



RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

POLARIZED MEDIA – POLARIZED AUDIENCE

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SERBIA

RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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POLARIZED MEDIA – POLARIZED AUDIENCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the process of democratic reform, which included the reconstruction of Serbia's media system, began to achieve the ideal where the media (by encouraging political responsibility and strengthening public participation) should have played a decisive role in promoting democracy (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). In the past twenty years, in an effort to achieve this standard, state-owned media have been privatized, state radio and television have been transformed into a public service broadcaster, a set of media laws was adopted in 2014 that regulate this area in a relatively satisfactory manner, and in 2020, a new Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia for 2020–2025 was adopted.

Despite all the measures and reforms, the Serbian media sector is still burdened with numerous problems and weaknesses. At the end of 2020, there were 2508 registered media outlets (Journalist Association of Serbia, 2020) that can hardly sustain themselves with the revenues generated on the market, especially in the year marked by the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The non-transparent ownership and financing of the media make them vulnerable to political and economic pressures. Tabloidization, disinformation and biased reporting increasingly impair the quality of news content, which is often placed in a way that favours the ruling coalition and demonizes political opponents and critical citizens. In 2020, journalists faced physical attacks, one arrest, smear campaigns, punitive tax inspections, and other forms of pressure (Markov and Min, 2020; Freedom House, 2021).

In this context, the project “Resilience: Civil Society for Media Free of Hate and Disinformation” launched a series of research studies. The first two carried out in 2020 were intended to provide better insight into disinformation and hateful propaganda models of the media and communication and determine the main patterns and examples of hate and disinformation narratives in Serbia. Their findings indicate the following:

In recent years in Serbia, in public communication, especially in the online sphere, hate speech significantly outweighs the arguments. Media outlets with national coverage (and related online publications) systematically

deliver content to citizens that propagates power, spreads disinformation, and incites hatred toward dissidents or neighbouring nations. Also, “the Internet has enabled various groups of extreme attitudes to reach directly to citizens, to communicate with them and spread their ideas more efficiently and massively than before” (Valić Nedeljković, Janjatović Jovanović, 2020). However, “hate narratives are also registered in those media traditionally considered socially responsible and critically oriented, as well as independent media.” In all the analyzed cases, the basic ideas and messages that are sent are reduced to the threat posed to “us” by “those” who threaten us, be they migrants, politicians belonging to the opposition or the government, or journalists. The number of messages/narratives calling for action against migrants is worrying. In the case of political opponents, the criticism is being reduced “to discrimination and hatred based on gender or sexual orientation” (Jovović, Valić Nedeljković, 2020).

In this third report, we present the research results to provide an overview of public opinion regarding media trust, including the gender dimensions of the problem.

To address this issue, we conducted an opinion poll and focus group research. IPSOS Strategic Marketing carried out the opinion poll research in Serbia from 24 to 28 February 2021. It was conducted on a two-stage random representative stratified sample with a quota selection of respondents (by gender and age). Stratification was based on the region and type of settlement (urban and rural). The data collection method was CATI (telephone) and CAWI (online) for certain population sections. The questionnaire used in the research was finalized by the IPSOS team based on a draft created by researchers engaged in the Resilience project. It consisted of questions and claims that measured demographic characteristics, media habits, trust in the media, and attitudes and experiences with the media. IPSOS also performed the statistical data analysis.

The focus group was held on 29 March 2021. It was attended by six journalists and editors (four male and two female) aged 31 to 66 working in local and national commercial or public service media.

In the following chapters, we present the findings we reached in this way and the recommendations arising from them.

2. JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS ON HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA MODELS AND HATE NARRATIVES

2.1. Instrumentalization of hatred in the service of political propaganda

Although a number of media outlets in Serbia still maintain a high level of professional standards, there are several different media groups on our media scene, which systematically place disinformation, hate speech and propaganda. At the forefront are tabloid dailies and some commercial television stations, especially those whose owners openly support the ruling party, and the state significantly financially supports them through various mechanisms (Valić Nedeljković, Janjatović Jovanović, 2020).

Journalists and editors, the focus group (FG) participants are unanimous in their assessment that propaganda and hatred are present in the Serbian media to a significant extent. One of the FG participants noted that the media instrumentalize the hatred rooted in society, “and it is now literally visible as soon as we go to the newsstand in the morning, or as soon as we open some portals” (FG Participant 4). However, it is a phenomenon that is gaining momentum in the media.

“The way the media reports has become more brutal, the vocabulary used in the last few years has really crossed some boundaries. I am aware that has been the case before, but I have the impression that it has now become so open” (FG Participant 6).

According to the focus group participants, propaganda—above all, the kind that relies on hatred or hate speech—is either in the service of politics, when it is necessary to impose a new topic or divert attention from important issues, or it is abused in some way by the media to achieve financial profit. As one of the FG participants pointed out, the hate speech employed in the service of politics can easily be recognized “because it will be coordinated in all or almost all tabloids. You can easily see in the media who the target is today, which organization, person, politician, public figure, etc.” However, the media do not refrain from fabricating content abundant with hate speech “just to get clicks” (FG Participant 1).

The impact is devastating on media users who, in the multitude of available information, recognize neither the quality media nor credible information.

“It’s not a big problem today to create your own media outlet. You can easily go online and create your own portal. The problem is that many

of these portals do not adhere to basic professional standards, the code of ethics. On the one hand, they behave like a media outlet, and on the other, they do not perceive themselves as an organization that has certain obligations and which must adhere to certain principles” (FG Participant 2).

2.2. Anyone can be the target of hate speech

As the most common targets of hate speech in the second phase of research within the Resilience project, we identified migrants, political opponents, and journalists (Jovović, Valić Nedeljković, 2020). Comparing these three groups, the editors and journalists participating in the focus group do not perceive that journalists are more endangered than others because “whoever bothers someone will be the next target” (FG Participant 2). However, they recognize migrants as the group towards whom the hate speech is most often abused by the various stakeholders “who want to push some of their interests, and it is easy to ignite passions if you use that theme if you attribute to them various crimes that these people did not commit” (FG Participant 2), or by the media which thus retain the attention of the audience on uneventful days. Targeting journalists (but also other groups such as migrants or politicians) with hate speech increases the risk of attacks on them. Journalists and editors point out that in addition to endangering personal safety, targeting journalists also reduces the level of trust in the specific media outlet in which they are engaged and calls into question their entire work. As one of the journalists participating in the focus group emphasized, “each of my reports is viewed differently, that questions what I do, that I have some ulterior motives, goals, etc.” (FG Participant 2).

To improve the situation in the considered areas, journalists and editors emphasize the need to educate citizens on media literacy. “Citizens need to be trained, the next generations, in media literacy to know how to distinguish what is a lie from accurate news and how they can be properly informed” (FG Participant 1).

In addition to educating citizens, it is necessary to strengthen existing and introduce new measures aimed at journalists and the media. The FG participants pointed out that “there are regulatory bodies that can and should control this situation. (...) There are laws, there is a code of ethics” (FG Participant 2). They also mentioned the examples of the Press Council, “how some things do work and how some bodies that have the significance of operating on the national level do function quite professionally” (FG Participant 5) and individuals who “sit in certain bodies in Serbia to whom these cases are important” and by whose efforts individual cases are resolved in a satisfactory manner (FG Participant 2). However, to be truly effective, they also need to react consistently and regularly.

The FG participants are unanimous in their assessment that true independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, i.e. its Council, needs to be ensured:

“There are various members under various influences, and they are, ultimately, representatives of the Parliament that elects them, so we can hardly say that they represent the industry, that is, that they care about the development of the media” (FG Participant 5).

The FG participants also propose stricter sanctions for media and journalists who violate the law and the Code of Ethics as well as the introduction of new (self-)regulatory bodies, such as chambers or associations of editors, which due to the importance of the editorial position in the media “could contribute to raising trust in the media in general” (FG Participant 5).

3. MEDIA TRUST – OPINION POLL RESULTS AND THE VIEWS OF JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS

3.1. Media use – TV dominates

The opinion poll results (IPSOS, 2021) show that television stands out as the most frequently used source of information in Serbia, with almost three out of four surveyed citizens claiming to be using it daily (72%). At the same time, for 48% of surveyed citizens, television is the primary source of information. Other “traditional” media, such as radio and print newspapers/magazines, are far behind – a quarter of the respondents listen to the radio daily (24%). In comparison, print newspapers and magazines are read daily by only 10% of citizens.

Following television, online sources stand out according to the frequency of use: 49% of respondents use social networks daily, and online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs) are used by 41% of respondents.

In addition to the media, people from the personal environment still have a significant role as sources of information – over a third of the respondents stated that they receive daily news through personal contacts such as family, friends, and colleagues (37%).

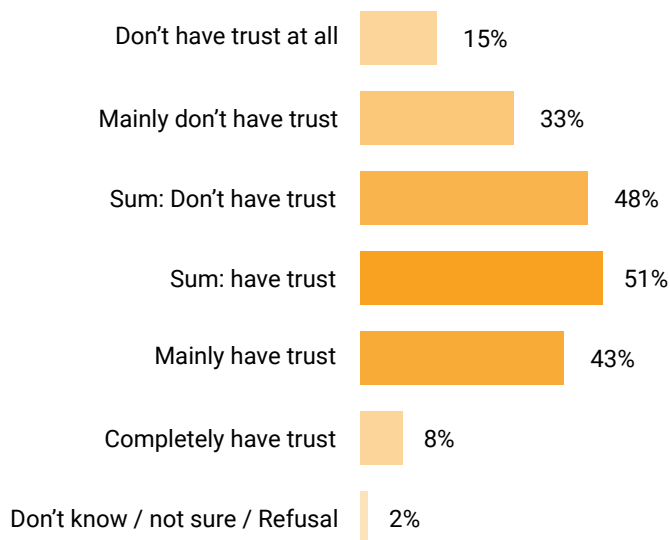
These results are consistent with the findings of another survey conducted by IPSOS during November and December 2019 (In Store, 2020), which showed that information through the television screen dominates among Serbian respondents (82%). Online sources in various forms (sites of major publishers, independent sites and portals, and social networks) are used as sources of information by 46% of the citizens surveyed in that research.

3.2. Media trust

3.2.1. Polarized audience

Judging by the respondents' answers, the audience in Serbia is divided when it comes to trust in the media such as newspapers, TV, radio, or online news sources to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. While 51% of respondents tend to trust the media, 48% don't.

Graph 1. *Distribution of answers to the question: In general, how much trust do you have in the media such as newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly in Serbia?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Given the multidimensionality of the issue of trust and the significance of the contextuality, comparing the results of different studies that measure its level is always risky. However, by recognizing the differences that may arise from different methodological approaches, if we compare the opinion poll results with the results of research conducted annually by the European Broadcasting Union, no significant changes are registered in relation to the results obtained in 2019. At that time, 53% of Serbia's surveyed citizens stated that they had a high or moderate level of trust in the media, and 47% stated that they had a low level or no trust in the media. The difference is registered at the observational level in the percentage of citizens expressing the highest level of trust – in 2019, it was slightly higher at 15%, compared to the 8% that we registered. (European Broadcasting Union, 2020).

3.2.2. Television, traditionally the most trusted media

As the most frequently used media, television is also the media that the largest percentage of surveyed citizens trust the most. When asked to rank news and information sources from the one they trust the most to the one they trust least, 39% of respondents singled out television first. When expressing the level of trust in each media type, half of the surveyed citizens claimed they mainly or completely trust television to be a reliable source of information (52%).

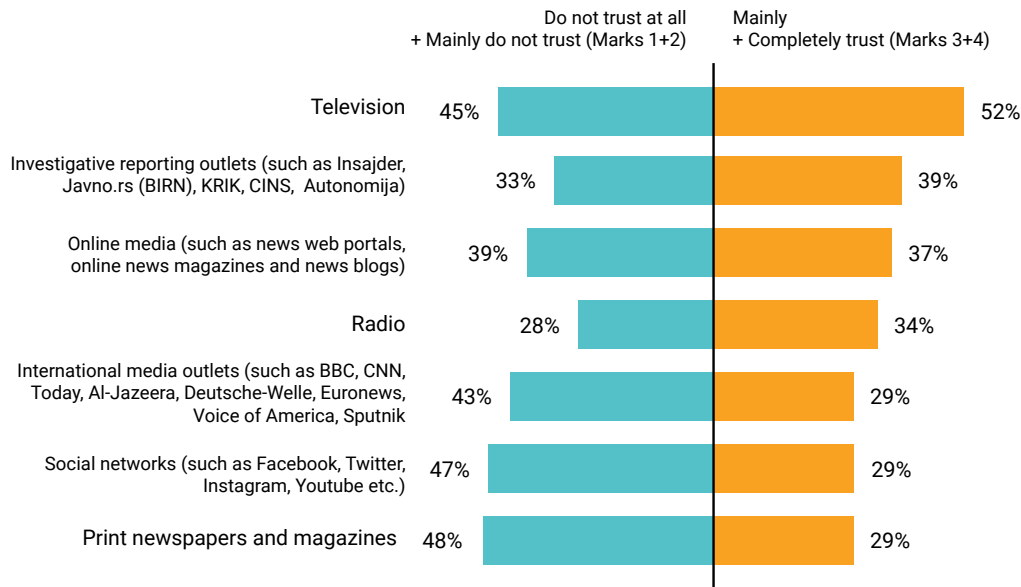
One of the focus group participants attributes this finding to tradition, “this cult of television still exists in the country, it is somehow related to the household” (FG Participant 6). Compared to the previous year, the percentage of citizens who trust television is slightly higher and is in line with the trend that citizens’ trust in television has been growing in recent years (European Broadcasting Union, 2020).

The reasons for this growing trend of trust in television should be sought in the fact that television is a medium that increasingly combines its informative with an entertaining role. Since “the TV is turned on non-stop, you always get some news in commercials during the series, the chyrons go non-stop” (FG Participant 3). Thus, incidental information, into which the viewer does not delve too deeply, is placed before him and results in greater trust than a particular medium deserves. Infotainment and the infomercial as today’s widely present hybrid genres appearing in all types of shows on national television channels in Serbia contribute to these results. Insufficiently literate media citizens find it harder to recognize false information placed in the form of entertainment and advertising (even political) shaped in the form of information in a highly professional way that obscures the essence of a given message, which is always propaganda and aims to increase the rating of political and economic elites.

After television, investigative reporting outlets (16%) and online media (10%) are the sources of information our surveyed citizens trusted most.

This high level of citizens’ trust in investigative media is encouraging, especially given the almost systemic efforts of the government to undermine their credibility. Over a third of surveyed citizens stated that they mainly or completely trust the investigative media (39%).

Graph 2. *Distribution of answers to the question: To what extent do you trust each of the following media is a reliable source of news and information?**



*The remaining percentage up to 100% refers to the answer I do not know / refusal.

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Radio is still highly rated when it comes to citizens' trust. Every third surveyed citizen reported mainly or completely trusting radio (34%).

Print media, social networks and international media outlets received the lowest scores when citizens were asked to say which media types they have a high degree of trust in (all three are registered at 29%).

3.2.3. A collapse of trust in the print media

The percentage of surveyed citizens who said they trusted radio, television, and investigative reporting outlets was higher than the percentage of those who said that they mainly or do not at all trust a given type of media (Graph 2).

Types of media that a far higher percentage of respondents estimated to be a less reliable source of news and information are print newspapers and magazines (48%), social networks (47%) and online media (39%).

For the print media in which "the trust has been crumbling" (FG Participant 5) for years now, the journalists and editors participating in the focus group estimate that the pandemic has also affected the level of citizens' trust. For

two main reasons: Their most loyal audience, retirees, could not even buy a newspaper because of the lockdown. And, tabloids in particular, besides the usual propaganda activities favouring the authorities, approached the reporting on the coronavirus in a sensationalist manner.

“On the front page, they say you should not be vaccinated; on the third page, they say you must be vaccinated; and on the fifth page, it is best to become infected with the coronavirus. All in the same newspaper.”
(FG Participant 3)

The results related to the level of trust in social networks indicate that Serbia is still in the group of countries where the level of trust in this type of media has been declining since it was first measured in 2014 (European Broadcasting Union, 2020). This trend has been particularly noticeable in the last few years, since political actors “discovered” social networks as a means of direct communication with citizens and use them “for networked propaganda, by directing traffic or a network of astroturfers to influence the formation of public opinion in accordance with its agenda under the guise of spontaneous communication” (Milivojević et al., 2020).

The international media outlets have not yet regained the trust damaged during the wars of the 1990s (Albany associates, 2021): 43% of surveyed citizens do not trust international media outlets.

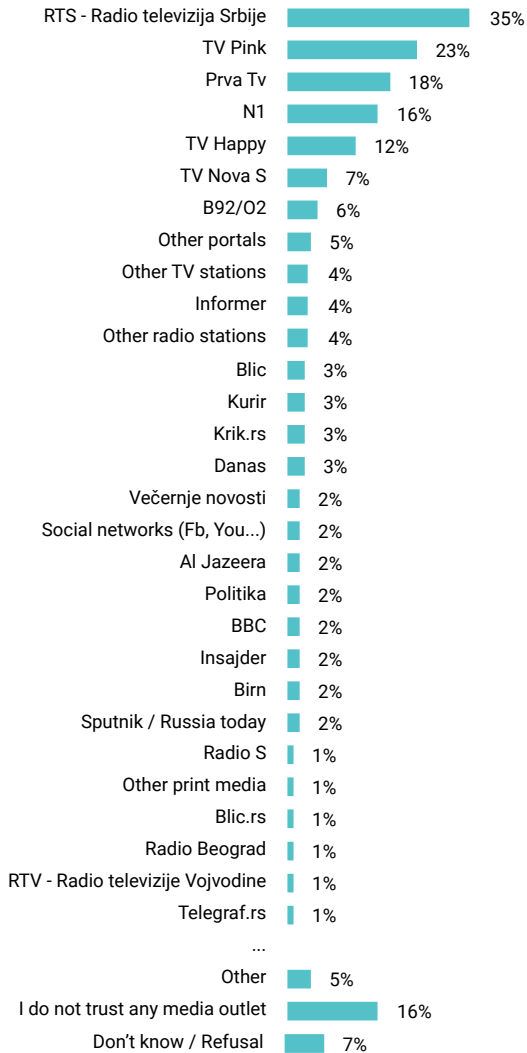
The journalists and editors participating in the focus group notice that online media “didn’t reach the power of traditional media.” Part of the cause lies in the “instability” of a number of portals that are unable to provide a continuous existence, while others “are being used as disposable media. Today we are going to attack someone from this website, when the people rebel and say it’s wrong, that website will be shut down, and we will move on” (FG Participant 3).

3.2.4. The trusted and distrusted media outlets – the same media on both poles

The specific media outlets that respondents singled out as the most trustworthy are RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) (35%), TV Pink (23%), Prva TV (18%), N1 (16%), TV Happy (12%). Other media outlets were chosen by less than 10% of the surveyed citizens (Graph 3).

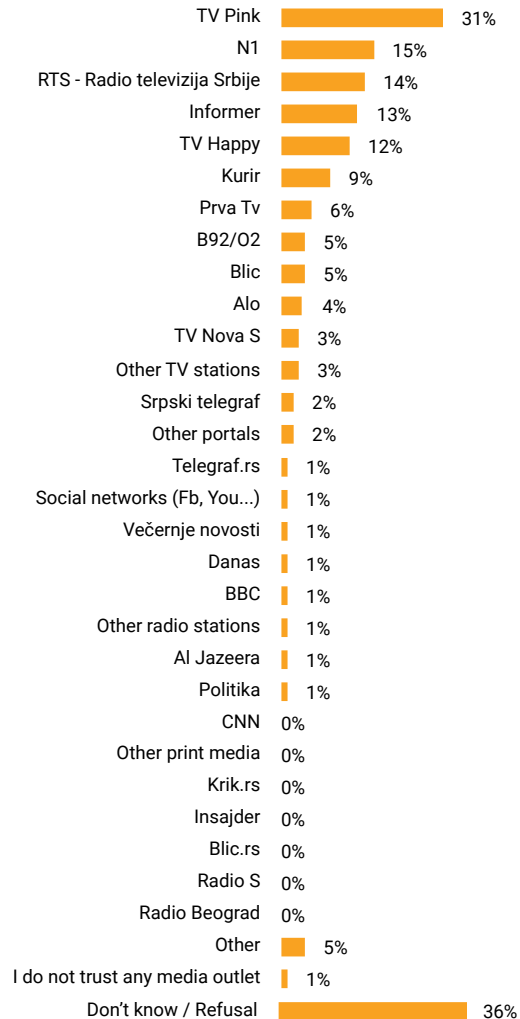
At the same time, the media outlet that the highest percentage of respondents chose as the least trusted is TV Pink (31%). It is followed by N1 (15%), RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) (14%), Informer (13%), and TV Happy (12%). Respondents opted for other media outlets in a percentage of less than 10% (Graph 4).

Graph 3. *Distribution of answers to the question: Which specific media outlets (TV channel, radio station, newspaper or news web portal) do you trust the most when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Graph 4. *Distribution of answers to the question: And what specific media outlets (TV channel, radio station, newspaper or news web portal) do you distrust the most?*



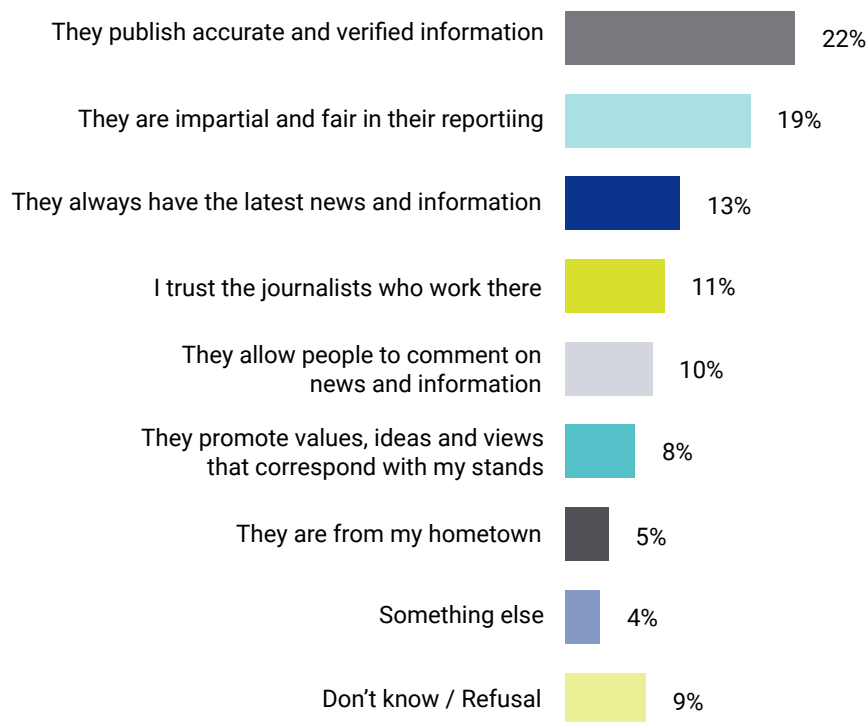
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The focus group participants, journalists, and editors, see these results, which indicate the degree of trust and distrust of the audience in specific media outlets, as a reflection of the Serbian reality.

“It is evident from these results that trust in the media is divided approximately in half, just as society is divided on the political axis. People simply have this tendency if they trust some politicians, they will also trust the media in which these politicians are frequently found” (FG Participant 1).

However, the surveyed citizens rarely recognized their political and ideological orientation as the reason for trust in specific media outlets. One part of the questionnaire used in the survey contained a set of statements relating to possible reasons why respondents trust the media they consider most trustworthy. The respondents’ task was to single out three statements with which they agree, and as their first choice, the statement with which they have the highest degree of agreement. Only eight per cent of the surveyed citizens stated that the most important reason for trust is that the media in question promote the values, ideas and views that correspond with their stands.

Graph 5. *Distribution of answers to the question: You may trust some media outlets more than others. Thinking about the media you consider the most trustworthy, what are the main reasons you trust them? - First answer.*



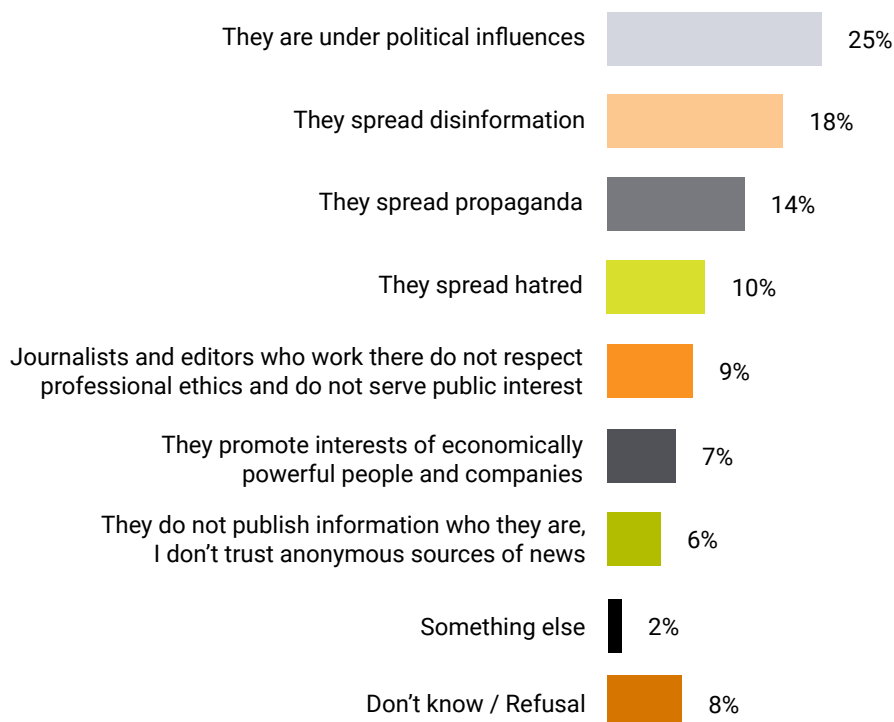
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The results show that as the most important reason why they trust a particular media outlet, the majority of respondents selected the reliability of the information they publish (22%), their impartiality (19%), topicality (13%), trust in the journalists work there (11%) and openness to active audience participation (10%).

However, one of the focus group participants indicated the effect of an additional factor influencing the choice of specific media – when the public trust the media, they are rarely able to separate its informative function from the others, “they accept the whole sphere around that media, lifestyle and so on. And that’s it, that’s the most important thing to them” (FG Participant 1).

By expressing their agreement with the statements describing the reasons they do not trust the media (which are considered the least trustworthy), the highest percentage of surveyed citizens put the influence of politics in first place (25%), followed by the spread of disinformation (18%), propaganda (14%) and hate (10%).

Graph 6. *Distribution of answers to the question: And thinking about the media you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons you do not trust them? - First answer.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

However, the focus group participants are unanimous in their assessment that the audience, in most cases, does not know how to recognize the influence of politics on the media or the propaganda and disinformation in the media.

“For me, the data about Pink is interesting. 23% believe them, and 31% do not believe what Pink reports. That’s roughly what the reality looks like. That the same media outlet has a massive percentage of people who do not trust it at all because they see it as propaganda and a large number of people do not even recognize that we have propaganda on that outlet” (FG Participant 3).

“How citizens perceive free media, that is, what is the role of the media, what should the media offer them? I think that a good portion of the population here never knew that, and they don’t know that today” (FG Participant 1).

In the last few years, several fact-checking media portals and organizations have been established in Serbia. Judging by the number of surveyed citizens who said they follow them (10%), they are still making a modest but undoubtedly significant contribution to the fight against disinformation.

3.2.5. RTS – always loyal

The law and the method of financing oblige the public service to meet the information needs of all (or at least the vast majority) of Serbian citizens. Judging by the results of the opinion poll research, RTS only half fulfils this task.

A little more than half (56%) of the surveyed citizens say they trust RTS (completely have trust 16%, mainly have trust 40%), while four out of ten claim the opposite 40% (mainly don’t have trust 23%, don’t have trust at all 17%).

According to the focus group participants, given the principles on which RTS’s work is based and the significant share in its news programme’s viewership, this percentage should be even higher. “[The news bulletin] Dnevnik at half-past seven on RTS is still the most-watched news programme” (FG Participant 2). In addition to the fact that viewers have a “habit” of watching RTS, the public service

“has good programming. RTS 2, for example. RTS 3 has TV shows that are well-produced and rich in content. Even on RTS 1 during the weekend, we can watch shows about health, we can watch well-hosted TV shows, it is not so bad” (FG Participant 4).

“Unlike Pink and some other television stations, it looks decent. And clean. And it is completely irrelevant what information it brings compared to other media, that is, other tabloid media, it looks

professional, people are neat and that looks good. Their features look like they are well done. And that is obviously enough for this society, for someone to have confidence in the media. So little is enough” (FG Participant 1).

In the opinion of the focus group participants, what was recognized by the 40% of respondents who stated that they don't trust RTS is

“the constant that RTS (...) is always on the side of those who are currently in power. Whoever is in power, RTS simply behaves in the same way. We have never seen them turn to the other side or report differently” (FG Participant 2).

To restore and improve citizens' trust, RTS should expand the range of topics it covers and put the interest of the public first instead of the interests of those in power.

3.3. Attitudes and experiences with the media

3.3.1. Obedient servants of their masters

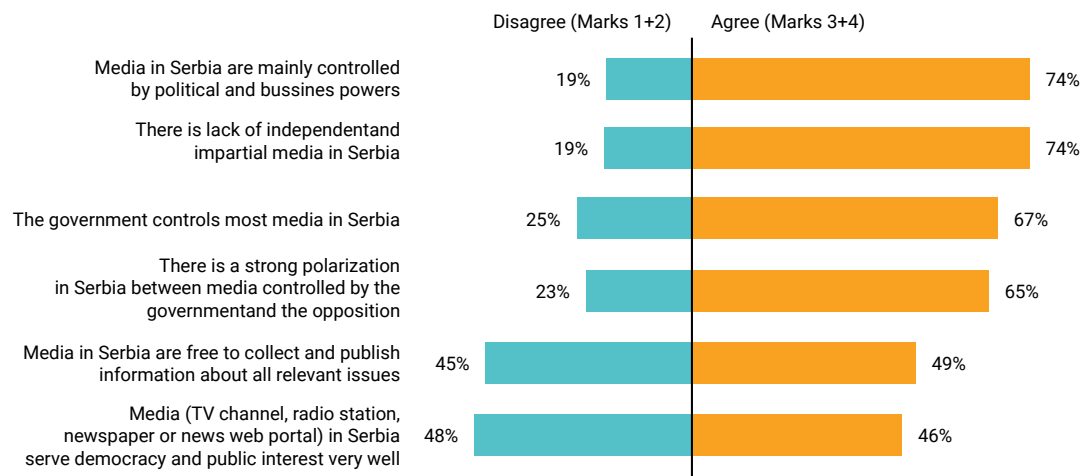
In the set of statements describing attitudes and experiences with the media, the highest percentage of surveyed citizens (74% of respondents) agreed with the statements that there is a lack of independent and impartial media in Serbia (52% strongly agree, 22% somewhat agree) and that media outlets are mainly controlled by political and business powers (46% strongly agree, 28% somewhat agree).

Two thirds of surveyed citizens agree that the government controls most of the media in Serbia (67%) and that there is a strong polarization between media controlled by the government and the opposition (65%).

The focus group participants are encouraged by the fact that such a high percentage of the population recognizes problems that limit media freedom and media independence.

According to one of the focus group participants, since the information on manipulating the allocation of project funds to the media was intensified at the local level, citizens have become more aware that the media are “under the control of either politicians or economic centres. (...) And that media outlets do not protect their interests, rather they are protecting the interests of their employers” (FG Participant 3).

Graph 7. *Distribution of answers to the question: On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Respondents are divided in their perception of media freedom and media contribution to democracy in the country. Namely, slightly less than half of the surveyed citizens agree that media outlets in Serbia are free to collect and publish information about all the relevant issues (49%), as well as that they serve democracy and the public interest very well (46%), while a similar proportion of respondents claims the opposite (45% and 48%, respectively).

In addition to pointing out the different attitudes of the respondents, for the focus group participants, this distribution of answers also indicates the lack of media literacy of citizens.

“Because if we look at the fact that 67% [of the surveyed citizens] stated that the media are under the control of the state, and 46% say that they serve democracy, the question arises to which media does this apply? Who do they think serves democracy if they are, for the most part, under control?” (FG Participant 3).

For the focus group participants, the solution is in education – more thorough education of journalists and the general education of citizens. As the improvement of the media’s economic status leads to the advancement of the position of the media in our political and social life, a part of that education of citizens should be directed towards strengthening the civic awareness that information cannot be free of charge. According to one focus group participant, the lack of that awareness is evidenced, for example, by the decline in the circulation of the print media. The media that are not financially supported by the audience are “subject to all possible pressure types. It’s

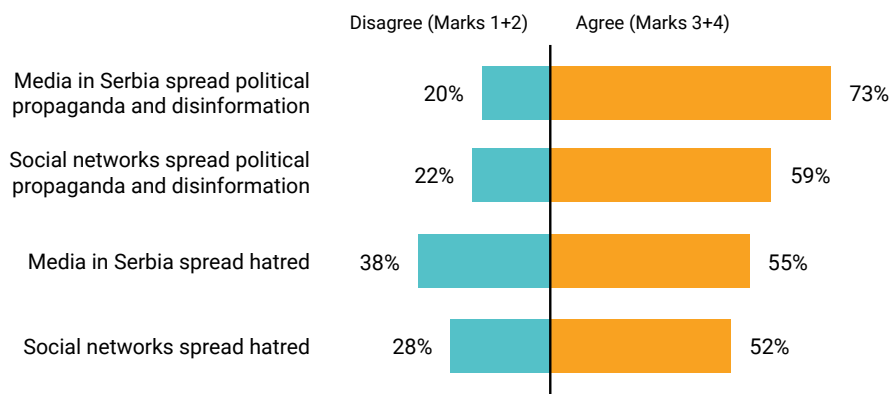
not just political pressure.” Since the 1990s, economic centres have also recognized the media as a means by which it is possible to “achieve a certain influence,” and

“anyone who has enough money is considering how to buy a media outlet. (...) We just need to develop the awareness that media content is just as important as other necessities that we need for a civilized modern life in the 21st century” (FG Participant 5).

3.3.2. Media spreading hatred, disinformation and propaganda

The majority of surveyed citizens agree that the media and social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation, with the share of those who recognize this phenomenon in the media being much higher (73%) than is the case with social networks (59%).

Graph 8. *Distribution of answers to the question: On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

More than half of the respondents agree that media and social networks are spreading hatred (55% and 52%, respectively).

The answers of the surveyed citizens within this group of questions caused the most concern among the editors and journalists in the focus group, especially the results related to the spread of political propaganda and disinformation in the media.

“That a larger number of people see the media as those who spread political propaganda and disinformation in contrast to social networks. But 73% of respondents is a large percentage. So many of them. That so many people perceive the media as a propaganda machine, that is problematic. (...) And to all of us working in the media, that is something that makes us think” (FG Participant 2).

Another notable problem is that citizens are aware that the media spreads propaganda, disinformation, and hatred, “but they are ready to trust the media if they say what they really think and even if they repeat the kind of hatred and propaganda and misinformation that suits them” (FG Participant 1).

By connecting these with the results that indicate the level of trust of citizens in the media in general, in specific types of media and specific media outlets, but also with the reasons why they trust or distrust certain media, the focus group participants point out that the causes of such assessments lie in social and media polarization.

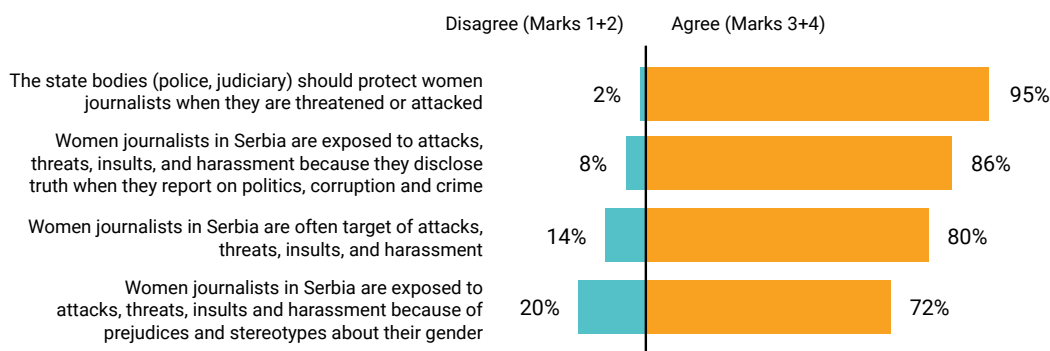
“Some [citizens] are more with one option, others with another. In essence, I think that both recognize the other side as propaganda, which is why that percentage is so high. Because what we agree with, we do not see as propaganda. But what the other side publishes in their media, we perceive as propaganda” (FG Participant 3).

“It is clear that there is that division in society, political division, ideological division; however we want to look at it, and it is clear that people also perceive media as if they were two poles. Opposite. (...) And then I wonder where the remaining 27% of people are who do not perceive the media as political propaganda. Do they also see such a great division between the media in Serbia? Because if there is a division, because if we look at the media as if some are at one end, others at the other, that there is nothing in between that we can hold onto, then that is a really big problem” (FG Participant 2).

3.3.3. Unfavourable position of female journalists

The majority of the surveyed citizens perceive the position of women journalists in Serbia as very unfavourable. More precisely, four in five of them agree that women journalists in Serbia are often the targets of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment (80%).

Graph 9. *Distribution of answers to the question: The following statements refer to the position of women journalists in Serbia. On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements.*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

In the questionnaire used in this research, we singled out some possible reasons for the position of female journalists with which the surveyed citizens completely or mostly agreed in the following percentages: nearly three-quarters of surveyed citizens agree that attacks, threats, insults, and harassment stem from gender prejudices and stereotypes (72%), while 86% think that the attacks are the result of revealing the truth while reporting on politics, corruption, and crime. Finally, there is almost unanimous agreement among the surveyed citizens that the state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when threatened or attacked (95%).

All focus group participants agree with the respondents that there is a problem concerning women journalists' position in Serbia. They believe that they are a frequent target of attacks, threats, insults and harassment precisely because they reveal the truth in their work, and the state has and should have an obligation to protect them.

However, journalists and editors do not perceive gender prejudices as a cause of attacks on women journalists but as a means used to discredit them.

“Their work is the least attacked. This is roughly the most difficult to attack. But that is why their appearance, preferences, habits, places where they were, the people with whom they socialize... are attacked. Because misogyny here is somehow one of those isms that have the deepest foundation” (FG Participant 1).

Gender prejudices used in attacks on women journalists are also seen as an instrument used to deter future journalists from choosing the profession.

“All the attacks on women journalists actually send a message to the younger generations. Don't do this job. It's hard there. Everyone will talk about your private life. Don't go there; it is a dirty profession you should not be in. I think the idea is that the attacks aim to prevent entrants, women, from getting into this business. And that the system would prefer them to continue to be presenters of crocheting shows, or the women's page, or a Saturday afternoon show, without tackling serious topics. Because so far, we have seen that women journalists are much braver than men. So I think that the current system sees women as a great threat, which breaks their monopoly of force and power and authority” (FG Participant 3).

According to journalists and editors in the focus group, attacks on women journalists

“(...) primarily affect women journalists who work in the media. Not so much the outlets themselves. (...) I would say that for some media outlets, it can raise viewership, listenership and visibility if there is a buzz about one of their female journalists having been attacked. On the other hand, I think that it mostly affects women who are the

target of such attacks. For any reason. Therefore, [it affects] both her professional and private life” (FG Participant 2).

According to the focus group participants, the fact that such a large share of the surveyed population recognizes the problem and its possible causes and sees a part of the solution in the systemic protection of female journalists is not of great importance for improving the position of female journalists in Serbia.

“Apart from seeing that citizens perceive this in the right way, it does not have much to contribute to change. I even think it is the same as with the significant perception of corruption, because we all know that we are bribe-takers and ready to give a bribe, more or less. So we are simply aware of that. It is the same with this thing that women journalists are an easy target (...) and no one is seriously thinking about it” (FG Participant 5).

“I am glad that people recognize that, but on the other hand, I wonder if people recognize that, and we still have a problem. Then it is definitely not right. It is just that the whole system is actually in trouble” (FG Participant 6).

What needs to be done to improve the situation? In addition to media literacy, the journalists and editors believe that it is necessary to strengthen existing mechanisms to protect journalists and ensure their consistent application.

“Some state bodies, which are supposed to deal with the issue, (...) have even raised their voices when there were attacks on women journalists. Of course, that is unconvincing and implausible if it is not followed by the measures that only the state has at its disposal.” (FG Participant 5)

The focus group participants also point out the lack of “guild solidarity,” where the reaction of colleagues and media that could have an impact is often lacking. “Because if a female colleague is attacked and all the media decide not to attend press conferences [as a gesture of solidarity and protest], that would really influence the state to deal with the attacks seriously. And to regulate them” (FG Participant 3).

As one way to improve the protection of journalists in general and women journalists in particular, the focus group participants support the initiative to grant journalists the status of an official.

“To grant the status of an official to journalists and try to see if that can influence things to improve. I think that for the female colleagues who deal with such serious issues that could improve the situation a bit” (FG Participant 1).

According to one of the focus group participants, women editors should play an essential role in the changes, given their position within the media. Although rare (and we should work on encouraging female journalists to train and strive for editorial positions), the female editors are those who could

“(...) actualize this topic to a much greater extent even when there is no immediate cause. (...) The media is an important factor of change, and journalists are the ones who can force the issue. The only ones besides politicians who have the tools, who have the infrastructure, and who have some media power to actualize certain issues and through that sequence meaning editors – some new media, conceived in a new way, could change this story in the right direction. Then all these bodies would react, and the political will, then that will would become the will of a much wider circle of people” (FG Participant 5).

In the end, journalists and editors in the focus groups are unanimous in concluding that political will is necessary to implement the existing mechanisms and introduce of new solutions.

“If there is the political will to stand in the way of attacks on journalists for any reason, then I think this is how it works in Serbia; it could be implemented or at least accelerated. And if there is no such political will, which I think is the case at the moment, then we will have this situation for a long time to come” (FG Participant 2).

4. CONCLUSION

The media system of the Serbian (not so) young democracy is in a difficult position. In addition to highly polarized media, where the basis of their polarization is unequivocally established in their different political and ideological orientations (Valić Nedeljković et al., 2021), the results of the opinion poll and the focus group research indicate that the local media scene is also characterized by a polarized audience.

The percentage of surveyed citizens in Serbia who stated that they mainly or completely trust the media (when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly) only slightly exceeds the percentage of surveyed citizens who say they do not trust the media.

Traditionally, television stands out as the medium with the highest percentage of trust among the surveyed citizens. At the same time, tabloidization and a sensationalist approach to reporting on the coronavirus have left their mark on trust in the print media (a sector dominated by tabloid print media), whom the highest percentage of respondents do not trust. What is encouraging, in a way, is the relatively high level of trust in the investigative media and the still modest but not negligible reach of the fact-checking portals.

The choice of specific media outlets that respondents singled out as the most or least trustworthy clearly illustrates the polarization of the audience. The same media are found at the top of both lists: The largest number of respondents singled out RTS (Radio Television of Serbia), TV Pink, Prva TV, N1, TV Happy as the media they trust the most because they publish accurate and verified information, due to impartiality in reporting, topicality of information, trust in the journalists who work there and openness to active audience participation.

TV Pink, N1, RTS (Radio Television of Serbia), Informer and TV Happy are the media that the largest number of the surveyed citizens singled out as the most distrusted because they are under political influence and spread disinformation, propaganda and hatred.

Resilience`s researchers also identified the same media as generators of propaganda, disinformation and hate in the research on disinformation and hateful propaganda models of media and communication (Valić Nedeljković and Janjatović Jovanović, 2020) and in the research on the main patterns and examples of hate and disinformation narratives in Serbia (Jovović and Valić Nedeljković, 2020). At the same time, the focus group participants – journalists and editors – see the tabloid media in Serbia as the main source of disinformation, propaganda and hatred.

Even a polarized audience recognizes that the media in Serbia are not good promoters of democracy and public interest.

The public media service RTS only partially fulfils its legal obligations because, for quite some time, in its news programme, it equates the public interest with the interest of the political groups in power. The majority of the surveyed citizens think that there is a lack of independent and impartial media in Serbia and that the existing media are mainly under the control of political and economic powers, primarily the government.

A significant number of the surveyed citizens consider the media in Serbia under the control of political groups at both ends of the spectrum. At the same time, many of the surveyed citizens think that the media is free to collect and publish information on all the relevant issues. These findings reflect the media reality in Serbia: after twenty years of reforms, the country has managed to create a system in which the freedom of the media implies (only) that our media freely report on issues relevant to the option whose interests they represent.

Both the media workers in the focus group and the surveyed citizens agree that propaganda and hatred are ubiquitous in the media. The media instrumentalizes hatred based on gender, national and other stereotypes in order to realize the particular interests of the groups to which they are loyal for ideological or financial reasons. But as the media workers warn, the media is also abusing the hatred rooted in society to increase circulation, viewership, or reach, and again, in the end, to make a profit.

The position of women journalists in Serbia is especially difficult. As many as 95% of the surveyed citizens agree that women journalists are exposed to attacks, threats, insults and harassment because they do their job well. The journalists and editors in the focus group do not see gender prejudices and stereotypes as a cause of attacks but rather as a tool to discredit female journalists. Not their work—because that is difficult to discredit—but rather female journalists personally, where attacks are dominated by discourse strategies stemming from classic misogyny.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- With the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the Ministry of Culture and Information, to introduce mandatory educational programmes in the field of media literacy at all levels of education.
- To strengthen organizations and institutions that implement media literacy programmes for citizens, both those in the formal educational process and informal programmes with significant (preferable synchronized, joint) financial support from the competent ministries (Ministry of Culture and Information, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development), European Union programmes and other donor support.
- The Ministry of Culture and Information, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, European Union programmes and other donor media development programmes to provide financial support to civil society organizations and professional associations dealing with journalists and editors' continuing professional education, especially for the implementation of educational programmes on professional standards and fact-checking. To provide the public with free access to transparent, regular, credible and independent media research and auditing (media market data, audience research, etc.).
- The Ministry of Culture and Information to initiate and support regular public debates and dialogue on the media between citizens and media representatives, and to develop programmes and campaigns to promote and nurture professional, accountable and unbiased media, contributing to media literacy and also to trust in the media.
- The European Union programmes and media programmes of other donors to provide continuous support to civil society organizations and media and journalists' professional associations whose activities aim to improve existing and introducing new self-regulatory mechanisms, as well as mechanisms for protecting journalists and for safeguarding civil rights in general.
- The National Assembly to amend the Law on Public Information and Media in order to avoid the possibility of political influence when electing members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media.
- The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media to accurately enforce the law and work precisely against conflicts of interest and media concentration, and thoroughly review acquisitions, i.e. the purchase of media outlets.
- The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media to ensure that the appointment of governing bodies of public service media is carried out without political interference and influence of other interest groups, in order to achieve the

public service media's full institutional autonomy and editorial independence in accordance with the Law on Public Media Services.

- Journalists' associations to conduct a broad information campaign on the position of journalists, especially female journalists, and to intensify pressure on decision-makers in order to enable consistent implementation of the existing mechanisms for their protection, and to advocate for the introduction of new protection mechanisms, such as, possibly, granting the status of an official for journalists.
- Journalists' associations to promote solidarity among journalists and media workers within their efforts to improve the protection of journalists.

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FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:

FG Participant 1, male, journalist/editor of a national online media.

FG Participant 2, female, journalist of national TV media.

FG Participant 3, male, journalist of local online media.

FG Participant 4, male, editor of national online media.

FG Participant 5, male, editor of national TV media.

FG Participant 6, female, journalist of national print media.

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