



GEORGIA: MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS RESEARCH



THOMSON REUTERS
FOUNDATION

CONTENTS

- 05. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
- 07. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
- 09. METHODOLOGY
- 11. BACKGROUND
- 15. MEDIA CONSUMPTION
- 20. NEWS ON THE INTERNET
- 23. TRUST IN MEDIA
- 29. UNDERSTANDING OF INDEPENDENT NEWS
- 35. GOOD JOURNALISM
- 41. CASE STUDY: MEDIA REPORTING OF COVID-19
- 45. RECOMMENDATIONS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Eastern Partnerships Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Team, who delivered this research against a tight deadline and with short notice. To Mark Gill, who joined part way through and instantly fitted into the team, and whose research insight, expertise and hard work were critical. To Katharina Merkel for designing the concept, leading the quantitative research and data analysis, and working tirelessly to provide all the data sets and subset analysis. And to Oleg Naumenko for coordinating all inputs from our research partners and helping design the research tool sets. Their input was vital to finalising the report and its findings.

We are also thankful to the experts who helped us to contextualise the findings and provided input for the recommendations, including Lika Antadze for grounding the research and helping add perspective and context to our findings.

Numerous TRF staff offered invaluable support, encouragement and ideas as this project progressed, including our design and communications teams as well as the Media Development and Eastern Partnerships Project Delivery team.

Special thanks go to Nura Ali for all of her wonderful design work and patient revisions, the team at AddTwo for their help with data visualisation, Paula Dear for proofing the writing and grammar, and everyone involved in the digital production and distribution of this new report. And finally, the greatest thanks are reserved for all those who gave us their time and insights in response to our quantitative research and focus groups questions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Television and social media are the two most popular sources of news and information in Georgia. On a weekly basis, 84% of our survey respondents watch TV, while 72% turn to social media. However, this masks significant age differences. For example, only 61% of those aged 18-34 use TV weekly as a source of information, compared with 96% of those aged over 55. In contrast, younger adults are around twice as likely as older adults to get their news from search engines, social media or messengers. Overall, Facebook and YouTube are the most popular social media / online platforms for news and information.

A minority of those surveyed have complete trust in the media – 29% trust the news most of the time. This is not unique to Georgia and some degree of scepticism is to be expected, and is welcome. There are no clear signs of a significant decline in trust, although the media receives a high level of criticism. This includes the majority view among respondents (52%) that there are a lot of fake stories ('fakes') and propaganda in all types of news, with an even higher number believing this is true of political news (62%).

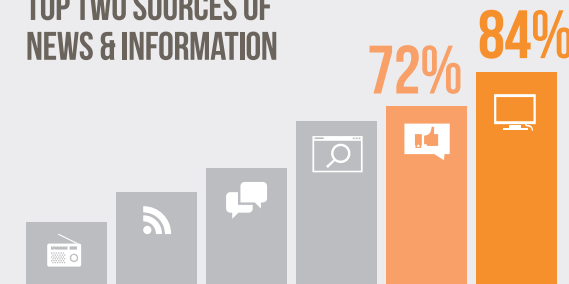
The challenges for independent media in Georgia are mainly around public recognition

of independent media brands. Encouragingly, only 35% of respondents think there is no independent media in Georgia, but most could not correctly name an independent outlet. There was also no clear view on the definition of independent media, although perceptions of what they can do are broadly positive, including general levels of trust (49%) and their ability to deliver unique and relevant news.

There is public demand for good journalism that is impartial, objective and professional, although fewer than half of our survey respondents (44%) believe they already access this type of journalism. Independent journalism therefore needs to distinguish itself from other types of media and supply news and information in a way that is appealing to potential audiences and on subjects in which they are interested.

Encouragingly, only a very small proportion of our respondents believe that Covid-19 is a hoax (4%) and many recognise positive ways in which the pandemic has been reported in Georgia.

TV AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOP TWO SOURCES OF NEWS & INFORMATION



"I see several sources of information and then I make conclusions. You cannot trust any media 100%."
(Female, 45-year-old)

29% "I TRUST MOST NEWS MOST OF THE TIME"



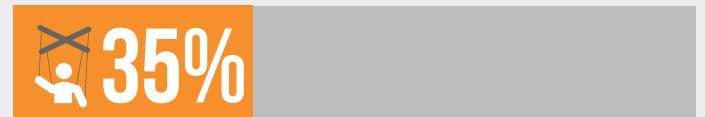
52% "A LOT OF FAKES AND PROPAGANDA IN ALL TYPES OF NEWS"



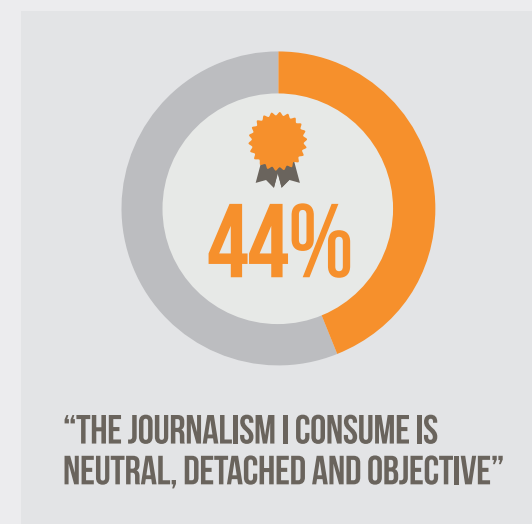
"CAN TRUST INFORMATION PROVIDED BY INDEPENDENT MEDIA"



"DO NOT THINK THERE IS INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN GEORGIA"



"IN INDEPENDENT MEDIA YOU CAN OFTEN FIND INFORMATION THAT IS NOT FOUND IN OTHER MEDIA"



4% "COVID IS A HOAX"

"Of course, journalist cannot be fully independent, because he/she is dependent on the head of program, sponsors, television and everything. Everyone's interests should be considered."
(Female, 49-year-old)

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on quantitative and qualitative research with the Georgian population living in urban areas. The quantitative research used a random sampling approach to obtain a representative sample of adults (aged 18+) living in 11 regions of Georgia, including around half (52%) who were living in Tbilisi.

All respondents were interviewed by telephone and a total of 500 successful interviews were completed between 1 and 10 December 2020.

The fieldwork was conducted by ACT (Analysis and Consulting Team), a professional social and market research agency based in Georgia.

Overall, 46% of respondents were male and 54% female. The age distribution was split as follows: 29% aged 18-34; 39% aged 35-54; and 30% aged 55 or older. Throughout the report, key differences in responses between genders and age groups are reported. 19% of those interviewed were educated to secondary level, 16% had completed technical or vocational-level

education, and a further 63% had achieved higher education qualifications (BA/MA/PhD). Just over a third (37%) were hired employees, and 20% were self-employed. Among other categories, 16% were unemployed, 11% pensioners and 11% homemakers.

The quantitative research was designed to provide statistically-reliable data on the media consumption behaviour of Georgian adults and to measure their attitudes to the media landscape in their country.

In addition, to provide a more granular understanding of why people hold particular views, four focus groups were conducted in February 2021. These groups were recruited and moderated by researchers from ACT and held virtually. A total of 23 participants from a broad cross section of adults across Georgia took part in the focus groups.



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

BACKGROUND

This research is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Independent Media in the Eastern Partnership States project. The Thomson Reuters Foundation, in partnership with BBC Media Action, is delivering assistance to independent media across Georgia, focusing on media partners operating at national and South Caucasus regional levels. The purpose of this research is threefold: 1) to contribute to the baseline for future programming; 2) to support identification of additional activities to assist media to build trust with their core audience; and 3) to provide independent media with audience insights which they might not otherwise be able to access. These include key issues such as audience understanding of good journalism, audience interpretation of independent media, and how people access news and information on social media and other platforms.

The media landscape in Georgia is generally seen as pluralist, but partisan and polarised, with outlets frequently representing the political interests of their owners. Georgia's place in the World Press Freedom rankings has remained at 60/180 for the last two years¹, with several challenges to Georgia's media freedom in the past year, such as: changes in legislation seen as restricting outlets' editorial

independence, via the gradual expansion of the mandate of the National Communications Commission²; national and international attempts to manipulate content on elections and coronavirus; and instances of violence against journalists in the run-up to the 2020 elections³. Alongside this, changes in media ownership have tested the plurality of the media landscape. The ECHR ruling in 2019 that led to restoring ownership of Rustavi 2 – once the main pro-opposition broadcaster – to a previous owner, and the consequent shift in editorial policy and dismissal of large numbers of staff, have been seen as a move to silence government-critical voices. This has been further evidenced by investigations and dismissals at other pro-opposition broadcasters.

Meanwhile, the use of social media to influence public opinion has been pervasive since the 2018 presidential elections cycle, in which both pro-government and opposition parties were found to have run disinformation and trolling campaigns⁴. This practice persisted throughout 2019 and 2020, with Facebook announcing its removal of hundreds of inauthentic accounts, groups and pages that were used to spread disinformation in favour of political parties, some of which was linked back to the ruling party Georgian Dream, or to foreign actors furthering conspiracy theories about Covid-19 and 5G⁵.

The context of protests, elections, a global pandemic and regional conflicts, alongside the fact that the top two sources of news for Georgians – TV and social media – are often partisan or vulnerable to manipulation campaigns, underlines the importance of having access to reliable, objective and trustworthy information, to support informed decision-making and hold decision-makers to account. In a crowded and polarised landscape, there is a clear role and need for trusted independent media outlets to gain greater prominence.

The findings of this research will be used to help the donor community, practitioners and independent media in Georgia to better understand their audience’s perceptions toward independent media and quality journalism. They will also be used to make recommendations on how to enhance the ability of independent media to reach and retain their audience, and raise awareness of the presence and importance of independent media within Georgia.

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/georgia>

² <https://rsf.org/en/news/mounting-pressure-georgias-media-run-elections>

³ <https://cpj.org/2020/10/at-least-5-journalists-attacked-beaten-in-southern-georgia-in-run-up-to-parliamentary-elections/>

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-net/2020#>

⁵ As above



REUTERS/Shamil Zhumatov



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

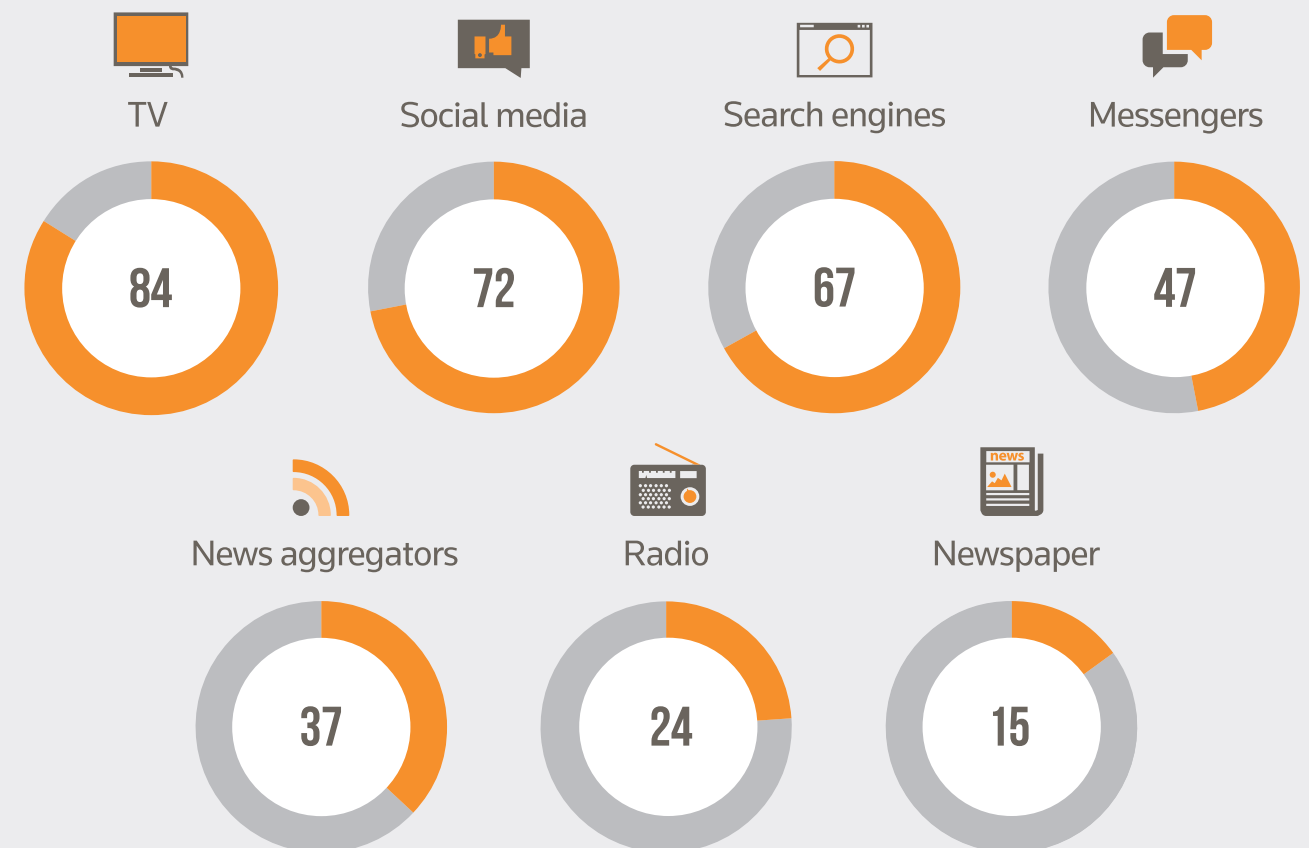
MEDIA CONSUMPTION

The survey respondents were asked where they liked to get their news from and which sources they used most frequently. The most popular source of information or news cited was TV, with 65% using it daily and 84% at least weekly, as shown in Chart 1. Social media (72% weekly) and search engines (67% weekly) are also widely used.

Relatively few said they listened to the radio to access news (24% weekly) and fewer still relied on newspapers (15% weekly).

CHART 1: SOURCES OF NEWS

% who like to get their news from the following sources (at least weekly)



Half of the respondents (49%) said they used the same media sources each day, though older adults are more likely to do so than younger people.

More men than women consume radio (35% vs. 15% weekly), whereas a higher proportion of women prefer social media (77% vs. 65%). Differences in consumption habits are more significant by age, with older people more likely to use traditional sources. For example, only 61% of respondents aged 18-34 use TV on a weekly basis as a source of information, compared with 96% of those aged over 55. In contrast, younger adults are around twice as likely as older adults to get their news from search engines, social media or messengers. TV is also particularly important for those living outside of Tbilisi (91% get news and information this way, on at least a weekly basis).

The focus group participants identified accessibility as a key reason for their preference for TV, given that the internet is not available in every part of Georgia. In addition, the visual effect of television makes it easier to understand information and many said that they found this type of traditional media more trustworthy and accurate. The key disadvantages of television mentioned were inflexibility and the amount of time required to receive information, especially when one has to wait for a particular news programme.

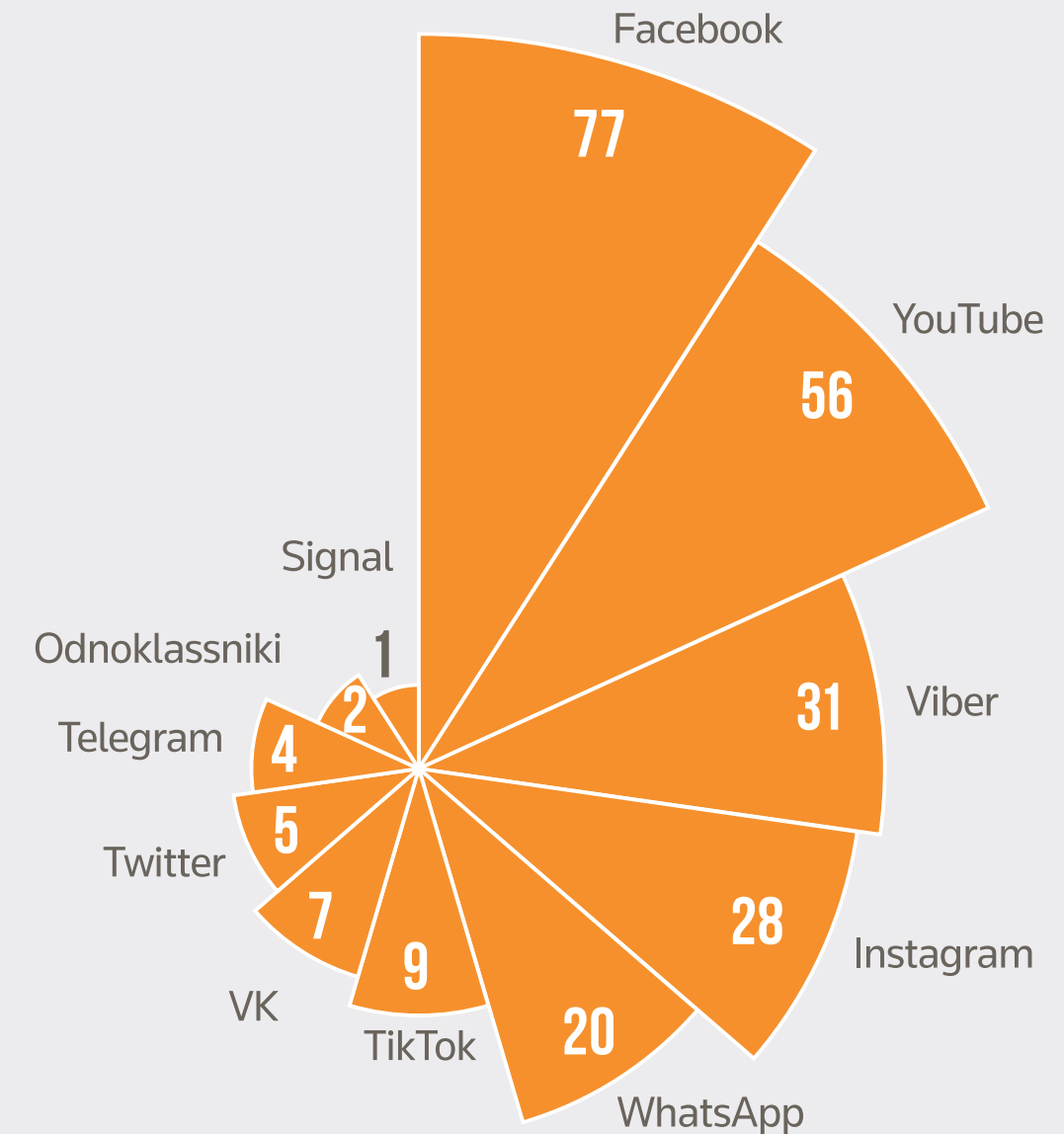
Our survey respondents were also asked how frequently they used social media platforms /

messengers as a source of news. Two platforms stood out – Facebook (65% used daily and 77% weekly) and YouTube (31% used daily and 56% weekly). Other platforms are used much less often as a source of news, as illustrated in Chart 2.

Facebook (72% daily vs. 57% weekly) and Instagram (21% vs. 10%) are more popular among women than men, but there is little gender difference when it comes to the use of the other platforms. Use of these platforms is considerably lower among those aged 55 or over. For example, while only 9% of those aged 18-34 said they had never used Facebook, this applies to as many as 43% of those aged over 55. Similarly, twice as many of the older age groups have never used Instagram, and while half of respondents in the 18-34 age category use YouTube daily, only 14% of the over-55s do so.

CHART 2: USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NEWS AND LATEST INFORMATION ⁶

% who use each type of social media / messenger to get news and latest information (at least weekly)



⁶ Websites/online media were not included in the list of channels asked about. However, based on a similar question asked in Ukraine, we would have expected around seven in 10 respondents to select this option, had they been asked.

A key reason that focus group participants gave for preferring online media was that they felt too many TV journalists do not manage their emotions well – for example, they are perceived as aggressive or do not speak literate Georgian. Furthermore, the focus group participants felt that the information accessed online via social media / media was faster and more diverse than in traditional media. In addition, they said people could express their own opinions through social media and consumers could compare and contrast information more easily (and often simultaneously).

Nevertheless, three key disadvantages of consuming news and information online were identified by focus group participants. Firstly, information shared on TV channels was perceived to be more refined and having been verified, because journalists would feel more responsibility over the shared information. Secondly, while social media was considered better for speed, it was felt that high speed could also increase the probability of inaccuracies. Third, participants cited the presence of fake accounts, bots and trolls in social media, which could be used to direct public opinion in favour of a particular set of interests.

The following are comments from three participants explaining their views:

“ **INTERNET MEDIA IS OPERATIVE. HERE TOO, YOU CAN MAKE COMMENTS. YOU CAN EVALUATE THE PUBLIC OPINION AND EVEN THE OBJECTIVITY OF THE NEWS.... [TV NEWS] IS BROADCASTED WITH SUCH EMOTIONS THAT IT NEGATIVELY IMPACTS ON THE PSYCHE AND MOOD, THAT'S WHY THE READING IS THE BEST OPTION... SOMETIMES JOURNALISTS CONVEY INFORMATION WITH SUCH EMOTIONS THAT I PREFER TO SEARCH INFORMATION ON MY OWN AND READ IT IN ORDER TO AVOID NEGATIVE PRESSURE.**

FEMALE, AGED 54

“ **PROS OF INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA IS THAT INFORMATION IS SPREAD FAST, YOU SHARE YOUR POSITION ABOUT THE SUBJECTS... SHORTCOMING IS THAT TROLLS AND BOTS EXIST AND SOMEONE USES THEM FOR THE FORMULATION OF PUBLIC OPINION.**

MALE, AGED 50

“ **SOCIAL MEDIA IS SIMPLER, DIVERSE... SOCIAL AGENCIES ARE VERY ACTIVE... IF SOMETHING HAPPENS, THEY TURN LIVES AND QUICKLY BROADCAST... IT [INTERNET] IS MORE COMFORTABLE FOR ME THAN TV.**

MALE, AGED 36

The survey respondents were asked to name one particular news outlet or source of information that they favoured. Rather than giving the name of a particular brand or outlet, most offered a general source of news, such as TV (34%), social media (18%) and the internet (17%). With regard to naming specific media outlets, TV channels were still the most prominent – 6% of respondents said Imedi TV, 5% named Mtavari Arkhi, and 3% mentioned TV Pirveli. It was notable that 11% of the total respondents found it difficult to name their favourite source of information. This was an unprompted question in that respondents were not given a list of media brands from which to choose and therefore the response relied on their recall. Had the survey respondents been prompted with the names of

specific brands, and not been able to offer generic options like TV or social media, it is likely that the results would be somewhat different.

By far the most common reason respondents gave for their choice of favoured news source was that the programme aligned with their personal preference (42%). The second most popular reason was that the reporting aligned with their personal values and political views (27%). These were the top two reasons given across gender and age groups; however, older people put more emphasis on reporting that aligned with their personal values and political views than was the case for younger adults.



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

NEWS ON THE INTERNET

When looking at, or seeking, news on the internet, the vast majority of respondents were interested in reporting on social issues in Georgia (86%) and around seven in 10 enjoyed in-depth and longer analytical content (68%). There was less desire for local, rather than national, news – three in four (74%) disagreed with the statement that they preferred local/regional news to news about the country as a whole.

This suggests that there is a significant desire for in-depth national news reporting, particularly on social issues in the country. The data also reveals that audiences typically use a variety of news sources to check what they see on TV and in social media (61%). At the same time, it is not clear whether people are reviewing different perspectives on the news, as the majority also

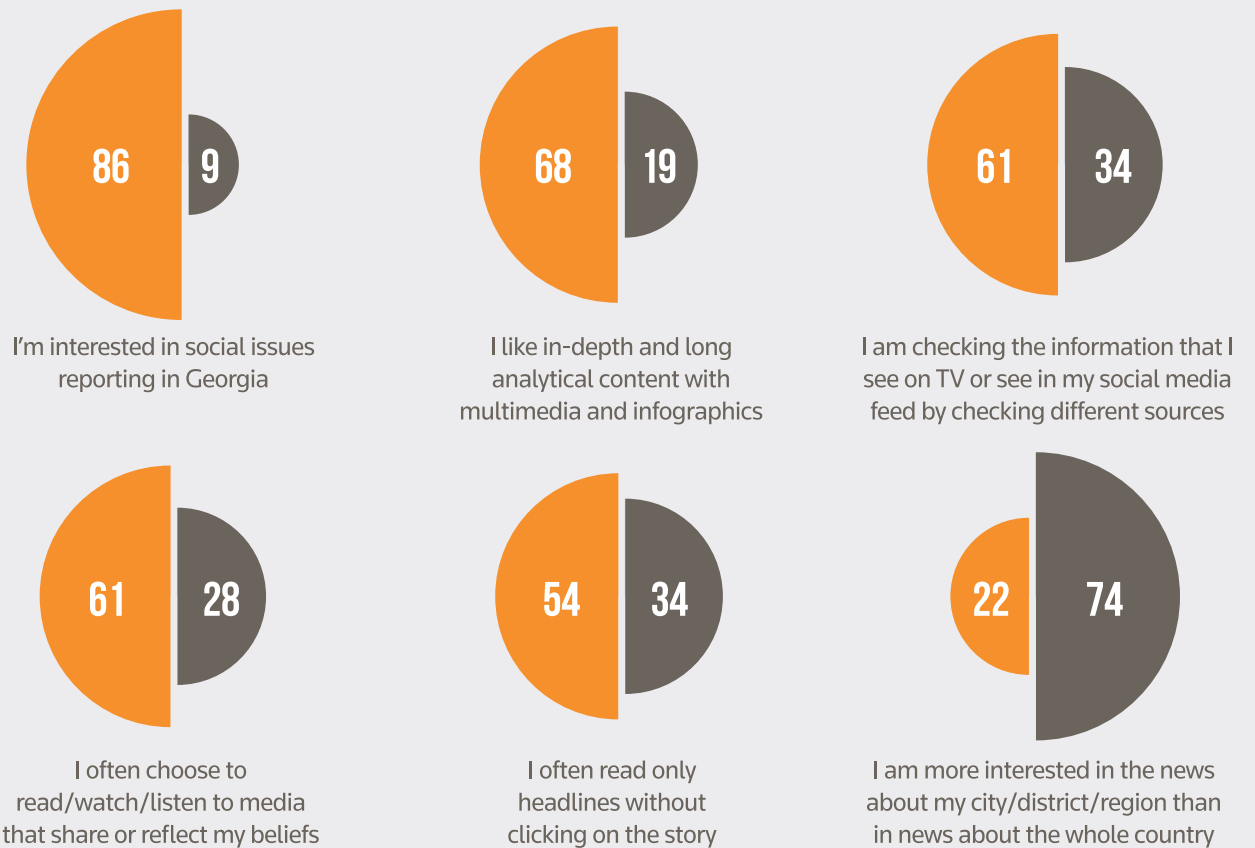
say they often choose to consume media that reflect their beliefs (61%).

People do not always read stories in full and most acknowledged that they often read headlines without clicking on the main story (54%). The research did not explore the reasons behind this – possible explanations could include limited time, the volume of potential stories to read or unappealing headlines. However, it does suggest that independent media need to think carefully about how they frame their headlines in order to encourage potential audiences to read their content, as it appears that many people will not automatically do so.



CHART 3: READING NEWS ON THE INTERNET

% agree or disagree with each statement



Views between women and men were fairly consistent across these variables, although slightly more women than men were interested in social issues reporting (91% vs. 81%). More older people said they consumed media that reflected their beliefs (which corresponds with the findings presented above), but fewer said

they often read only the headlines without clicking on the story (however, this could reflect a lower use of the internet overall). Interestingly, more younger people than older people said they liked in-depth and longer analytical content that contained multimedia and infographics (75% vs. 64%).



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

TRUST IN MEDIA

Almost three in 10 survey respondents (29%) agreed with the statement that they “trust most news most of the time” and a further 51% said they somewhat agree. Views are reasonably similar when analysed by gender and age, although location was a factor, with slightly fewer people living in Tbilisi than outside the capital saying they agreed (23% vs. 35%). Further detailed statistical analysis has revealed that the demographic background of the respondents does not predict levels of trust in the news to any great extent.

Eurobarometer⁷, which covers all 27 members of the European Union, asks a differently worded question than was used in this survey and therefore the results are not directly comparable. However, the Eurobarometer data helps to put these findings into context. In Autumn 2019, 10% of EU adults said they “definitely agree” that the media in their country provided trustworthy information and a further 46% agreed to “some extent”. Therefore, we would not expect most people in Georgia to say they “trust the media all of the time”, as scepticism is part of a healthy democracy. The highest proportions of “definite” trust in the EU were found in Denmark, Finland (both 28%) and Sweden (24%).

The survey respondents in Georgia were asked to select, from a list of four options, the source of news and information that they found to be the most reliable and trustworthy. Half selected TV (50%), in contrast to the proportion opting for online news websites (16%) and newspapers (13%). One in eight said they trusted none of these sources (12%) and only 1% selected radio. Even among those aged 18-34, TV was the most trusted (43%), although this age group was also more likely to choose online news websites or ‘none of these sources’ than were older people. The majority of over-55s opted for TV as their most trusted medium (58%).

Another way in which trust was considered was in terms of the background of different types of media. In this instance, respondents were asked to say which one of three types of media they found most reliable and trustworthy. However, when considered this way there was no clear majority view. Public broadcasters and TV (31%) and local independent media (29%) were selected by roughly the same proportion of the respondents, and both were more trusted than foreign media sources, which only 16% of people put first. Slightly more women than men trusted public broadcasters and TV. Younger adults were significantly less likely than older adults to select public broadcasters and TV (17% vs. 41%), and more likely to opt for foreign media sources, or none.

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2255>

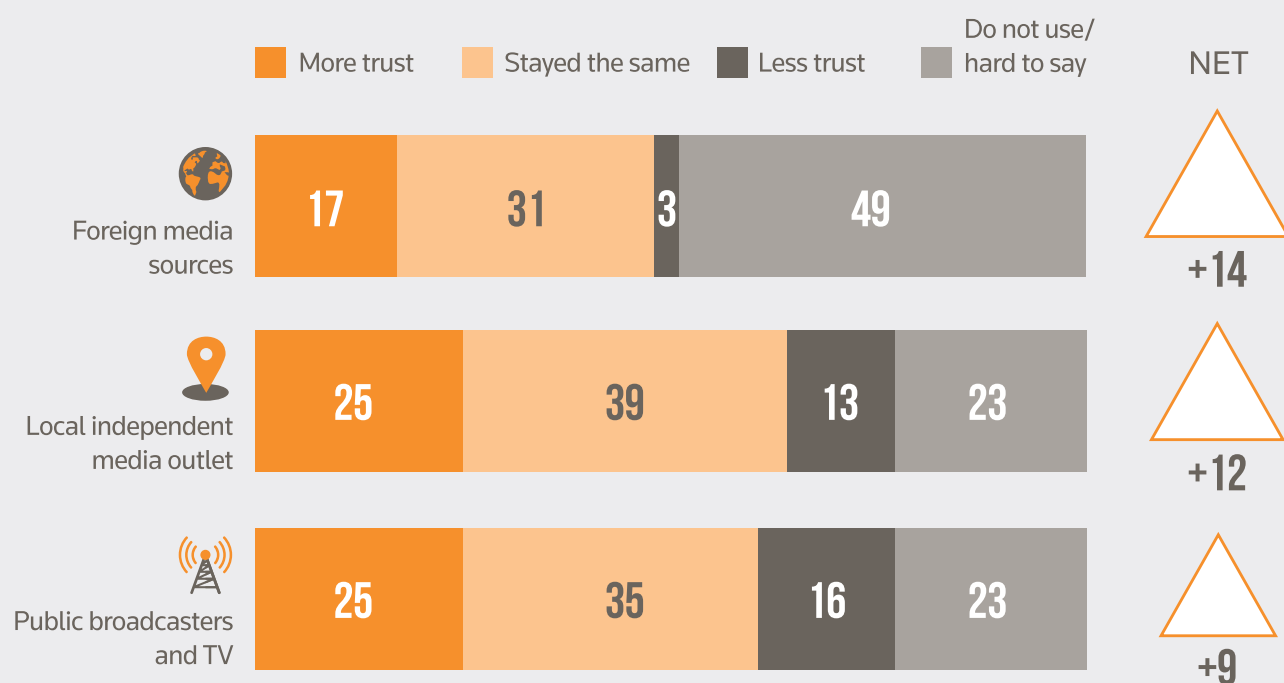
Part of the explanation for the lower ratings for foreign media is that a relatively high proportion of respondents said they did not consume, or had no opinion on, foreign media (48%), which is more than twice the proportion who do not consume/have no opinion on public broadcasters and TV (23%) or local independent media outlets (23%).

Chart 4 shows how people said their levels of trust in these three sources of news and information had changed over the past three years. The “net score” is the difference between the proportion who said more trust minus those who said less trust. A positive (+) net score

suggests increasing levels of trust overall, which is true for each of the three sources considered. Almost twice as many said they had more trust, rather than less trust, in local independent media (25% vs. 13%); for public broadcasters and TV the figures were 25% vs. 16%. Although only 3% of respondents had less trust in foreign media sources, the key difference is that many more did not have an opinion (48%), which is particularly the case for those living outside Tbilisi.

CHART 4: CHANGE IN TRUST OVER TIME

Q: How much, if at all, would you say your trust in each of the following has changed in the past 3 years?



To explore attitudes towards the media in more depth, the survey respondents were also asked their views on the extent to which “fakes and propaganda”⁸ are present in the media. This question was asked about different media settings, from news generally to political programmes, and then specifically in relation to experts, commentators and journalists. Chart 5 shows the proportion of adults who agree with each statement in relation to fakes and propaganda.

Overall, there is broad agreement that fakes and propaganda exist in the media. Just over half of the survey respondents (52%) agreed that there were a lot of fakes and propaganda in all types of news, which is considerably more than the 29% who disagreed (a further 19% were unsure). Even more – around three in five people – believed there were a lot of fakes and

propaganda in political talk shows (59%) and in political news (62%). Only a small proportion disagreed that fakes existed in these settings.

The respondents were considerably less likely to agree that invited experts or commentators (26%) or journalists and TV hosts spread fakes (34%), which suggests that individuals working in news can gain more public trust than media brands more generally.

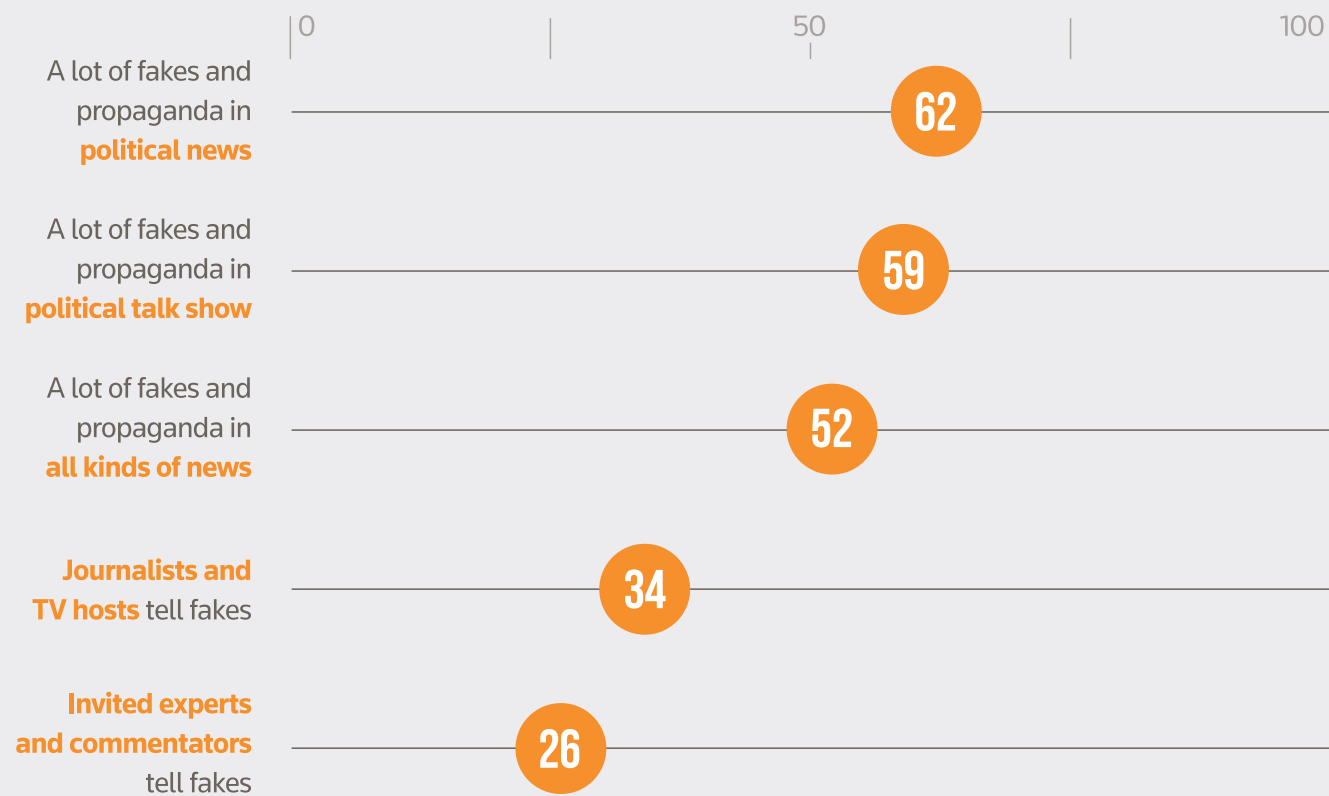
Men are more likely than women to believe that fakes and propaganda exist across different settings – such as in political news (70% of men agree vs. 56% of women), from journalists and TV hosts (40% vs. 29%), and from invited experts and commentators (32% vs. 20%). Attitudes to fakes and propaganda are relatively consistent between different age groups.



⁸ This terminology is widely used in Ukraine and is more easy to understand than concepts such as misinformation, disinformation or mal-information

CHART 5: FAKES AND PROPAGANDA

% agree with each statement



During the focus group discussions, the participants gave their opinions about the problem of fakes. There were common beliefs that the truth is very subjective and the media environment is polarised, which explains why there are so many fakes in the media. Some said they do not check the news they consume if they already trust the source of that news. Others said they checked information in a variety of ways, for example by cross-referencing a story across several media outlets or, if they

understood English, by checking international media. Others would sometimes corroborate national or local news via acquaintances and relatives living in different regions of Georgia.

It was recognised that there are trolls, bots and fake pages in social media and some participants said they believed it was not too difficult to identify the fake pages. For instance, fake accounts might constantly leave negative comments under the same platforms, use

photos of patriarchs and clerics on their profiles or create fake analogues of well-established platforms with the use of similar names. Several focus group participants said they used special sites and platforms dedicated to detecting fakes and checking the accuracy of information.

“ I DO NOT THINK THERE ARE SO MANY [FAKES], JUST MEDIA IS INCLINED TO BE PRO-RUSSIAN, PRO-WEST... EVERYONE HAS THEIR OWN INTERESTS AND BROADCASTS FROM THE ANGLE THEY FIND SUITABLE.

FEMALE, AGED 27



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

UNDERSTANDING OF INDEPENDENT NEWS

Around a third of survey respondents (35%) said they did not think there was an independent media in Georgia, and 11% were unsure, but the majority (54%) thought it existed. Younger adults are slightly less likely to think there are independent media, but there is no difference by gender, and more detailed attitudes towards independent news (as explored below) are similar between women and men.

When asked to name the media organisations they perceived as independent, 42% of our respondents said they did not know, or had not heard about, any independent media organisations. Almost three in ten (29%) said that they had heard about independent media organisations, but were unable to name any. Some of the survey respondents correctly identified several independent outlets, such as Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli, and Formula TV. However, partisan or only semi-independent media were also given as examples in some cases, such as TV Imedi, Rustavi 2, and POSTV.

The participants in the focus group discussions were also asked to suggest the names of independent media that they were aware of and the reasons they had for considering each to be independent. As with the quantitative research,

a significant proportion were not aware of any independent media or were unable to name particular outlets. The purpose of this exercise was to better understand the reasons people had for considering whether an outlet could be regarded as independent or not. These are summarised as follows:

- **Funding:** some regarded public broadcasters as independent because they were financed by the state/people; however, others saw this as an example of a lack of independence from the state
- **Non-partisan:** outlets that were perceived as not reflecting or promoting the interests of a particular political party were often regarded as independent
- **Own perspectives:** some felt that outlets and/or journalists that voiced their own opinions were independent because they were “not afraid to speak their views”. However, others felt they were not independent because such journalists typically did not provide balanced coverage
- **No external pressure:** similar to the above point, independence was sometimes seen

as being free from external pressure, although others pointed out that this did not necessarily mean these outlets provided impartial news or information

- **Balance:** most respondents agreed this was one of the key factors to be considered when looking for signs of independent journalism.

The disagreement about which channels or journalists can be defined as independent is important as it goes to the heart of how people define the meaning of independent media. There is broad agreement that independence and objectivity are not necessarily the same thing, and that media that are independent from external sources may also have other pressures – for example internal censorship (from editors or leaders) or the impact on finances that could either help or hinder an outlet in its quest to be independent. The following observations from focus group participants help to illustrate this complexity:

“ I DO NOT THINK THAT INDEPENDENCE AND OBJECTIVITY SHOULD BE THE SAME AND WE SHOULD DIFFERENTIATE HERE. OBJECTIVITY IS WHEN INFORMATION IS OBJECTIVELY SHARED; THE INDEPENDENCE IS EXPRESSED WHEN THE PARTICULAR CHANNELS CREATE AND SHARE THE CONTENT THEY LIKE, WHEN THEY ARE NOT LIMITED IN THIS REGARD AND THERE IS NO CENSORSHIP.

FEMALE, AGED 23

“ THE INDEPENDENCE AND OBJECTIVITY ARE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT THINGS. IF WE LOOK AT THE SITUATION FROM THIS ANGLE, WE CAN SAY THAT ALL TV CHANNELS AND MEDIA ARE INDEPENDENT... IN TELEVISION, THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO WORK, HAVE SALARY AND CANNOT EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS AS THEY ARE DEPENDENT ON SOMEONE, EVEN ON THE LEADERSHIP OF TELEVISION, WHICH CONTROLS WHAT CONTENT WILL BE BROADCAST.

MALE, AGED 45

“ OF COURSE, JOURNALIST CANNOT BE FULLY INDEPENDENT, BECAUSE HE/SHE IS DEPENDENT ON THE HEAD OF PROGRAM, SPONSORS, TELEVISION AND EVERYTHING. EVERYONE'S INTERESTS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED.

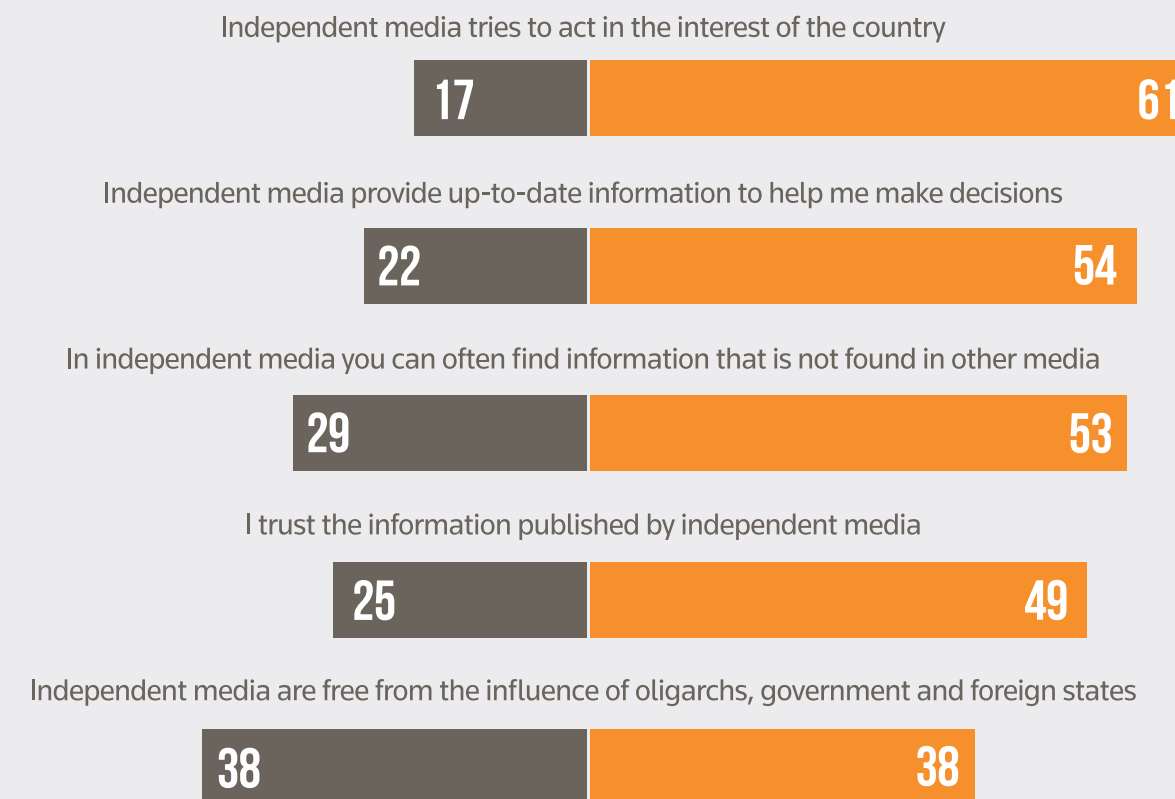
FEMALE, AGED 49

Despite the fact that most respondents were unable to identify specific independent media outlets, their overall attitudes towards independent media were broadly positive, as shown in Chart 6. A clear majority agreed that independent media try to act in the interests of the country (61%), which is true for more older than younger people (70% vs. 54%). More than half of the respondents said that independent media provide relevant information to help decision-making (54%) and produce information that's not available from other sources (53%).

Half (49%) said they could trust information from independent media and the remainder were split between those who did not trust it (25%) or felt it was hard to say (26%). Respondents were similarly split in terms of whether this type of media was free from the influence of oligarchs, state and foreign powers – 38% agreed it was, while 38% disagreed (and 24% felt it was hard to say).

CHART 6: ATTITUDES TO INDEPENDENT MEDIA

% agree or disagree with each statement



Therefore, while there are encouraging findings in this survey about the overall perceptions of independent media, significant challenges remain. First, the relatively low awareness of different brands/outlets; second, the fact that only half the respondents would trust information from them; and third, that people are generally not convinced that independent media are properly independent of external influence.

In addition, there is a relationship between general trust in the media and attitudes towards independent media. People with most trust in the news are also considerably more positive about independent media. Although causality cannot be ascertained, it is likely that citizens' access to, and consumption of, quality independent media could have a broader positive impact on public levels of trust.

The focus group participants were shown two news articles about a recent topic – in this case that of Alexei Navalny's investigative report "Putin's Palace", which had been released just before the focus group discussions took place. Article 1 (Lavrov's comments as Navalny Returns to Russia⁹) was produced by a Russian-leaning news agency, quoting a Russian state-run media outlet that had provided an official response to Navalny's investigation. Article 2 (EU Parliament calls for tougher sanctions on Russia over Navalny's arrest¹⁰) was a report written by an independent media outlet based

in Georgia. The participants discussed the quality of the journalism in both articles and whether they considered either or both of them to be independent.

The most popular assessment was that Article 2 was an example of better journalism than Article 1, as the first article was believed to be too short and did not provide information on why Navalny was detained, what rights he had and the context around his situation. Article 1 was perceived as interesting for people who were well-informed about the events around Navalny and simply wanted to know about Lavrov's statement. Article 2 was considered to be informative, interesting for a wider audience and accessible to people who did not necessarily know who Navalny was, nor what he was doing. This article provided extensive information about the event and provided the general background. In addition, the participants mentioned that it was written consistently and that the journalist had the correct focus.

When asked specifically whether either article was the product of an independent media outlet or not, some felt that it was difficult to say because one article was not sufficient to make a judgement. Where participants selected Article 2 as being more independent, the reason given was that it was more informative, while Article 1 was seen as not being independent because it published solely the Russian government's

position on why Navalny was detained and did not provide any information about the work of the detainee.

“ I THINK IT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY WHETHER MEDIA IS INDEPENDENT OR NOT BASED ON THE ONE ARTICLE. I COULD NOT.

MALE, AGED 20



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

⁹ Geoinform

¹⁰ One.ge



REUTERS/Irakli Gedenidze

GOOD JOURNALISM

The focus group participants highlighted the importance of good journalism, saying they believed that it was vital to society so that people had access to the truth. Some relied on particular media as a trusted source of information and news, but more people said they either trusted no media or used a variety of sources because no single outlet could be fully trusted.

“ I SEE SEVERAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND THEN I MAKE CONCLUSIONS. YOU CANNOT TRUST ANY MEDIA 100%.

FEMALE, AGED 45

“ WHEN THE SAME INFORMATION IS BROADCASTED DIFFERENTLY BY 4 OR 5 TELEVISION [CHANNELS], YOU CAN TRULY BE CONFUSED. IT IS BETTER TO NOT LISTEN TO ANYONE.

MALE, AGED 23

The participants were asked to say how they would define “good journalism” and the following are the features they suggested:

- **Objective and balanced:** not reflecting the interests of any political party.
- **Clear and understandable:** presented in a

way that is easily understood and provides clarity.

- **Reporting of facts:** not imposing the views of the journalist on the audience; and allowing people with different, or opposing, opinions to voice their views.
- **Professional:** journalists / presenters should speak literate Georgian and not be emotional in tone. Some participants also believed being presentable and well-groomed were features of good journalism.
- **Avoids conflict:** with many ethnicities in Georgia, journalists should have an obligation to refrain from feeding conflict or creating animosity.

“ FOR ME THE MOST IMPORTANT IS NOT TO SHOW THE SYMPATHY TOWARDS ANY POLITICAL PARTY DURING THE STREAMING AND BE BALANCED. EVERY SIDE SHOULD BE GIVEN A CHANCE TO TALK AND EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS AND JOURNALISTS DO NOT HAVE TO REVEAL BIAS. WHEN I SEE AGITATED JOURNALISTS, IT GETS ON MY NERVES.

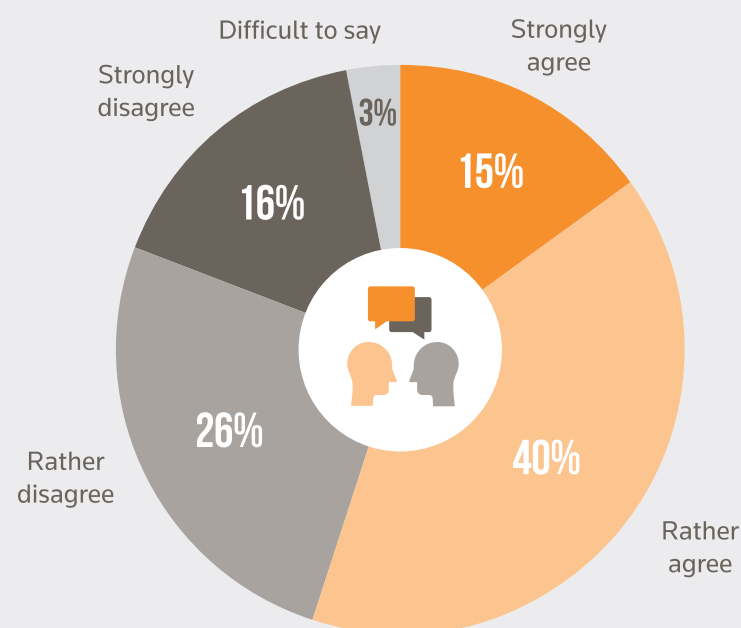
MALE, AGED 36

Interestingly, while participants had a clear sense of the characteristics of good journalism, very few were able to point to concrete examples of such journalism in practice. Two examples were provided by the focus group participants. The first was of a journalist covering occupation issues, who was kidnapped while working close to the conflict zone and detained until the engagement of the Georgian side. According to the participants, this case was very particular and showed the journalist’s dedication to the job. The second example given was that of Irakli Imnaishvili, the anchor of TV Rustavi 2, as he is considered to be balanced and unbiased.

The survey results revealed mixed attitudes to some aspects of journalism. Fewer than half of the respondents (44%) believed that the journalism they consumed was neutral, detached and objective, and only 6% strongly believed that it was. In contrast one in five (20%) said they did not consume this type of journalism and a third were unsure (36%). At the same time, respondents were more likely to agree than disagree that the journalism they consumed asked tough questions to influential and powerful people. More than half (55%) believed this to be true, compared with 19% who did not and 26% who were unsure.

CHART 7: TOUGH QUESTIONS

“The journalism I consume asks tough questions to influential and powerful people”



More than a third of survey respondents (35%) often or sometimes watched/read/listened to reports that they did not agree with, but many more said they rarely (40%) or never (22%) did. This suggests that a large proportion of audiences rely on media that affirms their views rather than necessarily challenging them or offering different perspectives.

Views about good journalism are similar between women and men. The key difference between age groups is that fewer younger than older people said that the journalism they consumed asked tough questions to influential and powerful people (47% vs. 63%). It was notable that people who did think independent media existed in Georgia were more likely to say the media they consumed was both neutral, detached and objective and asked tough questions to influential and powerful people.

To help gain a better understanding of how people judged and reviewed good journalism the participants in the focus group discussions were given two short articles to read about the same topic. They were then asked to give their reasons as to why they felt the articles demonstrated good or poor journalism. Article 1 was entitled ‘62 Armenian citizens in Azerbaijan - prisoners of war or saboteurs?’¹¹, while Article 2 was headlined ‘Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are unlikely to be imported to Georgia’¹². Both articles were intended to test audience perceptions

regarding the quality of the output and the reasons people would give for considering either article as an example of good or bad journalism.

Article 1 (Armenian citizens) was praised for providing in-depth analysis and presenting opinions from both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides. Some participants also liked the fact that the article provided sources and references so that readers could search for more information if they wished. The participants were divided on some aspects, however. On the one hand, some felt more information should be provided in the article and that more analysis or commentary from an expert, or someone neutral, would help. On the other hand, others criticised the article for being too long, overstretched and with too much detail.

The second article (vaccines) produced more mixed reactions, with some readers finding it difficult to evaluate its purpose and struggling to assess it. Others said it was good or close to good, because it was “small”, “comfortable” and “easy to read in smartphones”, and provided concrete facts without too many details. Others argued that the article was not a work of good journalism because it was superficial and not well written. Participants mentioned that the headline was so negative that it made them feel vulnerable and/or contradicted the content – namely that the headline said that the vaccines would not be imported, while at the end of the

¹¹<https://jam-news.net/ge/khojavendis-raioni-hadruti-yarabaghi-62-diversanti-samkhedro-tyve-azerbaijani-somkheti/>

¹²<https://jam-news.net/ge/saqartveloshi-pfizer-is-da-moderna-s-vaqcinebs-savaraudod-ar-shemoitanen/>

article it said that vaccines would be brought to the country by the end of January.

“ WHAT I HAVE READ ABOUT THE VACCINES, I CAN SAY THAT... IT IS WRITTEN THAT THEY DO NOT KNOW WHICH VACCINE WILL BE IMPORTED; IN ADDITION, THEY SAY THAT WE WILL HAVE VACCINE BY THE END OF JANUARY. I ASSUME YOU NEED TO EXPRESS EITHER FIRST OR SECOND...I COULD NOT UNDERSTAND; I COULD NOT MAKE CONCLUSIONS.

FEMALE, AGED 27

“ ARTICLE 1 WAS BETTER, UNDERSTANDABLE AND MORE FORMULATED; IN ADDITION, THE [POSITIONS OF] SEVERAL SIDES WERE PRESENTED. THE ARTICLE 2 [SAYS THAT] PRESUMABLY VACCINES OF ASTRAZENECA AND PFIZER WILL NOT BE INTRODUCED IN THE COUNTRY, BUT CONTENT SAYS... IT SEEMS LIKE JOURNALIST WANTS TO SHOW THAT VACCINES WILL NOT BE INTRODUCED, HE/SHE [JOURNALIST] DOES NOT WANT IT TO BE INTRODUCED OR I DO NOT KNOW WHY, BUT IN THE END IT IS WRITTEN THE VACCINE WILL BE INTRODUCED.

MALE, AGED 36

“ WITH REGARD TO THE ARTICLE 2... THE HEADING WAS CLEARLY NEGATIVE. IT WAS VISIBLE THAT THEY WANTED TO FORMULATE THE PUBLIC OPINION WITH THIS HEADING.

MALE, AGED 20



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

CASE STUDY: MEDIA REPORTING OF COVID-19

Participants in the focus groups were asked for their views on how well the media in Georgia had reported Covid-19. In some respects, the media were praised for good reporting, for example:

- Reporting and coverage contained recommendations from doctors
- Good information about state regulations
- Clear virus-related statistics

Many felt that social media was more effective than traditional media at providing information. Examples cited included the work of Giorgi Ghoghoberidze (Facebook page) and MEDGIDI (Facebook group).

Criticisms of media reporting on Covid-19 tended to focus on two areas. The first related to journalists coming across as too emotional, which could lead to fear, panic or anxiety among their audiences. The second was around the intensity



REUTERS/Irakli Gedenidze

and volume of coverage, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. On the latter point, it is perhaps difficult to be fully critical of the media in this regard, but it does illustrate the overall impact that the pandemic has had on society.

Almost seven in 10 respondents (69%) recognised that they had changed their behaviour as a result of news they had read about Covid-19. While it is always very difficult for people to directly correlate changes in attitudes or behaviour to particular events or news stories – and perhaps this is even more true in the case of Covid-19 – this finding does illustrate the fact that the majority of people believe that the media can, and does, influence their behaviour.

The widespread reporting of Covid-19 is, therefore, likely to be part of the explanation for the fact that only a very small proportion of the survey respondents (4%) – one in 25 people – believed Covid-19 was a hoax. There was no difference in views between women and men, nor by age group. Discussions with focus group participants also led to the suggestion that the low proportion of people who dismiss Covid-19 is also down to the fact that during the height of the pandemic many people were directly infected or indirectly impacted, therefore making

it very difficult for someone to deny the reality of the situation.

“ **THEY DID NOT BROADCAST WELL AND I CAN TELL YOU WHY. JOURNALISTS HAD REACTIONS LIKE EVERYONE WAS GOING TO BE SHOT. THE NUMBERS DID NOT MEAN MUCH FOR ME AS THE EMOTIONS [OF JOURNALISTS].**

FEMALE, AGED 54

“ **I THINK IT WAS THE ONLY CASE IN THE COUNTRY WHEN ALL MEDIA FROM ALL POLITICAL SIDES WERE UNITED AND COVERED THE NEWS... INFORMATION WAS BROADCASTED WELL, IT CONTAINED THE COMMENTS FROM THE DOCTORS AND WE ALWAYS KNEW HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE INFECTED, DEAD...**

FEMALE, AGED 27



REUTERS/Irakli Gedenidze

RECOMMENDATIONS

TV remains a very important source of news and information for people in Georgia. However, it is being challenged by new digital channels, especially social media. Younger people in particular are turning to online news and information sources, most notably Facebook and YouTube. Nevertheless, even among younger adults, TV tends to be the most trusted source of news.

At the same time, few people have complete trust in the media in Georgia. This is not necessarily surprising or concerning, so long as people do have information sources they can trust and that provide objective news and analysis.

Polarisation of politics, the news and the media are of great concern. Some feel that digital platforms and the potential for more news outlets serving increasingly niche markets may exacerbate this further. The challenge for independent media is to demonstrate to the public how they are independent, and why independence matters. This needs to go further than explaining ownership or editorial policy (albeit both are critical). People want to consume good journalism, and to have facts explained to them in a balanced way. They appreciate independent media that can highlight positive news as well as cover controversy; and they ask for media that are

professional, easy to understand, and do not create conflict or animosity.

The evidence generated through this research suggests that those interested in strengthening independent media should consider the following:

Wider media development recommendations

- 1) **Create a shared definition of independent media within the sector.** Future programming should try to create a shared definition and way of articulating what an independent media is and seek to encourage all independent media to use this definition publicly on their platforms. Once in place, independent media should conduct a collaborative awareness campaign to publicise this to their audiences in a consistent and coherent manner to increase audience knowledge of their unique selling points (USPs).
- 2) **Increase public awareness of what an independent media is and how it can be identified.** This may involve a mixture of a country-wide marketing campaign to explain the definition of an independent media and why it is important, and/or more targeted campaigns at improving media literacy in schools and universities.

3) Engage with associations and media NGOs.

Journalism associations and NGOs could be the standard-bearers who can work toward ensuring media commit to this definition of independence and maintain high quality journalism.

4) Develop a Journalist Code of Ethics.

The research has suggested that audiences are seeking good journalism, but do not always associate this with independent media. Future journalism and media development programmes should consider developing a Journalist Code of Ethics which independent media sign up to ensure all individuals and organisations are striving toward independence and good journalism.

5) Continue training and mentorship in content improvement.

Continue to provide training on how to produce objective and balanced content, together with support to ensure that the presentation is appealing and engaging, both in terms of professionalism and production quality.

Recommendations for media and journalists

1) Focus on quality and impartiality.

Audiences are seeking impartial, reliable and balanced journalism. Outlets and individuals should focus on quality rather than quantity to ensure that they produce content that audiences see as good journalism. Independent journalists should separate the reporting of facts and statistics from their own interpretation and, where possible, provide audiences with a diversity of views.

2) Personalise independent media branding.

Audiences have greater trust in individuals, be they experts or journalists, and organisations should therefore consider how they can personalise their brand. Digital media in particular lack a public individual ‘face’ such as a news anchor, and should identify ways in which their audience can familiarise themselves with their teams of journalists. This could include open editorial meetings and biographies on websites.

3) Ensure you have trusted sources.

Independent media should consider how to make better use of experts and trusted journalists who may be in a stronger position to enhance the trustworthiness of their content and support the development of trusted relationships with different audiences.

4) Multiply distribution options. Ensure content produced is easily accessible, especially across different digital platforms. In the case of Georgia this would include Facebook, YouTube and Viber. Independent

media outlets should also be supported so that their content can be found on search engines and aggregators, for example through search engine optimisation, link words, meta tags and key words.



REUTERS/Clemens Bilan/Pool



**THOMSON REUTERS
FOUNDATION**