

ICELAND

A small media system facing increasing challenges

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Introduction

Iceland is a very small country with a population of just over 360,000 people (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-c). It is an island situated in the North Atlantic Ocean, midway between North America and Europe. The Icelandic language is distinct, although it is similar to Scandinavian languages.

Iceland is an affluent country and a stable parliamentary democracy. Its political and socioeconomic structures differ in some respect from the Nordic welfare model, with a more limited welfare system, less developed corporatism, and a confrontational rather than consensual political culture (Jónsson, 2014; Kristinsson, 2018). The country became a sovereign state in 1918 but remained in a royal union with Denmark until 1944, when the parliamentary republic was founded. Historically, there have been four main parties in the Icelandic party system: a conservative party, an agrarian and centre party, a social democratic party, and a left-socialist party (Harðarson, 2008; Önnudóttir & Harðarson, 2018). In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, which hit Iceland particularly hard, causing economic and political turmoil, the economy recovered remarkably quickly (Jónsson & Sigurgeirsson, 2017), but the political unrest lasted longer. In the last decade, elections have been frequent and new political parties have gained footholds alongside the four traditional ones. Today, there are eight parties represented in Althingi, the national parliament of Iceland (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018). The present government is a three-party coalition of an unusual combination, as it is the first coalition encompassing both the conservative party and the party farthest from it for almost 70 years. Politically, Iceland is considered a mature liberal democracy, labelled a “full democracy” and ranked only second after Norway on the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2020 (EIU, 2020).

Freedom in the World 2021: status “free” (score: 94/100, down 3 points from 2017). Iceland’s country report 2021 is not available yet, but in the 2020 report (score 94), “links between elected representatives and business interests remain a concern, as does the concentration of private media ownership. Reports of systematic exploitation of immigrant labor have escalated considerably” (Freedom House, 2021).

Liberal Democracy Index 2020: Iceland is placed at the top of the Top 10–20% bracket – rank 19 of measured countries, up from 23 in 2019 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020, 2021).

Freedom of Expression Index 2018: rank 14 of measured countries, considerably up from 41 in 2016 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2017, 2019).

2020 World Press Freedom Index: rank 15 of 180 countries, fluctuating between 9 and 21 from 2013–2019 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

The Icelandic media system shares characteristics with the democratic corporatist countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), like a tradition of widespread newspaper reading and strong public service broadcasting. It is, however, also characterised by a combination of high levels of political parallelism and commercialisation and a less developed and weaker journalistic profession than in the other Nordic countries. Private media have not been burdened with public service requirements, nor has it received subsidies (Jóhannsdóttir, 2020).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Icelandic media system is its small size. All media companies in Iceland are small in international comparison. National media also dominate the landscape. There are several regional and local newspapers published in the country; however, local media has always been weak in Iceland (Guðmundsson, 2004; Statistics Iceland, n.d.-d). Nationally, there are two daily newspapers, of which one is for free – interestingly, free newspapers have had a uniquely strong position in Iceland (Bakker, 2013). In addition, there are a couple of weekly newspapers, and one biweekly newspaper. Legacy media have all firmly established themselves online. Online news sites with no links to legacy media also play an increasingly prominent part in news provision. There are several television and radio stations, but only two provide news services. Iceland is technologically advanced and has been at the forefront in the development of information and technology infrastructure (International Telecommunication Union, 2017). Internet access is almost universal (Internet World Stats, 2020) and in addition to domestic media, Icelanders have access to countless foreign media publications of all kinds. The Icelandic Public Broadcasting Service, Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV), enjoys a strong and stable position in the media market. With one television channel, RÚV’s audience share has seldom been less than 50 per cent; currently, it stands at around 65 per cent. Meanwhile, its Radio One and Radio Two have just over 50 per cent audience share combined (Gallup, n.d.-c). Trust in RÚV is also consistently higher than in any other media organisation. RÚV is financed by a broadcasting tax, and

advertisements account for approximately one-third of its revenue (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

In the past decade, the private media have been in turmoil, with frequent ownership changes and mergers. Most private news media companies have been running on loss or very meagre returns for years. At the time of writing this report, three private media companies, together with RÚV, dominate the media market in terms of revenue, audience share, and number of journalists employed (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2021). First is Sýn, a publicly traded tel-economy company owning several television and radio stations (among them Channel 2, the only commercial television channel with a news desk) and the second-most read online news site in Iceland, *visir.is*. Second is the media house Torg, which owns the free national daily, *Fréttablaðið*; an associated website, *frettabladid.is*; DV, a weekly subscription newspaper and website; and a television station (*Hringbraut*) which mostly produces lifestyle and consumer magazine shows and current affairs talk shows. Torg's sole owner is an investor with ties to a centre-right political party. The third big private media company is Árvakur, which publishes Iceland's oldest newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, and *mbl.is*, Iceland's most-read online news site. It also runs the radio channel K 100. The company has historical links to the conservative party and is now owned by a group of investors with ties to the fishing industry (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, media subsidies have been absent in Iceland. However, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture introduced a bill in the parliament last year, proposing public support for private media organisations (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020). The bill has not been passed yet, and surprisingly, has mostly been opposed by members of the parliament from the government's own ranks. Private media companies have also criticised it heavily for not limiting RÚV's position on the advertising market.

Covid-19

On 16 March 2020, the government imposed several restrictions on liberal freedoms in order to curb the spread of Covid-19. The restrictions were not as strict as in many other countries, for example, Iceland's borders were not closed, but passengers were tested or required to quarantine on arrival. Public gatherings were restricted, but primary schools stayed open, as did shops and services. These restrictions have changed continuously since, in tune with the spread of Covid-19 across the country (see also Ólafsson, 2021a).

During this time, the use of and trust in traditional media seems to have increased, at least momentarily (Market and media research, 2020). In general, the Icelandic news media is believed to have risen up to its public service obligations and has been praised for its extensive coverage and mediation of necessary

information about the pandemic to concerned citizens (Bernharðsdóttir, 2020). Financially, the Covid-19 pandemic, however, has worsened commercial media's situation. Advertising revenue decreased considerably due to the economic setback that followed the pandemic (Valsson, 2020). So far, news media companies have not laid off any journalists, however, other measures have been taken: the evening news at Channel 2 is now only available to subscribers (from January 2021), having been open to all from the start in 1986; one national newspaper, *Fréttablaðið*, has cut down its publication days from six to five days a week; and DV halted the publication of their printed newspaper (DV, 2020). The biggest magazine publisher also laid off 14 of its staff (Halldórson, 2020). In May 2020, the parliament passed laws providing substantial and unprecedented financial support for various sectors of the Icelandic economy, including private news media, which received up to ISK 400 million (approx. EUR 2.6 million) in September 2020 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2020).

Furthermore, the Icelandic National Security Council established a working group to map the extent and nature of information disorder concerning Covid-19 in the country during the first wave of the pandemic. The group conducted surveys and found that most Icelanders had received information about Covid-19 from domestic news media and reported high levels of trust towards Icelandic scientists and other experts that disseminated information about the pandemic. Moreover, Icelandic media outlets were trusted by over 80 per cent of Icelanders to disseminate reliable information about Covid-19, and most people had seen or heard false or misleading information about the virus and the disease through social media (Prime Minister's Office, 2020).

Leading news media sample

Our media sample for the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) 2021 consists of media outlets from the four biggest media houses in the country (discussed above), which represent different types and ownership. These are the private Channel 2 and *visir.is* (owner Sýn); *Fréttablaðið* (owner Torg); *Morgunblaðið* and *mbl.is* (owner Árvakur), and RÚV, the public broadcasting service. Our sample also included a small, national news organisation, Stundin, and *Vikurfréttir*, a regional newspaper. Stundin, founded and owned by journalists, runs a subscription-based online news site and a biweekly printed paper, *Stundin*. *Vikurfréttir* and its online version, *vf.is*, was founded by a journalist who is the paper's editor-in-chief; however, it recently stopped its print publication and is only available online now.

Editors-in-chief, journalists from the above outlets, and also the chair of the National Union of Icelandic Journalists were interviewed for this report.

Indicators

Dimension: Freedom / Information (F)

(F1) Geographic distribution of news media availability 3 POINTS

The mainstream news media are accessible throughout the country and there are no major regional differences. The number of news media available to Icelandic citizens is somewhat limited though, due to the smallness of the population and hence its media market.

All types of news media are available and widely used by Icelanders. At present, there are two national dailies available, one subscription-based and the other a free paper. Both are based in the capital, Reykjavík. In addition, there are around 20 non-daily newspapers published, half of which are free of cost (Nordicom, 2019a). All but the smallest of the printed papers have a digital equivalent online. Statistics about the media industry in Iceland are limited, as public authorities do not monitor the market to the extent done in, for example, the other Nordic countries, and the industry itself has not agreed upon the gathering of key indicators (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017). Several media outlets have opted out of circulation audits and web traffic surveys, and the data is, therefore, incomplete. For example, no recent subscription data is available for print or digital newspapers.

The Internet is universally accessible in Iceland and also widely used, with nearly 99 per cent of 16–74-year-olds using it regularly (Eurostat, 2020). In 2018, 78 per cent of Icelandic households were equipped with fixed broadband connections (digital subscriber line, optic fibre) (Post and Telecom Administration, 2019). A large number and variety of online news sites are also usually available.

In 2018, there were 14 television channels licensed in Iceland, one of which was provided by the public broadcaster RÚV (Nordicom, 2020). Only two operate a news service: RÚV and the commercial channel, Channel 2. Channel 2 is subscription and advertising based, and its news broadcast was open and free for all until January 2021. Both RÚV and Channel 2 are accessible throughout the country, and both also have an online platform for streaming and on-demand television and archive. In the radio market, there were 18 stations with a registered licence. Four of them have a nationwide penetration, the two public stations Radio 1 and Radio 2, and Bylgjan and FM95,7 operated by the telecom/media company, Sýn. Sýn also runs five other quasi-national radio stations, that is, they reach two or more regions of the country and 60–70 per cent of the population. 18 regional radio stations are licensed to broadcast (Nordicom, 2019b). Nearly all are also accessible online.

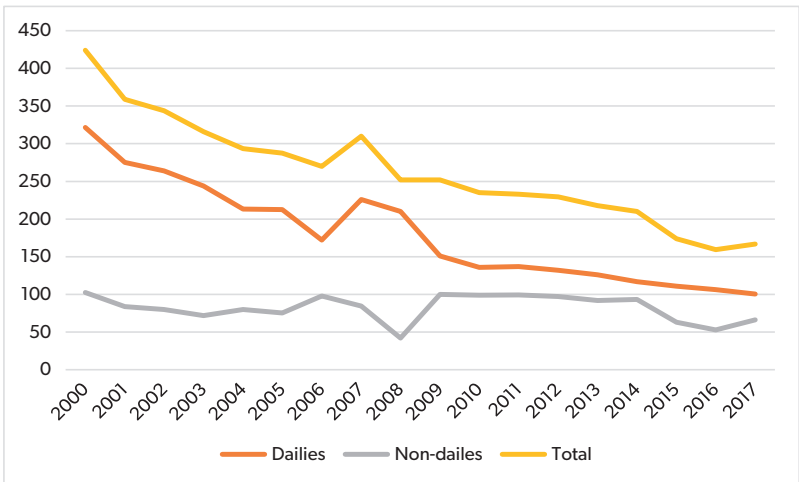
Icelanders are enthusiastic social media users. Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform, and according to an Icelandic survey from 2018, a total of 93 per cent of Icelanders used Facebook regularly (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2021).

(F2) Patterns of news media use (consumption of news) 3 POINTS

Online news and television news are the prime sources of news for Icelanders. Interest in news is high, irrespective of gender and in all age groups. There is a considerable age difference in platforms used, and among the 18–24-year-old age group, social media is a very popular source of news.

Newspaper circulation and readership in Iceland has traditionally been very high, but it is steadily declining, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Newspaper circulation, 2000–2017 (per thousand inhabitants)



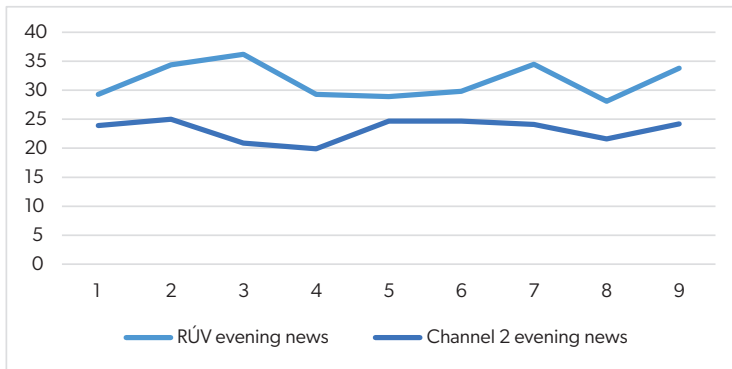
Source: Nordicom, 2019a

As of February 2020, in the 18–80 age group, the two national dailies, *Morgunblaðið* and *Fréttablaðið*, were read by 23.4 per cent and 37.2 per cent, respectively (Gallup, n.d.-a). A free national weekly newspaper, *Mannlíf* (now only available online), reached 16 per cent, while two national paid non-dailies, *DV* and *Viðskiptablaðið* (a business paper) reached around 5 per cent each. These were the only papers that participated in Gallup’s present readership survey. The free paper, *Fréttablaðið*, is delivered to people’s homes in the capital area, in addition to being available at key locations for free pickup in other areas, and,

unsurprisingly, it is more widely read in the capital area, or by 46 per cent as of February 2020. Compared with those who were older, printed papers were read less by the young. Of these, *Morgunblaðið* reached 12.6 per cent among 18–49-year-olds, and *Fréttablaðið* was read by 27 per cent in this age group, as per data from February 2020 (Gallup, n.d.-a).

Meanwhile, for decades, the reach of public broadcaster RÚV's main news broadcast at 19:00 had been fairly stable, with around 30–35 per cent among 12–80-year-olds. Within this demographic, it was followed by Channel 2's main and only news broadcast, which showed an average reach among 20–25 per cent (Gallup, n.d.-b).

Figure 2 Evening television news broadcast reach, weeks 1–9, 2020 (12–80-year-olds)



Source: Gallup, n.d.-b

Online news reaches more and more people. The most-read online news are those run by established private media organisations. On average, close to 200,000 people use *mbl.is* and *visir.is* each day (total population is 360,000). The public broadcaster, RÚV, has not been nearly as successful online as on traditional platforms and typically is in the fourth place of most-read online news sites, with 80,000–100,000 users per day (Gallup.n.d.-d).

Iceland has not participated in the *Reuters Digital News Report*, but Jóhannsdóttir (2021) conducted a survey using the report's questionnaire among a representative sample of Icelandic populace aged 18 years and older in 2017. The findings showed that Icelanders were enthusiastic news consumers. Nearly 87 per cent reported they accessed news several times a day – men more often than women (92% vs. 82%), but age and education did not make a significant difference in the frequency of access. A majority of respondents (61%) said they were extremely or very interested in news. At least 72 per cent of men were extremely or very interested, compared with 50 per cent of women, and those under 25 were seen to be less interested than their older counterparts.

The majority used online news (41%) and social media (17%) as their main news source, compared with the traditional platforms: television (23%), radio (12%), and printed newspapers (7%). It was also observed that the age gap in platforms used was considerable. Only among those 55 and older were traditional platforms the main news source of the majority (72%). Among those between 18–24 years old, social media was a main source of news (38%) as was the use of online news (42%), and only 20 per cent used traditional media as their main source of news.

The findings showed that news consumption was a cross-media experience, and people accessed news both online and offline. In a typical week, on average, they accessed news on eight different media outlets. Traditional Icelandic news media organisations are dominant in people's news consumption. Nearly 97 per cent consumers access online news sites, which are outlets of either legacy broadcasting or print media organisations.

Overall, the study shows that news is widely consumed in Iceland irrespective of age, gender, or education (Jóhannsdóttir, 2021). However, little is known about the reach of news among Iceland's growing immigrant population. In 2019, 14.1 per cent of its population were immigrants, and 38.1 per cent of those were from Poland (Statistics Iceland, 2019). The biggest media outlets have recently started to offer news in English or Polish to cater to the needs of immigrants; however, no statistics or research is at hand on the availability or use of news among them.

(F3) Diversity of news sources

2 POINTS

Editors-in-chief and journalists emphasised the predominant role of journalistic research over news agency and public relations material. National and international collaboration is increasing.

No news agency operates in Iceland, and use of agency material is, therefore, primarily for foreign news coverage. Most interviewees acknowledged the importance of news agencies (Reuters, AP, etc.) in the working process, but did say that they increasingly rely more on other sources and media outlets. Several interviewees discussed this in relation to it being much easier to access information online than before. None of the media outlets have permanent foreign correspondents. The importance of news agencies was particularly emphasised by the broadcast journalists, and the smaller outlets seem to use them the least. The public broadcaster participates in a network organised by Nordic PBS broadcasters and in the European Broadcasting Union network.

Concerning public relations material, interviewees mentioned that it was certainly used more than before. However, it does not usually change how they

use sources in their work. Some interviewees mentioned that public relations material does clearly find its way to the main online news websites, but in general, journalists said it does not change how they work.

Content exchange with partners and other media has increased in recent years. For example, one online-only news company regularly produces news and current affairs programmes for a small private television channel and publishes content in collaboration with a weekly newspaper. The public broadcaster has collaborated on several occasions with private media organisations on investigative projects. Icelandic news media have also worked with international news media on larger investigative stories, such as the *Panama Papers*. Individual journalists are active within international journalism networks such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

(F4) Internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy 2 POINTS

Journalists have much say concerning how issues are framed. They seldom have any influence on decisions about hiring the editor-in-chief.

According to all respondents, journalists have much say when it comes to how issues are framed in Iceland. Most newsrooms hold editorial meetings in the mornings where the issues of the day are discussed. There, editors present topics they want covered, but journalists are usually expected to bring ideas on topics for news stories. Interviewees mentioned that a lot of time was often spent discussing particular issues, and journalists had enough agenda-setting power in how issues were framed and covered. The decision-making process in editorial meetings was often quite informal and democratic, and following the meetings, there was usually an active and ongoing dialogue with the editors, news editors, and desk editors whilst the journalists worked on their stories. For example, if the journalists could not reach someone for an interview, there would be a follow-up discussion focusing on other suitable alternate interviewees.

Journalists in Iceland usually have no say in who is appointed as editor-in-chief. Some media outlets advertise the position (like RÚV and Sýn), whilst owners sometimes hire directly without the position being made public (like Árvakur and Torg). With smaller media outlets, the editors are commonly also owners.

RÚV and Sýn both have internal rules in place to make sure that male and female journalists are treated equally. Interviewees from other outlets highlighted that no formal rules were in place to make sure that gender equality was respected in the workplace.

(F5) Company rules against *internal* influence on newsroom/editorial staff

3 POINTS

Main news media all have established rules to guard their newsrooms from internal influences. Journalists mostly enjoy editorial independence.

The Media Act (no. 38/2011) obliges all media to have an editorial policy statement and rules of editorial independence published on the Media Commission (MC)’s website (Parliament, 2011). Many of these touch upon possible interventions on newsrooms and editorial work, and most of them stress independence from owners and external parties. Additionally, the most prominent news media houses also have internal rules of conduct or a code of ethics (CoE) and through these, have some protections against internal and external influence. The CoE of the National Union of Icelandic Journalists (NUIJ), however, does not cover external influences.

In the Public Service Broadcasting Act (no. 23/2013), an emphasis is placed upon professionalism in RÚV’s work (Parliament, 2013). RÚV abides by rules of editorial independence (Media Commission, 2020a) sanctioned by the MC, which, for example, bans RÚV’s board from interfering with news and news-related programmes. In RÚV’s “Rules on news and related programmes in RÚV”, reporters are also protected against interference from the state and its board.

Torg’s news media outlets portray a self-regulation system on the MC’s website (Media Commission, 2020b). It is clearly stated there that the interests of owners should never be considered when news is gathered and processed – editorial independence shall be upheld, and editorial products should be independent from boards and owners. If a board member or owner is the subject of coverage, a specified procedure shall commence that secures a fair handling of possible nuances, where a board member or owner shall be treated as an unrelated party. Between the news staff and owners, there is a “Guarantor” that treats complaints or accusations about rules being broken.

Morgunblaðið’s “Rules on Editorial Independence” have not been approved by the MC (Media Commission, 2019b). They state that decisions on content published in the paper and related outlets are in the hands of editors or their representatives. The editors and journalists are independent of others in their work, and journalists will, at each and all times, be offered the best possible conditions to uphold the editorial policy. Also stated is that cautions and layoffs are presented according to laws and regulations that apply.

Sýn’s news media have a Policy Statement and rules on editorial independence (Media Commission, n.d.-b), which state that reporters are independent from the owners and the board. The editor-in-chief is obligated to report any attempt to unduly influence editorial decisions to the company’s chief lawyer

at all times, and besides those legally sanctioned rules, the outlets also rely on the NUIJ's CoE.

The biweekly newspaper and online news site, *Stundin*, adheres to the media law by having a policy statement and rules of editorial independence (Media Commission, n.d.-a), in addition to relying on the NUIJ's CoE. The policy statement states that diversity in ownership contributes to the independence and objectivity of *Stundin*, and in the rules of editorial independence, it postulates that the staff shall own a majority of the shares (with no one shareholder owning more than 15%). There is also a guarantee that the board will secure editorial independence, hold special interests at bay, and not propagate the owner's interests in the production of news. The editors have sole power over hiring and firing.

The online news site and biweekly business paper *Kjarninn* also has a policy statement and rules of editorial independence, in adherence to the media law (Media Commission, 2019a). Otherwise, it relies on the NUIJ's CoE. The policy statement reminds journalists that their loyalty lies only with the readers and no one else, and the independence of editors and journalists is emphasised as well as an absolute division between editorial staff and departments of income. Journalists at *Kjarninn* cannot be fired without a written explanation.

Most other media outlets in Iceland have limited self-regulation tools, aside from what the Media Law requires and accepting the jurisdiction of NUIJ's CoE. Many of them are local and small, with one or two staffers – and those often being the owners.

With regard to ownership, the journalists interviewed said they never discussed editorial matters or news items with owners or board members, with the exception of the smallest media organisations where editors are also owners. Overall, most journalists and editors said that owners (who are not editors) usually did not interfere with editorial decisions or the daily operations of the news outlets.

(F6) Company rules against *external* influence on
newsroom/editorial staff

3 POINTS

All main news media outlets have rules thwarting the direct influence of external parties on newsrooms and media content. Editors and journalists alike strictly deny such influence. No advertisers can be said to have dominance in leading news media. Leading Icelandic news media houses separate newsrooms from their advertising departments. All declare explicitly in their formal editorial rules that the interests of advertisers shall never be considered in news production.

According to the interviews, people working in advertising departments at larger media outlets sometimes talk to journalists in an informal manner, but

employees from the advertising departments are never present during editorial meetings. Leading newspapers in Iceland often have special sections dedicated to, for example, travel and leisure, but the content there is not written by journalists, but people who are employed specifically to write for those paid sections.

Meanwhile, in the many smaller media outlets in rural areas, there are few tools to deal with external influences. They face the daily battles of being in a small close-knit society where a positive outlook prevails and the biggest advertisers are the municipality and one or two of the area's biggest business companies. Guðmundsson (2004: 53) concluded in his research on local media that proximity to advertisers and the community could matter: "Thus it is clear that the media is less likely to interfere in disputes in the region, and in some cases, ads have been used to control content".

Most private news media rely on both subscription and advertising, apart from the free paper *Fréttablaðið* – and as mentioned above, the leading online news sites are free of charge. Advertising has grown in importance to most media. *Kjarninn miðlar* is free of charge and its content is available to all, but it also receives monthly voluntary donations amounting to half of its revenue (RÚV, 2017). The public broadcasting service RÚV is mostly funded by the broadcasting tax, but has around 30 per cent of its revenue from advertising.

In April 2021, Statistics Iceland (SI) released its findings on the media advertisement market in Iceland for 2019 (Statistics Iceland, 2021). For the second time, advertising revenues to foreign companies were calculated, and it is estimated that in 2019, about 40 per cent of advertising payments went to foreign companies, compared with 34 per cent the year before.

According to SI's findings, national media has not just lost its share of the total advertising revenue. In 2019, advertising payments in national media amounted to ISK 11.5 billion, a 17 per cent drop from the previous year, calculated in fixed prices. These payments in 2019 were 41 per cent lower than they were at their highest in 2007, calculated in fixed prices.

Daily and weekly newspapers have traditionally been the most important advertising medium in this country, but have lost a huge share of the market in recent years. In 2019, about 52 per cent of advertising revenues went to television stations, about 21 per cent to daily and weekly newspapers (25% the year before), and 14 per cent to radio (13% in 2018). The share of national online media in advertising revenues has grown slowly but steadily, and it is now estimated that ISK 14 out of every 100 spent on domestic advertising goes to them.

According to findings from the Worlds of Journalism Study (Ahva et al., 2017), Icelandic journalists themselves did not feel that political or economic factors have much influence on their work. Comparative research concerning Nordic journalists found that fewer Icelandic journalists, proportionately speaking, found that external economic or political factors impinged on their work (Ahva et al., 2017). In this regard, Icelandic journalists ranked the high-

est overall in the absence of external influences within their work, with those from Norway and Finland, respectively, following.

All our interviewees – editors and journalists alike – rejected any influence of advertisers on specific editorial content. Advertising clients are diverse, and interviewees were unable to recall the largest advertisers. Most said they were not interested in knowing anything about the advertising shares – it was up to the advertising department – and they focused instead on editorial content. Some of the interviewees did recall specific examples of some advertisers trying to influence news reporting by threatening to withdraw (or withdrawing) adverts, but everyone said these rare instances had not influenced news reporting. A list of the 30 biggest advertisers in print media and television confirmed that there was not a dominant position of any one particular company.

(F7) Procedures on news selection and news processing 1 POINT

Internal debate is mostly limited to daily news meetings and the procedures concerning news selection and news processing are usually informal and not based on formalised rules.

Stylebooks are not used in Icelandic newsrooms, and much emphasis is placed on individual journalists bringing their ideas to newsroom meetings. According to the interviewees, there is little focus on formalised rules concerning news selection, and individual journalists have much autonomy when coming up with ideas for news stories and how to cover them.

There is little training provided to new journalists, and instead they are expected to learn it on the job, with some guidance from senior staff members. News stories are usually not checked by many people, aside from the desk editors, before they are published. Several interviewees mentioned that if a story concerned a particularly sensitive matter, then it was usually checked by more people.

News originating from social media was sometimes disseminated without being critically reviewed, said the interviewees. This is often the case when public figures post something on social media platforms, which is commonly viewed as a press release (a politician announcing something, etc.). This happens the most on mainstream online news sites where the priority is usually speed (being the first to report the story). However, in cases of ordinary citizens posting something newsworthy on social media, journalists usually try to critically review it before it is published.

According to the interviewees, there was also little internal discussion concerning how equality, inequality, and diversity should be addressed in the Icelandic media.

(F8) Rules and practices on internal gender equality 2 POINTS

Employment conditions among male and female journalists are mostly equal in terms of conditions and pay. Women are under-represented in decision-making positions in media companies.

Around 60 per cent of the members of the National Union of Icelandic Journalists are men and 40 per cent are women (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-d). Statistics on the gender ratio in decision-making positions in media organisations in Iceland are lacking, and of late, there has been discussions on a lack of gender balance in that respect. At the time of writing, all except one of the editors-in-chief, assistant editors, news editors, and assistant news editors in two national newspapers were men. According to the Gender Equality Act (no. 10/2008), companies are obliged to work towards equal rights and opportunities, specifically regarding decision-making positions in their companies (Parliament, 2008). In a recent interview, the head of the Directorate of Equality said that the situation was worrying (Guðmundsson, 2020). The gender ratio is more balanced in broadcast news media. The executive board of RÚV is gender balanced and RÚV's news editor-in-chief is a woman, four of five members of Sýn's executive board are men, and the editor-in-chief at Channel 2 is a man, but the news editor is a woman. Both RÚV and Sýn have internal rules regarding gender balance (RÚV, 2018; Sýn, n.d.), freely accessible on their websites. Interviewees from other media organisations, meanwhile, said there were no formal rules regarding gender balance at their workplace.

The interviewees stated that gender inequality had diminished in Icelandic media. Most discussed the trend in relation to Iceland's position as one of the most equal countries in the world. The interviewees said that they believed working conditions of men and women were mostly equal. Some of them, however, mentioned that it was difficult to escape underlying wider societal gender stereotypes in most work settings.

While editors mentioned that equal pay was prevalent, some journalists stated that although the norm, it was difficult for them to know for sure. A couple of interviewees mentioned there were different types of contracts for journalists, depending on when they started and what kind of work they did. So, it was difficult to compare and know for sure if conditions and wages were equal or not. A survey for the National Union of Icelandic Journalists showed that on average, men were paid 5–8 per cent higher wages than women journalists (Jónsson, 2018). One possible reason for that could be shorter work experience of women journalists. According to findings in the latest Worlds of Journalism Study (Kolbeins, 2012), women's work experience was eight years on average, compared with fourteen years among male journalists. However, after amendments to the Gender Equality Act, which came into force in 2018, companies with 25 or more employees were required to obtain a certification

of their equal pay system and its implementation. Sýn and RÚV have already implemented it (Þórðardóttir, 2019; RÚV, 2019b), and others are in the process of obtaining it.

(F9) Gender equality in media content

2 POINTS

Journalists agree that gender equality in media content is important, but no formal rules apply except at the public broadcasting service. Women are under-represented as news subjects.

The journalists interviewed agreed that gender equality in media content was important, but there was a lack of monitoring, with one exception: the public broadcasting service RÚV monitors the gender ratio in its news content and all its programmes, and the findings are published regularly on its website (RÚV, 2020). At other outlets, journalists mentioned they tried to make sure there was gender equality in the content, but that it was an informal practice. There were no formal mechanisms to monitor this in private media.

In their country study on news and gender within the framework of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), Jóhannsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015) found that women were grossly under-represented in the news. Only 20 per cent of news subjects in news on traditional and online platforms were women, down from 28 per cent in GMMP 2010. However, women were no less likely than men to feature as news subjects in so-called hard news. The situation appears to have improved since, and in research done for the Icelandic Association of Women in Business, women were 33 per cent of subjects in broadcasting news and 35 per cent in current affairs programmes in 2017 (Beck, 2017). Preliminary results from GMMP's latest study in 2020 indicate that women were around one-third of the subjects in the main news media. According to RÚV's own content monitoring, the gender ratio was equal overall in all programmes in 2020, but in news, the story was different: 61 per cent of news subjects were men and 40 per cent were women (RÚV, 2020).

(F10) Misinformation and digital platforms
(alias social media)

1 POINT

Misinformation on digital platforms is of minor relevance and importance so far, and defence mechanisms are not developed and not seen as a priority.

Respondents from leading news media houses mentioned that while misinformation could be a problem, it wasn't much of an issue in Iceland. The interviewees said that they used their journalistic skills to identify fake news and believed that

checking sources helped them to identify misinformation. With regard to foreign news, most of the interviewees mentioned they used credible news agencies and foreign news outlets and trusted the verification procedures used by those agencies and outlets. None of the news media in our sample collaborated with external fact-checking institutions or ran an in-house verification department, not even the public broadcaster RÚV. Overall, interviewees mentioned that Icelandic news outlets were simply too small to invest in verification departments, and most thought it was unnecessary, since fake news was not perceived as much of a problem in the country.

(F11) Protection of journalists against (online) harassment 2 POINTS

Journalists can usually rely on support and protection from their employers in case of harassment, but guidelines are often lacking.

In Iceland, threats and harassment of journalists were rare, but there were some occasional mild and non-violent cases in the form of phone calls, emails, or posts and comments on social media. According to the journalists, none of them had experienced any serious threats, but several had received unfriendly comments offline and online, particularly the female journalists. On some occasions, these had been discussed with their bosses, who had offered support. The editors interviewed mentioned that their outlet would offer support to the journalists in case of harassment, and most discussed this in relation to contacting the police. The interviews illustrated that the public service broadcaster RÚV and the private media house Sýn appeared to have the clearest structure in case journalists needed protection.

Recently – and after interviews were conducted for this research – Iceland’s largest fisheries company, Samherji, has employed various methods against media and journalists that have reported on the company’s alleged illegal activities in Namibia, Africa, currently under investigation (Júlíusson, 2021). The company has, for example, published several videos on YouTube, as well as articles in newspapers and on the company’s website, to refute the reporting and accusing individual journalists of dishonesty and malpractice. An employee of Samherji also stalked one of RÚV’s investigative reporters for months, and bombarded him with threatening text messages. Massive charges were filed to RÚV’s internal Ethics Committee, charging ten RÚV journalists for violating a clause that forbids them from expressing views on contested matters on social media (a highly criticised clause) – one of the reporters was found to be in violation. These counter-measures from someone subject to critical, investigative reporting are unprecedented, and are of concern to Icelandic journalists, but it remains to be seen whether other actors will take up similar tactics.

Dimension: Equality / Interest Mediation (E)

(E1) Media ownership concentration national level 1 POINT

Competition is limited in the small Icelandic media market, and four big media companies are overall dominant in all news media sectors. There is, however, no cross-ownership to speak of in the media sector.

All media outlets must register with the Media Commission (MC) and send in updated shareholder lists of both the main firms and of companies that own their shares. Thus, media ownership is public information and readily available on the MC's website. Mergers are by law (Act no. 38/2011) notifiable to the Competition Authorities, and rulings have been quite frequent (Parliament, 2011).

Private media ownership in Iceland has been highly concentrated, especially since the end of the party press (Karlsson, 2004). However, recently, the trend of concentration has somewhat decreased. In 2017, the telecom company Sýn bought the broadcasting section of 365 media, which had until then been Iceland's biggest private media company. The print section of 365 Media (*Fréttablaðið*) was then sold to Torg in 2019 (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2021).

Sýn is a publicly traded company with many shareholders. Seven pension funds hold 46.3 per cent of the shares, three banks hold 17.7 per cent, and a businessman and investor, Hreiðar Már Guðjónsson, owns 9.2 per cent. He is also the company's director.

Árvakur is most prominently (64%) owned by seven companies in the fisheries industry. Two individuals with ties to the conservative party own 20 per cent and 12.3 per cent of shares, respectively, in the company. In 2008, 365 media (then owners of Channel 2, *Bylgjan*, *Fréttablaðið*, and other media outlets) and Árvakur made an agreement to merge, but this was thwarted by the Competition Authorities, as it would lead to grave competition problems. This demonstrates that competition and concentration are in fact critically monitored in Iceland; however, the same companies were allowed (with conditions) to buy a distribution company in 2018.

Torg is effectively owned by an investor and businessman, Helgi Magnússon, who holds 82 per cent of shares in the company. Additionally, 10 per cent of shares are owned by a private company and the remaining 8 per cent by two individuals.

These three private media organisations (Sýn, Torg, and Árvakur) dominate the national news media market along with the public broadcasting service RÚV.

Stundin is owned by Útgáfufélagið Stundin, which in turn is largely owned by five members of the editorial or marketing staff – in total 61 per cent of shares, but not one person owns more than around 12 per cent. The remaining shares are owned by various other individuals. None of *Stundin*'s owners are noticeable as owners in other media outlets.

The biggest shareholders in Kjarninn miðlar are Hjálmar Gíslason, with 17.7 per cent of shares, and Vilhjálmur Þorsteinsson, with 17.2 per cent of shares. The company was founded by two journalists, Þórður Snær Júlíusson and Magnús Halldórsson, and they own 21.3 per cent combined, with the former also being the editor-in-chief. These and other smaller shareholders are not to be found with a stake in any other media organisations.

Table 1 Audience reach of Icelandic print, television, and radio, January 2019

	Audience reach (%)*	Media	Type	Associated media company
Fréttablaðið	37.2	newspaper	national/free	Torg
Morgunblaðið	23.4	newspaper	national	Árvakur
DV	7.2	newspaper	national/weekly	Torg
Stundin	10.4	newspaper	national/biweekly	Útgáfufélagð Stundin
Mannlíf	16.3	newspaper	national/weekly	Birtingur
Viðskiptablaðið	6.3	newspaper	national/weekly business	Myllusetur
RÚV-TV	58.3	TV	PSM	RÚV
Channel 2	21.7	TV	private	Sýn
Bylgjan	33.6	radio	private	Sýn
RÚV-Radio 1	26.4	radio	PSM	RÚV
RÚV-Radio 2	23.4	radio	PSM	RÚV
K-100	5.2	radio	private	Árvakur
CR 2 (newspaper titles)	60.6			
CR 2 (newspaper companies)	67.8			
CR 2 (TV titles)	80			
CR 2 (TV companies)	80			
CR 3 (radio titles)	83.4			
CR 2 (radio companies)	83.4			

*Newspaper readers per edition, average weekly television viewing, and average weekly radio listening in per cent of population aged 12–80 years.

Source: Gallup, n.d.-a–c

The media market in Iceland is small, and competition is limited in all news media sectors. As noted before, data about the media industry in Iceland are limited (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017), with several media outlets opting out of circulation audits and web traffic surveys, making the data incomplete. It is, as a result, difficult to calculate concentration ratio accurately, though it is safe to

say that concentration in the television, radio, and newspaper market is very high (see Table 1). There are more competitors online, but *mbl.is* and *visir.is* tower over the others in maximum audience reach (see Table 2).

Table 2 *National concentration of websites with news content, 2019*
(Unique Users, Top 7)

	Associated media company	Reach	% (total pop. 14+)
Mbl.is	Árvakur	170,900	56.9
Visir.is	Sýn	161,600	53.8
dv.is	Mediaprint	116,800	38.9
Rúv.is	RÚV (PS)	65,600	21.8
Frettabladid.is	Torg	37,500	12.5
Stundin.is	Útgáfufélagið Stundin	15,600	5.2
Vb.is	Myllusetur	10,200	3.4

Source: Gallup, n.d.-a–d; Statistics Iceland, n.d.-d

(E2) Media ownership concentration regional (local) level 1 POINT

In most Icelandic regions, there is one dominant local media outlet, and in many areas, only one outlet published. The national media is instrumental for people getting news in general.

Local media has always been weak in the small Icelandic media market (Guðmundsson, 2004). On a regional level, ownership concentration is high, in the sense that in most areas there is only one media outlet to speak of, usually an online news site. Also, these media outlets have only one to two staff members, and they are often also the owners.

There are regional newspapers in the northern, eastern, and western parts of the country, all being small organisations with a maximum of three journalists, and mostly owned by individuals who are also editors. These media outlets are generally not included in regular audience or readership surveys.

There are no regional or local television channels, except for N4 TV in Akureyri (North Iceland). N4 reaches the whole country, but its target areas are the north, northwest, and east of Iceland. It does not operate with a news service, and none of the staff are credited as reporters or journalists. N4 also publishes a small “what’s on” magazine. The biggest shareholder in N4 is one of the biggest companies in the region, KEA, and other private companies in the area. In addition, Akureyri municipality holds considerable shares. None of these shareholders have any stake in any other media outlets.

(E3) Diversity of news formats

3 POINTS

Icelandic news media provide for a large variety of different news formats, from headline news online to long-reads in newspapers and background features on radio and television. All different categories are covered, including local, national, and international news, as well as politics, economy, current affairs, culture, and sports sections.

Iceland's news media provide for a large variety of news formats, though it has somewhat decreased in the last decade, particularly on regional and local levels.

RÚV's main television news show at 19:00 normally lasts for around 30 minutes and is also broadcast on its Radio 2 channel. The 19:00 news is followed by another 30-minute news and current affairs programme four days a week called *Kastljós*. The late-evening news at 22:00 is broadcast four days a week and lasts 15 minutes. Additionally, once a fortnight, RÚV airs the programme *Kveikur* that is dedicated to investigative and in-depth journalism. On Sunday mornings, meanwhile, there is a weekly live discussion format on current affairs.

The private Channel 2 has a shorter main news format (15–20 minutes) every night at 18:30, but it is not any more sensationalist than the public broadcasting news. The current affairs programme that follows, *Ísland í dag*, can, however, be said to be more sensationalist, as it focuses more on human interest stories and not just on politics or economic affairs. *Kompás*, an investigative programme, scrapped for economic reasons in 2009 on Channel 2, restarted in 2019, but it is only aired online on *vísir.is*.

Both RÚV's and Sýn's radio channels have short news flashes every hour. RÚV has two main news formats, at 12:20 and 18:00, 20–30 minutes long. Sýn's radio *Bylgjan* has a 15-minute main news format at 12:00, and broadcasts Channel 2's evening news at 18:30. Both offer two-hour-long morning and afternoon news magazines on weekdays. RÚV's Radio 1 also has a weekly foreign affairs magazine (*Heimskviður*) and a weekly discussion format on current affairs. Furthermore, public and private television and radio provide podcasts and are available as web-TV and radio. RÚV Radio 1 used to have regional news format broadcast before the main evening news in the northern, western, and eastern regions of Iceland, but that was cut in 2009.

There are many online news sites, with the most-read ones being affiliates of established media, but there are also online-only news sites (see Indicator E1 – Media ownership concentration national level). All online news sites have a variety of formats: short breaking news, long-reads, short television news formats, and podcasts.

It is a distinctive characteristic of the Icelandic press market that it has “produced neither elite-oriented quality papers nor extremely populist tabloids” (Karlsson 2004: 242). In a market as small as in Iceland, there is little room for readership segregation based on purchasing capacity and other socioeconomic

divisions, and Icelandic newspapers mostly cater to the general public for their readership.

(E4) Minority/Alternative media

1 POINT

There is no minority media to speak of in Iceland. A few news media outlets have news in English or Polish to cater to the country's growing immigration populations.

As late as the early 2000s, Iceland was a very homogenous country, though immigration has increased in the past two decades. In 2019, 14.1 per cent of the population were immigrants, compared with 2.6 per cent in 2000. The Poles are the largest immigrant group, and in 2019, 38.1 per cent of the immigrant population was from Poland (Statistics Iceland, 2019). The biggest media outlets have recently started to offer news in English or Polish to cater to the needs of immigrants. One monthly magazine is published in English (*The Reykjavík Grapevine*) and carries some news, but it mostly targets tourists rather than immigrants. Little is known about the reach or use of news among Iceland's growing immigrant populations. Icelandic sign language is recognised as a minority language, and RÚV TV main evening news are interpreted in sign language.

(E5) Affordable public and private news media

3 POINTS

All news media can be considered affordable for the average household in Iceland. The price of a "basic package" of the most common media outlets can be considered low when measured by average spending power.

The statistics on consumer spending in Iceland indicate that the average household spending on cultural aspects has decreased since the turn of the century (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-a). Moreover, no data is available on consumers' spending patterns on the media alone.

Iceland's most read newspaper, *Fréttablaðið*, is distributed for free to most households in the southwest part of the country, where about two-thirds of the people live, and placed at key locations for free pickup in other areas. Meanwhile, the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* relies on both subscriptions and advertisements, with the subscription cost now at ISK 7,530 per month, or ISK 90,360 annually. Online news are, however, offered free and open to all. The newspaper *DV* also relies on both subscriptions and advertisements, with a subscription now at ISK 3,290 per month, whereas its online site is partly pay-walled. *Stundin* also runs a pay-walled online site and a biweekly printed paper, offering both for ISK 2,490 a month.

The telecom and media house Sýn runs numerous television channels including Channel 2, in addition to many radio stations. Its television channels rely on both subscriptions and advertisements. Many package deals are offered, with the basic subscription set at ISK 6,990 per month. All content on Sýn's online news site *visir.is* is free of charge for readers.

The public broadcaster RÚV is subject to a special status by virtue of being owned by the state. Its biggest source of revenue is through a broadcasting tax, where everyone between 16 and 70 years of age, with income over the tax-free mark (which in 2020 is at ISK 152,000 a month) pays ISK 17,200 per year, or ISK 1,490 per month. So, for a household of two wage-earning adults with children under the age of 16, the broadcasting tax amounts to ISK 2,980 every month.

The average disposable income of individuals in Iceland in 2018 was about ISK 403,000 per month (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-b) and thus about ISK 806,000 for a household with two wage earners.

Paying the tax for RÚV, a subscription to *Morgunblaðið* and Channel 2, (in addition to receiving *Fréttablaðið* and almost all news websites for free) would add up to about ISK 17,500 a month, and thus represent about 4.3 per cent of the average individual's disposable income. This amounts to about 2.2 per cent for a household with two wage earners. Such an amount can be considered readily affordable. As for the lowest incomes, minimum wages (before taxes) for a full-time position is, according to Efling worker's union (Efling, n.d.), nearly ISK 335,000 per month. After tax and personal deductions, the net income amounts to about ISK 265,000 every month. For the media package mentioned above – costing about ISK 17,500 a month – this low-income individual would be paying about 6.6 per cent of their net income. While this may be considered an obstacle, in a household of two such individuals, the percentage goes down to 3.3 per cent. Overall, access to media can be considered as very affordable in Iceland.

(E6) Content monitoring instruments

1 POINT

Publicly available institutionalised and independent media monitoring instruments are rare in Iceland.

Icelandic authorities do not and have never inspected media content. No publicly accessible media content monitoring is in place. A private company, Creditinfo Fjölmiðlavaktin [The media watch], collects all sorts of media content in their database, but access is restricted, and analysis is sold to commercial customers only. This database is highly useful for research purposes, and the company has on occasion worked with or given researchers access to

the data, most notably when researchers from the University of Iceland and University of Akureyri analysed economic coverage in the media in the run-up to the financial crisis in 2008 (Guðmundsson et al., 2010; Guðmundsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2010). Creditinfo also worked with the Association of Women in Business in mapping and monitoring gender representation in broadcasting news and news programmes in 2013 (FKA, 2020). Occasionally, Creditinfo publishes rankings, such as the representation of politicians in Icelandic media (“Who has been mentioned most often?”).

Additionally, Statistics Iceland collects and publishes data on the amount and share of Nordic and European programmes within the entire programming of both the public broadcasting service and private television (Statistics Iceland, n.d.), but this data is not updated often (the latest data from 2010), for lack of resources and funding. These reports also focus on numbers, counting minutes and genres, but not on content and quality itself.

The public service broadcaster RÚV is obliged by law (Act no. 23/2013) to publish an annual analysis of its programme (Parliament, 2013). These annual reports are produced internally and published on RÚV’s website (RÚV, 2019a).

Some external content research has been done at universities in addition to those mentioned above. Jóhannsdóttir (2018) and Guðmundsson (2012) studied commercialisation in the press, and Jóhannsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015) examined gender representation in the news media, to mention a few. However, no systematic and continuous monitoring or analysis of media content and quality is to be found.

(E7) Code of ethics at the national level

2 POINTS

A code of ethics exists at the national level and is respected by most news media outlets.

The National Union of Icelandic Journalists (NUIJ) has had a Code of Ethics (CoE) since 1965, with a functioning Ethics Committee ruling on complaints from that time, with a total of 251 complaints being ruled on in this period. In these 55 years, the CoE has changed relatively little. It has been concise and general from the beginning, with only five clauses on “dos and don’ts” in journalistic work, and one clause on the handling of complaints by the NUIJ Ethics Committee. This is very different from the vast majority of CoEs in most Western countries, especially the other Nordic countries, where the codes are much more detailed. The NUIJ’s CoE has clauses that promote fair, balanced, and impartial reporting. It stresses the public’s right to information, freedom of expression, and criticism, and the highest possible standards in gathering information, including the avoidance of reporting that may cause unnecessary pain or humiliation. It warns

against bribes and threats, promotes caution when publishing names, observes the general rule that every person is innocent until proven guilty, warns against conflicts of interest, and informs journalists not to confuse editorial material of clear informative, and educational value with advertising in pictorial or written form. In its rulings, the Ethics Committee has throughout the years stressed fairness, impartiality, and holding those in power accountable.

The CoE is generally accepted by journalists and media outlets, even if some of the rulings have, through the years, been debated and criticised. According to most of the journalists interviewed, they were familiar with the rules and used them as a roadmap, to a certain extent. It was the same for the editors interviewed. Since the rules are quite broad, some journalists and editors stated that they mostly represented common sense, and so it was not necessary for them to look them up regularly. But, if there were some difficult issues to address, the rules were a good guide to use as a compass, according to most of the interviewees.

Besides the NUIJ Ethics Committee, the public broadcasting service RÚV has a special in-house CoE, and the reporters there are in a separate union. The CoE at RÚV, and a ruling committee, was set up in 2016, but has had a very slow start, with only three cases submitted. The first two were dismissed, but the most recent one found one journalist in violation of RÚV's code of conduct on social media (see Indicator F11 – Protection of journalists against (online) harassment).

There are no other journalist associations which disseminate good practice – for example, improving skills and raising ethical standards or other provisions regarding the accountability of the media to civil society – aside from the courts. It should be added that the Media Commission (MC) also receives complaints on the media and makes rulings. For years, these cases mostly had to do with advertisements, children's material, and so on, but two recent rulings were on complaints over editorial practices. The NUIJ did not respond well to this change and said that it overlapped with the function of the NUIJ Ethics Committee, and the union withdrew its representative on the MC's ruling committee. This feud is unresolved.

(E8) Level of self-regulation

2 POINTS

Self-regulation occurs rather informally, with the public service media a notable exception.

The media law and the corresponding MC oblige all media outlets to write and send in an editorial policy statement and rules of editorial independence, as discussed above – and many of these touch upon democratic values and journalistic obligations to report in a politically balanced way.

The most prominent media outlets on the national level have, in addition, sets of internal rules of conduct or code of ethics, whilst at the same time adhering to the National Union of Icelandic Journalists' Code of Ethics. These internal rules are not always displayed on their websites, but some can be found on the MC's website.

Most of the journalists and editors interviewed from the private media outlets mentioned that internal rules exist, but these are quite informal and not all of them are written down. They were often discussed in relation to the working culture and journalistic practices at each outlet. An exception to this was Sýn; according to the interviewees, the internal rules there seem to be taken more seriously and were discussed as a more detailed version of the NUIJ' CoE.

In contrast to most of the private media, there are much stricter and clearer rules in place at the public broadcaster RÚV. Those interviewed from RÚV highlighted these rules and that journalists working there take them seriously. A special Act (Act 23/2013) applies to RÚV which emphasises impartiality (Parliament, 2013), and RÚV's rules on editorial independence emphasise quality, impartiality, and fairness. There are many other rules, including the work rules for RÚV's news department, with clauses on, for example, conduct toward news subjects, coverage of accidents and other sensitive material, coverage of court cases and police investigations, on impartiality, objectivity, and corrections, on conflict of interests, and on sources, information gathering, and precision. The right to reply is stressed.

Most of the media outlets that reach the whole country and have news desks have internal rules or CoE that stress balanced coverage, allowing all viewpoints to be heard. On the other hand, there are rather limited formal systems for hearing complaints about alleged violations of ethical standards, with RÚV a notable exception. Nowhere is there a special ombudsperson, and as far as can be seen, none of these media outlets have rules or clauses that guarantee gender balance in news subjects.

(E9) Participation

2 POINTS

Audience participation in news mostly consists of posting comments online through social media and letters to the editor.

Icelandic audiences can participate by posting comments on some news sites (not all of them allow comments). In order to comment, audiences normally need to do this through linking their social media accounts, usually Facebook, as anonymous comments are usually not allowed on the mainstream sites. According to the interviewees, the comments were reviewed when there was time and on ad hoc basis, but normally, there wasn't a systematic review process in place.

Audiences can also publish letters in the main newspapers and on news sites. There was usually one member of staff (not a journalist) who read through the letters to make sure they could be published, said the interviewees. They added that the newspapers and websites try to be as open as possible when it came to publishing such material. Icelandic newspapers are considered very open to articles from ordinary people and devote considerable space to them. E-mail addresses for the news media outlets and journalists are publicised, and people are encouraged to get in touch. The Icelandic news media is also very open to using photos and video recordings from Icelandic audiences on the scene when a newsworthy event takes place.

The public broadcasting service RÚV has, in recent years, made various efforts to connect with its audiences, for example, by holding open meetings throughout the country for people to discuss programme matters and continuing to invite people to comment and ask questions on its online site. RÚV also organises events at its premises and welcomes group visitors (such as schools). Its online news site, however, is not open to reader comments.

Furthermore, research indicates (Jóhannsdóttir, 2021) that Icelanders are reluctant to embrace the participatory possibilities enabled by digital media. Only a small minority actively engages with the news.

(E10) Rules and practices on internal pluralism

2 POINTS

Icelandic newsrooms do not have codified rules on internal pluralism, but journalists try to make sure that there is diversity in the range of voices represented.

The newsroom journalists interviewed said they try to make sure that there is diversity in the range of voices represented in the media. The choice of experts used is regularly discussed in newsroom meetings, and journalists often look for new faces they haven't interviewed before.

However, most interviewees admitted they often don't have time to search for new experts. Experienced experts know how to fulfil the needs of the media. This was particularly emphasised in relation to certain people knowing how to perform for television. Since the population in Iceland is so small, there are often just one or two experts in particular fields. The Icelandic news media therefore needs to rely on a much smaller pool of experts than found in larger states.

In general, journalists are free to interview who they like, and diverse opinions are usually welcomed in news outlets.

Dimension: Control / Watchdog (C)

(C1) Supervising the watchdog “control of the controllers” 1 POINT

Self-observation by journalists in the media and public debates about journalism are not frequent, but sometimes occur in relation to specific issues. No systematic news media monitoring is done in Iceland.

The Media Commission (MC) is the only institutional mechanism in place for media monitoring, and its scope is limited. The MC shall, by law, monitor the status of and developments on the media market and collect relating data, monitor registration obligations and the granting of licences to provide audiovisual media services, and ensure that information on all the media service providers are available. Five persons are appointed to the MC, including one by the National Union of Icelandic Journalists (NUIJ). At the time of writing (August 2020), there is criticism from the NUIJ over the functioning and rulings of the MC, and the representative of NUIJ resigned from the commission in April 2019. The NUIJ felt that in contrast to the function of MC rulings for the first five to six years, the rulings have, on at least two occasions, drifted beyond the institution’s scope and into ethical journalistic conduct that should be covered by the self-regulation function of NUIJ’s Code of Ethics Committee.

The public broadcaster RÚV is monitored by the MC but also falls under the scrutiny of the Ministry for Education, Science, and Culture through the Public Service Remit (negotiated every four years). The ministry can ask for information regarding the Remit at any time, and representatives of both parties have meetings twice a year on how it is carried out and whether changes should be made.

A government bill proposing public financial support for private media was tabled in the parliament last year, but it has not been passed at the time of writing this report (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2020). It is unclear whether the bill will be passed, but if it becomes law, monitoring of the media will increase.

The National Union of Icelandic Journalists publishes a magazine twice a year with coverage of media matters. It also has a CoE ruling committee that scrutinises possible violations based on complaints. From 2017 to 2019, 21 complaints were filed, of which 4 were considered to include a breach of code (see also Indicator E7 – Code of ethics at the national level). As for other monitoring activities, academics at universities are doing research, but to a rather limited degree. Statistics Iceland collects and publishes statistical facts on media turnover, distribution, consumption, and so forth, and there are firms like Gallup that measure media usage. As for media blogs, journals on media coverage, and journalism, relevant media bloggers, newspaper space, television and

radio programmes on news coverage, and other such independent and private monitoring, they are non-existent in Iceland. There is a popular Facebook page (Fjölmíðlanörðar [Media nerds]) with a lot of discussions, but little real impact.

(C2) Independence of the news media from powerholders 1 POINT

Law and internal rules protect journalists' independence, but ownership structures indicate that political and economic interests still play a big role in some leading news media.

For decades, Icelandic media was interwoven with party politics. That “system” began to unravel in the 1960s and 1970s, but the party press lasted well into the 1990s (Harðarson, 2008). Today, there are no formal links between media and political parties. To enhance professionalism, journalists and their union have sought to introduce codes and internal rules to keep political and economic powerholders at bay (see Indicators F5 & F6 – Company rules against *internal* and *external* influence on newsroom/editorial staff).

The board of the public broadcasting service RÚV is appointed by the parliament, in accordance with the parties' strength. It was a forum of heated party political battles for many years. However, in the last two or three decades, board meetings have become more balanced and focused on the overall running of the company, rather than nit-picking about the tone of news coverage or discussions and guests in news-related talk-shows. The most prominent example of a board member defending his party in news coverage came in 2015, when RÚV and other media houses covered the ties of then Prime Minister Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson to an offshore tax-haven company (registered to his wife). His party's representative on RÚV's board criticised RÚV's news coverage on this – but there is no indication that this outcry had any influence on the coverage. RÚV's board consists of nine members: five from the three-party majority (the conservative Independence Party, the centrist Progressive Party, and the socialist Left-Green Movement) and four from opposition parties.

As for private media, today's media market has progressively parted ways with erstwhile political affiliations. However, there have been at least two exceptions of late, where politically labelled individuals have sought to invest in media outlets or companies with semi-political objectives.

The newspaper *Morgunblaðið* is majority-owned by a group of investors from the fishing industry today. These companies want to uphold a national fisheries policy that supports their interests and stand against Iceland joining the EU. This has been consistent with that of the conservative Independence Party that has for the most part dominated Icelandic politics for decades. *Morgunblaðið*'s owners hired Davíð Oddsson as one of two editors in 2009.

Oddsson had been the party's chairman and prime minister of Iceland for a long time. Three other well-known political-party personalities hold sizeable shares (although not a majority) in *Morgunblaðið*'s mother company, Árvakur. In another case from a few years back, some individuals stemming from the centrist Progressive Party sought to acquire an influence in media. Most notable of them was Björn Ingi Hrafnsson, former Reykjavík municipal council member for the party, and former advisor to Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, the former prime minister. Hrafnsson became influential in at least two other media outlets but financially over-reached within them, with the plans ending in bankruptcy.

There are at least two instances of weaker political connections holding shares in media companies that are worth mentioning. First is Vilhjálmur Þorsteinsson, who is a 17.1 per cent shareholder in the online newspaper *Kjarninn* and a member of the Social Democratic Party, though not currently in the leadership. Second is Helgi Magnússon, the new owner of Torg (publisher of *Fréttablaðið* and *DV*), who has ties with the centre-right party Viðreisn and is indeed considered one of its founders. Magnússon proclaimed after buying Torg that he was an investor and would not seek to influence the journalistic output (Júlíusson, 2017; Rögnvaldsson, 2019).

Active or former leading politicians are not major shareholders or board members in other leading news media houses. And there is no doubt that for these media outlets, it is considered important to hold at bay any attempts of political influence on editorial output, as can be seen in their editorial policies and internal rules, as well as the NUIJ's CoE. The same applies to influence from economical stakeholders. But even if such rules and policies call for a strict separation of party politics and economic interests from editorial work, it seems clear that such factors can have an impact, direct or indirect (Ólafsson, 2019).

It does seem plain and visible that the powerful owners of *Morgunblaðið*, who comprise majority shareholders from the fisheries industry, aim to uphold their interests within the paper's op-eds, at least. Such an exercise of influence by shareholders in editorial work within *Morgunblaðið* is the most evident among all media outlets. The ownership of Sýn (Channel 2, several television and radio stations, and online *visir.is*) is much more distributed, with no clear majority owner. The biggest shareholders are pension funds, banks, and insurance companies; however, none of them has a share larger than 13.6 per cent.

All major Icelandic media outlets have formal editorial policies, in accordance with the Media Law, as well as in-house rules of ethics or conduct. The emphasis on editorial independence and thwarting outside influence is clear, and Icelandic journalists resist such influence. On the other hand, RÚV's board is politically appointed, *Morgunblaðið*'s has ties to the conservative Independence Party and fishing industry giants, and the media organisation Torg, owned by an investor with political ties, also undermines the independence of its media outlets.

The economic situation of private news media in Iceland is also of grave concern. Most private news media companies have been run at a loss or with very meagre returns for years, and some have lost hundreds of millions ISK. This is recognised in the government's new bill on public support for private media, but as mentioned above, the bill has not been approved.

(C3) Transparency of data on leading news media 2 POINTS

Information about media ownership is transparent online. Important data on the media market is, however, often lacking.

Information on media laws and regulation are easily accessible online, provided by parliament and relevant ministries. All media are required to provide the Media Commission (MC) with detailed information regarding ownership, and rules on Editorial Independence and Mission Statements are published annually on the MC's website (*Fjölmíðlanefnd.is*). Information on ownership is also found in every edition of printed papers and on web pages of the media companies, along with information on board members, key management, and editors.

Recently, it was revealed that the former owner of the newspaper *DV* (now owned by Torg) had kept the paper afloat for years with loans from a well-known investor and billionaire, who had been *DV*'s sole creditor and de facto the influential "owner" (Kjarninn, 2020). This has led to calls for amendments to the Media Act, requiring media companies to not only disclose their owners but also their biggest creditors.

The public broadcaster RÚV is required by law to publish business reports containing information on its financial performance and on its programming annually (RÚV, 2019a). The MC also evaluates RÚV's fulfilment of its Public Service Remit (latest report 2019) and makes this evaluation available online every year (Media Commission, 2020c).

Public authorities do not monitor the media market to the extent done in many other countries, and the industry itself has not agreed upon the gathering of key indicators (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017). The Media Commission is also, by law, obligated to collect data on the status and development of the media market. However, it has done so to a very limited extent as it has been chronically underfinanced and understaffed (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018). Statistics Iceland also collects data on the media market, but its resources are also insufficient.

Only publicly traded companies are obligated to publish their business results, and the only media company on the stock market is the telecom and media company Sýn. It publishes its annual report online (the latest from 2019).

Private media companies are not obliged to publish their business results and refrain from doing so. However, all private companies are required to send

annual business reports to the Iceland Revenue and Customs, and transcripts have recently been made available online at no cost.

(C4) Journalism professionalism 2 POINTS

The share of higher education among journalists is increasing, but time and resources for professional journalism are on the retreat.

The education of journalists has greatly improved, and over two-thirds of Icelandic journalists have a university degree (Kolbeins, 2012); however, in an international context, this is not particularly high. Data from the Worlds of Journalism Study show that in 53 of the 67 analysed countries, 75 per cent or more of the journalists have university education. Furthermore, formal education in journalism is not nearly as common in the Icelandic media as in most countries. According to the Worlds of Journalism Study, only 25 per cent had specialised in journalism or communication studies. Out of the 67 countries that took part in the study in 2012, only in Bhutan (23%) and Japan (12%) are the percentages of journalists with journalism degrees lower than in Iceland (Worlds of Journalism Study, n.d.).

Staff shortages also seriously limit Icelandic journalists' possibilities for "high-class journalism". A study on the state of journalistic professionalism in Iceland showed that although oriented towards public service, journalists "are undermined by the realities of the media market" (Guðmundsson & Kristinsson 2019: 1700). Journalists are seldom specialists, which may make them more dependent on their sources (Ólafsson, 2020; Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

Our journalist interviewees said that resources were diminishing, and that could be even more exaggerated in Iceland than in larger states because most media outlets are very small. Journalists have little time and resources for investigative journalism, nor do they have much time to engage with further education to increase their professionalism as journalists.

(C5) Journalists' job security 1 POINT

Economic pressures mean that many experienced journalists have been laid off. Job security is low and short-term contracts common.

Journalists' job security has decreased in the last decade, particularly in the private media. It was pointed out by interviewees that there was a key shift in Iceland following the 2008 financial crisis. Many senior journalists were let go and younger journalists were hired to lower costs. Many journalists are on short-term contracts and there is very little job security overall.

In 2012, the average work experience of Icelandic journalists was twelve years (Kolbeins, 2012). Newer data isn't available, but it is unlikely that it has increased in the private news media since, as layoffs have been frequent, and many journalists quit for better pay and less stressful jobs (for example, in public relations) (Ólafsson, 2019). Moreover, freelance journalism in the news field is not a common practice in Iceland.

Journalists can easily be dismissed from their jobs. The Media Act does not contain any clauses protecting journalists from writing against their convictions, and neither are there any special privileges or financial compensations for journalists in case of dismissal or termination of contract that occur due to changes in ownership or the political orientation of the medium. The National Union of Icelandic Journalists has repeatedly called for more protection for journalists, but so far, this has been in vain.

(C6) Practice of access to information

2 POINTS

Public information is accessible by law, but not always in reality. Journalists often must spend time and effort to get access.

The Media Act (no. 38/2011) does not cover access to public information *per se*, except for touching upon the media's part in securing the public's right to information in Iceland (Parliament, 2011). The Information Act (no. 140/2012; see Parliament, 2012) and the Administrative Procedures Act (no. 37/1993; see Parliament, 1993) cover the media as well as the public's right to information, so it was not considered necessary to address it in the Media Act. Journalists have no special privileges on paper, but the media's important role in information gathering and publishing is acknowledged and upheld in laws.

The Information Act was first passed in 1996, but has been amended several times; most significantly in 2012 and 2019. From the start, this law was passed to secure as much right to public information as possible, with the then prime minister wording a strong message that its content was aimed at ensuring all exceptions were to be interpreted narrowly. This meant that all concessions for doubt would be interpreted in favour of the public. Soon, however, there was criticism, especially by the media, on how many exceptions there were in the law and of (some) governmental bodies being excessively protective of information. Even so, the law covered a long-awaited ground in many cases: when governmental departments, institutions, and publicly owned companies refused to hand out or give access to public information (documents and other information), inquirers could submit an appeal to the Information Ruling Committee (IRC) (Government of Iceland, n.d.).

Criticism continued over the next few years, but it was not until after the 2008 financial crisis that pressure was really put on authorities to amend the law

significantly. The media and people with financial interests began to demand access to documents pertaining to the crisis, but the law did not support this surge. And indeed, the left-wing government of 2009 to 2013 began work on a new law with significant increase of access and more beneficial procedures. There were four key changes: 1) the older strict demand to name exactly all documents sought after was eased; 2) the number and types of authorities the law covered was increased (adding government-owned companies, 51% and over); 3) provisions were made to shorten the time rulings took; and 4) there was a clause ordering state and municipal governmental bodies to start the construction of registers of all cases and documents, to be available online. The amendments came into effect in 2013. The 2019 changes added the legislative and the judiciary branches to the “pool” and an “advisor” position was founded to advise the public on procedures and public officials on how to deal with inquiries. Moreover, provisions were made to bring about speedier resolutions by the IRC (with a 150-day limit, as a stepping stone, down eventually to 90 days).

IRC reports have not always specifically stated when cases originate from the media or others (rulings are published with complainant nameless), but increasingly, this has been mentioned and covered in rulings and statistics. Reports show fluctuations in the number of complaints, and in recent years, overall rulings have varied from 21 (2008) up to 74 (2012), and there has been an increase in time that does not help attempts to shorten the time it takes IRC to rule on complaints.

The journalists interviewed stated that access to information had definitely improved in Iceland in recent years; there used to be more reluctance to hand over information, but now the law is much better and journalists can usually get the information they need. It was stated, however, that this could be a very long process, particularly if the IRC needs to be involved. There is sometimes reluctance to hand over information, so journalists sometimes need to spend time and effort to access it. In order to exercise the watchdog function, journalists need unrestricted access to public information. This access is certainly not “unrestricted” in Iceland, but the information law in most cases secures that journalists get important information.

(C7) The watchdog and the news media’s mission
statement

2 POINTS

The watchdog function of media in Iceland has grown significantly in recent years, and some outlets and programmes have investigative journalism as their brand. Investigative journalism is, however, expensive, and media outlets are grappling with resource constraints.

For most of the last century, Icelandic media outlets consisted of small political party-owned or affiliated newspapers, on the one hand, and a heavily politically

monitored national broadcasting service, RÚV, on the other. There was basically no tradition of professional and politically impartial investigative journalism. This began to change in the 1970s and 1980s, when the professional watchdog role began to gain strength, the party mouthpieces started to disappear, and the political grip on RÚV subsided.

Investigative journalism has, to some extent, gained momentum in the media. Outlets like *Stundin* and *Kjarninn* consider investigative journalism to be their main objective. RÚV has a small team of investigative journalists, and its television programme *Kveikur* produces investigative reports and in-depth coverage on issues of public relevance. The investigative program *Kompás* (published online only at *visir.is*) also regularly produces in-depth coverage on powerholders and social matters that need immediate attention. After the 2008 economic crash, the Icelandic media produced powerful coverage on corruption and mismanagement, sometimes with different outlets joining hands or working with foreign media, such as with the *Panama Papers*. The National Union of Icelandic Journalists (NUIJ) has annually awarded investigative journalism (and other kinds of journalism) since 2003. The interviewees stated that the watchdog role of the media is very important, and it is a clearly a part of Icelandic journalists' identity. The momentum concerning investigative journalism is evident, but at the same time fraught with difficulties (see Indicator C9 – Watchdog function and financial resources).

(C8) Professional training

1 POINT

There are not many higher education opportunities in Iceland for journalists, and course attendance is low.

Compared with larger countries, there are not many higher education opportunities for journalists in Iceland. The NUIJ sometimes organises educational courses, often in cooperation with the University of Iceland and University of Akureyri and the Nordic Journalism Center (NJC), but attendance is often low. According to NUIJ's collective wage agreement with Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise, journalists are entitled to a two-month paid leave every five years for further education. No information is available on the extent to which that is used, but several journalists are known to have attended NJC courses during their leave.

The journalists interviewed had not attended any training recently, but mentioned that they knew that it was possible to apply for training courses and in some cases, to go abroad for this. Most said that they had not really thought about this recently, as there is very little time to plan these types of activities with so much going on in their daily work life.

(C9) Watchdog function and financial resources

2 POINTS

News media in Iceland lack resources to conduct quality in-depth reporting, and analysis on their daily reporting and investigative reporting is seriously hampered for lack of time and finance.

Investigations are expensive, and the media outlets are most often run with a loss. There are no official funds to apply for, and only very few journalists work at most of the outlets.

Both editors and journalists highlighted the fact that there were little resources available for in-depth or investigative reporting in Iceland. On a daily basis, investigative reporting is mostly based on ad hoc resources. Occasionally, editors ask a particular journalist to look into certain matters, and journalists can ask for time to work on a specific story, but this often means that the journalists end up spending considerable time working on the story in their own time. The Public Broadcasting Service RÚV was most often mentioned as an important exception. Overall, the consensus in the interviews was that there were far too little resources available at the newsrooms of the Icelandic media – and in particular, the private media – to produce quality in-depth and investigative reporting (Ólafsson, 2021b).

Conclusions

This is the first time Iceland has participated in the Media for Democracy Monitor project; therefore, the findings cannot be compared to previous results. It is, however, clear that the economic situation of the news media in Iceland has taken quite a downturn in the last decade, and the financial situation of private media organisations is of grave concern. There is a risk to media diversity, and news media's independence and role as a public watchdog and informer is also in danger. This has been acknowledged by the authorities but not yet followed up by action, except as a one-time support in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The news media is widely available throughout the country and can be considered affordable for most people. As a result, news consumption is wide and equal in an international comparison. Audience participation in news is, however, limited.

Competition is also limited in the small Icelandic media market, and four big media companies are dominant in all news media sectors. Media ownership concentration has slightly decreased in recent years, but is still considered very high.

The legacy news media houses have all established rules to guard their newsrooms from internal and external influences, and journalists claim they enjoy editorial independence and strictly deny any undue influence from owners,

advertisers, or other powerholders on their work. Ownership structures and the very precarious financial situation do, however, indicate that political and economic interests may still play a big role in some leading outlets.

On a positive side, and in spite of the above, it can be said that the watch-dog function of media in Iceland has grown significantly in recent years, and considerable investigative reporting has been carried out. Many examples of corruption and wrongdoing have been exposed.

Professional ethos has remained strong among Icelandic journalists, and that is reflected in the established ethical guidelines and professional norms. On an international level, proportionately, very few Icelandic journalists have a journalism degree, and further education opportunities are limited. Economic hardship has led to decreased job security in the last decade – particularly in the private media sector – and layoffs have been frequent and short-term contracts common. An increase in harassment and targeting of journalists observed in many countries is, however, not a major problem in Iceland. Overt threats and harassment of journalists are rare, and only happen occasionally in a mild and non-violent manner. Iceland ranks high on most international gender equality measurements, and in journalism, the employment conditions and pay among men and women journalists are mostly equal. However, women are still under-represented in decision-making positions in media companies. Journalists agree that gender equality in media content is important, but no formal rules apply except at the public broadcasting service.

The legal framework around freedom of expression and access to public information is generally considered adequate, though journalists complain it is often time consuming to get access. Information about media ownership is transparent and available online, but important data on the media market and its development is, however, often lacking. Systematic continuous monitoring and analysis of media content and quality is non-existent, and there is lack of organised media criticism.

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