started across the border in Kazakhstan, a [Radio Azatlyk report](#) on January 7 noted. By July, authorities seemed to have partially succeeded in blocking VPNs since reports on Russian news sites such as TASS, RIA Novosti, Azerbaijani news site Trend.az, and foreign news and information websites could not be accessed using VPNs according to Radio Azatlyk.

The extent to which the population has basic digital and data literacy skills is unclear. It is likely low since some 70 percent of the population is not connected to the internet, making it also likely that most of the population is unfamiliar with algorithms and the ways personal information can be utilized to target digital users.

Media employees, particularly those working at websites that disseminate state information to an audience outside the country, probably receive some training in digital security.

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

Turkmenistan's government prefers to keep its people in the dark about what is happening inside and outside the country, so media literacy is not even a consideration. What the government wants, and what is taught in school and reported in the country's media, is that Turkmenistan is a great country, advanced, prosperous, and a wonderful

“The state's campaign to block VPNs picked up pace in 2022.

place to live--all thanks to the president--though after the change of president in 2022 much praise was also directed to the president's father, who is also chairman of the Halk Maslahaty.

Turkmenistan's people know this is not true. However, they are not able to fact-check the information the government and state media provide. The close watch the MNS keeps on the country makes it dangerous to look for information that would counter or discredit the official narrative.

Turkmenistan citizens who have traveled outside the country, such as the many who work or study in Turkey or Russia, surely see a difference in the way news is presented in Turkmenistan and abroad. However, most Turkmen citizens reside permanently in Turkmenistan and while they might understand their state media is propaganda, they probably have not seen high-quality news and information.

A July 15, 2022, [article from Progres.online](#) lamented, “[i]t seems that Turkmen youth, educators as well as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Economy are not aware of the wide spectrum of possibilities the Internet provides both for personal and societal progress. For many Turkmen Internet means only social media such as IMO, Instagram or YouTube.”

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

Most of the information available to Turkmenistan's people is not useful for their lives. State media does not report about increases in prices for, or shortages of, basic goods, looming job cuts, severe storms, expected drought, or many other issues that would be important for people to know.

There is no freedom of speech or rights to information in Turkmenistan.

Journalists are not free to report what they wish and must conform their journalistic activities to the topic and standards set by the government

“There is no freedom of speech or rights to information in Turkmenistan.

and the MNS. There is no civil society in Turkmenistan.

Occasionally a Turkmen citizen does publicly vent their discontent over some aspect of government policies, for example by calling for a protest or writing an open letter to the president. All such people have been imprisoned. In 2022, there was no incident of anyone exercising their nominal right to freedom of speech by making a statement that would displease Turkmen authorities.

There is no platform for public debate or any support for it from the government.

Much of the information the state and state media release to the public is misinformation. The rosy situation in the country that the government and state media portray is a stark contrast to the grim lives many people in Turkmenistan are leading. While this information is false, it is not intended to do harm to any individual or group and hate speech has not been seen in Turkmenistan.

In theory, Turkmen citizens could report misinformation to their local representative, but it more than likely result is the person making the complaint would face consequences. Turkmenistan’s people have learned not to bring any grievances to officials unless it is literally a matter of life or death.

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

“The concept of meeting the needs of the audience in Turkmenistan is completely absent,” one panelist commented. The security service selects topics to be reported—and rarely are these issues helpful for Turkmenistan’s citizens trying to understand the situation in their country and make informed choices about their futures.

It is unclear if content producers use any quantitative data, and in actuality there is no reason for it. Turkmenistan’s media is dedicated to propaganda and glorying the alleged achievements of the government. This has been true since independence and demonstrates that content producers are not interested in creating material that is genuinely

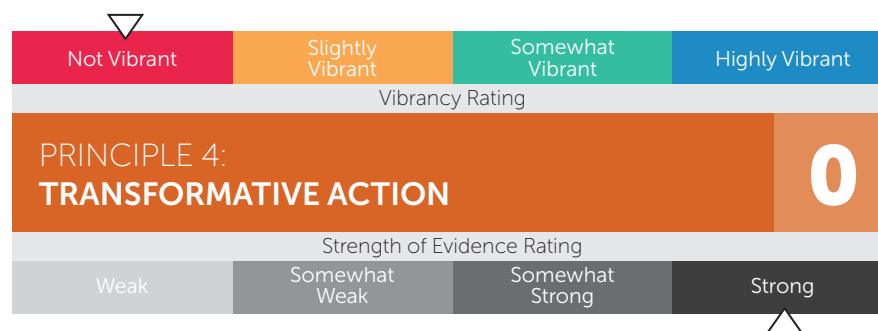
popular with the people, only in continuing to spread propaganda.

Collaboration between journalistic media, content producers and government institutions exists only to the extent that they all need to ensure the information they release to the public conforms with the MNS’ policies on topics and presentation.

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

Community media has never existed in Turkmenistan. The government has always discouraged its people from forming any group or organization outside of state-approved organizations. State media generally does not report community news.

The closest thing there is to community news would be local chat groups that meet on social networks. Such groups avoid political or religious topics, and no information is exchanged regarding gender rights or the rights of minority ethnic or religious groups.



In light of Turkmenistan’s highly repressive environment, none of the indicators under this principle received high panelist scores. With the stranglehold that the state has on information and the flow of opinions, there are no nonpartisan sources of information in the country and, furthermore, no publicly expressed ideologies that differ from the heavily enforced state information. Citizens do not engage with their elected officials, and they are not exposed to fact-based health recommendations. Furthermore, there are no independent civil society

organizations operating within the country. Corruption of any stripe is not acknowledged by the state, unless the president calls someone out.

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

Every institution or organization in Turkmenistan works for and answers to the state. As such and as the panelists noted, there is no such thing as nonpartisan news and information sources in Turkmenistan with varying viewpoints. Under the current circumstances in the country, it is inconceivable that there could be a nonpartisan source of anything.

The government long ago placed restrictions on the importation of foreign newspapers.¹

People with VPNs still can, to an unknown extent, access websites outside the country, but there is no data on what people read since the authorities forbid use of VPNs.

There are no town hall meetings or call-in shows. Generally, people cannot express opinions that disagree with the state narrative. The state discourages exchanges of any information that does not benefit the government.

There is no evidence individuals engage in open and constructive discussions, and unless they have a VPN, they do not have access to quality news and information.

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

As noted throughout this chapter, state media is concerned with

¹ “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkmenistan,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/turkmenistan/>

propaganda not information. Most of what state media disseminates is misinformation.

Turkmenistan’s people do not engage with officials, whose election was really only a formality as most “elected” officials are unknown to their constituents. The presidential election in March 2022 was another example of how meaningless information is in determining the outcome.

“**Generally, people cannot express opinions that disagree with the state narrative.**”

At the February 11, 2022 extraordinary joint session of parliament, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov said he was tired, and a snap presidential election was announced. The following day, Turkmenistan’s Central Election Commission set March 12 as the date for the election. As was widely expected, Berdymukhammedov’s son Serdar was a candidate, running against eight competitors who were largely unknown to the general public in Turkmenistan. Serdar won the election easily. According to the country’s Central Election Commission, Serdar won the election, receiving nearly 73 percent of the vote, which was a relatively low total considering his father took nearly 90 percent of the vote in 2007, and some 97 percent in the 2012 and 2017 presidential elections.

“**There are no independent civil society organizations in Turkmenistan.**”

Serdar’s eight opponents in the election were all people who were unknown to most of Turkmenistan’s citizens. His father similarly competed against candidates who were previously not known to the Turkmen people.

Likewise, with earlier presidential elections in 2007, 2012, and 2017, and in parliamentary elections, nearly all constituents do not know of—and often had never even heard of—candidates competing for seats.

There is no evidence that people follow fact-based health and safety recommendations—quite the opposite. Turkmenistan’s people have been told by state media to use supposed home remedies championed by former President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who is a dentist by training and has allegedly written books on Turkmen traditional

herbal medicines. For most of these traditional remedies, there is no scientific evidence to support their curative properties.

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

There are no independent civil society organizations in Turkmenistan.

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

It has never been clear what information Turkmenistan's government uses to make public policy decisions. One panelist wrote, "I would argue that ONLY mal-information informs the government." The information the government provides to its citizens is therefore rarely helpful and often unreliable.

Officials can only refer to the government's version of events if they wish to keep their jobs.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic norms.

Information sources within the country never reveal corruption. Corruption is not a topic for state media, except when the president rebukes an official, usually at a session of the government, and reveals that individual has engaged in corrupt practices. The elder Berdymukhammedov did this, interrupting his reports or statements to single out a person and point out all the person's alleged shortcomings and illegal activities. Usually this is followed by news the official in question is on trial or already in prison. State media only reports on the corrupt activities after the president has exposed them publicly on television.

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Turkmenistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the result of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.

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