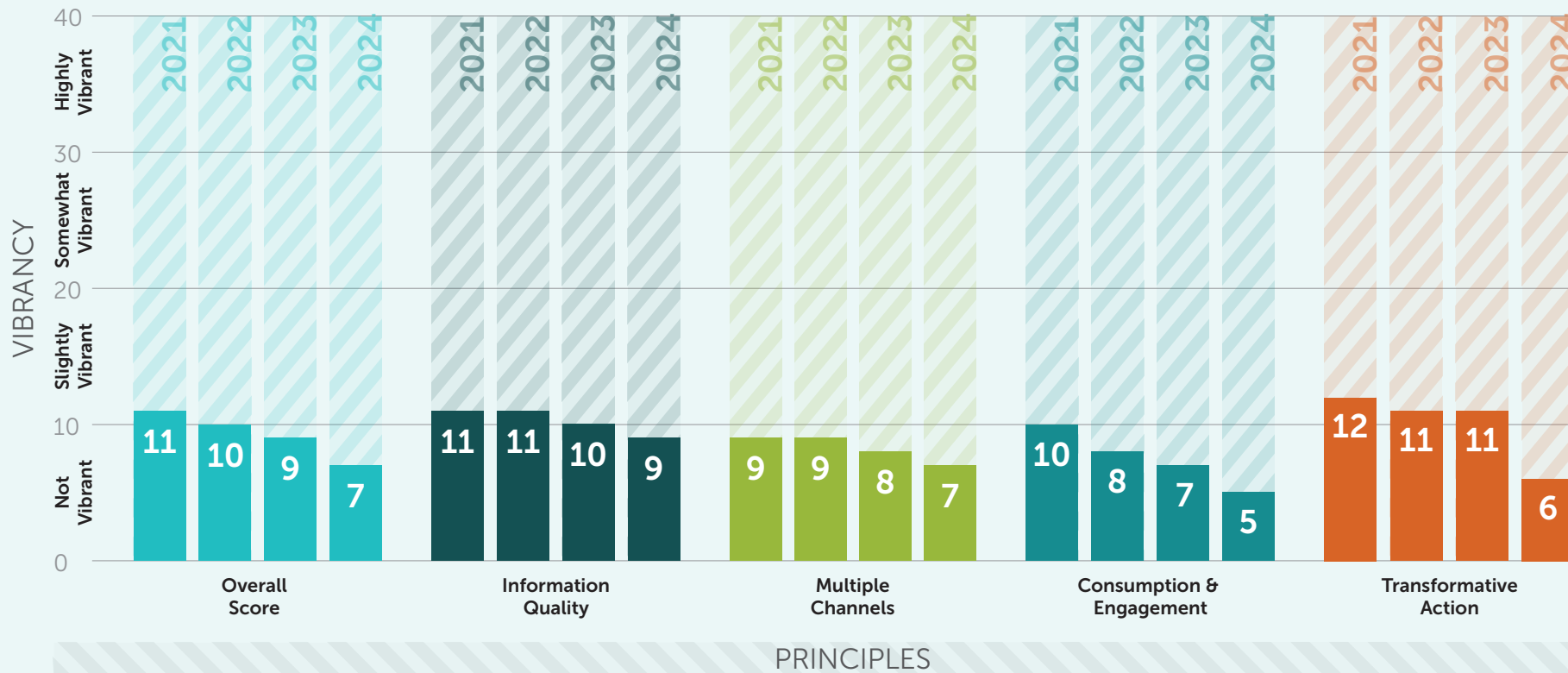


# AZERBAIJAN

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 4





PRINCIPLES

**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

7

The situation in the media sector in Azerbaijan worsened in 2023, compared with previous years. After a three-year court case, in February a journalist who had worked for a state-run news agency for many years attempted suicide after claiming the court was pressured from “above” during their trial; later in the year, the court awarded the journalist some compensation. Additionally, the arrest of a journalist’s news source served as a stark indicator of deteriorating conditions in the country’s media sector in 2023.

In February, freedom of expression was further stifled as a professor who worked for globally-renowned universities, a PhD student, and social activists were arrested simply for speaking the truth about Azerbaijan’s political and socio-economic issues. For the first time in decades, a media outlet was sued under Azerbaijan’s criminal code and at least 13 independent and investigative journalists were imprisoned after being accused of smuggling in 2023. For the first time in the country’s modern history, bank accounts of the family members of imprisoned journalists were frozen, depriving them of financial support for months.

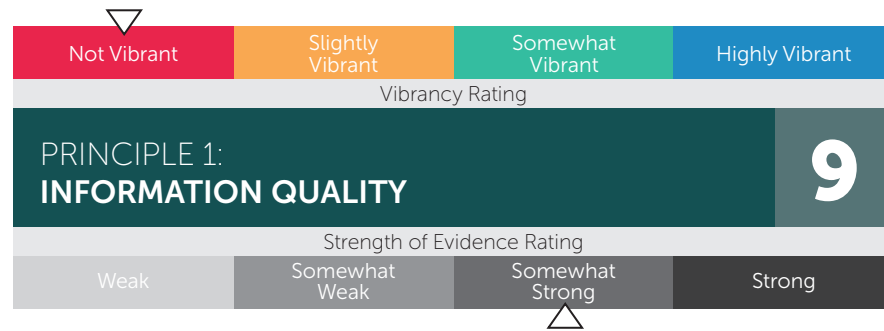
After a day-long military operation, Azerbaijan proclaimed the restoration of its territorial integrity following the recapture of the city of Khankendi within the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave by Azerbaijani security forces. However, this operation led to a crackdown on TikTok, one of the most widely used social media networks, and many individuals who posted criticisms of the operation on social media were subsequently incarcerated.

While the government still used WhatsApp groups to send a list of daily topics that the local mainstream (government-

affiliated) media are allowed to cover, remaining independent media outlets in the country had their principal staff members arrested in 2023 and were operating with limited budgets, as funding is heavily controlled.

The new media law forbidding journalists to work without state registration, which came into force in 2023, culminated in a series of arrests and warnings by the fourth quarter of the year. Furthermore, their media inquiries to government bodies remain unanswered, as they are not registered by the Media Registry Office, which operates under the auspices of the Media Development Agency. In 2023, government-backed trolls were actively working to discredit much of the fact-based content produced by independent media. They persistently labeled the staff of these outlets as journalists “lacking national identity.”

The media events that marked 2023 led to a decline in scores across multiple indicators in this year’s VIBE report, reflecting a rapidly deteriorating operating environment. All principles scored lower than they did in last year’s VIBE study, with the number of media outlets producing high-quality content shrinking and very few journalists contributing to high-quality content following a series of arrests. Media literacy and digital security skills throughout the country remain extremely low: Due to the lack of media literacy in the country, government-backed trolls described the fact-based and unbiased content produced by independent journalists as “anti-Azerbaijan” articles and accused them of damaging the image of Azerbaijan at the behest of the West. The government, meanwhile, turns a blind eye to corruption, civil liberties, and human rights violations.



Principle 1 dropped one point in the VIBE 2024 score versus the 2023 VIBE study. The panel was more pessimistic about the media sector's situation compared with the previous year, noting that maintaining quality information on various topics was highly problematic and getting worse. The journalists who continue to work for government-funded media admitted that they still base their work on the official directives that appear in their WhatsApp group. They also observed that the government scrutinizes the information intended for citizens more closely than before, determining when and how it should be disseminated. The indicator on content production being sufficiently resourced was the lowest-scoring indicator in this principle, reflecting the financial pressures that independent media within the country, as well as those media which were forced to exile, face.

Panelists expressed concerns that “soon, there won't be a single journalist producing quality content left in the country.” They added that the police criticize journalists for their influence on the people, with one panelist reporting that a policeman openly blamed them for causing public uproar and giving the people a voice.

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

Despite the fact that there are many television, radio, online, and print media outlets in the country, their mission is not to report the truth, nor do they serve to create content on numerous topics. “It's no secret

that independent journalists are bribed with government grants. In our country, information is only disseminated to suit the government's agenda. This is nothing new. Journalists from AbzasMedia are being arrested and accused of smuggling simply because it now aligns with the government's interests,” explained one of the panelists.

Several media outlets producing high-quality content on a variety of topics covertly operate in the country. However, the ongoing arrest of journalists progressively undermines their investigative work. In early 2024, one of the presenters of Toplum TV—a local, independent, and professional media outlet—announced live on air that, due to the lack of staff, it could not cover the snap presidential elections in the country. “There is a lack of genuine political and social discussions concerning serious topics in the mainstream media,” observed one panelist.

While local pro-government media outlets address only directives from the government, some important news topics or events are deliberately omitted from their daily reports.

When the locals of Soyudlu village in the Gedebey district protested against harmful mining practices near their village, journalists were denied access, and all roads to the village were blocked. The village remains under the blockade to this day, and journalists are still prohibited from visiting. Consequently, there is very little information about the events that unfolded in this location.

Students from the Faculty of Journalism at the Azerbaijan University of Languages protested the absence of English-speaking lecturers with journalistic backgrounds. Despite their demands for English-speaking journalism professors, the university authorities recruited only English-language teachers with no journalism experience. This protest was never covered by the news and received very little attention from the media.

The government does not have the tools to regulate social media, including YouTube. Most information is disseminated through Facebook. Nevertheless, panelists said that those who criticize the government or share something that the government does not like are often blackmailed or face a jail sentence after being accused of resisting police arrest or carrying drugs. In addition, the social media



pages of independent media and bloggers, who create quality content, are attacked by government trolls spreading disinformation and hate speech. Panelists claimed that the targets of their hate speech are increasing in number and attacking a wider range of different profiles.

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

The most trusted information is disseminated by the BBC News Azerbaijani service, Voice of America, and Azadlıq Radiosu (Radio Liberty in Azerbaijan). However, some panelists claimed that more recently, Azadlıq Radiosu took a step back in this regard and became more moderate, compared with dissident media outlet Meydan TV. As for local media outlets Toplum TV and Abzas Media, many of their staff members have been imprisoned, and now their activities are mainly conducted by journalists living outside the country who continue to report fact-based truths.

Panelists divided the country's media into three camps. The first comprises government-controlled media outlets, including state-run media and mass media financed by actors close to the government or receiving subsidies or direct financial support from government institutions. They spread pro-government news and include local television stations (public and online television). The second includes independent local media operating both within or outside the country, albeit in extremely low numbers. This includes Toplum TV, AbzasMedia, and various other small websites striving to retain their independence. The third camp comprises foreign media Azerbaijani services operating independently. One of the panelists observed that “to maintain their presence in the country, foreign media try not to cross the line.” There are also YouTube channels belonging to independent media outlets that the Azerbaijani government has yet to restrict.

**Panelists said that those who criticize the government or share something that the government does not like are often blackmailed or face a jail sentence after being accused of resisting police arrest or carrying drugs.**

According to the new media law, signed into law in 2023, it is mandatory for registered local media outlets to produce at least 20 original pieces of news content in a day. This undermines information quality, as journalists have no time to verify the information. In parallel, limited journalism-related education, combined with low media literacy among readers, also negatively affects the quality and accuracy of the news.

In October, local media reported that the assailant responsible for the armed attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Iran back in January 2023 had been sentenced to execution. Describing it as an act of terrorism, local media, including state television, spread this information, while Iranian state media outlets had not published anything pertaining to an execution and Iranian officials claimed there was no political motivation for the attack. Some time later, in February 2024, public television stations aired the same story once again and conducted interviews with the parents of those who were injured during the incident. However, they did not provide any timeline for the perpetrator's execution and failed to provide a credible source.

It is also difficult for independent journalists to access facts and primary sources for the country's news. The financial reports of many government bodies are not available. Databases that were publicly accessible a few years ago, such as the agricultural subsidies database and records disclosing the owners of companies operating in the country and their home addresses, are now restricted.

According to the new media law, prosecuting or pressuring journalists for their opinions based on information not prohibited by law is not permitted. However, during the Soyudlu protests, representatives of independent media outlets were forcibly removed from the village while pro-government media were allowed to visit the location.

“Government authorities don't respond to [independent] journalists' phone calls or messages and they demand official media inquiries

when caught off guard, but they don't answer media inquiries, either," explained one of the panelists.

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

Neither the government nor unprofessional independent media, including bloggers and government trolls, avoid the use of harmful information and hate speech. Panelists reported that during the day-long Nagorno-Karabakh war in September, terms such as "enemy" were [used by local media outlets](#). When the BBC Azerbaijani service provided comprehensive coverage of Azerbaijan's anti-terror actions in Karabakh, the Press Council labeled the outlet as "a [propagator of Armenian separatism](#)."

The media law requires that "racial, religious, ethnic, and other types of discrimination should not be propagated" and prohibits open calls for ethnic, racial, and religious enmity. Although the country's criminal code also bans hate speech and all forms of discrimination, the law is not applied to those who express hatred toward people at the behest of the government.

Not a single law was adopted to protect LGBTQ+ rights in the country in 2023. Although the members of the LGBTQ+ community spread information regarding the murder of a transgender woman in 2023, local pro-government media did not cover the crime.

Very few media outlets verify their information using at least two sources. "Most media outlets still don't think to monitor the content they produce or don't have enough resources or technical knowledge to do it. We didn't see any progress toward decreasing the amount of disinformation and hate speech," a panelist added.

**“ The politicized nature of the advertising market, combined with the fact that large businesses tend to belong to the ruling Aliyev family or different government officials, means that not many companies risk broadcasting commercial advertisements on independent media outlets.**

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

Although many Azerbaijanis have access to the news in their own language, ethnic minorities continue to receive little to no coverage from pro-government media outlets. Their issues remained unaddressed in 2023 without any visibility in local media.

Panelists argued that the relative dominance of women in the mass media industry should not be mistaken for gender balance, as it primarily stems from the sector's low incomes. In state media, it has been quite some time since women occupied directorial positions, and only two examples come to mind. As for critical media, Abzas Media was once run by a woman, and the editor-in-chief position of Meydan TV has been occupied by a woman for many years.

### **Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

Professional content producers do not have adequate financial resources. "Independent media are deprived of all the financial resources controlled by the government," said one panelist. Furthermore, commercial advertisements receive a share based on which media company they are expected to be disseminated by and to whom the media outlet belongs. It is unclear how subsidies are distributed, databases are not accessible, and the media are not required to be accountable.

Very few companies in Azerbaijan dare to advertise their services or products on media critical of the government. The politicized nature of the advertising market, combined with the fact that large businesses tend to belong to the ruling Aliyev family or different government officials, means that not many companies risk broadcasting commercial advertisements on independent media outlets. In addition, although

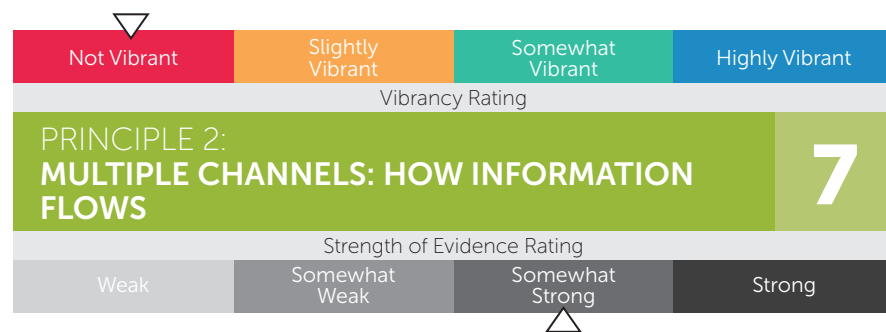
companies were previously allowed to subscribe to any media outlet, they are now limited to certain media.

Panelists recalled that Turan Information Agency and *Ayna-Zerkalo* newspapers used to earn money from commercial advertisements and subscriptions. However, due to politicized advertising and unfair competition, their financial resources have been hugely depleted.

The government's Media Development Agency also allocates funding to news and information websites that are state-owned or affiliated with the Azerbaijani government.

Despite the fact that journalists' monthly salaries in local media are high compared with the officially announced median salary, they are still too low relative to the cost of living when high inflation and their daily activities are taken into account.

For example, a television presenter hosting a live program every day to discuss the political agenda on a local pro-government television channel typically earns around AZN 1,500 or \$900 per month.



Principle 2's score dropped by 1 point in comparison to the 2023 VIBE study. There were 13 journalists who were accused of smuggling and consequently arrested, along with dozens of activists with divergent opinions who were imprisoned in November and December of 2023. Pro-government media continued to attack the Azerbaijani language services of foreign media and independent media.

Indicator 7, concerning people's access to information channels, attained the highest score of the principle (14), although the country's internet infrastructure does not cover remote areas and the cost of it in villages is prohibitively high. Panelists gave Indicators 6 (right to create, share, and consume information) and 10 (independence of information channels) scores of 3, the lowest of this principle, reflecting eroding freedom of speech, loss of independent media outlets, and the high number of journalists detained by authorities in 2023.

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

The Azerbaijani government claimed that the right to freedom of expression was protected in 2023. However, six staff members of Abzas Media--including its head, Ulvi Hasannli, Editor-in-Chief Sevinj Vagifgizi, Editor Mohammed Kekalov, Correspondents Nargiz Absalamova and Elnare Gasimova, along with investigative journalist Hafiz Babali, who published his articles on Abzas Media--were all accused of smuggling and subsequently arrested. The Abzas employees denied the accusations against them and said their arrests were a direct consequence of their journalistic activities. The European Union voiced its condemnation in a [statement issued in December](#), highlighting that "Azerbaijan violates its international commitments and takes suppressive steps against the freedom of expression."

Panelists argued that "imprisoning the key staff members of Abzas Media resulted in their website being frozen, rendering it nonfunctional."

The head of the Kanal13 internet television media outlet, Aziz Orujov, and two of his staff members, Rufet Muradli and Shamo Eminov, were also accused of smuggling and were imprisoned. Muradli was issued a 15-day pretrial detention and was released after the completion of his term.

During a series of arrests in 2023, freelance journalist Teymour Karimov was also incarcerated. In addition, those who wrote posts condemning the country's military operations or those who publicly complained about the Karabakh war have also been subject to jail sentences.

Although the constitution and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which Azerbaijan ratified, serve to protect freedom of expression and freedom of speech, the government has adopted new legislation in the past couple of years that restricts these freedoms. “The laws are restrictive and they no longer provide protection,” one of the panelists claimed.

Under the provisions of the 2023 media law, fines are imposed for the dissemination of prohibited information. Since April 2023, fines totaling around AZN 3,000 (\$1,800) were issued to media outlets found violating rebuttal, reply, and correction rules. These fines pose a significant financial burden for media outlets already struggling to survive in a relatively less competitive and smaller market.

One of the new punishments issued by the government is to freeze the bank accounts receiving salary payments and the pension cards of the family members of the incarcerated journalists. “There is self-censorship due to these state-issued fines,” a panelist added.

Another event that highlights deteriorating freedom of speech issues in 2023 was when one of the pro-government local television stations targeted an independent media outlet for [broadcasting complaints](#) regarding living conditions, employment, and medical care made by local residents from the Baku region and several other national regions. During Sunday evening prime time, a pro-government television station aired the reports to its large audience, describing the journalists who created the video or written content as traitors devoid of any national allegiance.

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

Traditional media outlets in Azerbaijan have already lost their influence. Television and radio stations are only a source of light entertainment, panelists claimed.

Panelists also agreed that people have better access to the news via social media in the past decade, particularly in larger and more populated cities such as Baku, Sumqayit, Ganja, and Mingachevir.

“Compared to the cities, there is hardly any internet access in more remote villages. There is no infrastructure for Wi-Fi, and mobile internet is too expensive for villagers,” one panelist explained. While some locations suffer from poor internet connections, social media is not popular among villagers, especially those in conservative communities who consider its use to be a “harmful habit.” Moreover, the government can restrict the internet at any given moment, directly disrupting the flow of information.

One of the panelists recalled that after a day-long military operation in the Karabakh region on September 19, the internet was restricted and totally blocked in the Tartar district and its surrounding villages for over a month.

Some portions of the population living in the cities subscribe to cable television. Television channels from different countries are included in the cable television packages. “But if one of the foreign TV channels criticizes the ruling family, then the channel is removed from the package, an example being FOX TV,” observed one of the panelists.

Sign language interpretation is a required condition to provide deaf audience members access to media content. However, television stations in Azerbaijan either completely ignore the need for sign language, or they apply this service only to the major news programs aired in prime time.

**Despite there being a law protecting the right to information, the government has gradually modified the other laws, converting media law within Azerbaijan to a tool to hinder or restrict journalistic activity.**



### Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Panelists observed that journalists are unable to provide exclusive stories that include input from the government for their outlets: “You submit a media inquiry, and then you have to wait, and after some time you may find that the answers to your questions have already been published by all the news outlets before you receive any answers from the government office.”

Despite there being a law protecting the right to information, the government has gradually modified the other laws, converting media law within Azerbaijan to a tool to hinder or restrict journalistic activity.

There is little evidence that citizens get to participate in public-policy and decision-making processes. Governmental press officers either refuse to discuss problems or they provide delayed responses, offering only limited information when compelled to do so.

Numerous lawsuits regarding media inquiries remained unanswered by the end of 2023, and there are also court trials ongoing. Most of the government offices send press releases only to pro-government media, discriminating against other media outlets. “An event occurs in the country and press officers deny the news, but eventually, it becomes clear that a significant event really has taken place,” explained one of the panelists.

Panelists unequivocally asserted that there is no evidence to suggest that Azerbaijani citizens trust the spokespeople of government bodies and claimed there are none that can be trusted. People either tend to distrust official information or simply do not pay much attention to it. “Government officials are primarily required to be loyal to the government. It doesn’t matter whether the public believe them or not,” a representative of one of the pro-government television channels explained.

“As many media outlets are funded by government grants through the Media Development Agency, commercial advertisement revenue takes a backseat, while media outlet owners exert direct influence over the content produced.”

Even for state media, access to official data depends on the extent to which the government chooses to disclose information. Media funded by the government disseminate the limited information they are allowed to share, while independent journalists strive to obtain data through alternative channels. Moreover, access to some government websites is restricted.

### Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Following the adoption of the new media law, panelists affirmed that government control over the media has increased. Furthermore, licensing procedures, which were already biased and lacking in transparency, have become more challenging.

To establish a new television or radio station, it is essential to gain permission from a government official. Demonstrating loyalty to the government is also a key factor. Even if individuals have enough financial resources and technical capabilities, it is impossible for those who are opposition members to obtain a license for television or radio broadcasting.

Not a single independent individual obtained a television broadcasting license in 2023. Only online media can be established without permission.

“The only thing public about İctimai TV [which translates as ‘Public TV’] is its name. There is no evidence to suggest that it is an independent or unbiased media outlet,” one panelist stated. There are no political debates, corruption cases, or critical socioeconomic topics aired on İctimai TV; however, there is plenty of information promoting the ruling party’s agenda. It is difficult to distinguish İctimai TV from any other state-run television station.

İctimai TV also fails to adhere to the guidelines intended to raise public awareness on various issues. Only one program, called “Don’t Keep It for

Tomorrow,” very timidly addresses some of the country’s social issues, panelists explained. An examination of İctimai TV board of directors and the content of their daily programs underscores that the station’s activities are highly politically influenced.

As for internet providers, they have the authority to block any website based on political directives, without the need for a court decision.

**Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

The affiliations of a media outlet (to specific people, organizations, or government offices) are apparent in its daily activities, articles, and approaches to issues. For example, a pro-government media outlet would never describe increased product prices as a “price hike.” Instead it is more likely to express that the “price has changed.”

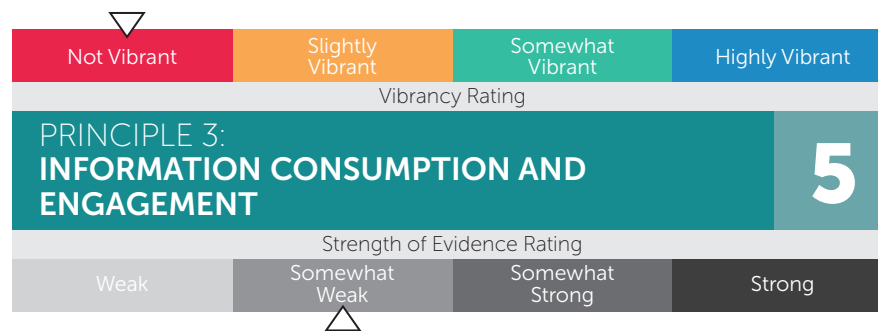
As many media outlets are funded by government grants through the Media Development Agency, commercial advertisement revenue takes a backseat, while media outlet owners exert direct influence over the content produced. If the owner makes a decision, no one, including the editor-in-chief or any other staff member, has the right to question that decision.

Given that all members appointed to the managing boards of the media outlets are politically motivated individuals, it is unrealistic to expect them to act in accordance with state policies in Azerbaijan.

State media cannot freely obtain statistical data and publish it independently. The agency that distributes television and radio frequencies fails to be politically neutral, and internet providers are also run by those who are either close to the government or controlled by them. “State media outlets directly depend on the government, and their editorial policy is based on the directives received. Not only topics for discussion, but also the pundits invited to appear on the programs, are selected from a list provided by the government,” one panelist explained.

When we study the list of media outlets that received a share of the budget allocated by the Media Development Agency, it becomes clear

that they are all “government-approved” media organizations. Websites refrain from publicly criticizing the mobile operators with which they have established a commercial advertisement contract. Even specialized media, such as sport websites, avoid criticizing the football teams with which they have signed a contract.



Principle 3’s rating dropped twopoints in VIBE 2024, compared with its score in the 2023 study. Panelists agreed that a major issue is citizens having extremely limited understanding of digital security; therefore, Indicator 11 on privacy protection and security received a very low score. The score for Indicator 12 on media literacy was the lowest in this principle, despite the newly-formed Media Development Agency announcing that it would provide training courses related to media literacy in Baku and other regions.

Readers, viewers, and listeners do not have enough skills, knowledge, and experience to absorb information. Most viewers do not know how to protect themselves from digital threats. There is little evidence to suggest that journalists are familiar with how to protect themselves. Media literacy is not at the core of education programs provided by schools and universities. Freedom of assembly and freedom of expression was not protected in 2023. In Azerbaijan, news sites and social networks can fall victim to cybercrimes at any given time.

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

Azerbaijan is one of the countries with a high prevalence of distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, and digital protection measures in the country are very weak.

Low media literacy in the population results in a lack of knowledge regarding algorithms and security tools. In addition, training courses that would teach citizens how to protect themselves from internet threats are not accessible to most. Internet users in Azerbaijan do not take internet security and confidentiality very seriously.

Some journalists do not understand the seriousness of the problem, while others say they are not afraid. A small number understand how important it is but do not know how to protect themselves. Sometimes, journalists use the unverified free social media apps. Some journalists use the cracked version<sup>1</sup> of Microsoft Office and, in many cases, they do not ensure that the two-step verification is implemented on their social media pages. “Those of us working for state media feel that, whatever kind of security problems we may have, we are just soldiers serving the government,” said one panelist.

Government officials claimed measures had been taken to improve digital security. However, panelists are more aware of the activists, representatives of civil societies, and government opponents who complain about falling victim to cyberattacks.

Panelists believed that independent media outlets do not have access to the high-tech digital tools available to state media outlets.

The number of reports of cyberattacks on websites that are critical of the

1 Cracked software has had its copyright protection broken and subsequently exposes the user's personal and financial information to risk, which can result in identity theft.

government and social media users has decreased over the past couple of months, relatively speaking. However, the same cannot be said for journalists who, even if they have implemented a two-step verification system for their e-mail account or social media pages, are confronted with the dissemination of their private information on a regular basis. One of the panelists asserted rumors of mobile operators leaking the confirmation codes to state officials.

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

The Azerbaijani government does nothing toward increasing media literacy in the country. Not only is media literacy low, but so is the overall level of education in the country, one panelist explained. By studying the general reaction to publications on social media, it is possible to

gauge to what extent Azerbaijani citizens are skilled enough to verify whether the information is true or false.

All media-related training courses were suspended in 2023 after many journalists were arrested, while in 2022, both public and secret trainings were offered in the country. One of the panelists expressed doubt about when, if ever, media training for young journalists will be available again: “Will they ever return? Or will they abstain from signing up to these programs

through fear of government prosecution? I don't know.”

The panelists assumed that the functions and responsibilities of the media are of little interest to the majority of the population. People are not armed with the skills to check facts, correct mistakes, or debunk disinformation using online tools and websites in Azerbaijan. Very few can distinguish fake news from truth.

The media's activities, choice of programs, and content reveal low professional standards, as well as the public's low level of media literacy.

ADA University in Baku, one of Azerbaijan's most prestigious universities, offers media-related training courses; however, no one from independent media is invited to attend them. Therefore, little is known about these training courses, how effective they are, and what is being taught.

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

Panelists expressed that it is clear that the government aims to eliminate independent media in Azerbaijan. One of the panelists noted that the current situation is so dire that it is comparable with the media sector conditions in 2015, which was also marked by multiple journalist arrests and the government banning NGO activities in the country.

“In this country, where freedom of speech and freedom of expression is punished, information laws hold no validity,” one of the panelists stated.

In discussions among Azerbaijani social media users regarding issues such as gender equality, war, and LGBTQ+, there is a [high prevalence of hate speech and manipulated information](#). There are a limited number of spaces and platforms available to the opposition, independent NGOs, and social activists for healthy public debates. Discussions of this kind would never be permitted on local television and radio programs. The Caspian Platform offered Azerbaijanis a limited opportunity; however, its Facebook page was removed shortly after Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, the platform's founder, was arrested.

Public discussions can be held only if they are approved by the authorities and government bodies are not criticized. Political debates are only held regarding foreign policy on state-run television stations. Experts representing all sides in the debates express the same view, and critical opinions are directed only at foreign countries or abstract

communities. When the public send complaints to the ombudsman, there is often no response.

There are at least 288 political prisoners now in Azerbaijan's [prisons](#).

It is possible to spread fact-based news, but those who do are punished for doing so. Citizen Ruslan Vahabov was imprisoned for four years because he shared a post on his Facebook account after it was officially

announced that at least 200 Azerbaijani soldiers had been killed in a day-long anti-terror operation. He was charged with carrying drugs and arrested a day after he shared the following post on Facebook: “Question: What did we gain in 24 hours and 43 minutes? Is it time to start building another “Bravo” supermarket, or not?” This post referred to the Bravo supermarket chain, which is owned by the Aliyev family, implying that capturing territory would expand their business.

“One of the panelists noted that the current situation is so dire that it is comparable with the media sector conditions in 2015, which was also marked by multiple journalist arrests and the government banning NGO activities in the country.”

### **Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audiences' needs.**

According to Azerbaijan's law on requesting official information, the relevant institutions must respond to media inquiries in at least 24 hours and no more than seven working days. However, many government agencies rarely observe these timeframes.

Most media do not see any reason for monitoring their audience or conducting comprehensive research to understand the needs and interests of potential audiences. Although the audience is given the opportunity to contact the editors or share their opinion in the comments section, the editorial staff mainly ignore their messages, suggestions, or remarks. The local media mainly disseminate information serving the interests and needs of the government rather than those of the audience.



Even though citizens are given the opportunity to comment on social media and online websites, critical opinions are deleted, hidden, or targeted by trolls or fake accounts. The comments section of the YouTube channels of the president and almost all state media is closed.

Programs aired during prime time on all high-rating television channels either focus on marriage or domestic issues. Local media attempt to attract their audiences with misleading headlines, showbiz news, and crime news. A panelist working for a local television station said that ratings reveal that the majority of their audience members are inclined to watch light entertainment or reality television shows; this is why the stations prefer to air shows of this nature.

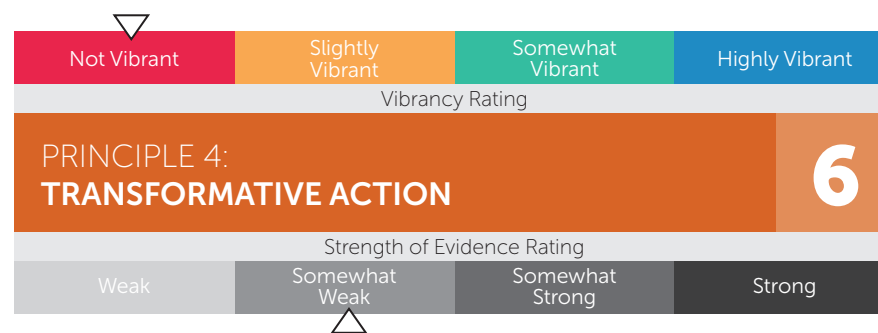
Panelists agreed that independent media attempt to exchange views with civil society; however, since independent media and CSOs are disappearing collaboration between the two sectors is challenging.

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

Azerbaijan has only a few examples of community media outlets, such as [Fem-Utopia](#), a feminist YouTube channel, and *Southern News*. Community media report on topics (feminism, the LGBTQ+ community, problems in ethnic communities) that other media outlets do not cover. They do not spread any harmful information targeting individuals, groups, or public interests. However, since media literacy is low and people living in the regions do not understand the importance of community media outlets, there is very little awareness regarding the presence or absence of such media.

There are no community television or radio stations with a government license. Some panelists argue that there is no community media in Azerbaijan at all.

After operating for 14 years in the southern regions of Azerbaijan (Lenkaran, Astara, Masalli etc.), *Southern News* (*Cənub xəbərləri*) newspaper and its website, cenub.az, were forced to shut down on January 10, 2024, due to insufficient funding.



Principle 4's score dropped 5 points from the 2023 VIBE publication. After several NGO representatives were imprisoned for speaking out about social issues, many activists now choose to remain silent in order to protect themselves rather than engage in efforts to advance society. Panelists gave Indicators 19 (government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions) and 20 (good governance and democratic rights) the two lowest scores of this principle—3 and 2, respectively—since government officials do not justify or discuss their decisions with the public and does not address. to corruption, human rights abuses, or civil liberty violations.

Panelists believed that people cannot distinguish fake news from the truth, nor understand political processes to assess the situation. They also felt that the country's socioeconomic problems are what preoccupy the people and prevent them from focusing on other issues.

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

Discussions are rarely seen on social media platforms; moreover, there are no debate programs aired on television stations. Only the program "Don't Keep It for Tomorrow" on İctimai TV could be deemed as some sort of public debate.

Given the lack of platforms and adverse conditions hinder public discussions, they simply do not take place. In addition, many social

media users who actively and openly criticized the government in previous years have been dissuaded from doing so after they received calls from the police. There is a sense that “Big Brother is watching you,” and people use self-censorship to avoid police custody.

The Azerbaijani public can get news from different sources based on their foreign-language skills. The majority of the population speaks some Russian or Turkish, so they can read or watch the news in a language they understand.

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

The population’s ability to discern between true and false information is also limited. Many do not question official news sources; instead, they tend to believe the information provided by the government. However, people are more inclined to watch reality or light entertainment television shows, rather than serious news programs.

In 2023, protests erupted in the Saatli region over water scarcity and in the village of Soyudlu due to ecological issues. However, the local media covered these protests disparately, with little attention given in other regions. “People are not interested in politics, generally,” said one panelist.

There is no direct contact between citizens and government officials, with interactions limited to a level the officials permit. Panelists observed that government officials demonstrate little interest in engaging with everyday people.

The government continues to manipulate the population with its misinformation, seeking to create the illusion of democratic elections.

Only a small fraction of the population can discern and follow fact-based health and safety recommendations.

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

While both government-backed and independent NGOs and CSOs operate in the country, there are far fewer that have maintained their independence. One of these minority NGOs is [Eco-front](#), which differs from other pro-environment NGOs in terms of its accountability and transparency.

In 2023, those who tried to register their NGOs faced artificial barriers. The number of CSOs operating in the country is very small, compared with previous years. Some of them are attempting to remain active, albeit discreetly. NGO representatives, a small number of individuals, strive to raise awareness on environmental, sociopolitical, and economic issues, organize events, and monitor elections.

According to the panelists, there is a scarcity of CSOs in the country. They encounter limited opportunities to act, and the political environment often poses obstacles to their activities. “There are no real CSOs in the country—only courageous individuals attempting to make a difference,” a panelist added.

NGOs and CSOs rarely take part in public debates and decision-making processes in politics. In most cases, political decisions are made by the ruling party or other government bodies. The discussion

about the media law took place after it had already been adopted by parliament. Despite the harsh criticism against the new media law and the law on political parties, most of the remarks were hardly considered, and laws were adopted without civic participation.

**“ The number of CSOs operating in the country is very small, compared with previous years. Some of them are attempting to remain active, albeit discreetly. NGO representatives, a small number of individuals, strive to raise awareness on environmental, sociopolitical, and economic issues, organize events, and monitor elections.**

Panelists consider that the country's femicide issue has worsened, and the situation requires the NGOs supporting feminism to be more proactive. However, as most NGOs are under government control, instead of having real debates on this issue and finding solutions, they mainly avoid addressing the subject.

The country's remaining independent NGOs do not share manipulated information and tend to disseminate the useful results of their research. Independent media also benefit from their research. "Authorities such as the Press Council should be protecting media and putting pressure on the government to release all the detained journalists, but they choose to remain silent," one panelist stated.

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

There are no standard debates and discussions in the country. The government fails to share the details regarding its decision-making processes. Government officials do not justify their decisions, comment on them, or discuss them with the public. Whenever they do, they rely on the communication of their own media organizations or NGOs, rather than independent ones. In the rare instances they have made public comments regarding their decisions, they often manipulate information.

President Ilham Aliyev often says that Azerbaijan has no political prisoners and that all human rights are protected. "This is disinformation. He says there are 30,000 ethnic Armenians; I couldn't find a single one of those 30,000," one of the panelists added.

Azerbaijan's land borders have been closed since March 2020. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse, the Azerbaijani government announced that land borders will remain closed until April 2024. The government extends this period every three to four months without providing a valid explanation for the extension.

**President Aliyev never agrees to being interviewed by independent media outlets and rarely addresses CSOs' topics of interest in his speeches. The president grants interviews only to a select few state-run television stations every three to four months.**

Neither the president nor government officials are in contact with independent media and NGOs. President Aliyev never agrees to being interviewed by independent media outlets and rarely addresses CSOs' topics of interest in his speeches. The president grants interviews only

to a select few state-run television stations every three to four months. The journalists hosting these interview are allowed to ask him only the questions that were prepared for them in advance.

Independent journalists are constantly forced to represent the viewpoints of their opponents in their debate programs because government representatives refuse to participate.

Government spokespeople fail to fulfill their functions: they discriminate between journalists and are selective when providing information. They communicate openly with pro-government media. However, pro-government media publish their press releases without questioning them, as they do not have the authority to question state institutions. Panelists believe that Azerbaijani press services often aid the government in concealing information. Accessing accurate statistics is challenging and severely restricted for both state and independent media.

The panelists believe that state media distort information and serve as a mouthpiece for the government.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

The government does not respond to corruption, human rights abuses, or civil liberty violations.

Despite ample evidence pointing to election fraud, government bodies refrain from taking action to address it. For example, polling station results were not annulled, despite numerous violations of the election

code being captured in videos shared by media, social media users, and even live CCTV footage.

“Election mechanisms are totally different in the country. It’s as if only one clear candidate was presented to win the election,” a panelist said.

After the Karabakh war, Azerbaijan’s geopolitical situation shifted. Although panelists acknowledge the country’s lack of transparency, they also observe a lack of concern from the West regarding the state of media and civil society in Azerbaijan.

Panelists claimed that despite the decline of freedom of expression and increasing repression, there has been no significant support from Western organizations. One of the panelists recalled an incident at the US Embassy in Azerbaijan when women’s rights defenders Narmin Shahmarzade, Gulnara Mehdiyeva, and Sanubar Hedarova held a [protest in the embassy building](#) to draw attention to the increasing number of femicides and acts of domestic violence in the country. A panelist claimed that, not only did the embassy remove them from the building, but it also handed them over to the police.

In Azerbaijan, rather than the media influencing the state, the state influences the media. The panelists highlighted this reality by explaining that state-run media report only on officials involved in corruption or wrongdoing, after they have been dismissed or arrested for some form of betrayal.

Independent journalists are not invited to state events or conferences. Even journalists who find a way to attend these events after learning about their whereabouts are forcibly removed from the premises in many cases.

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

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