

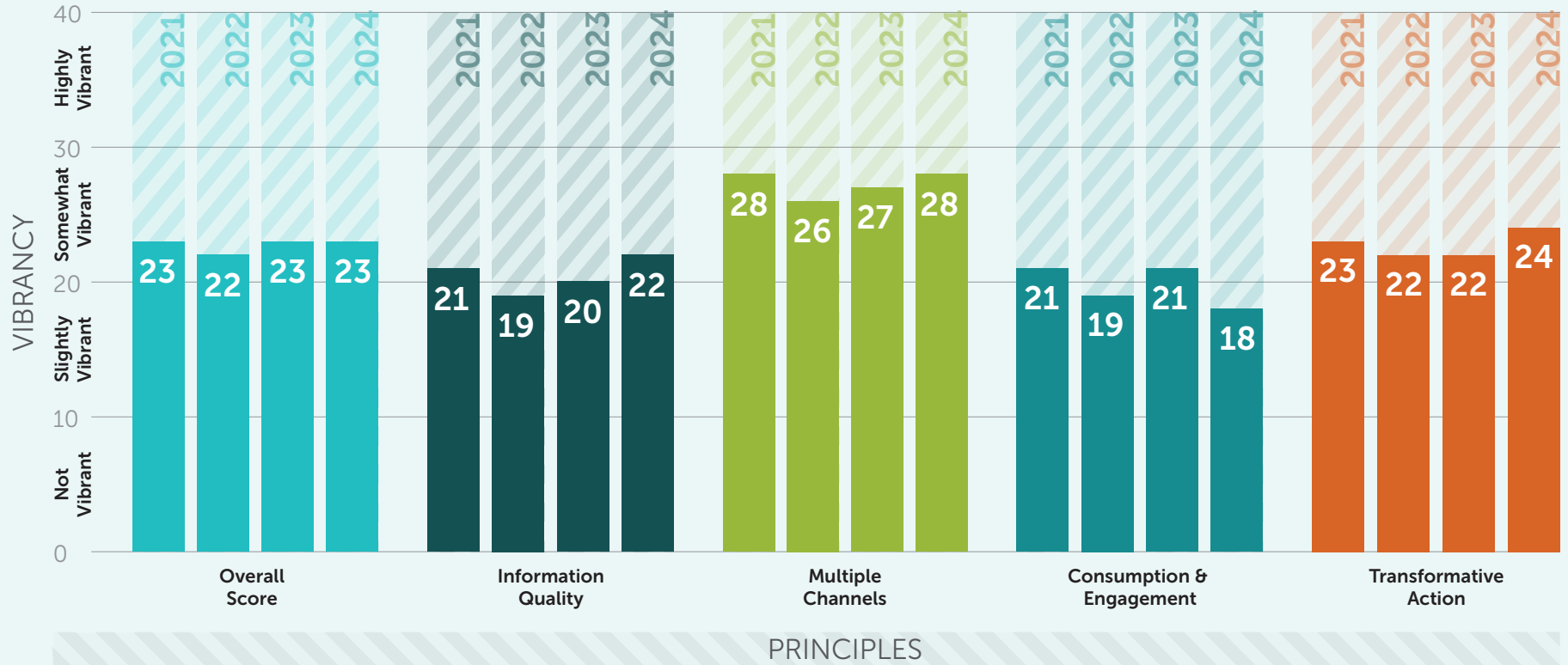
ARMENIA



Vibrant Information Barometer

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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.

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.

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.

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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

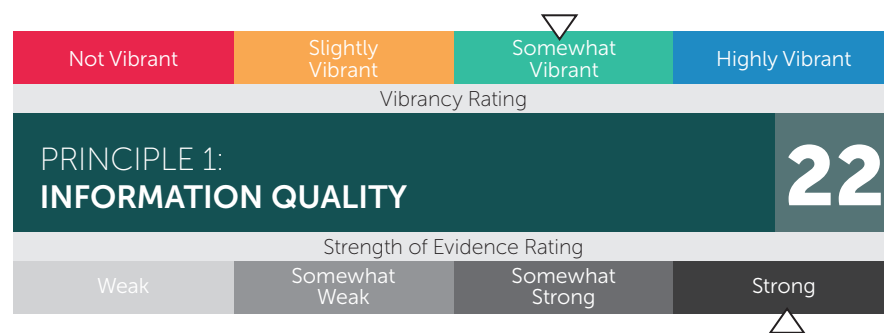
The ongoing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan were a key focus for Armenian media in 2023. Pivotal events include a nine-month blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh—an ethnic Armenian region in western Azerbaijan under de facto Armenian governance since 1994—from December 2022 through September 2023. The blockade and subsequent military attacks displaced over 100,000 civilians, which the European Parliament condemned as violations of international law and infringement on earlier ceasefire efforts. The blockade severed the Lachin humanitarian corridor—the only access route to Armenia—resulting in shortages of food, fuel, and medicine. Azerbaijan’s government did not heed calls to restore freedom of movement to the area.

In addition to the humanitarian consequences, the blockade of the Lachin corridor limited access to Nagorno-Karabakh for Armenian and international journalists, greatly impeding information gathering and reporting on the ground. Reporters Without Borders noted that only Azerbaijani journalists from state or pro-government media were physically permitted past checkpoints, describing Nagorno-Karabakh as “a news and information black hole.” Non-professionals also faced challenges in communicating their experiences. The blockade disrupted communication infrastructure, making it difficult for civilians to connect with loved ones outside the region and share their stories with the world.

The media landscape in Armenia continues to face various challenges, with little progress since last year’s VIBE

study. While some areas such as hate speech saw slight improvements, major concerns remain unchanged, which may account for the panelists’ overall pessimism despite the improved score. Panelists are uneasy about new legislation that may further restrict access to information. Additionally, both professional and non-professional content creators compound the existing problem of information manipulation in media. While some outlets produce ethical and evidence-based content, their number remains insufficient. Most media outlets lack true independence due to political influence and the loyalties of their ownership. Public media, television, in particular, is still perceived to be under government influence. Insight into the ownership of media outlets is often lacking, and funding sources heavily influence editorial content.

Media literacy remains a major challenge, despite extensive training, seminars, and workshops organized by international organizations and local NGOs. Although the number of nonpartisan outlets has not significantly increased, their audiences have shown a modest climb. Despite this audience growth, there are still major obstacles to influencing public opinion through quality information over manipulated information. Media efforts also have yet to meaningfully deter corruption.



Overall, the number of content producers disseminating ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content remains modest. Panelists agreed that any improvements have been minor, that manipulated information remains widespread, and that both professional and nonprofessional content producers contribute to this problem. While hate speech incidents were perhaps slightly lower this year, panelists attributed this primarily to the lack of major internal political tension rather than organic improvement. The majority of outlets are still not editorially independent due to the nature of their ownership and political or business affiliations. Content production is insufficiently resourced and professional journalists are poorly paid, which impedes their ability to focus on their primary jobs.

Indicator 4, on inclusive and diverse news content, scored highest in this principle again this year, while Indicator 3, on hate speech, scored the lowest as in last year's study and improved by just two points, reflecting the panelists' sense of minimal change.

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

There is adequate infrastructure to produce varied content, including print, broadcast, and digital media. However, university and other professional training in ethical and evidence-based content production remains a weak spot in Armenian journalism and mass media. Both state and private higher education offer many courses in journalism and

mass communication, but the quality varies and most lack an emphasis on hands-on skills. This state of affairs has persisted for decades. The situation outside major cities is worse, with just a few journalism students at local universities. "I don't even know where they are going to do their internships, or when they graduate, where they are going to work," lamented Anahit Harutyunyan, a freelance reporter from Gyumri, the second largest city in Armenia. Donor-funded initiatives, on the other hand, are well-funded and seeking to bridge this gap. Harutyunyan also noted that language barriers remain an issue for aspiring journalists who do not know English well enough to participate in international training opportunities.

A limited number of content producers act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive for accuracy. They are, however, outnumbered by numerous producers of manipulative information. "Anyone publishes whatever they want," noted Nelli Babayan, a journalist with Aravot.am. The professional ramifications for producing content that do not meet ethical criteria are either nonexistent or their impact is not readily observable. "For professional ramifications to work, you have to adhere to/accept certain [quality and ethical] norms," she said.

The overall body of content covers a variety of topics on political and social issues. Specialized and thematic reporting, on the other hand, has traditionally remained under-covered due to associated costs and resources. Gegham Vardanyan, an editor at Media.am, noted that "just as the society is polarized and just as the media field is polarized, so are the topics." He observed that the media is heavily centered on politics and trivial topics for local Armenian consumption only, with minimal attention to the significance of news events. Local events are rarely covered in a way that people outside of Armenia would understand the issues at stake. "I believe, both in terms of exporting and importing [Armenia-based] news events, media is failing its important mission," maintained Vardanyan.

For the most part, journalists try to hold government actors accountable through their reporting. Although some panelists were unsure if these efforts lead any real consequences, political analyst and researcher

Edgar Vardanyan of Boon.tv asserted that “this often has an impact as the public officials then feel obliged to explain away this or that act of theirs.” The overall body of content includes information covering local, national, regional, and international news. Regional and international news coverage, however, has been traditionally challenging. Regional news coverage still remains mostly event-based—if there are no major events, news flow is limited. Suren Deheryan, PR & Media Component Director at Project Harmony Armenian Branch, noted that there are very few regional reporters remaining, which negatively impacts coverage. Several journalists have switched fields due to the increasing difficulty in earning a livable income as a reporter in many regions. “There used to be a cadre [of professional journalists] who aren’t available now, and the ones that are entering the field just aren’t good enough,” he lamented.

International news coverage has sustained its traditional flaw: accounts are rarely first-hand and instead rely on translations from Russian-language sources, which are often of dubious origin or reflect the narrow viewpoint of the Russian government’s interests and priorities. In one recent case, the Russian state news agency TASS and other pro-government Russian outlets reported on Russian Foreign Ministry’s spokesperson Maria Zakharova’s Telegram post, where she ridiculed US President Joe Biden for supposedly saying that he was born in Israel. (In reality, Biden had [remarked](#), “The State of Israel was born to be a safe place for the Jewish people of the world.”) A variety of outlets with large audience sizes shared the post, including news.am (868,000 Facebook followers and 8 million monthly visitors), lurer.com (245,000 Facebook followers and 2.2 million monthly visitors), and tert.am (634,000 Facebook followers and 358,000 monthly visitors). At best, international news is from reliable sources but lacks contextualization and, here too, language challenges remain. “Even CNN or BBC content sometimes reaches Armenian audiences through the prism of their Russian services [as opposed to the English-language services],” observed Samvel Martirosyan, IT security expert and co-founder of CyberHub. News content, with rare exceptions, is not editorially independent due to ownership and/or political and business affiliations, whether factual or perceived.

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

Well-sourced, objective, and fact-based information is still the exception in Armenia rather than a widespread norm. Both professional and non-professional content producers create or disseminate manipulated information. The broadcast outlets licensed and regulated by the Commission on Television and Radio rarely engage in the intentional creation of explicitly manipulative information, but non-professionals do so frequently and their content is often popular and spreads quickly. The Telegram messaging service, with its numerous channels, is replete with these non-professional content creators, who also spread manipulative information through social networks such as Facebook and YouTube.

Edgar Vardanyan observed that political events have a great impact on the volume of manipulative content and, if nothing intense or conflict-driven occurs, the volume of manipulation and hate speech diminishes during that lull. He maintained that “although the number of outlets spreading misinformation and hate speech is high, in terms of audience size, those outlets that are ethical have larger audiences,” citing the examples of Radio Azatutyun (RFE/RL’s Armenian service), Public TV of Armenia, and Shant TV. “Compared to 2022, misinformation has decreased, owing to the reduced political demand, which in turn, is due to the lack of major [political] conflicts,” explained Martirosyan. “It’s not that these outlets have become better, but just that the ‘contractors’ haven’t tasked them to promote specific agenda as much as they used to before.”

Professional content creators also produce manipulative or misleading information. 5 TV channel, an outlet usually opposed to the government, did so when covering Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s meeting with the European Parliament President Roberta Metsola in Strasbourg. The coverage reproached her for supposedly falling short of labeling the mass flight of people from Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) as forced displacement or ethnic cleansing during her opening remarks, but rather calling it “the movement of 100,000 people from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia,” ignoring the rest of her remarks where she actually [calls them](#) “forcibly displaced” and “refugees.”

There are reliable fact-checking resources such as Fip.am, CivilnetCheck, and media.am. However, professionals use them mostly on an ad hoc basis, with minimal use by the general public. A new initiative by Hetq, a network of fact-checkers, created the Facebook group InFact/Pastatsi for journalists and anyone interested in fact-checking. In another positive development, Civilnet became the first Armenian media organization to join Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

Media outlets and digital platforms have mechanisms or processes in place for moderating content, though their work is increasingly challenging given the high volume and speed of news events.

The majority of panelists agreed that the government does not create misleading or false information through its official channels. However, the panelists suggested that manipulation sometimes occurs indirectly by individuals who are (or are perceived to be) affiliated with the government, other public officials, government-loyal members of parliament, etc. through social media posts or in interviews. Generally, this coverage uses manipulated data, comparisons, and reports to favor the present government's record. In these cases, journalists usually try to hold the government accountable by identifying manipulated information with the use of fact-checking platforms.

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

Foreign governments, traditionally those of Azerbaijan and Russia, and their proxies create and disseminate content that is intended to harm, both in the form of mal-information and hate speech. In one example, the Azerbaijani state news agency, Azertac, published an interview in several languages with Spanish reporter David López Frías, who had visited the blockaded humanitarian corridor linking Artsakh to Armenia,

in which he was [deliberately misquoted](#) as saying: "Vehicles pass here without any problems. You just see people demonstrating to protect nature." When later contacted by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), López explained that he had said the opposite, with RSF's Jeanne Cavelier asserting, "This barefaced lie by a government-controlled media outlet is further evidence of a desire on the part of the Azerbaijani authorities to manipulate national and international public opinion."

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Non-professional content producers are still on the forefront of producing harmful information through their wide presence on Telegram and on various social networks. In one instance, a claim was spread through different channels that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan refused to accept forcibly displaced refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, which, despite being a fake statement, was further spread by people with poor media literacy and disseminated through social networks such as Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram. There are

generally no consequences for non-professionals who spread harmful content.

Self-regulation of content moderation in Armenian media is in its early stages. Armenia lacks a well-established, industry-wide self-regulatory framework for content moderation, and relies almost solely on media outlets' voluntary adherence to its recommendations. The lack of clear enforcement mechanisms for self-imposed guidelines weakens their effectiveness. Also, the effectiveness of self-regulation varies based on the specific media outlet's commitment to ethical journalism. For many, political influence or owner pressure on the outlet effectively hinders their capacity to self-regulate. Some media outlets have internal guidelines for journalists regarding fact-checking and ethical reporting, however, these are not standardized across the media landscape. Smaller media outlets might lack the resources to invest in robust fact-checking or hire dedicated content moderators.

While social media platforms like Facebook have their own content moderation policies, their effectiveness in Armenia is not yet clear. On the other hand, some social media platforms have much looser control, such as Telegram. Content that would be banned or blocked elsewhere appears frequently, although they [claim](#) that “to counter abuse of our public platform, we employ a combination of AI-driven and manual moderation for public content, together with processing user reports.”

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

Information exposes the majority of citizens to a wide array of perspectives. However, LGBTQ+ content is still under-covered by traditional mainstream outlets. There are no communities whose experiences or viewpoints are deliberately excluded by the professional media, nor any formal censorship mechanisms. Marginalized groups not represented enough in the mainstream media have alternate methods and/or platforms for expressing their views. Gender composition of professional and non-professional content producers has not changed dramatically during the last ten years. Most reporters are women, and they continue to experience low pay. Outlet owners are mostly men, with gender parity among media managers.

According to Edgar Vardanyan, there is minimal improvement in the diversity of content. There are numerous groups, such as sexual and religious minorities, whose interests, issues, and daily lives are not reflected in mainstream media. “This type of coverage is mainly triggered by events—for example, a homosexual person committed suicide and it was covered, but it doesn’t get beyond that,” he observed. A relatively new platform set up in 2019, Xirat Media ([xirat.com](#)), presents the life and culture of the Yezidis, an ethnic and religious minority living in Armenia and around the world. Through human rights initiatives, particularly focusing on the rights of national minorities, Xirat Media aims to amplify the voices and experiences of Yezidi communities.

Professional content producers routinely struggle financially as it is becoming increasingly difficult to find secure market-based, non-political funding sources.

Deheryan noted that, overall, information exposing the majority of citizens to the experiences or viewpoints of all genders and various ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds is made available almost solely through projects with donor funding and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Although media outlets generally do not initiate these stories on their own, there are skilled professionals who do so with great results and impact on the intended audience. Larger audiences, however, are more interested in “scandalous and vulgar content,” he lamented.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

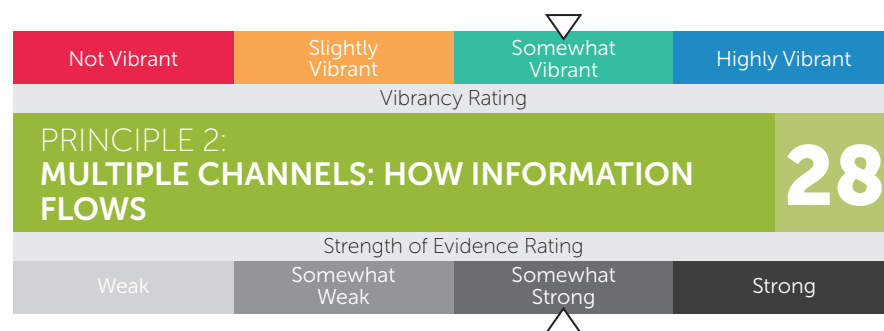
Professional content producers routinely struggle financially as it is becoming increasingly difficult to find secure market-based, non-political funding sources. Significant advertising funds go to international companies such as Facebook, Google, and Instagram, as well as to social media influencers (primarily on Instagram and TikTok).

“The media outlets are not financially independent; if it weren’t for grants, the reliable independent outlets would not be able to produce high quality content,” observed Babayan. She maintained that because funding is insufficient, those outlets that do have advertising still have to seek additional funding. Anahit Baghdasaryan, a reporter for [mediapoint.am](#) and a program officer for Goris Press Club, noted that the regional advertising market is insignificant, and regional media outlets rely on international donor funds to remain independent and financially viable. Harutyunyan confirmed that because social media (primarily Facebook) killed advertising placements, local TV outlets are on the brink of extinction, shrinking from as many as 60-70 employees 10-12 years ago down to 5-6 at present. In general, only those who have been able to take advantage of international donor funding have managed to survive.

Government subsidies have further shrunk; for 2024, they are budgeted at AMD 62 million (\$152,000), a significant decrease from the previous 71 million (\$183,000). These funds are primarily allotted to minority

language outlets, regional print media, and cultural literary publications. The amount distributed is not significant enough to distort the market, and panelists did not voice concerns about the transparency of distribution.

The panelists agreed that the overwhelming majority of journalists are not paid sufficiently to focus on their primary jobs, forcing them to rely on additional employment or freelancing. Harutyunyan affirmed the dire situation in local regions, where TV outlets newsrooms operate without clear timelines due to a lack of financial resources. “I know of a journalist working at a greenhouse, another one at a local store; there are TV outlets that don’t have even one reporter,” she said. Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief of the *Sevan* newspaper, added that demographics reveal the extent of the problem—the younger generation of journalists do not come back to rural regions after training or studying in the capital, therefore only older journalists remain at regional outlets.



While the real ownership of Armenian media outlets is often unclear, ownership and funding sources continue to heavily influence the overall editorial agenda. Public awareness of information access mechanisms is low. The effectiveness of legal mechanisms for protecting freedom of expression remains uncertain and there have been cases of intimidation, online attacks, and legal pressure of journalists for their work. Journalists are concerned with the potential impact of new legislation restricting access to information. Public media are still susceptible to government influence. The US State Department’s [2022 Human Rights Report](#) on Armenia also notes that, according to some media watchdogs,

public television continued to present news and political debates from a pro-government standpoint, although it remained accessible to opposition voices. This year, the highest score in this principle was again Indicator 7, confirming that, overall, people have adequate access to channels of information. The lowest score in this principle was, unsurprisingly, Indicator 10, on the independence of information channels.

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

Legal protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press exist. Deheryan noted that with the constant advancement of technology, the tools available to create, share, and consume information are becoming more accessible, making it increasingly difficult for governments to restrict free speech. On the other hand, governments can also take advantage of these tools to shape informal agendas and attempt to build audience favor. Babayan suggested that before 2018 there was systematic censorship, which is not the case now. Self-censorship, however, is still an issue in Armenia. “By default, a journalist already comes with an inner editor,” noted Artyom Yerkanyan of Shant TV. “I am totally free, I do what I want, but I know what to want and what not to want.” Edgar Vardanyan suggested that there can be exceptions, too, and that at Boon.tv he does not engage in self-censorship at all.

Journalists experience harassment in the course of their work. According to the October 2023 [quarterly report](#) from the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, during the first three quarters of 2023, Armenia had three cases of physical violence against journalists, 47 cases of pressure on media outlets and personnel, 106 violations of the right to receive and disseminate information, and 29 cases of lawsuits involving media and journalists.

In September 2023, during initial hearings of the Civil Contract party’s lawsuit against the Union of Informed Citizens NGO, the Yerevan Court of General Jurisdiction ruled in favor placing a lien on the claimed amount of AMD 1 million (\$2,500), effectively freezing the NGO’s account until the final ruling. The lawsuit was filed in response to Fip.am’s July 2023

article which alleged that the ruling Civil Contract party, led by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, had inappropriately used community leaders in the Spitak region to mobilize Yerevan-based relatives and acquaintances of local residents to vote for the party in the upcoming city council elections. Nine media CSOs [condemned](#) the practice, saying that the pursuit of security measures against media outlets is a blatant attempt to exert undue pressure and settle scores with editorial teams, and that the courts granting these motions to place liens on media assets disrupts the operation of editorial offices and stifles the free flow of information.

After a July 2023 press conference with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, news outlets and supporters using fake and real profiles on social media [attacked](#) NewDay.am editor Ani Gevorgyan and Aravot.am journalist Hripsime Jebejyan with threats and obscene language. Both reporters filed police reports and legal claims. “The reporters assume that the individuals behind this are connected to the authorities, but perhaps they just favor them [and do this on their own],” suggested Babayan.

Tirayr Muradyan of Hetq.am observed that harassment against journalists has shifted from physical violence to online attacks. Now, critics set up websites dedicated to spewing insults and obscenities at journalists and their outlets, which is also a form of intimidation since journalists’ families and friends can encounter the content as well. “Because the current opposition is so weak and vulnerable [due to corruption allegations in the past when they were in power], the media has become the primary challenge [to the government’s efforts to silence dissent],” noted Muradyan.

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

Information and communication technology infrastructure generally meets the information needs of most people. Telecommunications and internet infrastructure extends to all geographic areas, both urban and rural. The regional panelists note that regions outside the capital and rural areas also have reliable internet. According to [2022 data](#) from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a monthly fixed-line

broadband subscription with 5 gigabytes (GB) of data costs about 4.3% of Armenia’s per capita gross national income (GNI). Meanwhile, mobile data plans with at least 2 GB of data per month cost around 0.94% of Armenia’s per capita GNI.

Armenian is the dominant language while content in minority languages is accessible. Public Radio of Armenia has programming and news in minority languages, including Russian, Yezidi, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Greek. Armenia has a high 99.8% literacy rate, and for people who are not literate, there are plenty of other sources, including but not limited to radio and television. Media accessibility for people with disabilities is inconsistent; few programs with sign language interpretation or audio descriptions are available. Websites and apps are often inaccessible for visually impaired users. Sign language interpretation is a real challenge because of the limited number of interpreters, while the alternatives are visual news sources, websites and apps, closed captions, real-time closed captions, wherever available, radio, podcasts, etc. The internet is equally accessible to both users and content producers, with no recent problems in this area. If the internet fails, there are TV and radio channels available through free terrestrial broadcasting, although their availability and diversity varies, especially outside larger cities.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Right to information laws exist and, for the most part, conform to international standards and norms, but are not always implemented in a timely and comprehensive manner. In just the first three quarters of 2023, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression recorded a total of 106 violations of the right to receive and disseminate information.

In June 2023, the Investigative Journalists NGO (the publisher of Hetq.am) filed a lawsuit against Armenia’s Ministry of High-Tech Industry for refusing to provide the names of IT companies that received government financial aid from a pool of AMD 10 billion (\$25,575 million) approved in December 2022. Despite Hetq’s repeated requests, the ministry has been reluctant to disclose the identities of the companies receiving this assistance and the amount they received. Administrative Court Judge

Elena Arakelyan set the first hearing date for January 2024 and Hetq predicts that the trial could be postponed indefinitely if the judge or any of the parties involved requests a postponement due to medical reasons.

Anahit Baghdasaryan observed that, especially in smaller towns, people tend to be more reluctant to exercise their rights to information out of perceived, though not necessarily real, fear of social stigmatization. She also noted that readily available information is infrequently accessed, such as an infographic her media outlet published featuring the municipal budget for the town of Goris, which analytics revealed is not actively accessed.

Several media groups in Armenia have expressed concerns about a new bill approved by the National Assembly that would potentially give the government broad authority to restrict access to public information. The media groups [say](#) a provision in the bill will add a new category of information called “service information of limited distribution,” allowing the government to withhold information deemed to be “state, banking, or commercial secrets,” which could be used to deny access to almost any document circulating within a government agency, even if it does not contain any sensitive information.

There are mechanisms to help the public access government policy and decision-making information, but awareness of them is low and even informed members of the public rarely use them. As Babayan noted, citizens rely on the media for information about the government. In addition, as Muradyan explained, “There are government spokespeople who are very responsive, and they would follow up all the inquiries, but then there are also those who are basically busy with the minister’s PR and do not fulfill the function of information liaison, and their role is rather to cover, buffer and protect their public official.” However, he observed that in general there is a wide range of open data, with minimal restrictions.

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Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Armenian law does not make a distinction between owning a media company and owning any other commercial outlet, making it relatively

simple to start a media company. However, broadcast media still need to go through a licensing process. There are laws that regulate transparency in media ownership which require media outlets to submit a “real beneficiary” declaration every year. The law defines a “real beneficiary” as an individual who owns or oversees the organization. However, transparent identity remains a problem. The official owners and directors are known, but their benefactors and supporters remain largely anonymous. In general, only outlets that function

through grants and international donor funding disclose their funding sources, typically when it is a funding requirement.

Gegham Vardanyan maintains that because of the shifts in information consumption patterns, the audience size, impact, and importance of free terrestrial broadcasting has diminished. Likewise, its political importance and competition for terrestrial broadcasting licenses has also decreased. According to the 2023 [Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia](#), funded by USAID and implemented by Internews, 58 percent of respondents chose social media, blogs, vlogs, and podcasts as their primary source of political and social news. TV is mentioned by 56 percent, however, and includes TV channels accessed through IPTV and online streaming. Internet service providers do not discriminate based on users, content, or destination web addresses.

The Commission on Television and Radio (CTR) is the broadcast media regulatory body of the Republic of Armenia, established in 2001. The CTR awards licenses and allocates frequencies for television and radio stations competitively. While its composition has evolved over time, the National Assembly currently elects all seven CTR members to serve six-

year terms, ensuring gender representation. Finally, the body itself elects a chairperson from among its members through a secret vote.

Public service media provide educational news and information. Panelists noted that Public Radio is stronger in this area and does a better job of serving all members of the public in a nonpartisan manner. Panelists noted that Public TV programming has improved somewhat in recent years but does not yet genuinely serve all members of the public without partisanship. “We shouldn’t just acknowledge the existence of these programs just to check off a box, but rather we should focus on to what extent this programming changes society’s mentality and tolerance towards different minority groups,” said Babayan. “In this sense, I don’t think they change opinions in our society.” As Edgar Vardanyan noted, Public TV still resembles the Soviet era, highlighting the example of a story on the Armenian IT sector which only featured public officials and no industry experts.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media organizations are still mainly influenced by their ownership, and funding sources still dictate editorial stance, as has been the case for decades. “We have outlets that are funded by state/public means, which mainly serve the authorities of the day, we have outlets that are funded by donor funding and do not have political ambitions, and we have outlets that serve this or that political wing/interests,” explained Muradyan.

In practice, for professional content producers, there is not a clear distinction between newsroom operations and business operations. Efforts to maintain newsroom integrity through this separation—a crucial factor to ensure that editorial decisions are not unduly influenced by business interests—are not commonplace. Babayan offered an example in which the editor of an outlet received money during a Yerevan municipality elections campaign for providing favorable coverage of a

candidate; however, the content was not explicitly presented as paid for advertising, but rather as a conventional news story.

The state funds Public TV and Public Radio of Armenia. In 2024, Public TV will receive around AMD 6.42 billion (\$15.8 million) in state funding while Public Radio will receive AMD 956 million (\$2.36 million). Public

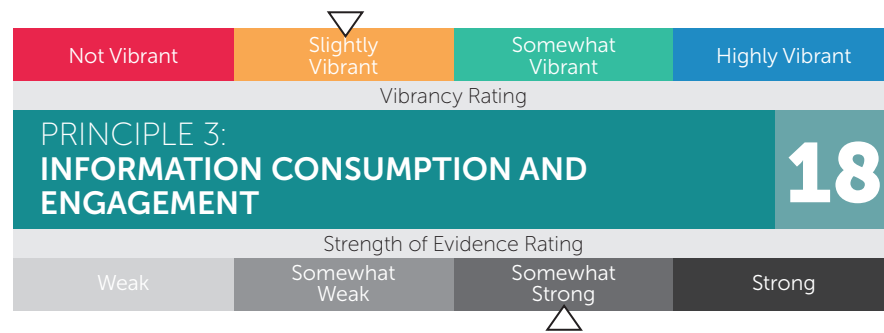
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TV also sells commercial advertising, which accounts for its status as one of Armenia’s better-funded media outlets. Addressing the issue of political interference into the management and editorial content of Public TV, Babayan also noted that its decision-makers are associated with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, further

calling into question the editorial independence and likelihood of self-censorship.

Public TV is more likely to give positive coverage to the government and its policies, while critical coverage is often ignored. The Council of Europe’s 2022 Media Sector Needs Assessment report on Armenia found that in many cases, public media refrains from government criticism.

During the inauguration of the newly elected Yerevan Mayor Tigran Avinyan in October 2023, journalists were barred from entering the municipality to partake in the ceremony. Official sources claimed this was due to limited space, while media CSOs were strongly critical of this approach, [saying](#), “The municipality violated not only the right of journalists to freely access and disseminate information, but also infringed upon the public’s right to stay informed.”



Media literacy remains a major challenge in Armenia’s media environment, which accounts for Indicator 12 receiving low scores in this principle. Indicator 13 had the highest score in this principle, as journalists, civil society activists, and the general population use their freedom of speech, while right to information are predominantly claimed by journalists and civil society activists only. In general, Armenian media and content producers often fail to conduct thorough audience research to understand the public’s needs, interests, and behaviors. This deficit stems from a variety of factors, including limited resources, a lack of awareness of the benefits of research, and a focus on traditional production methods that prioritize speed and efficiency over analysis of audience needs.

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

Legal protections for privacy protections and digital security exist, and Armenian law incorporates all the basic requirements of the Council of Europe’s Convention on Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data. The Personal Data Protection Agency, overseen by the Ministry of Justice, is responsible for oversight of data protection legislation. However, enforcement is lacking and the general population’s awareness of the law and the agency is minimal.

Martirosyan’s Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) organization, Cyberhub.am, remains dedicated to delivering comprehensive information technology support and training services to a diverse range

of individuals and entities, including journalists, independent media outlets, human rights defenders, activists, and CSOs. Cyberhub.am plays a pivotal role in enhancing digital security practices by assisting media organizations in fortifying their defenses against cyberattacks. CyberHub.am also assists media outlets, civic groups, and individuals when their social media accounts are hacked or suspended.

In one notable case, hackers hijacked the YouTube channel of Aravot.am and deleted 12 years of video content just hours before the scheduled release of an investigative report exposing a corruption scandal involving the misuse of state funds by key political staff of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Press freedom groups in Armenia [condemned](#) the attack, urging law enforcement to identify and punish the perpetrators, citing a troubling pattern where criticism of authorities precedes hacking attacks on online platforms. Earlier in the same year, unknown hackers attacked the YouTube channel of the Union of Informed Citizens, which is the publisher of the fact-checking platform Fip.am. In both cases, the channels were later restored with the help of CyberHub.am.

A [collaborative investigation](#) by Access Now, CyberHub.am, the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Amnesty International’s Security Lab, and independent mobile security researcher Ruben Muradyan also revealed the extent of the NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware between October 2020 and December 2022. Among the victims were a former Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, two journalists from Radio Azatutyun (RFE/RL’s Armenian service), a United Nations official, a former spokesperson of Armenia’s Foreign Ministry, and seven other members of Armenian civil society. The findings highlight the concerning use of spyware technology against individuals involved in human rights, journalism, and diplomatic circles in Armenia. “Zero action was taken afterwards on the part of the state in terms of protection [against future attacks],” said Martirosyan, noting that state authorities could have implemented protective and preventive measures such as training, response instructions, and awareness raising activities.

The general population’s basic digital and data literacy skills remain inadequate. Cases of digital fraud, scamming, identity theft, and phishing are still commonplace.

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

There are a growing number of media literacy initiatives, predominantly targeting the younger generation of Armenian citizens. Media Literacy Week 2023 in Armenia, for example, focused on media literacy in the digital environment. Several other initiatives were launched, including the Digital Citizen Ambassador Training (DCAT), which aim to empower young Armenians with technology skills and foster a generation of informed decision-makers, as well as training programs on how to combat information manipulation.

Martirosyan, however, said that government involvement should be more consistent in order to produce significant effects. He advocates for public awareness campaigns and enhanced use of social media advertising, as well as improved training for educators who in turn can pass media literacy skills and knowledge to their students. He also thinks that media literacy improvements are more likely if overall literacy across disciplines improves.

It is difficult for individuals to discern high-quality from poor-quality news and information. The aforementioned 2023 Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia reveals that a mere 18 percent of respondents are proficient in recognizing and fact-checking suspicious information. Individuals with higher and postgraduate education display enhanced recognition and fact-checking skills (25 percent), outperforming those with secondary/high school and vocational education (17 and 14 percent, respectively). Among age groups, younger respondents exhibit stronger fact-checking abilities (27 percent) compared to middle-aged individuals (18 percent) and older adults (12 percent).

Ordinary citizens seldom use tools or websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing manipulative information. Gegham Vardanyan pointed out that few readers respond to invitations to send suspicious

information for debunking, noting that “in general, we, as a society, are very susceptible to misinformation.”

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

Journalists, civil society activists, and the general population use their freedoms of speech and rights to information. The Armenian online environment is generally safe for free speech. The 2023 Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia found that a substantial majority (76 percent) believe that speech is mainly free for citizens, while 70 percent of respondents believe that speech is mainly free for the press. On the issue of online expression, the study revealed that 56 percent of respondents mostly agree that they can freely express their opinions about any topic online. The study also found that 48 percent of respondents mostly agree that they can freely criticize the government and those in power.

Panelists found that most people rarely engage with fact-based information. While platforms for public debate exist, they are not widely used. For most people, online platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, and to a lesser degree the

comments sections of some online periodicals—are one of the only spaces for public debate. Call-in shows are also available, primarily on radio stations.

Social media platforms are often riddled with manipulative information, obscenities, hate speech, and even calls to violence. The only recourse is reporting the content

to platform support teams for policy violations, but moderation varies depending on the platform as well as the particular owner of a page. The majority of reputable professional content producers and media outlets post summaries of their policies regarding inappropriate language in comments sections, while channel owners of non-professional pages are more lax. For example, a popular platform has been Radio Azatutyun’s “Facebook Briefing,” which allows users to suggest questions for the host

“ The general population’s basic digital and data literacy skills remain inadequate. Cases of digital fraud, scamming, identity theft, and phishing are still commonplace.

to ask guests through Facebook comments. The platform moderators remove offensive, sarcastic, violent, and hateful content before it reaches the guest. Call-in shows are primarily found on radio stations.

In [a notable case](#) from November 2023, the government charged human rights activist Avetik Ishkhanyan, the head of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, with inciting violence for a Facebook post declaring “death to traitors” and calling the prime minister a traitor for his actions related to the Azerbaijani military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to local rights advocates, the government’s Investigative Committee has selectively prosecuted cases like this one with the goal of self-censorship among critics.

People do not usually report manipulative information and hate speech to public councils, ombudsmen, or platform moderators. The above-mentioned study revealed that 65 percent of respondents answered that they do nothing when faced with false, misleading, or unethical information. At the same time, 84 percent of respondents believe that hate speech is a major problem in Armenia, and 68 percent believe that they often come across hate speech on public online platforms.

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

Limited resources have historically been and remain a major obstacle for Armenian media outlets to conduct rigorous audience research. Outlets and content producers often operate on tight budgets, making it challenging to invest in research or hire specialized research organizations. This lack of financial support can lead to a reliance on outdated or incomplete data, which hinders the creation of effective content that resonates with audiences.

“Many Armenian media outlets and content producers are accustomed to traditional production methods that prioritize speed and efficiency over audience understanding and may rely on their own intuition or gut feelings to guide content creation rather than using data.”

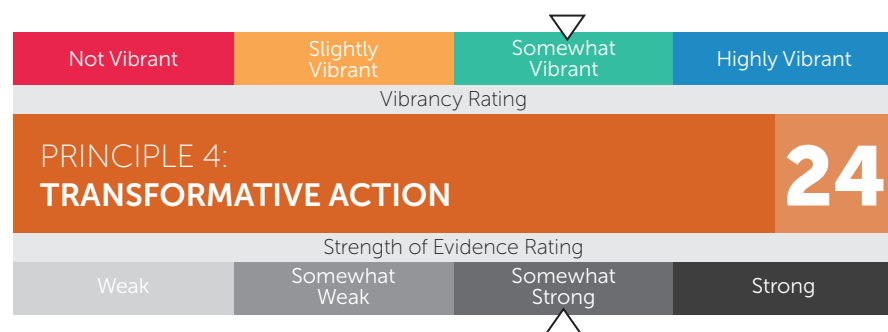
Some media outlets are skeptical of audience research, but it can help them create more relevant and engaging content, attract new audiences, and ultimately improve their business outcomes. “On a regular weekly basis, we analyze our audience data, be it on our website, Facebook, or YouTube presence, to see trends in age demographics,” Muradyan said. He further added that as a known investigative platform, readers often provide feedback on areas of interest and suggest possible investigations. Anahit Baghdasaryan mentioned a Facebook survey she used to find out readers’ interests and preferred formats of presenting information. Her team later incorporated the findings of approximately 100 responses into content produced for youth. She also mentioned that Google Analytics remains a major tool in helping to understand audience preferences and quantitative data.

Babayan, on the other hand, explained that politically influenced outlets cannot afford the luxury of producing content that reflects readers’ interests, as they are more concerned with the political priorities of their owners. In addition, many Armenian media outlets and content producers are accustomed to traditional production methods that prioritize speed and efficiency over audience understanding and may rely on their own intuition or gut feelings to guide content creation rather than using data.

The majority of ethical and fact-based outlets have fair and open processes for audiences to provide feedback through letters to the editor or moderated online comment sections, as well as comment sections on Facebook and other social media. They also take steps to build trust with audiences through transparency in authorship and reporting methods, as well as publishing corrections. Overall, high quality media outlets and CSOs enjoy mutually beneficial relationships, where CSOs help media produce more accurate, credible, and impactful journalism, and media help CSOs reach wider audiences.

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

As with the 2023 VIBE study, the panelists generally agreed that Armenia does not have community media, as classically defined. Similar types of media outlets occasionally emerge, but they do not last, likely due to inconsistent involvement. Although this type of media is a minimal part of the media sphere, there are local, independent, commercial newspapers and radio stations that, according to some panelists, effectively fulfill the functions of community media outlets.



Although nonpartisan news and information sources have not significantly grown in number, their audiences have shown modest, yet steady growth. Despite this, the public’s views on political and social issues are still widely shaped by manipulative information and, as with last year, Indicator 17 scored the lowest in this principle. Indicator 18, the highest scored in the principle, reflects the significant benefit of media-CSO partnerships, which build trust and credibility. CSOs are often seen as credible sources of information, and collaborating with them signals to the audience that a media outlet is committed to journalistic integrity and accuracy.

Government officials are not forthcoming about their decision-making, especially in sensitive areas like personnel appointments and terminations. This lack of transparency fuels public debate over the adequacy and sincerity of their explanations, often leaving citizens skeptical of their intentions. While the efforts of the media undoubtedly

raise awareness and foster public scrutiny, it is difficult to gauge whether these actions directly deter or lower the incidence or severity of corruption in national or local governments.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist and often have large audiences, which have shown steady growth. Based on information posted on their social media pages, Radio Azatutyun currently has 818,000 YouTube subscribers (up from last year’s 763,000) and 1.3 million Facebook followers (up from 1.2 million); Factor TV has 337,000 YouTube subscribers (up from 288,000) and 390,000 Facebook followers (up from 367,000); and CivilNet TV has 255,000 YouTube subscribers (up from 214,000) and 508,000 Facebook followers (up from 478,000).

However, Deheryan noted that low quality information draws in audiences, lamenting that many Armenian citizens and online outlets gravitate towards sources that provide sensationalist rather than well-researched information. This preference seems to be deeply ingrained, making it challenging to persuade audiences to embrace quality journalism. Edgar Vardanyan, on the other hand, shared his optimistic observation that citizens increasingly prefer and seek higher-quality information.

The panelists mostly agreed that few news sources are entirely nonpartisan, and even the most respected news organizations can sometimes have a bias, especially when evaluating people’s differing perspectives. Babayan noted that, in her opinion, an outlet can be considered nonpartisan if, in addition to its news reporting, the overall content and editorial policy are nonbiased, which further narrows the scope of outlets that can be considered truly impartial. However, ethical outlets are genuinely committed to providing high-quality, objective journalism.

People’s participation in the exchange of information with others they disagree with is still predominantly through digital forms such as social

media platforms like Facebook and YouTube as opposed to town hall meetings or call-in shows.

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

Another noteworthy finding of the 2023 Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia was that only 39 percent of the respondents have the ability to separate facts from opinions and to identify manipulative strategies, with higher percentages observed among respondents who have more education, are younger, have a higher income, and are from urban areas compared to their counterparts.

In one example, Edgar Vardanyan explained that based on the results of the recent Yerevan municipal elections in September 2023, voters who chose obscure party The Public Voice were likely influenced by manipulative information, which frequently appears during Armenian elections. The party, led by controversial fugitive blogger and former police officer Vardan Ghukasian, won seven seats and later played a determining role in helping the ruling Civil Contract party install one of its senior members as mayor of Yerevan after failing to win a majority. Ghukasian emigrated to the United States and gained a following for his hard-hitting, abundantly profane political commentary, including against Prime Minister Pashinyan and members of his family.

The public is increasingly following fact-based health and safety recommendations, according to panelists. “I don’t remember hearing someone say they got a flu shot, say, ten years ago, as opposed to today,” observed Edgar Vardanyan. However, there are also cases of individuals following and sharing manipulative health information. Harutyunyan also complained about the proliferation of popular TikTok creators who produce manipulated information detrimental to public health.

“Many Armenian citizens and online outlets gravitate towards sources that provide sensationalist rather than well-researched information.”

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

Media outlets actively engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues. There are times when this collaboration is indispensable given the depth of expertise and insights they offer on specific issues, communities, or regions, which journalists often lack. Their expertise enables media to produce more accurate, comprehensive, and impactful reporting.

CSOs play a critical role in fostering a well-informed citizenry and ground their work in factual, reliable information. When outlining their mission and objectives, CSOs rely on credible sources and data to clearly communicate their goals and the issues they address. They understand the importance of disseminating accurate information to the public and this commitment to truthfulness extends to their advocacy efforts. When calling for policy changes, CSOs leverage high-quality investigative reports and research to build strong arguments supported by evidence.

Anahit Baghdasaryan noted that, especially in rural regions where expertise is strictly limited, CSO representatives are viewed as trusted sources of information and regional media outlets therefore collaborate with them often. Babayan also mentioned that media outlets frequently turn to trusted CSOs for expert opinions on human rights, ecology, and draft legislation with valuable outcomes. Gayane Mkrtychyan, a freelance reporter, cited CSO connections and expertise as essential for identifying and persuading people to be featured in stories on topics such as HIV/AIDS and the LGBTQ+ community. In general, CSOs are often seen as credible sources of information, and collaborating with them positions a media outlet as committed to journalistic integrity and accuracy.

CSOs actively work to reduce the spread of manipulative information through various trainings, workshops, seminars, and other engaging activities. Media Literacy Week 2023, held again in Armenia on November 6th, brought together stakeholders across the country to raise awareness

and acknowledge advancements This year, it was centered on media literacy in the digital environment and was organized in partnership with the EU-funded “Youth in Action: Youth Empowerment and Leadership Development in Armenia” project. The Digital Citizen Ambassador Training (DCAT), a project sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Armenia and coordinated by American Councils for International Education in Armenia, aims to equip young Armenians with the skills and knowledge necessary to utilize technology responsibly and ethically.

The Berlin-based NGO CRISP, in collaboration with local CSO Center for Policy Studies (CPS), also concluded the first set of media literacy trainings for youth who work in media and civil society against manipulative information. The training included a simulation game, interactive exercises, and debriefing sessions to help participants understand the disinformation ecosystem in Armenia and develop strategies to counter disinformation.

Martirosyan and Muradyan, however, observed that, because many of the CSO representatives who played an active role before the revolution and previously criticized the state are now either in government or the parliament, they are now more tolerant or willing to justify policies.

Overall, CSOs across different areas are actively involved in discussions on various policy formation issues, and legislative amendments. They provide commentary and expert opinion on a wide range of issues; however, it is hard to assess their degree of influence over ultimate decision-making.

In April 2022, the Armenian government and legislative representatives embarked on a collaborative endeavor with CSOs to revamp the country’s media development policy. The memorandum of understanding emphasized the need to modernize media regulations to address contemporary challenges and align with international standards and practices. However, CSOs criticized subsequent government attempts to introduce legislative changes, feeling sidelined and their input disregarded. They saw the new law “On State Secret,” the draft law

“On Environmental Information,” and the draft on making amendments and supplements to the law “On the Legal Regime of Martial Law” as means to restrict access to information. CSO representatives noted that they were not properly discussed prior to their publication or circulation. “We note that it has been almost a year that the authorities have not abided by the agreements stipulated in the Memorandum on multiple occasions,” media CSOs said [in a joint statement](#).

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

Traditional press conferences are increasingly less common. In November 2023, Prime Minister Pashinyan employed a new press conference model when he answered more than six dozen WhatsApp video questions previously recorded by the Armenian people and diaspora during a live, eight-hour televised press conference. The Q&A session was aired on Armenian Public Television, the Prime Minister’s Facebook page, and the government’s official YouTube channel.

The e-draft platform—an initiative of the Ministry of Justice of Armenia as part of the country’s ongoing efforts to improve transparency and accountability in its legislative process—is a unified website where draft legal acts are published for public feedback. However, Babayan noted that even with frequent negative feedback, drafts are not significantly modified. Instead, drafts which get wider attention outside of the platform through expert opinions in the media or as a result of protests are more likely to be modified.

Martirosyan explained that through e-draft, the government only creates the impression that they work transparently. In reality, they draft bills in a vacuum without public discussions, expert reviews, or CSO involvement, then post those on the platform, set a period for feedback of about two weeks, and present it as having undergone public discussion. “In fact, it’s a trap, and a good platform is used for bad purposes,” he said.

Overall, manipulated information remains a significant challenge in Armenian political discourse. Many people in Armenia lack the skills to

CSOs play a critical role in fostering a well-informed citizenry and ground their work in factual, reliable information.

critically evaluate information online, making them more susceptible to believing manipulated information. Moreover, since many media outlets in Armenia are biased towards certain political parties, it is difficult for people to find objective information. In addition, social media algorithms can create echo chambers where people are only exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs. During elections, manipulated information campaigns can target specific candidates or parties with fabricated stories or manipulated visuals, online rumors, and conspiracy theories, all of which impact political discourse and social cohesion.

Government officials often fail to provide adequate explanations for their decisions, particularly regarding key personnel changes such as appointments and terminations. Even when explanations are offered, they are not necessarily satisfactory to the public at large, nor offer references to facts and data. In a recent example, the government allocated \$6 million to American rapper Snoop Dogg's planned concert in Yerevan, claiming it would raise Armenia's international profile and attract foreign tourists. The concert sparked controversy and criticism from the public and the anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, particularly due to the choice of the organizing company, Doping Space, which was established only a month prior to its selection with no history in organizing major events and was selected without a tender process.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Muradyan suggested that when media outlets publish stories that hold government actors accountable, the government may not act upon it right away but rather save it for the future should the political figure fall out of favor. It is therefore unclear if the government's actions actually stem from the reporting or if the media just offers a convenient excuse. "This is not a part of political culture in Armenia yet," he said.

Muradyan also noted that public tolerance towards corruption is high and that quality information does not necessarily prevent corruption risks, although this could change with a different government. "I'm sure

if the government changes, today's articles about corruption risks will be turned into criminal cases by the future government actors, just as today's government uses Hetq's articles on corruption of the previous government actors and turns them into criminal cases," he explained, "At the time, those articles were written under the rule of the previous government and had no political consequences. Today, it is under political circumstances that these articles are being [reexamined]." He added that while the existence of quality information does not prevent or lower the incidence or severity of corruption in national or local governments, it still impacts public opinion.

The government frequently fails to respond in an appropriate manner when information sources reveal corruption. In a previously mentioned case, the Union of Informed Citizens (UIC), an Armenian civic group, accused Prime Minister Pashinyan's Civil Contract party of abusing administrative resources to secure victory for its candidate, Tigran Avinyan, in the 2023 Yerevan municipal elections. The group claimed that officials from a local community were drawing up lists of voters from Yerevan and pressuring them to support Civil Contract's mayoral candidate over others. The UIC's accusations raised concerns about the fairness of the planned elections in Armenia, as Pashinyan himself has previously condemned such practices. The NGO was later sued by the Civil Contract party for revealing the incident and a lien of AMD 1 million (\$2,500) to secure the claim was imposed.

Furthermore, the Independent Observer coalition, which consists of the UIC and Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor, received numerous complaints that public sector workers were being forced to attend Civil Contract's final campaign rally, citing [reports](#) of Yerevan district administrations ordering their subordinates to leave work early to participate. In another instance, when Avinyan held a smaller event in Nor Nork (one of Yerevan's administrative units) on September 8, civic activists posted footage of the rally on social media, suggesting that the entire staff of schools, kindergartens, and local government bodies participated. Avinyan and Pashinyan denied allegations of forced attendance on all counts. Avinyan further drew criticism for meeting with hundreds of students at the State Engineering University of Armenia on the last day of the campaign, despite a legal ban on campaigning

in educational institutions. The university administration reportedly encouraged students to skip classes to attend the meeting.

Large-scale, mostly peaceful protests erupted in Armenia following the Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, with protestors demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan, blaming him for failing to prevent the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. Riot police detained hundreds of protestors during the demonstrations, although most were released after a few hours, and at least 33 people were injured.

While media outlets and citizen journalists play a crucial role in bringing to light and documenting human rights abuses and potential violations of civil liberties, the impact of their work on preventing or mitigating these transgressions is not evident. However, they remain instrumental in upholding the current state of accountability and panelists suggest any decrease in oversight would make the situation worse.

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