

GEORGIA

An Information Ecosystem Assessment

Part Three: Engagement, Trust, and Behavior



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Acknowledgements

Research for this report was led by a team of researchers in Georgia,

Dr. Anna Keshelashvili,
Dr. Maia Mikashavidze,
Ekaterine Basilaia,
Teo Kavtaradze,
Mariam Menabde,

in partnership with the Caucasus Research Resource Center, Koba Turmanidze, Otar Saldadze, Kristine Vacharadze, and support from the Internews editorial team, Rafiq Copeland, Justin Auciello, Kenichi Serino, Zoey Tung Barthelemy.

Funding for this report came from Facebook, Inc. and the team wishes to thank all individuals who participated in the survey, focus groups and interviews.

The layout of this report was designed by Ura Design.

Lastly, the research received support from Mamuka Andguladze, Katherine Baughman, Risa Chubinski, Yana Gololobova, Mariam Inasaridze, Aidan Iusubova, Ekaterina Kharbedia, Marianna Karapetyan, Bakar Kavtaradze, Tamar Kuratishvili, Irina Samkharadze, and the GIPA Communications' graduate students.

About This Report

Internews' Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) methodology is designed to help understand how information moves and flows through communities. Information ecosystems are more than infrastructure or networks of formal news media, and other information channels. Informal networks, personal connections, digital and face-to-face channels, and trust-based information flows that are influenced to varying degrees by news or media are all parts of an information ecosystem. To make sense of these dynamic systems a broad view is needed. Internews' IEA model goes beyond the traditional 'supply side' view of media landscape and media capacity (information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumer data, curators, and sharers), to encompass a 'demand side' perspective, where the human factor is critical for a full understanding of any Information Ecosystem.

This IEA is a detailed examination of the information ecosystem in Georgia, analyzing the various means of information exchange for the population. The report is intended as a practical tool to help inform programming priorities and policy approaches. The Georgia IEA, which was completed with support from Facebook, includes an in-depth examination of social media. In Georgia, as around the world, social platforms have a rapidly changing role in the production, distribution, and consumption of information. Online behavior cannot be viewed as independent from the wider information ecosystem, and this report seeks to explore this intertwining.

Over the final six months of 2020, five researchers based in Georgia, conducted more than 60 field interviews, undertook ethnographic observation and desk research, and conducted focus group discussions and a national survey in partnership with research company CRRC, to collect the findings in this report. This is the first study of its kind to ever be conducted in Georgia.

Part Three of the IEA covers engagement, trust, and behaviour, and draws more on qualitative research and can be found below. Parts One and Two are published in separate documents. Part One covers context, infrastructure, regulation, and revenue, while Part Two covers production, distribution, and consumption of information.

Part Three

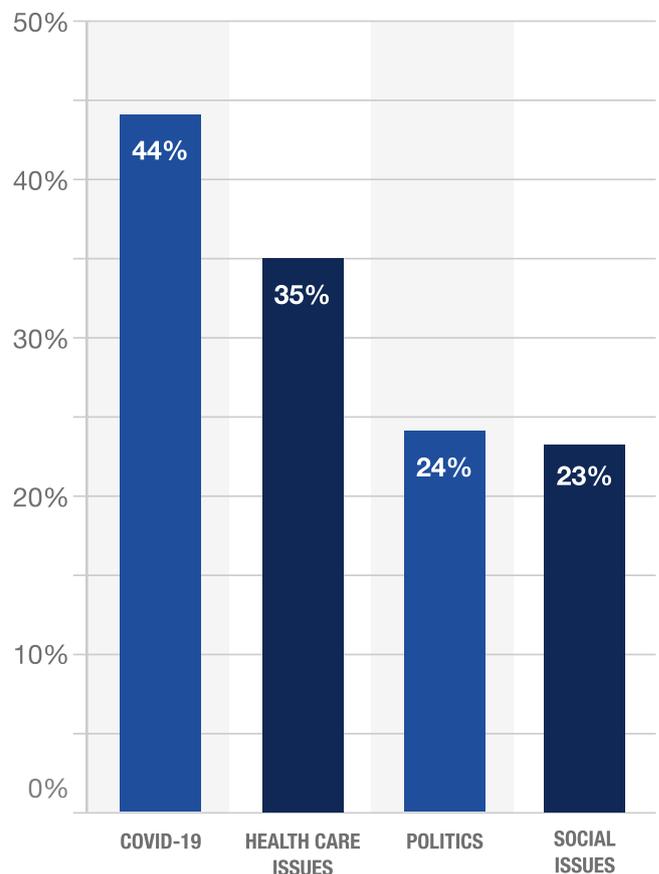
Engagement, Trust, and Behavior

News and Public Affairs	04
Television	06
Radio and Print Media	07
Web Media	08
Social Media	09
Interpersonal Communication	13
Demographic Divides	16
Sharing, Expression and Self-Censorship	18
Social Media	18
Home	23
Trust	24
Media	24
Interpersonal	27
Media Influence	28
Media Literacy	32
Disinformation and Misinformation	32
Digital Literacy	36

News and Public Affairs

Important events generate an increased need for information. The research was conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and during and after the 2020 Georgian Parliamentary Elections. Thus, the information people sought and consumed was often related to the pandemic as well as the Elections and the subsequent protests led by the opposition parties.

Most important news among Georgians



In general, news consumption appears to have increased due to the pandemic and the elections, which prompted people to seek information more often than usual.

For example, a 26-year-old man who primarily uses social media to gather information about sports, began using it to find information about political affairs during the Elections and protests. Equally often, people searched for information on COVID-19 – a behavior that seems to have become habitual for many, as many people start their days by looking for updates on COVID-19 statistics. Interest in health issues was common across age groups.

For example, a 22-year-old woman with a law degree from Tbilisi said she is interested in information about COVID-19 because it is **“the most important and relevant topic today.”**

Georgians across ages, or gender, are commonly interested in current events and news.

For example, a 24-year-old construction worker from Kaspi said he is interested in **“what is happening in the country and what is the situation.”**

An 18-year-old high school student from Ambrolauri considers herself to be an **“active citizen”** and thus tries to stay informed about the general socio-political situation in the country and **“whether [politics] is the way [she] wants it to really be.”**

Senior citizens too worry about the developments in the country. A 62-year doctor from Kutaisi said he follows **“politics mostly, because of the kind of [eventful] life we have.”**

A 65-year-old woman, active in civic projects, expressed a similar view: **“Because the Elections are approaching, and something weird is happening in the country, we are all politicized and follow political information.”**

The interest in politics may drop once the important events such as the Elections are over, as a 41-year-old unemployed male from Variani village attested, noting that he is interested in politics, but **“not so much after the Elections.”**

Users are not actively seeking information but rather rely on TV stations and social media feed to select stories for them.

Information is not always actively solicited but is sometimes consumed passively when browsing social media, especially Facebook, and, to a lesser extent, Instagram. In general, users are more likely to “scroll” than “browse”, with over two thirds of Georgians (72%) consuming information that they “came across.”

There are differences in levels of interest in news and current affairs.

“I do not need any information such that I am actively seeking it.... When I do consume information, it is usually when a lot of my friends share something and it becomes must-see”, said a young male.

On the other hand, a 31-year-old employed man with a degree in cinema studies from Tbilisi said he tries to avoid the news on politics during tense moments: **“I can’t tolerate the amount of emotionality, I take things too emotionally... [when] there is a specific event unfolding and when you realize some specific groups are behind it... Afterwards there is public’s reaction, which becomes so overwhelming.”**

By contrast, a middle-age female from Tbilisi said this: **“I watch TV all night long, while I do my house chores. I get emotional and think news over and cannot wait until the next day starts to share with friends.”**

Television

Most Georgians rely on TV for information on public affairs. Two thirds of TV users watch TV “all the time.”

The majority of those who prefer to receive news on television, start a day by turning on a TV: “**First of all, my morning starts with television, [to find out] what is happening in the country, and, in general, what is the situation. Because I get less information through social network, I do not like it in general. My main source of information is television,**” said a young male from Guria.

Many people mentioned that they have TV on all the time while they are doing house chores or working from home, and only after consuming news on TV they turn to Facebook.

As a 45-year-old unemployed woman from Tbilisi said, “**I mainly watch or listen [to news] on television, but once I’m done with my housework and get some rest in the evening, I check Facebook.**”

57-year-old female specialist of the Russian language and literature from Telavi, too, said she watched TV at home in the mornings and used Facebook in the evenings.

It seems that in families, where several generations live together, TV is on most of the time, with the oldest family members likely to be “**controlling the remote.**”

A 50-year-old man from Akhaltsikhe said his elderly mother gets to decide what to watch, and he joins in when he returns from work: “**I sit with her and watch TV, what else would I do when I don’t have to work.**”

A 38-year-old man from Batumi said he has TV on all the time “**in the background**” while he is working on something else to keep himself in the loop of current developments. “**If something interesting comes up, I will return to it later,**” he added.

Young people, the majority of whom deliberately choose not to watch TV, catch a glimpse of TV as it is mostly turned on at their homes. A 26-year-old man prefers watching the news on Facebook and only watches television inadvertently: “**Of course when I’m home and it [a TV set] is turned on, I am listening to it whether I want it or not.**”

In general, the youth is less interested in watching TV, and quite a few of young respondents said they did not own television sets at all. For example, an 18-year-old medical student from Tbilisi said she has not watched TV “**in probably 3 years.**”

A 22-year-old woman with a law degree from Tbilisi said she does not own a TV, because she is “**not interested enough to buy it**” and prefers to access news through Facebook, Instagram, and Google.

Middle-age and older people tend to prefer watching television content on TV, rather than online, while the youth, which relies on social media platforms for information access, consumes much of TV-generated content there.

As a 39-year-old entrepreneur from Racha says, 30% of information for him comes from television, which he prefers to watch on a TV set, while the rest of information “**comes from social media and Internet.**” When he is online, he sometimes watches television content, but also follows digital media sources, such as Mtisambebi.ge and Radiotavisupleba.ge.

Major national television channels are main sources of information for Georgian TV audiences. Some only watch those broadcasters with which their political views align, while others switch between channels to compare the coverage of events by pro-governmental or pro-oppositional stations.

“I start by watching TV Pirveli, but I check it against other channels too; Some televisions are taking one side, some the other side...” said 40-year-old man from Rustavi.

Radio and Print Media

Instances of radio or print media used as pathways to information are rarer and mostly occur with the older people.

Fewer people use the radio for obtaining information. Use of radio for information is the highest among 35-55 years old (17%), followed by users over 55 (11%) and young people aged 18-35 (10%). Magazines and newspapers are named as sources of information most often by citizens over 55 (18%), followed by adults aged 36-55 (15%) and young people aged 18-35 (9%).

In general, the choice of media sources depends on a person’s lifestyle or occupation. For example, the use of radio is most convenient for drivers as radio does not interfere with driving. A 38-year-old man, who regularly commutes between Batumi and Tbilisi, said he has a 20-year-old habit of listening to *Radio Fortuna* in his car.

“When I drive back and forth, some radios are accessible, some are not on the road, but Fortuna is always accessible, so I constantly listen to Fortuna,” he says.

For younger people, print media seems to be a relic of the past.

In two cases, young people shared they were perplexed that people were still buying newspapers.

When a young woman saw her older neighbor carrying *Asaval-Dasavali* newspaper, she incredulously asked: “Where did you buy it? I didn’t even know it was still published.”

In another instance, a student laughed when she saw her father with the newspaper *Resonance* and inquired: “What made you buy a newspaper? Who reads newspapers anymore?”

An 18-year-old medical student from Tbilisi said she reads a newspaper but cannot not recall its name because she “buy[s] it mostly for crossword puzzles, then sometimes glance[s] at the news.”

By contrast, newspapers are attractive for a 70-year-old retired man from Tbilisi, because they offer a diverse range of topics: “I read them from the first page to the last, when I’m done reading about politics, then [I read] other articles, including sports news. I’m interested in everything: culture, sports, politics. When I take a newspaper, for example, *Resonance*, I start it from the beginning -- political news, and then on to the last page, [where] there are sports news, and jokes, and I read them too.”



Web Media

Over one third of Georgians uses news websites and news applications to obtain information.

Every third digital media user accesses websites daily. The use of digital media is affected by generational, geographic and technological divides. Information websites and applications are used by close to half of the users aged 18 to 35 (45%) and adults aged 36 to 55 (44%). By contrast, only 20% of people over 55 use news websites and applications.

People sometimes have a hard time remembering the websites they use to get information, as most of them access these news sites from social networks.

However, some say they access news websites directly, mentioning: interpressnews.ge, news.ge, intermedia.ge, ambebi.ge, radiotavisupleba.ge, and on.ge as sources.

Checking news online is almost an hourly activity for a 38-year-old male from Batumi, who regularly checks Interpressnews App on his phone or goes to the news agency's website since this outlet provides him with "mere facts, no opinions." He also frequently checks the website of Georgian Public Broadcaster, which he happens to like increasingly. For international news, he also goes to BBC and BBC Russia.

A 37-year-old male from Zugdidi trusts the local media website, Livepress.ge, the most. Typically, he reads Livepress stories once he comes across them on Facebook, "but if something important happens, and I'm interested in hearing more, I go directly to the website."

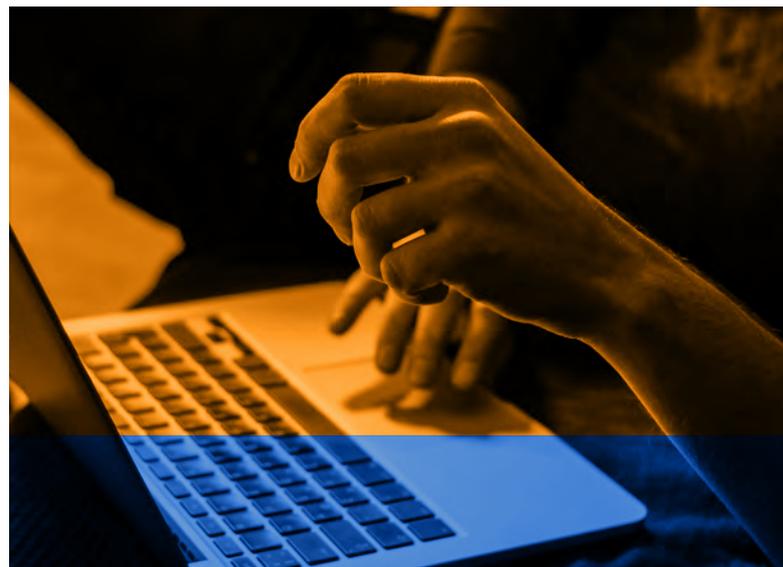
Those young people who do not own social media accounts or refrain from regularly using platforms for a variety of reasons, obtain news through web media.

For example, a 19-year-old IT student from Ozurgeti does not trust or own social media accounts except for Reddit - "because it does not need registration and does not collect your personal data" - and instead goes directly to the pages of media outlets to obtain information. He, for example, accesses BBC News online or goes to "someplace similar." For news about Georgia he visits websites of Georgian TV channels, for example, Imedi TV.

A 22-year-old graduate student of public administration from Tbilisi distrusts information presented on Facebook, uses the platform infrequently, and prefers to go directly to the websites Imedinews.ge and Interpressnews.ge, or gets her information from Radiotavisupleba.ge on Instagram. If she needs specific political news, she searches the web with names of politicians as her keywords and visits governmental websites.

The Armenian-speaking population in Javakheti, apart from watching Armenian-language television channels, receives information from a local Armenian-language website, Jnews.ge, and from news.am.

Lastly, some college-educated urban youth access European and US media outlets for information.

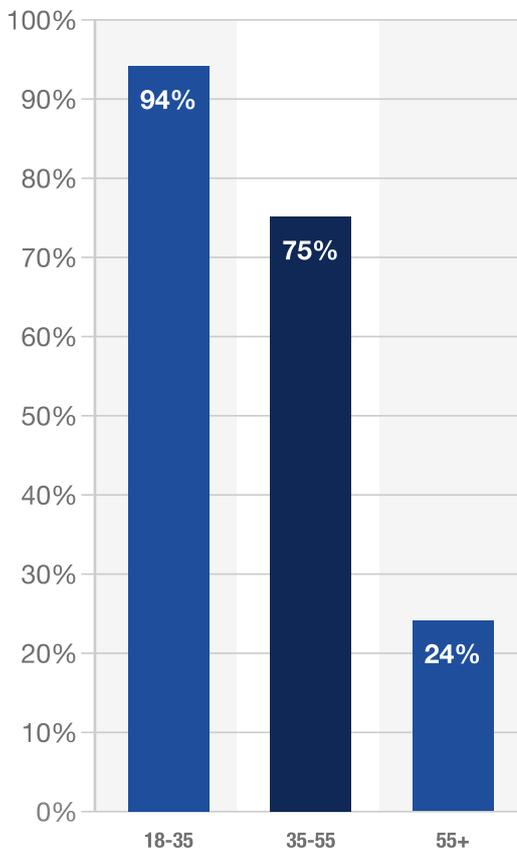


Social Media

Social media platforms are widely used to access information on public affairs.

There are age-based differences in social media use for information.

Percentage of population by age groups using social media



Young adults, up to 35 years old, rely on social media platforms, such as Facebook, and, in a few cases, Instagram, as the main access point for information. They tend to be more educated and own smartphones and have access to the Internet.

Young Georgians prefer to use their cellphones to access online information even if they own computers.

For example, a 22-year-old graduate student in public administration from Tbilisi sometimes uses a computer when home, but still prefers to use her cellphone in search of information because she finds it more comfortable and efficient: **“You have it all the time with you and you have access to anywhere in the world in your pocket.”**

Similarly, a 24-year-old lawyer from Kvemo Sarali primarily uses her cellphone to access information on Facebook, because she is rarely home and does not get to watch TV. Yet another interviewee, a 35-year-old employed man from the city of Batumi in the Ajara region, says the first thing he does when an important event is unfolding is to get on the Internet and start searching Facebook on his phone.

A 32-year-old housemaker from a small town of Senaki shares a common habit of Facebook users in her age group, saying: **“I think before I get up in the morning, like others, I scroll the phone for information.”**

In general, scrolling rather than seeking for information is a way of getting news across generations.

Social media users most often read headlines (52%) or watch videos (49%), and more rarely read articles (44%). About one quarter (25%) of them frequently reacts to the content on social media by liking it, while less than one fifth (18%) sends information to friends. Fewer comment (16%) or share information publicly (14%). Only 6% of users blocks or reports posts.

The youth prefer social media to television as an access point to news. As 30-year-old unemployed woman from the village Erge in Ajara puts it, **"everything can be already found on Facebook."**

It is there, on Facebook, that the young people consume TV news by watching live streams or clips from Georgian TV channels or read articles by various online media outlets they follow. In fewer cases, young users consume news on Instagram and will use Google to find specific information when they do not encounter it on their feeds.

When something important happens, a 21-year-old cashier from Tbilisi will go to Facebook for information, which is often provided from traditional media sources: **"I go to Facebook and it [information] instantly pops up. Because I liked them, [Facebook] instantly [shows] me Rustavi 2, Mtavari TV [channels he liked]."**

A 24-year-old factory worker from Kaspi looks for information on Facebook because he **"will get more or less correct information."** However, if he does not find interesting information on Facebook, he will search on Google.

Younger people more than older people are likely to follow media pages.

The young people rely on their social media feeds to provide them with news and are typically well-aware of the media sources they follow on social media.

Many are subscribed to the pages of various Georgian TV channels as well as different online media outlets on Facebook, and, less frequently, on Instagram.

A 22-year-old unemployed lawyer from Tbilisi gets her news by "scrolling." She says that she **"has liked and followed all TV channels there are,"** among them *Mtavari TV*, *Rustavi 2*, *TV Pirveli*, *Georgian Public Broadcaster Channel One*, *Imedi TV*, *Formula*, and watches live streams by these TV stations. Additionally, she follows media outlets such as *Radiotavisupleba.ge* and *Tabula.ge*, and is quite reliant on Facebook's algorithm: **"Facebook sees that I have it open throughout the day; When I open the feed, it shows me the information I am mostly interested in right away."**

Similarly, a 24-year-old lawyer from Kvemo Sarali does not go directly to the pages of media sources but comes across them while scrolling and is aware of the media pages she follows.

An 18-year-old medical student from Tbilisi follows many pages on Facebook, including "almost all" TV channels, as well as political pages, because some **"post different information and it is also interesting to see many different opinions and listen to different variations on one news piece."**

Likewise, a 23-year-old graduate student in media studies from Tbilisi says he rarely visits websites directly, but obtains information by clicking on posts shared by pages he follows on Facebook, for example, *Publika.ge* and *Netgazeti.ge*. He is very particular about which TV channels to follow on Facebook, and avoids those he believes manipulate information. Yet, he says he may still be following some TV channels which he may have **"liked during childhood"** and has not checked them since.

When describing their media consumption, some people equate social media with the Internet, at least in linguistic terms, which suggests that social networks may be one of the most important sources of information for young adults.

For example, an 18-year-old high school student from Ambrolauri says that when she wants to look for important information or get updates, she “scrolls the Internet” and later clarifies that she means Facebook.

It is also important to note that social as opposed to traditional media may be the preferred access point to information for a minority of the population, of various ages, as a result of the language barrier.

A 24-year-old lawyer from Kvemo Sarali says that people she knows do not watch TV because they do not know Georgian, but speak Azerbaijani language: “Because news is in Georgian, they do not obtain information from television, their main source of information is Facebook.”

Similarly, ethnic Armenians, who rarely watch Georgian television but more frequently turn to Armenian television channels, seek and access local and foreign Armenian-language media sources in social media and the web.

While many young adults have people whose opinions they trust or find to be of significance on Facebook, they tend to know these people personally and explicitly follow influencers they do not know personally in fewer cases.

For example, an 18-year-old high school student from Ambrolauri clarifies that she only adds people on Facebook whom she knows personally and values opinions of all her friends.

Likewise, a 22-year-old woman with a law degree from Tbilisi could not name any influencers but says she has people on Facebook she knows personally, whose opinions she trusts and values, and with whom she sometimes engages by commenting on their posts.

A 24-year-old factory worker from Kaspi does not follow any politicians or famous individuals on Facebook, because “one politician may say one thing, then another politician may say something else,” which results in uncertainty. He prefers to get information from media, where there is a discussion, and he will get a better sense of what is happening.

Senior citizens too are more likely to consult friends and colleagues in social media rather than influencers. 65-year-old civil society activist from Kutaisi said she checked pages of people whose opinions she trusted, and, in general, she trusted people who were not involved in politics and who had no interest in diverting from the truth.

Young adults follow or visit influencer pages when it is about a specific topic, or when it reflects their worldview. Some will also follow influencers to hear radical and different opinions.

An 18-year-old medical student from Tbilisi cannot recall any influencers she may be following, but says she is generally interested in the opinions of those “who write something and who are a bit [eminent] in some matters.”

A 24-year-old lawyer from Kvemo Sarali befriends people she does not know in real-life on Facebook to hear different opinions that she finds interesting. Some of these people are activists and share important information about the Karabagh conflict, which she may not otherwise receive.

Likewise, a 23-year-old graduate student in media studies from Tbilisi, too, follows people he does not know personally, but whose opinions he considers important on various topics, some of them public figures with whom he shares “ideological unity or some type of connection.”

By contrast, a 20-year-old student from Tbilisi follows journalists on her Facebook page, among them, *Mtavari TV* journalists, even though their opinion “is not acceptable” to her, but is “still interesting.” She also follows politicians, like Mamuka Khazaradze.

Similarly, while a 22-year-old currently unemployed lawyer from Tbilisi does not follow any influencers, she still goes to the pages of “active public faces [journalists and politicians]” to see if they expressed their views on certain events, because she wants to get “radical [political] viewpoints.”

People follow groups on Facebook that focus on topics other than public affairs and politics, but have hard time recalling names of large public groups they belong to. Many are engaged in geographically based groups and mostly interact with others in private messaging groups on Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp.

Internet users across generations rarely access large public groups deliberately. Large membership of groups makes interaction unbearable for many users and they leave these groups. Some do not know how they end up in groups in the first place but try to avoid or leave large public groups.

A 62-year-old English teacher from Telavi constantly tries to manage her social media account and remove herself from these groups: “They make me a member of a group, I try to get out. I don’t like groups and collective memberships.” She says, the main reason why she avoids these groups, is that group discussions are full of “aggressive commentary” and “hate speech”: “In these groups, when issues are discussed, often there are very aggressive comments.... I am not attracted to this kind of violent, aggressive and hateful speech... I am categorically against it and do not want to listen or share it. I cannot be part of anything, in which evil and hateful language abounds.”

Many cannot even name any of such groups or recall a name of a group they are members of. A 24-year-old factory worker from Kaspi, who is a member of several sports-focused groups on Facebook, is also in one group with a large membership the name of which he cannot remember, but knows that it shares information about current events in Georgia or abroad: “everything a person should know is [shared] there.”

Users are more willing to join interest-based groups of communities interested in specific topics. They are also more likely to remember the correct names of such groups. They value this experience for the quality of content. For example, a 32-year-old Senaki housemaker says, “it is interesting, you know why? Mothers’ group is about one topic, the group on health is about another, there are all these interesting moments, and I can’t resist, I become interested in everything.”

A 20-year-old student from Tbilisi is a member of many groups, but specifically mentions two. One group accepts only women with a very large membership where “women help each other very much” through discussion of various personal issues, exchanges of information about sexual education, and other similar topics. The second group is her university group for students to exchange assignments and communicate with professors.

Similarly, a 24-year-old lawyer from Kvemo Sarali recalls only one group she is a member of, a platform for students from Borchalo, where information, study materials, and education news are shared.

In general, women are more often becoming members of different groups. For example, 62% of women and only 54% of men are members of different Facebook groups, while only 27% of women and 40% of men are not members of any groups.

While topic-based group members come from across the country, from urban and rural settlements, geographically based groups exist for almost every town in Georgia, bearing the names of these towns and uniting local communities. Often, these groups are created and administered by local media organizations, which also spread their news in groups. Members engage more with news shared in these groups, and often, people living in the same city use these groups to offer help to others **“be it moving from city to city or other types of needs.”**

People frequently and repeatedly rely on each other and seek information from family members, friends, or co-workers, exchanging information in messages or chats.

On social platforms, most interaction and information sharing happens in closed chat groups in Messenger, WhatsApp and Viber. Moreover, about half (49%) of the Internet users are most likely to read or view the information when they get it as a private message from someone they know. For some, this is the only purpose of social media – to communicate with the family members away from home, or say hello to acquaintances.

Some even abandon Facebook but remain in Messenger. They too get updates from their peers about what is going on Facebook. Real-life communication is replicated in such chat groups, where close friends may **“talk about everything,”** as a 49-year-old woman from Kutaisi says.

Interpersonal Communication

People of all ages engage in receiving and transmitting information by word -of-mouth from and with people they know and trust.

Social circles and families are an important source of information and frequently serve as the main source of information.

The reasons for initiating interpersonal exchanges on matters of public life vary. For some, neighbors and friends are the only source, since they cannot afford to have a TV or Internet at home. Others are trying to restrain negative information from news sources, and eventually refuse to use either a TV or social networks.

As a 47-year-old man from Samegrelo says, **“as I go outside, I meet several neighbors who are very informed and absolutely all the information becomes clear to me from seven to eight thirty. I was a user of the Internet for a while, I also loved television, but I decided to calm my nerves.”**

Yet others consult family and social circle to shield themselves from disinformation.

Turning to family members for information about Georgian public affairs news is quite common among the ethnic minorities, especially those who do not speak Georgian.

An older woman from Ninotsminda says her source of information is her children: “... When I talk to my children on the phone, I ask them about information that I am interested in or check weather certain information is true.”

Through these interactions, individuals get information that they might have missed, form opinions, and deepen their grasp of current affairs. “I have a wide circle of friends and know people, who supply me with information,” said a construction worker from Khashuri, who had little time to use media.

Younger family members inform older people. A 52-year medical doctor from Kutaisi said he relied on his son for news shared by Western media.

A 20-year-old male said: “In the evenings, I hang around with my dad. I sit next to him, as he watches TV; We start discussing news (my father is a news junky); I give him information, which he does not have; How do you know that? he asks. Through Facebook? Can you get me a Facebook account, please...”

Older people have a higher reliance on human sources for public affairs information.

They actively share information and discuss public affairs with family, friends, and co-workers, and exchange news with each other and with younger people to get a full grasp of the events in the country.

A 62-year-old doctor habitually shares information with friends and family, often, through text messages and chats, and cannot imagine “there exist people who do not discuss pressing issues and share opinions.”

“When I am at work and come across something interesting, or my wife does, we send each other information.... Colleagues too [share information],” he said, adding he gets more information from his son, “who [himself] gets everything” from multiple sources.

“Typically, when we get together after work or in the morning – we talk about all kinds of topics”, said a 58-year-old construction worker from Khashuri. “I may not have heard of something, but a co-worker has, and he tells us.... this is how we share information,” he added.

A 65-year-woman from Telavi utilizes all available means to discuss information with others, among them “face-to-face... calling on the phone and providing information, well, more-so sharing than providing; sharing and discussing some topic by Messenger or in writing or by calling.”

In and around Marneuli region, densely populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis, local teahouses in villages gather male communities together for information exchange. This tradition has had a long history, but while it may be a main source of information for many, it does not attract some younger adults.

For example, a 21-year-old man from Marneuli says: “... In the village teahouses, everyone says something, who knows something, speaks, and who does not know anything, also has his say. That is why I do not go to such places and do not get information there. I have friends who do not talk about what they do not know and always check the information. I ask these friends and if they know, they tell me, if not, they will find out and tell me.”

Whether they are engaged actively or not, striving to be informed is a shared value among people across the country.

For example, a 32-year-old employed woman from Rustavi, even though she is not always actively consuming news, wants to be informed “generally about politics not only in Georgia, but in the world too.”

For a 32-year-old man from Ajara, the main interest is the country’s future: “The type of information I’m interested in is related to Georgia’s fate. What else should I look for? Georgia’s fate, or how Georgia’s future will develop, in other words, politics.”

However, there are a few who seem disenchanted with the current predicaments, do not display any interest in the socio-political news or exhibit limited interest.

For example, a 19-year-old IT student from Ozurgeti believes that nothing important is happening in the country and therefore is uninterested in the current news: “The main topics are the Elections and coronavirus. Nothing is interesting for me about these two topics. It does not matter if I have opposing views, I cannot change anything for my country.”

He elaborates that he was not interested in the Elections as it did not really matter to him. “which government it would be, for [him] they are the same” and that he is uninterested in politics because “nothing has changed [for him] during the time of either [government].”



Demographic Divides

There are strong age and gender-based differences in terms of need for information.

Unsurprisingly, youth are commonly interested in education, while people over 55 look for information on health care. The latter draws women's attention more, while men are attuned to politics and sports. Sports seem to be of interest across age groups among men. Most of them say they are interested in developments in this field, and often search for sports news.

A 32-year-old male from Kakheti said: "I am sometimes interested in sports, I wonder what Georgians do in sumo, I wonder what our arm wrestlers do."

53-year-old man from Terjola too, is interested in sports and visits news website (Ambebi.ge) frequently to check sports news.

Social issues and economics are among the topics of interest to many.

"Of course, I am more interested in economics, this is an important issue, and the social situation is interesting," said a 57-year-old woman from Tbilisi, explaining further that it is important for people to understand how to manage their economic lives.

A 58-year-old construction worker from Khashuri, who was concerned that the coverage of current affairs overlooked the most important issue – economic hardship of the population, said: "News sources cover current events, in their own different ways, [but] what is in it for the people? ... people are parsing through the garbage to collect empty bottles, food...and scraps, and this is a shame for the country. Televisions [if and when they document the poverty] are doing so in their own [political] interests, nothing more."

Income, level of education, and technological divide matter. While the middle-age people who use social media for information have different levels of education, when it comes to older people, employment and higher education gain importance.

The social media users over 55 are mostly employed individuals with higher educational attainment and higher income, who own smart phones and have access to computers in the offices or at home.

For example, a 62-year-old English teacher from Telavi said she watched four TV stations, followed Facebook pages of these TV stations and of popular TV shows, and often watched Facebook Lives.

"I am on top of news all the time, essentially know what is happening in my country at any given point, be it news or information about COVID-19. [Providing information 24/7] is the function of social media," she added.

65-year-old civic activist said she was using all types of media – TV, radio, Facebook, newspapers, and, generally was trying to get information everywhere, at home, in the car, in the office.

A 62-year-old medical doctor from Kutaisi also accesses TV and other media pages on Facebook via mobile and an office computer and regularly watches TV at home.

On the contrary, a 69-year-old ethnic-Armenian housewife from Akhalkalaki, watched TV but did not have a social media account.

A technological divide affects the use of platforms, with use skewed towards higher income and technologically savvy urban users, despite a wide reach of mobile Internet.

“My telephone is old, loads [content] slowly, and I do not want to waste time,” said 57-year-old teacher from Telavi.

A 42-year-old unemployed woman from Khulo village said that she used to watch television programs on Facebook pages, but has been using social media rarely recently, because she did not have enough money to buy the Internet package.

Younger people often act as gatekeepers to the information found online for their older relatives who do not have access to the Internet or are not entirely familiar with it.

In one example, a younger person followed various news pages and pages of TV channels using the smartphone of her 58-year-old father so that the latter would have access to other sources of information besides television. Soon after, she encountered her father and their elderly neighbor on the shared balcony of their home, reading the Facebook posts containing news, as well as the comments beneath them, and debating each other aloud.

While the majority of young users (90%) can easily find information using search engines, only 59% of those over 55 years old can do the same. However, they still use search engines to verify the information they find on various social networks or to find additional information.

As a 58-year-old woman from Kakheti says, “when I am on Facebook, if I am interested in some information and want to get to know more about it, then I am... searching for information on Google.”



Sharing, Expression and Self-Censorship

Social Media

Georgians generally value freedom of speech and express opinions freely on public matters. However, on social media platforms the level of comfort in expression and engagement varies.

Social media platforms offer their users a space that fosters exchange and interaction, one where they will inevitably encounter different opinions and viewpoints, ideally resulting in healthy conversations and debates.

Yet, paradoxically, many of the social media users in Georgia tend to avoid sharing information or participating in the discussions in the form of comments and posts, when it comes to matters of socio-political nature.

The most common form of interaction with information is reacting, which 25% of social media users does often, while the least common is sharing information publicly (only 16% does it often). While some engage actively by reacting, commenting, and, to a lesser extent, sharing information, others abstain from most forms of engagement. Additionally, activities such as tagging, commenting, sharing, and sending private messages to friends are more common among female users than men.

People, across all age groups, rarely engage in discussions and steer away from posting on social media when it comes to politics or public affairs because they fear the ire of others.

A 22-year-old woman with a law degree from Tbilisi finds that people on Facebook are “too aggressive” and participation in discussions “is not worth it.”

A 26-year-old entrepreneur from Shkmeri also worries that his posts or comments might “catalyze responses and even verbal abuse...”

While 57-year-old female from Telavi sometimes shares “positive” news publicly on Facebook, she avoids commenting or sharing negative information in fear of upsetting others and to avoid online “polemics.”

Similarly, a 32-year-old-woman from Ambrolauri avoids sharing or posting about politics or other controversial topics to avoid creating tension on her Facebook page: “They fight in their commentaries, they fight with me, and with one another, so I try not to share.”

A 23-year-old graduate student in media studies from Tbilisi does not participate in heated discussions on Facebook and finds them unhelpful. He offers a rationale for the hostile interactions he encounters: “All the energy, anger, and resentment that these people may have, due to public policy mismanagement or due to lack of access to many resources... is spent in these pointless discussions, and people's courts that ultimately produce no results for anyone.”

Social media users avoid discussions with those whose views do not coincide with their own and eschew trying to win others over, deeming the attempts futile.

An 18-year-old medical student from Tbilisi, who used to share her opinions, among them political posts, on Facebook, recently started to hold back from publicly expressing radical views: “No matter what you write, no matter how meticulously you explain it, not everyone will understand it as you intend it to, everyone interprets it in their own way, and it is still better to talk with those who will understand.”

A 31-year-old man from Tbilisi says he stopped posting his opinions and sharing information on Facebook because “this didn't yield positive results; those with whom I was arguing would stick to their positions, and I would stick to mine. It was a useless waste of my energy.”

The reason for abstaining from publicly sharing information or engaging in discussions on public affairs is associated with aggressive political discourse on Facebook, as many say they are least likely to engage with politically divisive content.

As a result, when social media users share information or comment on posts of others, the content in question tends to be uncontroversial or less likely to provoke unpleasant arguments and confrontations.

A 62-year-old medical doctor from Kutaisi says he likes to share information about culture and history on his Facebook wall or comment under postings of others but refrains from sharing political content.

Likewise, a 45-year-old woman prefers not to share hot-button information, even if she finds it important, and instead shares "stories that are neutral and will not cause too much commotion on [her Facebook] wall."

Context collapse – the result of sharing online space with members from many different social circles – prevents some people from expressing their opinions in an uninhibited manner to avoid getting into hot water.

A 62-year-old English teacher explained why she was "restrained" while sharing and commenting on public affairs in social media: "Due to my profession, I have an army [of Facebook friends], including my students. I try to be correct, but often, in comments or evaluations, I may get emotional. I am trying not to do so. However, in this highly emotional context I want to express my feelings [over public affairs] but do so very rarely."

A 38-year-old man from Batumi experienced unintended consequences of stating his opinions openly when his business was negatively affected. An opinion leader, whom he confronted on Facebook, started asking people to stop buying merchandise from his store. He has since stopped expressing his views in the form of posts "to avoid conflict or unnecessary reactions."

The need to separate public and private personas to avoid controversy and maintain a specific image in the eyes of others pushes some to employ even more furtive ways of communication.

A young lawyer from Tbilisi has a very particular approach to social media use. She has a public page where she shares her thoughts with her followers and another fake account for expressing her opinions in various closed groups.

Nevertheless, while the majority abstain from debates, there are still people who share their sentiments openly when the topic of discussion is close to them, and when they feel they have a valuable opinion.

A 24-year-old factory worker from Kaspi does not share political news on his wall because he considers it to be unappealing to his friends, yet he does not shy away from getting into discussions on Facebook when he sees comments that are "devoid of reality and not real," prompting him to share his opinion in order to persuade those he believes are wrong.

Similarly, while an 18-year-old high school student from Ambrolauri does not remember ever sharing news, she still expresses her personal opinions by writing about subjects she takes issue with or that she likes and comments on others' posts when they deal with the topic on which she has her own view, and "thinks [she] has to express [it]."

Generally, however, information is much more frequently and freely shared in private encounters and interactions, which is true across all age groups. Family, friends, and co-workers are important sources of information on public affairs, and people frequently engage in various discussions with each other.

These exchanges take place in person or via medium. People telephone and text each other to share news, while Internet users also chat in closed groups on Messenger, Viber, or WhatsApp. Typically, platform users join multiple chat groups with family members, relatives, classmates, friends, and co-workers. Chat applications are actively used to exchange news stories and other media content.

While young people extensively use messaging applications and are often part of chat groups, they have a slight preference for discussing information in offline settings.

They most often engage in the exchange and sharing of information as an innate part of communication. A 29-year-old man, a hotel employee from Shekvetili finds information sharing an important activity to boost the debate on some important issues: "Of course we do [discuss], because, the debate is about finding the truth, of course, we share, we tell one another what is right and what is good."

However, he says this happens in person, and not through different apps.

A 22-year-old graduate student in public administration from Tbilisi often uses Facebook Messenger to communicate with friends because "no other source of communication is as widespread." Nevertheless, she most often discusses current events with her friends offline, debating various issues, and discusses politics with her father at home.

Private chats are also favored when various circumstances prevent people from meeting in person.

For example, a 23-year-old graduate student in media studies from Tbilisi says that because of the pandemic, as well as because they have different schedules, he regularly uses chats to communicate with friends and "to keep up to date with events," sharing links to various information and discussing.

Similarly, a 24-year-old lawyer from Kvemo Sarali exchanges information and shares the news with her friends in Messenger or WhatsApp groups because they "are unable to meet often."

At times, the reason for sharing information is not its dissemination, but an opportunity to digest and process it together with others and feel less alone in one's troubles.

People often call their relatives, friends, co-workers, or neighbors to discuss a particular piece of information they have received during the day, a behavior that is especially common for older people.

An 83-year-old woman, subject to the influence of the news she receives, regularly calls her friends and neighbors after watching TV to discuss the latest news and often invites them over to continue the discussion at home. She engages in this behavior especially when the news upsets her. For example, one evening, after watching the news, she called several friends in succession, expressed outrage about what was happening in the country, quoted Nika Gvaramia, the director of *Mtavari TV*, and concluded: "In short, they made a mess of this country. Nothing good happens anymore. Crime and disaster are everywhere."

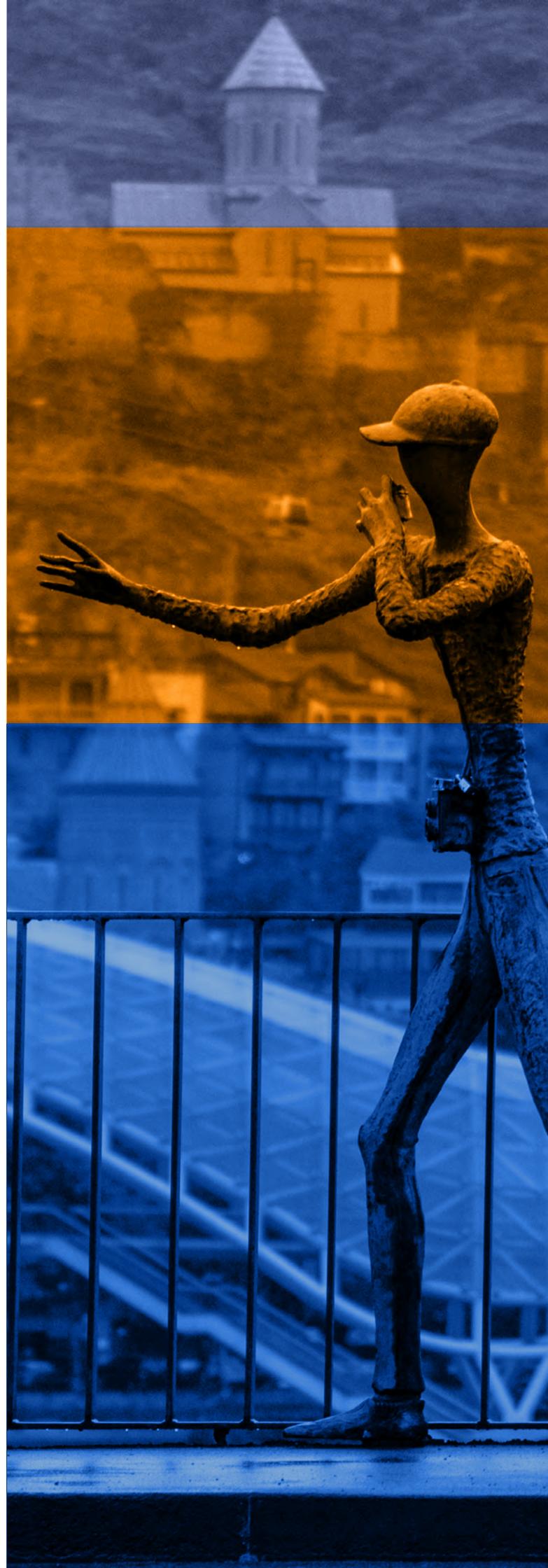
A middle-age female from Tbilisi said she watches TV all night long, broods over news and “cannot wait until the next day starts to share with friends.”

Face-to-face communication has not lost its prominence.

Information is shared in various places and settings, on public transport with strangers, during a “supra”, a traditional Georgian feast, where people from all walks of life may gather together, or in other places of social gathering, for example, the so-called “birzha”, areas in neighborhoods where people, often men, converge and socialize. As a woman from Kutaisi says “the easiest [way of sharing] is the direct contact. So far, there are no issues with that in Georgia. Street, [public] transport, neighbors, friends.”

Finally, while people participate in discussions and debate in private communication more openly, some are still cautious about discussing contentious topics with people close to them for fear of breaking social ties.

A 65-year-old woman from Telavi refrains from discussing political matters with people who hold opposing views because of “political polarization,” so as not to “damage personal relationship because of some politics,” preferring to discuss such matters with those who



share her point of view.

Home

Home is not only a physical place but a space that fosters and facilitates communication and sharing, an environment where people may feel most at ease, without resorting to pretext or formality. While the exchange of information can indeed happen anywhere and in any setting, it is doubtful that it can be as candid and without pretext as when it happens at home with one's loved ones. But home is certainly not the only place where participants tend to share information, and the family members are not the only people who make up their social networks. In a culture that is more collectivistic than individualistic, close social ties extend far beyond those with whom people share the same living space and often include other relatives, co-workers, and even neighbors.

Exchange of information is an integral part of the social fabric that makes up communities, both large and small, and while the social fabric of cities is being transformed due to various factors accompanying urbanization, some neighborhoods still retain spaces that explicitly facilitate interaction and communication, among them the so-called 'Italian' courtyards often encountered in Tbilisi – apartment buildings, only a few floors high and with large balconies, situated around a courtyard. As one ethnographic account highlights, exchange of information often occurs in such a setting. Neighbors routinely meet on a shared balcony and discuss various news. Some of them spend most of their leisure time there, while others stop by on their way out or back home. On the Election Day, neighbors moved through the courtyard and balcony, discussing the Elections and other news with one another. Among them a young woman, and four men of different ages (from 30 to 84 years old). While older neighbors shared the news that they have obtained from television or radio, younger ones mentioned information they received from social media, discussing everything from politics to sports. By sharing a physical space for many years, these people have cultivated distinct ties to one another, ties that both enable exchange of information and are in turn strengthened by it.

Of course, the neighbors do not always agree with each other on various topics, but the familiarity they share precludes them from getting into harsh debates. One of the neighbors asks the other to stop watching *Imedi TV* or *Mtavari TV* and switch to another, more "neutral" channel, yet this comment does not lead to an argument, on the contrary, the conversation respectfully continues; At least two of the neighbors support opposing political parties, the Georgian Dream, and the United National Movement, yet they do not quarrel, even when one of them insults the other's favored party.

Both of these exchanges may have led to an argument if they had occurred with strangers on social media or with family members at home. In the former case, the asynchronous communication and possibility of anonymity may embolden people to express their views without fear of immediate repercussions, while in the latter case, people may feel more comfortable stating their opinions without worrying about damaging relationships that are already firmly established. Neighbors, as part of the participants' social networks, fall somewhere between the two, the social proximity makes it possible to communicate more or less freely, but it is still

Trust

Media

People generally are mistrustful toward the media, but still consume it in their own ways. Less than one third of Georgians fully or partially trust media, while most (49%) neither trust nor distrust and 17% fully or partially distrust media.

“In today’s reality, none of the televisions is trustworthy,” said 58-year-old construction worker from Khashuri.

This opinion is shared by many, across different generations and settlement types. For example, a 50-year-old man from Akhaltsikhe says he does not trust any media outlet completely.

Similarly, a 22-year-old unemployed lawyer from Tbilisi does not trust any media outlets and feels all of them are subjective: “That is why I look at everything, so that I formulate my own opinion and do not find myself in one very radical space.”

Another young adult shares his critical viewpoint and explains that he distrusts media because every media outlet “has published unverified information or information they have published contained too many flaws.... There were too many scandals. Even the most [well-]funded media and media outlets with largest budgets, they are more prone to these scandalous mistakes and cascades of manipulations they offer us that are in fact very easily recognizable...”

Some say that false information can be spread by any media. However, they note that televisions do not necessarily provide false information, instead they add their own interpretations of events and misinterpretations.

“In general, television does not spread completely false information, television is still considered the official news source. They spread information with their own interpretation or their analysis, based on their own position, in which there may be inaccurate nuances ... [Television] is characterized by exaggeration,” noted a 30-year-old man from Javakheti.

In general, women are more likely (69%) to trust the information received on television than men (61%) and less likely to distrust (9%), compared to men (11%).

For example, a 42-year-old woman from Khulo says: “I compare news coverage and believe whatever seems closer to the truth.”

Similarly, a 22-year-old woman from Ninotsminda, explains: “I probably trust TV channels more, but I do not trust 100%, I probably trust their information with 50-60%, because they talk about something on one channel, something completely different on the other ... Unfortunately, this happens because these TV channels are not independent.”

People detect biased coverage and are aware of the political affiliations and slant of TV stations. These individuals typically switch between TV channels and use other media sources to get a balanced picture of the events in the country. Over half of the population (55%) thinks media serve political and partisan goals.

“In modern reality, none of the televisions is trustworthy. What one [channel] is saying is different from another. Televisions cover what’s happening in the country differently” says a 58-year-old construction worker from Khashuri.

A 19-year-old IT student from Ozurgeti believes that TV channels “cover the news differently and based on a political point of view, for specific purposes, as well as in favor of different parties.”

Similarly, a 62-year-old medical doctor from Kutaisi says: “I watch all channels, both sides, so called pro-government and oppositional... One is the voice of the government, and another is of the opposition. In order to form an opinion, one should watch both [sides].”

People switch the television channels and seek additional sources to understand what is happening in the country.



“In the past several years, journalism has been divided into two parts - pro-government and pro-opposition... As it is not easy for us to obtain information, our journalists report without any evidence. I personally try to verify the information from several different sources, by watching several channels or online media,” a 28-year-old male schoolteacher from Khuldara says.

A 40-year-old man from Rustavi is critical and mistrustful toward politically biased media and says, “I don’t trust any of the television channels, all of them need to be verified, so I try to watch different ones.”

While people do not trust any single source, many still have preferred sources of information if their individual worldviews coincide with that outlet's editorial slant. Among those who trust the media, about one third justify their trust by the similarity of viewpoints.

For example, while a 24-year-old factory worker from Kaspi says he does not trust any TV channel, he is still subscribed to *Mtavari TV*, *TV Pirveli*, and *Rustavi 2* on Facebook, because they express opinions that are “interesting for people and that they need to know” and “[all three] have more or less the same opinion.”

He trusts information broadcast by one of these channels if it coincides with the information broadcast on all three.

An 18-year-old high school student from Ambrolauri does not trust TV or online sources implicitly but watches *Mtavari TV* because she finds those channels interesting that cover “information more sharply, where there is more criticism, more discussions, which show more negative [news] and bring to the forefront [the negative].”

The loyalty to the televisions with the viewpoint similar to that of the user is the same across generations, as a 45-year-old woman from Tbilisi, who watches mainly *Imedi TV*, attests: “I watch Imedi, because I think they are telling the truth.” The same idea is offered by 28-year-old housemaker from Zemo Nikozi village: “Perhaps, I trust Imedi TV because I watch it more often, I watch other channels less often, and I trust it [Imedi TV] because it is close to me.”

A 32-year-old employed woman from Rustavi says she limits herself to watching only certain media outlets even though “they might not be objective, but they are acceptable to me... simply, my views about politics coincide with theirs.”

A middle-age man, ethnic Kurd, who prefers Russian-language media to Georgian media, displays the loyalty to *Sputnik-Georgia*, which he believes, “does not write opinions, but only facts,” and this makes it a credible source in this user’s mind.

Division of facts and opinions and the need for a neutral, balanced source of information is expressed by many people.

A 62-year-old medical doctor says he very much wants to trust and use any one source which is not biased. “My English is not good but if it was, I’d listen to BBC, and would trust it... I cannot accept any of the sides [i.e., politically affiliated stations], because all have their own [political] interests, by all means. As I said, I’d be more willing to watch a neutral channel, if I had access to it, such as BBC...I know BBC is trustworthy, I know from my child.”

Among main reasons to trust media, individuals name trustworthy journalists (35% of those who say they trust media) and the provision of comprehensive information by the media (34%).

A 62-year-old summed up the issue of trust by saying: “To tell you the truth, I trust people but based on many years of experience, I know that it is very hard to get accurate and unbiased information.”

For some, public affairs coverage on TV is more about communication between the political elites than about informing people: “I do not want to discuss the government or the opposition here, but they fight with each other constantly [on TV]”, says a 58-year-old construction worker from Khashuri. “I switch from one channel to another and check, what one [political actor] is saying about another and vice versa,” he adds.

Interpersonal

People often seek information by reaching out to friends, family, and others in their social circles, yet the information obtained is not always assumed to be trustworthy merely based on personal ties to the source.

The degree of trust greatly depends on the specific experience, competence, or reputation of the source of information as perceived by the information seeker. Nonetheless, in some cases, the information may be distrusted simply because people's opinions or views do not coincide with each other.

When it comes to information, kinship and friendship are not a strong enough foundation for trust, instead, a lot of weight is attached to the opinions of those who people not only know personally, but who also possess experience or qualifications in specific areas or are generally believed to be reputable and knowledgeable.

For example, a father trusted information about the US Presidential Election provided by his daughter's journalist friends based in Washington, ostensibly because of their proximity to the events, their profession, and the reputation of the companies that employ them – *Voice of America* and *Fox News*.

People often reach out to friends in the medical field to get information about COVID-19.

For example, a 62-year-old man, purposely called his friend, a doctor, to inquire about the state of the pandemic and then shared the news about the overcrowded hospitals with his family.

A 45-year-old woman read an article about COVID-19 to a family member and explained that she trusted the person who shared the article on Facebook because it was from "a very successful doctor in Essen, a city in Germany" and that she often awaits the information shared by this friend.

Sometimes individuals are considered to be credible sources based on attributes other than possessing knowledge or credentials relevant to the information people seek.

In one example, a 62-year-old man seemed to believe the information provided by a friend about the new restrictive measures against COVID-19 because everything the friend told him before “came true.”

The trust was afforded not because of any specific expertise but based on the proven track record of the source.

A 47-year-old woman distrusted information broadcast on television and instead relied on her son’s opinions, and information provided by him, because of “his education and experience”. Here, trust is based on a combination of a personal relationship and the knowledge that the source is well-educated and worldly, and thus better able to make sense of uncertain circumstances and information.

Similarly, a 62-year-old woman from Kakheti says she verifies information with younger people: “I often check with them, how correctly I understood information, whether or not there is some other piece of information that would help me to understand something better, and I learn a lot more from people much younger than myself.”



Media Influence

People are reluctant to admit the media exerts influence over them, and have mixed opinions on the media’s influence on people and on public opinion.

“Media has no influence on me whatsoever,” says a young male from Tbilisi.

A 52-year-old worker from Shindisi village shares similar opinion, saying that “media has influence over others, but not me, because I believe in what I believe, and media won’t change my mind.”

Younger people think that the media influences older people, who spend more time at home, watching television.

For example, a 26-year-old entrepreneur from Shkmeri village believes the media can affect old people more than young ones: “There are people, young people of course, but mostly elderly people, who can be manipulated by the media.”

A 20-year-old student from Tbilisi believes media influences people who “are easily susceptible to influence...some people...do not even read and do not comprehend it entirely, neither [TV] story, nor article, nothing, but it [news story] can very much influence [and manipulate] people who are not too bright.”

Similarly, a 28-year-old schoolteacher believes the media not only influences but exerts pressure on those people who are “illiterate and who cannot always comprehend that they’ve fallen under the media’s influence.”

He also says that it depends greatly on which sources of information these people rely on.

A 29-year-old man from Gardabani brings an example of his own family to discuss media influence: "My father mainly watches the Russian media ... I am more pro-Western and familiar with the Western media ... Sometimes the conflict between the West and Russia is also discussed in our family. He is more pro-Russian towards processes ... My position is closer to the West. It's very interesting, people who live in the same place, but under the influence of the [different] media, they have different worldviews."

An 18-year-old high school student from Ambrolauri believes that media holds the power to influence one's views and compares the process to that of parents schooling their children: "When they teach you something and advice you and when they repeat it many times, whether you like it or not, you become influenced by it."

On the other hand, a 41-year-old unemployed man from Variani says that although media influences people, it does not create public opinion, "because people are left in uncertainty, cannot understand any more what is true and what is a lie, don't know what they should believe in."

A 22-year-old woman from Ninotsminda shares this attitude, noting that public opinion gets lost in the middle, when two opposing groups spread contradicting information.

Among the older people, who are thought to be influenced by televisions more, opinions also vary as to the media's influence on people and collective opinions. Some downplay media influence altogether, while others think media influence is real but limited.

A 57-year-old Russian language specialist from Telavi said media's influence was "somewhat strong," and that people in villages, deprived of interaction with many other people, experienced media influence most strongly. She said she encountered people who strongly believed and watched only one TV station and were influenced by it.

62-year-old English teacher too thought large parts of the society lacked critical thinking skills and were therefore strongly influenced by the media: "[Media] are shaping public opinion, because there are many people in the society who accept what is given to them."

By contrast, the medical doctor from Kutaisi thought media impacted collective opinion in the society, but media's influence on individuals was negligible: "I personally do not know a single person around me who is mesmerized by a television to believe in everything [this television] is saying."

Some older citizens equate media influence with government control and try to resist it. They recall times when "everybody thought the same" under the influence of the Soviet television propaganda.

"You know what public opinion is? It is created by people, therefore people should connect to each other and form an opinion, for instance, about the government... Everyone knows... that the population of Georgia is extremely poor and unwell. What [media] persuasion or informing can convince us that we are doing well? We are not doing well," said a 58-year-old construction worker from Khashuri.

Media influence seems to be stronger when media align and reinforce already held views.

For example, a young man from Tbilisi explains the effect of a specific media outlet: “Radio Tavisupleba reinforces my values and positions.”

A 22-year-old graduate student in public administration from Tbilisi is confident that television shapes public opinion: “In Georgia there is simply no other source of information, [but] TV [which] is turned on in every family, everyone watches news and what they are saying there, people begin to think in the same way. So, if you look at it statistically, whoever watches Imedi supports the government, whoever watches Rustavi 2, Formula, and channels like that, support the opposition...it gets imprinted in our minds, we [start to] believe what they are telling us.”

In a similar vein, a 22-year-old currently unemployed lawyer from Tbilisi believes that TV channels target specific segments of the population who may already share the views the channels disseminate.

She believes media do not create a unified opinion, but rather influence people who are “non-radical” and are “neither here, not there [politically].”

A 23-year-old graduate student in media studies from Tbilisi expands on the idea: “This polarized media environment creates such a contradictory information field that people lose their opinions completely, not that they form or get [new] opinions, on the contrary, they scatter what they already have and are caught in a whirlpool of constant uncertainty, from which it is very difficult to get out and get to some kind of truth. Then they choose the media outlet that is closest to their [political] party interests and the party they support, they choose that media, and listen to it only.”

This opinion is shared across generations, despite of gender, level of education, or type of settlement, as a 53-year-old man from Terjola attests, “whatever political viewpoints people have, they believe in different news from that point of view.”

The media can have a role in the actions people take.

News about COVID-19, especially the daily updates on the number of infected, plays a role in how people behave.

On the day of the post-election protest, according to interviewees in this study, many people remained home, as they were afraid to go to the rally because they trusted the opinion of the deputy head of the National Center for Disease Control, Paata Imnadze, who said that such gatherings would have dire consequences in terms of COVID-19 spread.

In some cases, information about the number of infections will prompt people to warn and convince others to be more careful, even if it does not really change behaviors.

Sometimes, the effects are relatively more subtle. For example, a young student, after seeing in a private chat group the footage of police dispersing the protesters during the post-election rally with water cannons, got into an argument with her mother about the topic and used the same expressions and voiced the same sentiments as her passionate activist friend who shared the video with her. Additionally, on a separate occasion, she got into an argument with her father after discussing forged summary protocols sent to her by the same friend.

These examples suggest that the young woman not only trusts the information provided to her by the person whose opinions she values, but that it results in discord with her parents who hold opposing views.

The most overt influence people experience comes from the amount of negative and repetitive information they receive.

A 31-year-old man from Tbilisi thinks the media exerts a huge psychological influence on people. He observed that at the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic “the people became psychologically overwhelmed, they became scared, some ran away from the cities to villages as if the virus wouldn’t get them there...”.

A barrage of discouraging and sometimes conflicting information wears on people and leads to avoidant behavior. Some people resort to taking a break from consuming information from TV or social media, sometimes even unfollowing pages of TV channels, as well as politically active people on Facebook, as was the case with a young woman from Tbilisi. When her mother remarked that she was burying her head in the sand, she replied matter-of-factly: “Yes, but instead I will be calm and only look at beauty pages and pages of happy people.”

Still, a lot of people, while displeased with the information they receive, continue to seek it out, as the desire to be informed about the circumstances and events that may impact their lives outweighs the negative emotional effects that knowledge may bring.

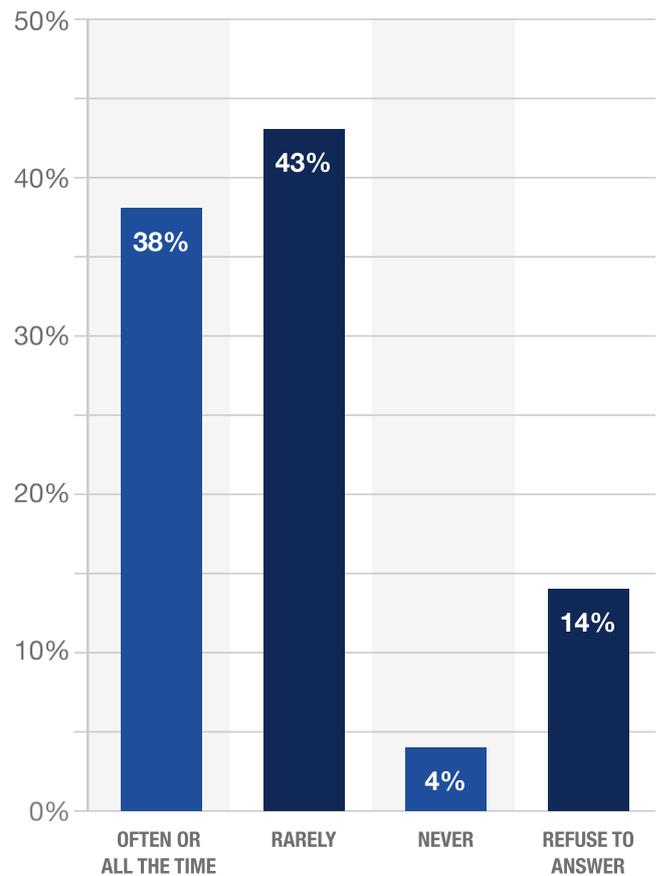
For example, when another young woman asked her 55-year-old mother to take a break from starting her mornings by watching negative news, the mother replied: “How can you not watch it, can’t you see what is happening?!”



Media Literacy

Disinformation and Misinformation

Perception among Georgians on how often they encounter disinformation



Georgians understand that disinformation is a deliberate lie, false information that is spread with the help of the media – traditional or social, although some say that disinformation can be spread even by people unknowingly.

In fact, many of them believe that misinformation is always or most frequently spread by the lay people (18%) and 23% think that misinformation is most often spread by members of the government.

A 50-year-old man from Akhaltsikhe gives an example of the misinformation coming from the politicians or the government members through media: “When you hear promises made by the government on television, and then you observe reality and never see results...”

While 28% of people assume that misinformation is spread often or very often by opposition political leaders, 27% think that Georgian media often or very often spread misinformation, and 15% think the same about foreign media. Although some people say that the “televisions tell lies.” Similarly, some say that Facebook is “full of lies.”

For instance, a 30-year-old housemaker from Erge village states “there are rumours everywhere, all rumours... for example, about actors or other topics, and then when you listen carefully you can tell this all is not true. Facebook is a gossiper.”

Similarly, a 62-year-old medical doctor from Kutaisi says that “there are many fakes on the Internet, one can feel it.”

Although ethnic Armenians rarely watch Georgian television, but rather receive information from Armenian television, some blame Georgian television broadcasters for spreading disinformation amid the war in Karabakh.

“I still do not watch Georgian channels, they only show these false videos spread by Azerbaijan, and they preach what Azerbaijan says. It should not be so. In Georgia, information from both sides should be disseminated and not one-sided... Georgia and its media are supporting the Azerbaijani side today, and this is very clear, so watching them is not very important to me,” says a 30-year-old man from Javakheti.

Unlike bias, disinformation is viewed as harmful.

A 69-year-old ethnic Armenian from Akhalkalaki said this: “I wish everybody shared accurate and official information... We want to know exactly what is going on and what to do... We do not know what to trust and what to avoid.”

A 53-year old unemployed female recalled how she heard a rumor in winter that “because of the coronavirus, [the authorities] will disinfect air by helicopters at night.” She brought inside everything she had in the yard to protect from the poisonous substance only to find out the next day that the information was false. “When I told the neighbors [what I have done], everyone laughed, told me it was a lie and how could I have believed it“.

“This is an information chaos, that’s what I’d call it,” is how a 47-year-old man from Samegrelo region characterizes the information environment in the country: “Unfortunately, in Georgia, too much disinformation is being spread. Even our family members may spread disinformation... we should verify, cannot trust even that family member, because... where did she get this information, we don’t know. Information chaos is the name for what we have in the country, hear from television, or see in social networks.”

A 23-year-old graduate student from Tbilisi provides an analysis and ample example of this “**information chaos**,” offering unique reasoning behind rarely encountering straightforward fake-news or clickbait websites on the web. He believes that legitimate Georgian media sources superseded such sources in the Georgian online media environment, which he believes is “**polluted**,” and compares the production and proliferation of suspicious sources on Facebook in Georgia and abroad: “it is easier to distinguish there [the western countries], because there are clickbait sites that constantly work on this content and you know if you open it, if it has an obscure name, it is a suspicious site, and [in Georgia] authorized media outlets dare to do such things that this line is completely erased.”

Some people tend to read suspicious news, while others try to avoid it.

A 24-year-old factory worker from Kaspi, if he suspects the news is fake, he does not open or read it, and may unfollow the pages or groups he has noticed are sharing false information. He recalls the pages which, in his opinion, disseminate such information in order to attract attention and garner engagement: “[Media] may write fake news, so that some other person comments, so that [they] will collect comments.”

On the contrary, a 31-year-old-man from Tbilisi says that some of his friends on social media share false information, which he usually reads to satisfy his “**curiosity**” even though the information might not seem convincing or truthful to him.

Curiosity seems to be a common reason across generations for reading false news online, as a 57-year-old female too reads information she suspects to be false because she finds it “**interesting**.”

“**This is only curiosity and nothing else**,” says a 26-year-old housemaker, who also does not always avoid false information.

Similarly, information being false, does not stop a 35-year-old man from Batumi from reading it up to the end. On the other hand, a 62-year-old English teacher is more selective with what she reads: “I very often clean my Facebook page of various groups and information that I am not interested in; While scrolling, I do not click on all stories.... If something is suspicious, I try not to open it and read.”

Frequent consumption of false information may explain the fact that the social media users very rarely block or report fake news, which only 6% does “**often**” and 14% - “**sometimes**”.

Digital Literacy

When it comes to information verification techniques, people rely on various techniques - some check with alternative media sources, some verify the information with their friends, relatives and colleagues. Others rely on intuition, logic and common sense.

40% of people say they can detect disinformation; however, most cannot explain how they do it.

“I have no idea how I know something is fake, but I know it,” says a young man.

Among various types of content, people most easily recognize humorous-satirical information. 44% think they can do so always or often, 31% say sometimes, and 10% people can rarely or never identify such content. Over a quarter (28%) of users does not know what is “a bot”, and 15% does not know what is “manipulated video/ audio “deep fake” (26% say they do not know how to detect “deep fakes”).

People employ different means when deciding whether to trust the provided information, they cross-check and compare the information on different platforms, they look for official sources, and pay attention to others’ judgments. Young people are more likely to verify information than the elderly. Most often, seniors check facts in multiple media sources, talk to friends and colleagues **“in the know”** or use intuition and logic.

One of the most common ways of verifying information is checking information by switching from one television channel to another. A 32-year-old bank employee from Ambrolauri says she usually watches several sources to get hold of a bigger picture and deduce facts, similarly to how an **“arithmetic mean”** is composed.

A 55-year-old man from Rustavi, says it is not easy to tell the false from truth, it takes time, **“maybe you will not find it out from television, but you need to ask people, what, who, how.”**

Younger people believe they are adept, if need be, at spotting fake news and disinformation by employing common sense, intuition, and logic, as well as by checking, and comparing the same information on different pages or by different sources.

Only a few are relatively unaware of how to verify if the information is correct or are otherwise unconcerned with the matter.

A 22-year-old graduate student in public administration from Tbilisi considers fake news to be like **“an experiment when you whisper in someone's ear, [who then conveys the same information to another, and] you will hear completely different opinion from the last person,”** and thus when she obtains information, she starts searching for the initial source, and also pays attention to the comments: **“Many bots write such nonsense, just to write [something] and create a rating for fake news, and I don’t even pay attention to them, because they are easy to spot.”**

She cross-checks information provided even by the friends she trusts, asking them for links to information they posted.

A 23-year-old graduate student in media studies from Tbilisi is more proficient in detecting fake news based on his education and employs multiple ways of verifying if the information on Facebook is truthful, for example, checking the origins of the image or video and the date it was created. Yet, he finds that he does not need complicated means of verification in Georgia, because **“the fakes are so superficial,”** and easy to spot, **“you just have to look at it and guess if you are dealing with manipulation or not.”**

In contrast, an 18-year-old high school student from Ambrolauri has not given much thought to how to tell fake news apart from truthful information, supposing that spotting fake news may be possible once you are already reading the news based on "how the story is told."

Similarly, an 18-year-old medical student from Tbilisi finds it hard to tell fake and real news apart, although mentions that she guesses the news is untruthful if it conveys overtly unbelievable information: "Some of it is so absurd, that you don't need much besides logic to guess." She tries to verify information only if it sounds "too illogical and unbelievable," but says she does not do this often.

Sources of information and headlines are two main tools for verification that most people find important in detecting the false information.

A 28-year-old schoolteacher from Khuldara village said he learned about the verification techniques after he attended a training. He says he knows that he should check the date when the website was set up, check the author of information, readership statistics for a story and some security signs and certificates of a website.

Just like him, a 32-year-old female bank employee from Ambrolauri says she also learned how to verify information on the Internet by attending some trainings, listing down various ways of verifying visual information.

When deciding on the truthfulness of the content, many pay attention to the headlines and the comments under the posts.

A 24-year-old lawyer from Kvemo Sarali has undergone previous training in detecting fake news but does not remember the exact techniques because she did not have "the need to use it."

Instead, she decides on what to read or watch on Facebook based on the headlines and reads a few sentences in the beginning: "Sometimes they put such headlines that it [seems like] an interesting story, but you are not interested at all because they write such nonsense. So, when I am interested in the story and see the nonsense in the beginning, I do not open it at all."

A 22-year-old woman with a law degree from Tbilisi recognizes that news is fake when they have "unrealistic" headlines and comments and believes fake news is disseminated by "trolls."

A 22-year-old graduate student in public administration from Tbilisi tries to avoid consuming "unnecessary information," and decides what to read based on the headlines: "When I look at this headline, I already know if I am interested in it or not."

She opens the links to the information she finds suspect when she considers it interesting because she wants to know "exactly what they are writing and how reasonable it may be and so that [she can] check it."

On the other hand, a 62-year-old English teacher says she has enough skills to figure out "the target, goal and motivation" of the sender of fake news. She said she was blocking requests for push messages from known news sources of disinformation, such as *Marshalpress* news agency.

Age matters also when it comes to more basic Internet skills.

For most Internet users (80%) it is easy to find information using search engines, and for 12% - it is not easy. However, 65% believe they can verify information, while 22% say they cannot verify the information easily. In general, it can be said that for a large part of Internet users, using the Internet to get information is not associated with difficulties.

It is also easier for young people to use the Internet than for people over 55. The biggest difference between these two groups is related to information search and retrieval. While 90% of the people aged 18-35 find desired information easily, only 59% of those over the age of 55, and 80% of those aged 36-55 do so.

People place responsibility on the government to curb disinformation.

Most (29%) place responsibility squarely on the government; Others think media outlets (13%) and the society at large (12%) should limit disinformation. Very few (8%) think the responsibility to curb disinformation lies with online platforms. One fifth of the population think all of these actors should strive to limit disinformation.

