RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

POLARIZED PUBLIC TRUST IN THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Anida Sokol

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mostly fragmented along ethno-national and political party lines reflected in the public's trust and attitudes towards the media. Although the media sector is oversaturated with numerous media outlets,[1] they mostly do not reflect media pluralism but rather selective media reporting and sometimes different interpretations of the same events, based on ethno-national or political party lines, and the public mostly follow the outlets that support their stands.[2]

Annual polls on media freedom in BiH of the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2020), conducted by the research agency Valicon, have shown that over the years, the media has been among the most trusted segments in BiH society along with religious institutions followed by the non-governmental sector.[3] Since 2014, trust in the media, has been mostly very high, ranging from 77% up to 81%, but reached a lower percentage in 2017 (53%). In contrast, trust in religious institutions has remained steady high from 71 up to 77%. In the last three years, the level of trust in the media in BiH was 77% in 2018, 66% in 2019, and 77% in 2020, while the level of citizens' satisfaction with the work of the media and journalists has been above 50% (69% in 2018; 53% in 2019; 65% in 2020). On the other hand, a high number of respondents agree that media freedoms are not present in BiH or are present only to some extent (84% in 2018; 80% in 2019; 71% in 2020), that politicians and political parties have the biggest influence on the work of the media (75% 2018, 64% in both 2019 and 2020) and that the work of journalists has been largely politically motivated (72% in 2018; 87% in 2019; 72% in 2020). The polls have also shown a growing percentage of those according to whom attacks on journalists can be justified (7% in 2018; 21% in 2019; 19% in 2020) (BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020).

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1   There are three public service broadcasters, around 100 television channels, 146 radio stations, eight news agencies and eight dailies, and numerous online media outlets (Petković and Hodžić, 2020; 7).

2   One-sided interpretation in the BiH media has been discussed at IREX panels and pointed out in IREX annual reports. See for example: IREX, 2019.

3   Annual polls of the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2020). The polls are conducted based on CATI – Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing, on a sample of around 500 respondents.

This report draws on previous polls and research studies to discuss the results of a new IPSOS' public opinion poll in Bosnia and Herzegovina on public trust in the media and media-gender issues, which was conducted for the Resilience project, from 10 to 30 March 2021, on a sample of 1003 citizens with the face-to-face method of data collection. The sample is stratified along different demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational level, employment status, region and type of settlement, rural and urban. The aim of the poll was to identify the main patterns of media usage habits, the public's trust and attitudes towards the media and social networks, and their attitudes towards the position of female journalists in the country.

The poll results were further discussed at a focus group convened on 20 April 2021, gathering seven media representatives from different professional media outlets in BiH. [4]

The publication is the last report within a three-part research study in the Resilience project, following a research study on disinformation, propaganda and hate models in the media in BiH (Sokol, 2020a) and a research study on hate narratives in the media and user-generated content in BiH (Sokol, 2020b).[5]

Using the qualitative-quantitative research method, this final report aims to show the level of trust of the public towards the media in BiH and the reasons for the lack and presence of public trust, whether and to what extent propaganda, disinformation and hate models and narratives in the media influence the public's attitudes towards the media, and some of the recommendations for improvement. The report will also compare the results of the IPSOS poll with other polls and studies conducted in BiH and try to explain some of the discrepancies between trust in the media and negative attitudes towards the media and the work of journalists in general.

In the following sections, the results of the IPSOS poll and of the focus group discussion will be presented and analyzed, followed by a conclusion and recommendations.

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4   About the project, see: https://media.ba/en/project/resilience-civil-society-media-free-hate-and-disinformation

5   For the same studies from other Western Balkans countries, see: https://seenpm.org/category/resilience-news/

2. MEDIA USAGE – TELEVISION AS THE MOST USED SOURCE OF NEWS IN BIH

Despite the rise in the numbers and popularity of online media in the last decade, the IPSOS poll, conducted for the Resilience project in March 2021, shows that television stands out as the most-used news source in BiH. Almost three quarters of respondents (71%) claim to watch television daily to get news, i.e. information about political and social events. One half of the respondents (50%) use social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube)[6] on a daily basis to get news compared to one third (33%) who follow online media daily, such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs, to obtain information. On the other hand, 44% of respondents obtain news daily from people they predominantly know, such as family, friends or colleagues, while only a fifth of respondents (21%) listen to the radio and only 5% read print newspapers and magazines daily to obtain news. However, the results indicate significant differences in the use of information sources according to age. Respondents belonging to the age group of 60 and above are more likely to watch television on a daily basis to obtain news (88%) than those in the 18–29-year-old age group (45%). Regarding other demographic characteristics, television is watched across all educational levels daily – somewhat more among those with primary education or less (77%) compared to those with higher education (60%), both in rural (72%) and urban (71%) settings, among the employed (65%) and unemployed (68%), and among those who do not trust the media (69%) and who trust the media in general (74%).

Graph 1. *Media usage: How often do you use the following sources to get news, i.e. information about political and social events?*

	Every day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Less often than monthly	Never	Don't know / Not sure / Refusal
Television	71.4	16.0	4.8	3.9	3.5	0.4
Radio	21.2	14.5	10.8	15.0	35.8	2.6
Print newspapers or magazines	4.6	7.4	8.4	13.2	62.5	3.9
Online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs)	32.6	17.1	9.3	9.5	28.9	2.6
Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, etc.)	49.5	11.8	4.5	4.5	26.9	2.7
People you predominantly know in person: family, friends or colleagues	43.6	22.8	14.6	10.1	7.1	1.9

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

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6   *In BiH, the most important social network is Facebook, followed by Instagram. There are around 1.8 million Facebook users and around a million Instagram users. Data obtained from statista.com.*

Younger generations, in the group age 18–29, more often obtain information following social networks on a daily basis (84%) and online media (49%) on a daily basis compared to those in the age group 60 and above (14% and 12%, respectively). Those with a higher level of education report following online media and social networks daily (54%, online media; 67%, social networks) more than those with primary education or less (16%, online media; 36%, social networks), more among those with higher household income (48%, online media; 60%, social networks) than lower (15%, online media; 30%, social networks).[7] Online media are somewhat more followed by those in urban (38%) than in rural (28%) settings, while social networks more by those who do not trust the media (57%) compared to those who trust them (43%).

Graph 2. *Sources of information: And what is your main source of information?*

Television	49%
Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)	25%
Online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs)	15%
People you predominantly know in person: family, friends, or colleagues	6%
Radio	1%
Print newspapers and magazines	1%
Refusal	3%
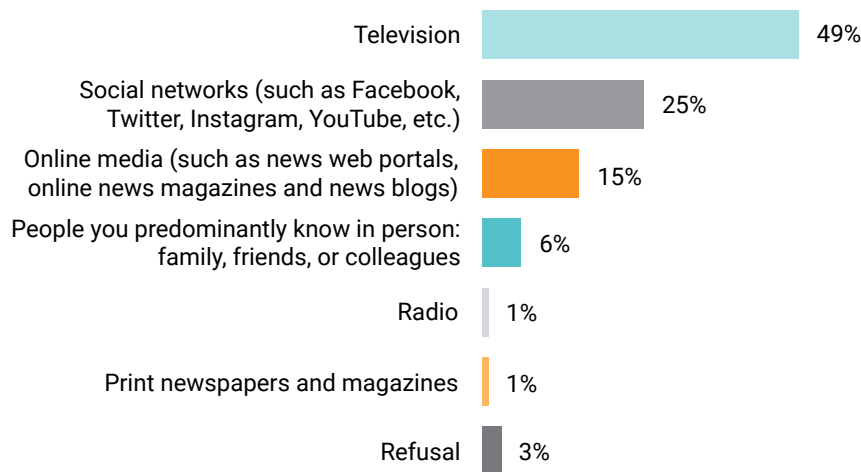
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The IPSOS poll results also illustrate that television is the primary source of information for half of the respondents (49%), followed by social networks (25%) and online media (15%), while radio and print are far behind, at a single-digit level. Television is the most important source of information for those in the age group 60 and above (82%), while its relevance as a source of information decreases among lower age groups – 45–59 (59%), 30–44 (36%) and 18–29 (12%). It is also a more important source of information for those with primary or lower level of education (65%) compared to those with higher education (34%), with less income (71%) compared to those with higher (31%), for those who trust the media (56%) compared to those who do not trust the media (43%). Social networks and online media, on the other hand, are more important sources of information for younger generations (age group 18–29, 54%, 26%, respectively) than for older ones (age group 60 +, 3% both social networks and online media) and for those with higher income (35%, 16%, respectively) than with lower (12%, 8%, respectively).

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7   *Higher household income refers to more than 1500 BAM (around 760 euro) and lower to less than 600 BAM (300 euro) a month.*

Overall, the results reveal that almost three quarters of respondents watch television on a daily basis to obtain news and half of them consider it the most important source of information. Such results are in line with other studies according to which television is still considered the dominant source of information in BiH, especially among the older population (Petković and Hodžić, 2020; 15). The poll on media freedoms for 2020, for example, showed that television is the first choice as a source of information for 54% of the population, followed by the internet (38%) and the radio (4%) (BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020; 29).

The poll on the level of information of citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic in BiH, conducted by IPSOS and UNICEF in 2020, has demonstrated that people's most important source of information on COVID-19 was television (79%), followed by web portals (30%), social networks (23%) and non-formal sources of information, such as social gatherings (15%) (UNICEF, 2020: 13).[8] Indeed, global studies have indicated that the importance of television as a source of information has 'revived' during the COVID-19 pandemic and its use increased during 2020 (Newman et al., 2020: 9).

Studies have also shown that the use of online and social media in 2020 also substantially increased (Newman et al., 2020: 9). For younger generations, the internet, including social and online media, has been the most important source of information (Sokol, 2019: 48; Galan et al., 2020: 3). The internet has been the main source of information on COVID-19 in BiH for respondents in the age groups 31−34 years (77.2%), 25−30 (76.7%), and 20−24 (66.7%), a poll conducted by the Regulatory Agency for Communication and UNICEF in 2020 revealed (CRA, 2020: 4). [9]

According to the focus group participants, the results of the IPSOS poll (March 2021) were predictable; however, one representative of an online media outlet said that he had expected a better positioning of the online media and a decline in television as a news source due to the rise of technology.[10] The IPSOS poll results demonstrate that social networks rather than online media are the second most important source of information after television and are used more on a daily basis for obtaining news than online media. However, such results should be taken with caution since previous studies on the media consumption habits of young people (18−30 years of age) have shown, for example, that young people sometimes do not make distinctions between professional online media and social networks, that they also obtain news from the social media accounts of professional media outlets on the internet, and that local online portals are also important sources of information for

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8   The poll included 3000 respondents, combining CAWI (Computer-assisted web interviewing) and CATI (Computer-assisted telephone interviewing) methods.

9   A poll on the level of information of young people on COVID-19, conducted by the Regulatory Agency for Communication and UNICEF, indicated that overall, the internet stands out as the most important source of information for 64% of respondents (3445 respondents), including different age groups. However, such high internet usage can be explained by the fact that the questionnaire was sent through Viber and Facebook and that 75% of the respondents are under 35 years of age.

10   Focus group participant 2.

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them (Sokol, 2019a: 48-51). There is a tendency among younger generations to scroll through social networks consuming information that "comes up" rather than searching for information and relying on information shared by their friends on social networks (Sokol, 2019a: 48-51).

The poll results also show that the significance of television decreases among younger age groups, among those with higher income and education and those who have less trust in the media. Such results are in line with global trends among young people to disregard traditional sources of information, which points to the need for traditional media to find alternative ways to attract younger generations (Galan et al., 2020: 4). Unsurprisingly, only 1% of respondents consider radio and print as their main source of information which attests to the global trend of the decline of the print media, which has been particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Newman et al., 2020: 9). Although radio is not considered a relevant source of information, according to the poll, other studies have pointed out that it is used for entertainment and relaxation (Sokol, 2019b: 50).

3. MEDIA TRUST – PUBLIC DIVIDED OVER THEIR TRUST IN THE MEDIA

The poll results illustrate a sharp polarization of the public in BiH regarding their trust in the media: half of the respondents, in sum, claim to not trust the media, while nearly as many claim they trust the media (49% vs 47% ratio in favour of distrust). More specifically, the results indicate that 41% of the respondents said that they mostly trust the media, such as newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources, when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly, and on the other hand, 35% said that they mainly do not trust the media. Only 7% of the respondents said that they trust the media completely, and 14% said that they do not trust the media at all.

Graph 3. *Trust in the media: In general, how much trust do you have in the media – such as newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly in BIH?*

Don't have trust at all	14%
Mainly don't have trust	35%
Sum: Don't have trust	49%
Sum: have trust	47%
Mainly have trust	41%
Completely have trust	7%
Refusal	3%
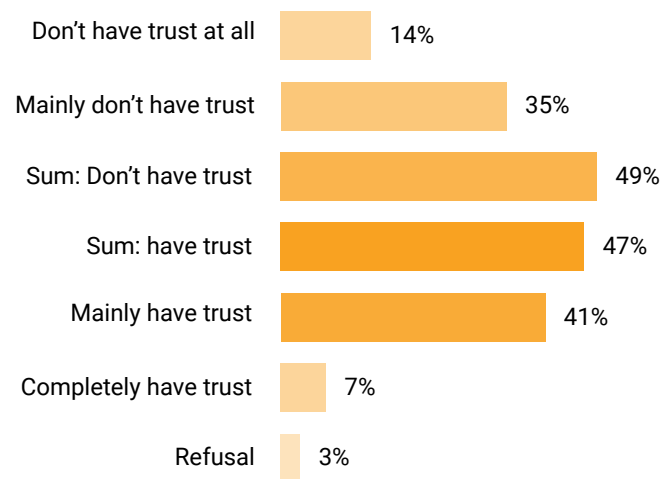
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When compared with the results of the poll conducted by the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in 2021, in which 76% of the respondents say they trust the media, the data obtained in this IPSOS study display a lower percentage of the overall trust in the media in BiH. The reasons for this can be found in the different designs of the questionnaires, since the public, in the case of the poll conducted by the BH Journalists Association, can exhibit a higher trust in the media when confronted with questions about their trust in other actors, such as public institutions and political figures. However, the BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung poll (2020) points to a high percentage of negative attitudes towards the media in general, such as that the work of journalists is politically motivated.

Polarization of trust is present along different demographic categories, but the IPSOS poll results indicate, however, a slight tendency towards a decrease in distrust in the media in higher age groups – in the age group 60 and above, 28% of the respondents claim that they mainly do not trust the media compared to the 18–29 age group in which 40% said they mainly do not trust the media. Polarization of trust is visible also within the three main ethno-national groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats), but a higher percentage of distrust is present in the group Others[11] – in which 60%, in sum, do not trust the media, compared to 30% that, in sum, trust the media. Such results can be explained by the overall fragmentation of the media along ethno-national lines, in which the mainstream media usually reflect the interests of the three ethno-national groups and their political parties, disregarding the others. Research has also pointed to the overall exclusion of minority groups on broadcasters (CRA, 2019: 40).

Generally, levels of trust are higher among those who prefer traditional media such as TV, radio and the press. Among those who follow traditional media, 28% mainly do not trust the media, and 48% mainly have trust compared to those who follow modern media, among which 43% mainly do not trust the media and 36% mainly have trust. Such results can be explained with a higher percentage of disinformation and problematic media content in the modern media, i.e. online (Cvjetićanin et al., 2019: Sokol 2020a: 7) and with the tendency that those who follow modern media, mostly younger generations, exhibit more distrust generally towards institutions—including the media, but also have more knowledge on disinformation since most of the media and information literacy educational activities of the non-governmental sector in BiH targets younger age groups (Hodžić, Petković and Bašić-Hrvatin: 2019; Sokol, 2019a).

The focus group (FG) participants pointed that one of the main reasons for the decrease in trust in the media is the existence of numerous anonymous portals that spread disinformation and propaganda both for financial and political purposes and which, according to them, mar the image of professional media outlets. The Communications Regulatory Agency has been effective in regulating the content of TV and radio stations to some extent, but, according to the focus group participants, the internet has posed news challenges to the media sector, and there is a lack of efficient regulatory frameworks for online media.

> *"With the advent of the internet, it turned out that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as I also see in the surrounding countries, it was as if we were not ready for this degree of democracy… Today, there is no political party that does not have at least two portals… I think that with the development of such online media, we are in a situation in which the public's trust in the media has weakened. I think we urgently need some regulation here."* (FG participant 1)

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11   This group includes minorities and those who do not self-identify according to the constituent categories – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats.

The focus group participants see the other reason for the polarized trust in the media in the lack of financial sustainability of professional media that lower the quality of their reporting. Research studies have indeed identified numerous obstacles towards independent journalism, with some being the modest size of advertising markets (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 9). The focus group participants stress the need to establish sustainable financial models for professional and independent media outlets in BIH.

3.1.   Trust in different types of media – television as the most trusted source

Respondents have the most trust in television as a reliable source of news and information; nearly six out of ten claim they mainly or completely trust television to be a reliable source of information (57%). Respondents are divided over whether other types of media represent trusted sources of news and information. International media (such as BBC, CNN, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche-Welle, Euronews, Voice of America, Sputnik), investigative reporting outlets (such as the Center for Investigative Reporting, BIRN – The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Zurnal.info) and radio have the trust of two out of five respondents (44%, 39% and 44%, respectively), while nearly as many do not trust them (41%, 41% and 40%, respectively). Similarly, approximately one third trust the press (34%), while more than two fifths consider it untrustworthy (44%). There is a higher percentage of distrust towards social networks compared to trust (50% vs 33%) and online media (48% vs 33%), which, as pointed out above, could be explained by the lack of effective (self)regulation of these media and large volumes of disinformation online.

Graph 4. *Reliable sources of information: To what extent do you trust each of the following media is a reliable source of news and information?*
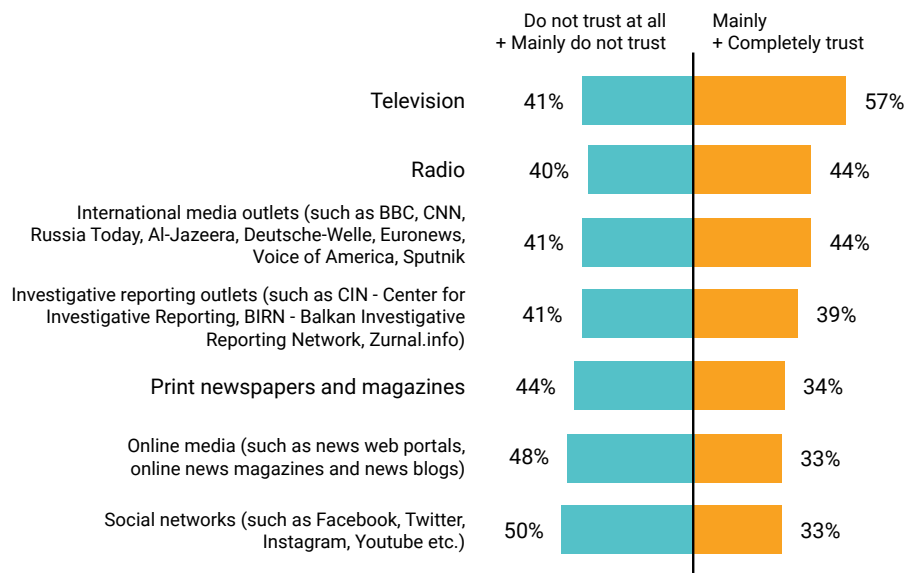
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Trust in television increases with age, as in the age group 60 and above, 67% claim to completely or mainly trust the media, compared to the 18–29 age group, in which 47% claim to do so. Trust in television is more present among unemployed (57%) than employed (49%), among those with primary education or lower (66%) compared with those with higher (56%). On the other hand, among young generations, in the 18–29 age group, there is a tendency to trust social networks (45%) and online media (46%) more compared to higher age groups, 60 and above (16%, 17%, respectively). Respondents with a higher level of education and higher household income trust online media more (40%, 39%, respectively) compared to those with primary education or lower and lower income (24%, 18%, respectively). These results could be explained by media consumption habits because those in higher age groups and with lower levels of education follow TV more than those with higher levels of education and younger age.

Similar findings were obtained when citizens were asked to rank the mentioned types of media from the one they trust the most to the one they trust the least. Namely, television is the source that over a quarter of the respondents ranked as the first source they trust the most (28%), followed by radio (13%), international news outlets (12%) and print newspapers and magazines (11%). In contrast, 7% of the respondents ranked social networks as the first source of information they trust the most, and only 5% named online media and investigative reporting outlets.

Graph 5. *Most trusted sources of information: And now, please rank the following sources from the one you trust the most to the one you trust the least when it comes to the news and information. - Rank 1*

Source	Percentage
Television	28%
Radio	13%
International media outlets (such as BBC, CNN, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera, Deutsche-Welle, Euronews, Voice of America, Sputnik	12%
Print newspapers and magazines	11%
Social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)	7%
Online media (such as news web portals, online news magazines and news blogs)	5%
Investigative reporting outlets (such as CIN - Center for Investigative Reporting, BIRN - Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Zurnal.info)	5%
Refusal	19%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

These findings align with other research studies where television is indicated as the most trusted source among the media in BiH. For example, the UNICEF research showed that in terms of trust in the information on COVID-19, television is the most trusted among the media (22% of respondents have complete trust, 24% mainly have trust) above radio, social networks, print and online media and even above independent experts, but below friends and families and the World Health Organization (UNICEF, 2020: 17).

The IPSOS results show lower levels of trust in social networks and online media but also in investigative media outlets that have been singled out as good examples of independent journalism in BiH (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 23; IREX, 2019: 7), compared to TV, radio, international news outlets and print. Such attitudes can result from a lack of knowledge about these media outlets, lack of trust in foreign-funded media, and the overall lack of knowledge of journalistic standards and investigative reporting. Research studies have indicated that, for example, young people are critical towards media reporting in BiH but are not able to explain journalistic standards and work procedures, such as fact-checking, which is an essential element of investigative journalism (Sokol, 2019a: 72).

The Ipsos results also demonstrate that respondents show similar levels of trust towards social networks and online media, which could point to the lack of distinctions between professional online media and non-professional internet and other social platforms. Focus group participants raised concerns that the lines between professional and non-professional media outlets and even social networks have been blurred, due to which it is difficult for citizens to distinguish professional media from non-professional ones, and there is a tendency of the public to treat them all alike. This is particularly problematic in a country where media and information literacy are not part of formal education and one of the answers the focus group participants see in educating citizens how to recognize professional media reporting and classifying professional media outlets from the non-professional ones.

However, research studies have shown that problematic media content is also present among the traditional media, and a number of them have been singled out as examples of propaganda, disinformation and hate models (Sokol, 2020a). As one focus group participant noted:

> *"There is no doubt that these portals have caused enormous damage to journalism, and to media literacy in general, and to culture and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina in general. But I think that the greater damage was done when other media, relevant media, started the race with those portals for readers. When they started adapting their titles to clickbait, when they started shortening texts and their content."* (FG participant 5)

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3.2. Reasons for trust: Having the latest news and information as the most important reason for trust

Looking at the first answers as well as when all the answers are considered, the main reason why respondents consider some media trustworthy is that they have the latest news and information (52%). Publishing accurate and verified information and being impartial and fair in reporting come next (49% and 46%, respectively). Other reasons are that they allow people to comment on news and information (28%), that they promote values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands (27%), and they trust the journalists who work there (26%), while 15% of respondents said that they do not know/ cannot answer. Even though providing the latest news and information is one of the most important roles of the media, it should not be ranked as the main criterion of trust in a news outlet compared to other criteria such as accurate and verified information and impartial and fair reporting. Having the possibility to comment on news and information and promote values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands are also not relevant criteria for accuracy. Such answers provide insights into the levels of media and information literacy skills of citizens, which are considered to be poor due to lack of media and information literacy in formal education (Petković, Hodžić, and Bašić Hrvatin 2019: 11; Sokol, 2020a: 71). Even though media and information literary workshops mostly target young people and are urban-centred (Petković, Hodžić and Bašić Hrvatin, 2019, 1), no significant differences in reasons for trust in media outlets can be singled out among age groups, levels of education and urban and rural settings.[12] In addition, the fact that 27% of respondents consider the promotion of values, ideas and views that correspond to their stands as an important reason for their trust in the media can attest to the polarized public based on ethno-national or political stands. However, these results should be taken with caution since they were based on already given options. More research is needed to assess the public's level of media and information literacy skills in BiH.

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12   *That the media publish the latest news and information is considered as a more important reason of trust among those in rural settings (59%) rather than in urban (42%). However, that the media publish accurate and verified information and are impartial and fair in their reporting are considered more important reasons of trust in rural (52%; 51%) than urban settings (44%; 40%).*

Graph 6. *Reasons for trust: You may trust some media outlets more than others. Thinking about the media you consider the most trustworthy, what are the main reasons you trust them?*
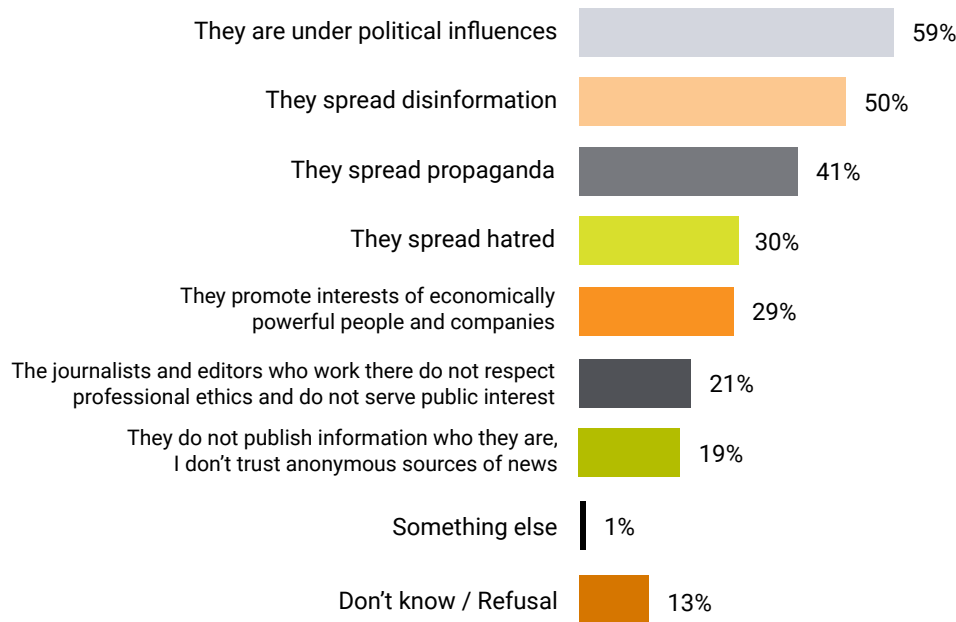
Reason	%
They always have the latest news and information	52%
They publish accurate and verified information	49%
They are impartial and fair in their reporting	46%
They allow people to comment on news and information	28%
They promote values, ideas and views that correspond with my stands	27%
I trust the journalists who work there	22%
They are from my hometown	10%
Something else	1%
None / Don't trust them	0%
Don't know / Refusal	15%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

3.3. Reasons for distrust – political influence as the main reason for distrust

The main reasons for distrust are related to the perception that certain media are under political influence and that they spread disinformation (59% and 50%, respectively). In addition, more than two fifths do not trust certain media outlets because they believe they spread propaganda (41%), because they spread hatred (30%) and promote the interests of economically powerful people and companies (29%). Other reasons for distrust are that journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and that the media do not serve the public interest (21%) and that they do not publish information on who they are (19%). Such attitudes are present equally among different age groups and educational levels, even though some differences can be observed among those with different income. For example, that professional ethics is not followed by media representatives is more valued as a reason for distrust among those with higher income (37%) than those with lower income (14%).

Graph 7. *Reasons for distrust: And thinking about the media you consider
the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons you do not trust them?*

Reason	Percentage
They are under political influences	59%
They spread disinformation	50%
They spread propaganda	41%
They spread hatred	30%
They promote interests of economically powerful people and companies	29%
The journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and do not serve public interest	21%
They do not publish information who they are, I don't trust anonymous sources of news	19%
Something else	1%
Don't know / Refusal	13%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Political influences are singled out as the most important reason for distrust
in media outlets (59%). These attitudes align with other research studies
that point to the public's general belief that the media are under political
control. For example, the results of the poll of the BH Journalists Association
and Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (2020) showed that respondents believe that
politicians and political parties have the biggest influence on the work of the
media (2020, 64%) and that the work of journalists has been largely politically
motivated (2020, 72%).

Focus group participants also pointed that political influence on the editorial
policies of the media is one of the main reasons for the polarized public
trust in the media. Research studies have pointed that most media outlets
are affiliated with political parties through financing and ownership patterns
(Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 8; Sokol, 2020a: 4). According to one focus
group participant:

> "*One of the reasons for distrust of the media in the last, let's say, five
> to ten years, is the complete polarization of the media on a political
> basis. So, if we are going to give the example of Banja Luka, you have
> to look at three news programmes to know what happened that day,
> because you don't have a real picture from one news programme.*"
> (FG participant 5)

Similarly, in focus groups discussions in other studies, young people said that they do not trust the media since they are under political influence (Sokol, 2019a: 59). However, often these attitudes are overgeneralized and reflections of common attitudes about the media: many respondents could not elaborate on connections between politicians and the media and explain the pattern of influence through, for example, financing and ownership (Sokol, 2019: 72). Such overgeneralizations can harm the work of professional and independent media due to the tendency of the public to consider all the media to be under political influence.

The focus group participants also noted that the media in BiH has been oversaturated with political topics and politicians, giving little attention to real-life stories, the economy and positive stories, which can also reduce public trust towards the media. Indeed, in previous research studies, young people stated that they are not satisfied with the media content and do not follow the media because they mostly dedicate space to politicians (Sokol, 2019, 56). The poll results of the BH Journalists Association and Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (2020) indicate that a large percentage of respondents agree that the media should report more on the everyday life of citizens (38%, 2020).

Other reasons for distrust are that the media spread disinformation, propaganda and hatred. Even though focus group participants pointed out that anonymous portals on the internet have largely lowered the public's trust in the media, that media outlets do not publish information who they are is a reason for distrust for only 19% of respondents, which points to the need for media and information literacy education.

3.4. Trust in specific media outlets – polarized audience along ethno-national and political party lines

Regarding trust and distrust in specific media outlets, no media outlet can be specifically singled out as the one with a very high percentage of trust or distrust, and answers with the highest percentage of responses were those in which the respondents said that they do not trust any media (19%), or that they do not know which media they distrust the most (51%).

A commercial television station from Bijeljina BN TV and the public service broadcaster of the Federation of BiH, FTV, are the most trusted media outlets by 15% and 16% of the respondents, respectively, while around a tenth of them name the public service broadcaster from Republika Srpska, RTRS (10%) and a CNN-affiliated broadcaster N1 (9%). Other specific media outlets that are trusted the most by 5–6% of the respondents are: the commercial television from Sarajevo, Face TV, the public service broadcaster on the state level BHRT, the international news outlet Al Jazeera Balkans, and commercial television stations: Hayat TV (6%), TV PINK, OBN TV, and NOVA BH (5%). Among the most trusted media outlets are popular commercial TV stations and public service broadcasters. In contrast, only a number of popular online

media were mentioned as the most trusted outlets, with somewhat lower percentages, including, Klix.ba (4%), Vijesti.ba, and Avaz.ba (2%). In addition, 19% of respondents stated that they do not trust any media outlet, and 10% stated that they do not know.

Trust in specific media outlets is different across ethno-national groups, which is the most visible regarding public service broadcasters:

- 30% of Serbs trust RTRS the most, 2% of Others, 1% of Croats and no Bosniaks;
- 24% of Bosniaks trust FTV the most, 8% of Others, 4% of Croats and 4% of Serbs;
- 9% of Bosniaks trust BHT, followed by 8% of Others, 4% of Croats and 2% of Serbs.

Polarization is also visible within ethno-national groups based on political party lines. For example, 30% of Serbs trust RTRS the most, whose reporting favours the ruling SNSD party in Republika Srpska and 40% BN TV, that favours the opposition parties in the Republika Srpska.

Face TV, Al Jazeera Balkans, Klix.ba and Avaz.ba are trusted more by Bosniaks (11%, 10%, 7%, 3%, respectively) and Others (8%, 10%, 9%, 2%, respectively) rather than Serbs and Croats, while Hayat TV is trusted mostly by Bosniaks (11%). Ethno-national polarization is also visible, for example in the data that 17% of Croats stated that they trust the Croatian national broadcaster HRT the most, which is the highest percentage compared to the other media Croats have selected.

Trust in some media outlets has, however, been seen in more groups, which include N1, which has Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian versions (Bosniaks 12%, Serbs 2%, Croats 11%, Others 16%) and in the commercial outlet PINK BH that mostly provides entertainment programmes (Bosniaks 7%; Serbs 6%). N1 has been pointed to as an example of an independent media outlet that complies with professional standards and whose reporting is well resourced (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 28), but examples of its reporting have been debunked by the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje mostly in regards to disinformation and clickbait.[13] One focus group participant stated that he expected N1 to have a higher level of trust among the respondents. [14]

Differences of trust in specific media outlets are also visible along other demographic characteristics: BN TV, FTV and RTRS are trusted more by those with primary or lower education (22%, 22%, 13%, respectively) rather than higher (8%, 7%, 6%, respectively) and Al Jazeera Balkans, N1 and Klix more by those with higher education (8%, 13%, 9%) rather than primary or lower (2%, 6%, 1%).

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13 See: https://raskrinkavanje.ba/medij/n1.
14 Focus group participant 3.

Some other media outlets that have been indicated as the most trusted media outlets have been listed as examples of models of disinformation and propaganda in previous studies: the public service broadcaster RTRS, known for its selective media reporting against the opposition (Sokol, 2020b: 15-17), and Avaz.ba, the online version of the daily newspaper affiliated with the SBB political party (Sokol, 2020a: 11-12) that in recent years has been conducting a negative campaign against migrants and refugees (Sokol, 2020b: 7-11). Both media outlets have been listed as sources and distributors of disinformation by the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje (Cvjetićanin, 2019: 35). In addition, other most trusted media outlets have been pointed as high-risk media for the spreading of disinformation and other problematic media content, including RTV BN, Hayat, and Face TV.[15]

When it comes to the least trusted media outlets, there is also no high consensus of citizens: approximately one fifth mention RTRS, while one tenth name FTV as the ones they distrust the most (19% and 10%, respectively). Other media outlets that they distrust the most are BHRT (7%), BN TV (6%), Hayat and OBN (3%). Distrust in these media outlets is present across all ethno-national groups: RTRS is most distrusted by Others (27%), followed by Bosniaks (20%) and Serbs (19%), FTV by Croats (14%), followed by Serbs (13%) and Bosniaks (8%) and BHRT by Serbs (12%), followed by Croats (6%), and Bosniaks (5%). These results reflect both polarization along ethno-national and political party lines, but also generally negative attitudes towards the public service broadcasters and commercial media in the country due to political influences on them.

Results point to the phenomenon of the partisan knowledge gap in which the public relies on sources based on their ethno-national and political party affiliations and believe in facts that make one's own group look good (Iyengar, 2017: 242). Studies have shown that the media in BiH have been reflecting different ethno-national narratives, emphasizing the issues and the agenda of one's own ethno-national group and disregarding the others, which is visible, for example, in the selective coverage of the war events (Sokol, 2019b: 34). The focus group participants agree that the public in BiH usually follow the outlets that support their stands. One focus group participant noted that "*people watch television similarly to how they vote, they watch who they support and they are, in fact, for or against those media.*"[16] Another participant emphasized the lack of dialogue in the media that reflects different standpoints.

> "*It indirectly speaks of that one-sidedness of our media, which find it difficult … to promote that kind of dialogue, in which you have completely different stances on issues being discussed … But we do not have that healthy dialogue, constant discussion between people who speak with arguments, from different positions, so that you come to some comprehensive picture.*" (FG participant 7).

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15   *See the lists of the media: https://raskrinkavanje.ba/medij/n1.*
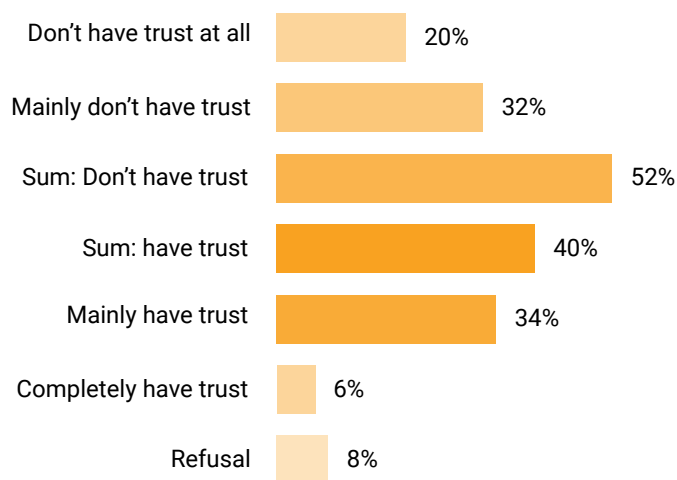16   *Focus group participant 5.*

Finally, even though the public are polarized about their trust in the media, still 51% of the respondents stated that they could not name the media they distrust the most. These answers can point to the overgeneralized attitudes towards the media and the impossibility of the respondents to specify and elaborate their stands.

3.5. Divided trust in public service broadcasters

When asked specifically about their trust in the three public service broadcasters, BHRT, FTV and RTRS, the respondents are divided. In sum, half of the respondents say they do not trust the public broadcasting services BHRT and RTVFBiH (52% and 50%, respectively), while two fifths claim the opposite (40% and 42%, respectively). However, a somewhat higher share of respondents does not trust RTRS, with a 60% vs 31% ratio in favour of distrust. There is a clear ethno-national division in terms of trust in the public broadcasters, as Bosniaks are more likely to trust BHRT (51%) and RTVFBiH (57%), while on the other hand, they more often do not trust RTRS (69%). The opposite is true for Serbs, who have more trust in RTRS (54%), while the level of trust in the other two public broadcasters among them is lower – 68% of Serbs, in sum, do not trust RTVFBIH and 66% BHRT. Trust in public service broadcasters is also higher with age – 50% in the age group 60 and above in sum have trust in BHRT and RTVFBIH, compared to those in the 18–29 age group (32%) Distrust is higher among those with higher income: 63% in sum do not trust BHRT and FTV, compared to those with lower income, 44% BHRT and 39% FTVBIH.

Graph 8. *Trust in BHRT: On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media – BHRT (Radio and Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*

Don't have trust at all	20%
Mainly don't have trust	32%
Sum: Don't have trust	52%
Sum: have trust	40%
Mainly have trust	34%
Completely have trust	6%
Refusal	8%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Focus group participants noted that such results are predictable due to the high level of political influence on public service broadcasters, especially through the appointments of the steering boards. Public service broadcasters continue to be in a difficult financial situation due to the lack of an efficient financing system, the law on the public broadcasting system is only partially implemented, and entity laws are not in line with state-level law (State Department 2021). One focus group participant stressed the increasingly bad financial situation of BHRT and the lack of efficient legislation that would introduce a stable financing system. According to her:
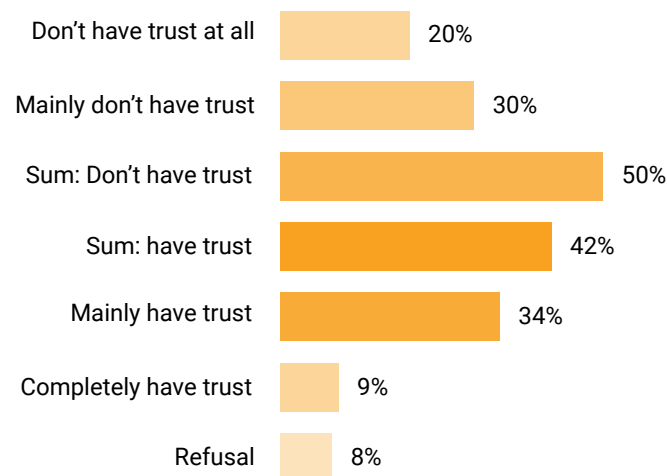
> "*As long as politics shapes the members of the steering boards, as long as politics has not been persistently solving the issue of stable financing of public service broadcasters in BIH, turning us into a kind of beggars who have been patching up literally to produce anything, which is visible also on the screen and it is logical that the citizens lose trust.*" (FG participant 4)

Another participant pointed in particular to the problematic reporting of RTRS, which the CRA has fined multiple times for violating the principles of fairness and impartiality, including those related to war (Sokol, 2020a: 14).

> "*It is really very difficult to avoid that elephant in the room, RTRS, that is not only under political influence, but a television channel that is so toxic for the media space and politics in general in BiH, for reconciliation processes, for transitional justice … and it is high time we spoke openly about this.*" (FG participant 5)
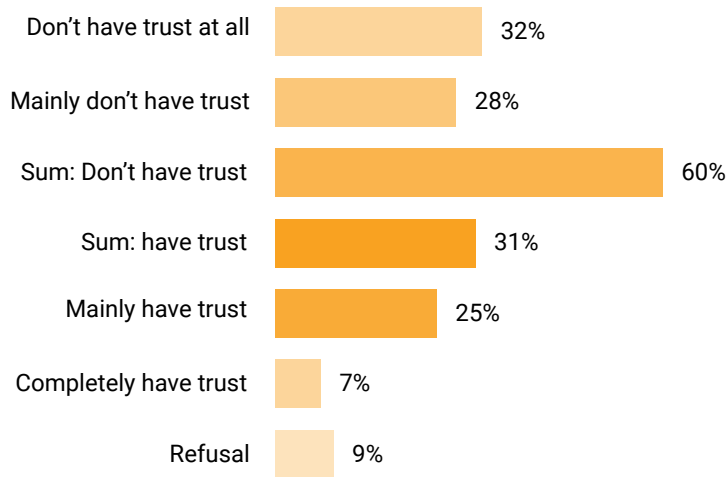
Focus group participants stressed the urgent need to solve the financial sustainability of the public service broadcasters and restrict political influence through financing patterns and the appointments of the managerial staff and steering boards in public service broadcasters.

Graph 9. *Trust in FTV: On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media – RTVFBiH (Radio-Television of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*

Don't have trust at all	20%
Mainly don't have trust	30%
Sum: Don't have trust	50%
Sum: have trust	42%
Mainly have trust	34%
Completely have trust	9%
Refusal	8%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Graph 10. *Trust in RTRS: On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media – RTRS (Television of the Serbian Republic), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*

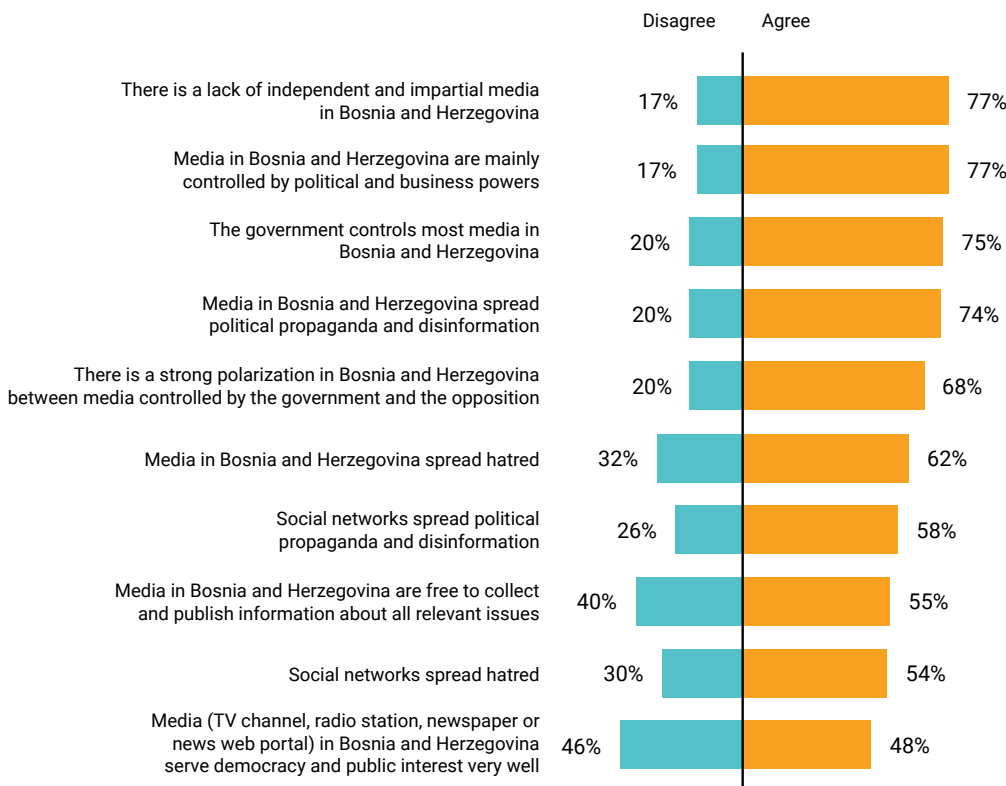| Category	Percentage
Don't have trust at all	32%
Mainly don't have trust	28%
Sum: Don't have trust	60%
Sum: have trust	31%
Mainly have trust	25%
Completely have trust	7%
Refusal	9%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

3.6. Highly negative attitudes towards the media

The poll results show highly negative attitudes towards the media in BiH. The largest share of respondents believes that the media in BIH are controlled and that there is a lack of independent and impartial media. Also, political propaganda and disinformation are widespread in the media and these attitudes are present across different demographic groups. More specifically, three quarters of citizens claim that most media in BiH are controlled by political and business powers (77%), as well as by the government (75%), that there is a lack of independent and impartial media (77%) and that the media spread political propaganda and disinformation (between 77% and 74%).

Furthermore, two thirds of respondents agree that there is a strong polarization in BiH between media controlled by the government and the opposition and that media in BiH spread hatred (66 % and 62%, respectively). The results attest to the general attitude among the BiH public that politicians and political parties have the biggest influence on the work of the media and that the work of journalists has been largely politically motivated (BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020). Studies have revealed that through ownership and financing patterns, political parties and business groups influence the editorial policies of the media (Sokol, 2020a: 4). However, there are examples of independent media outlets that adhere to professional standards, including non-profit media that receive support from foreign donors, media receiving support from global networks and commercial media financed through advertising (Petković and Hodžić, 2020: 23).

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The attitudes to social networks are perceived similarly, even though somehow fewer respondents have negative attitudes towards social networks, which they agree spread political propaganda and disinformation, as well as hatred (58% and 54%, respectively). Agreement that social networks spread disinformation and hatred is higher among the 30–44 age group (70%) compared to those in the age group 60 plus (47%), and among those with higher education (73%) compared to those with primary education and lower (46%). The fact that more respondents believe that the media spread propaganda, disinformation and hatred compared to social networks point to worrying trends and to the level of negative attitudes towards the media. Previous studies have, indeed, exposed that traditional media in BiH, in addition to social networks, spread disinformation and propaganda and pointed to examples of hate campaigns against specific groups, including migrants and refugees, political opposition and minorities in the traditional media (Sokol, 2020b). Focus group participants agreed that such examples of hate narratives influence the public's perception of the media and reduce their trust in the media.

Graph 11. *Attitudes towards the media: On a scale from 1 to 4, assess how much you agree with the following statements*

	Disagree	Agree
There is a lack of independent and impartial media in Bosnia and Herzegovina	17%	77%
Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mainly controlled by political and business powers	17%	77%
The government controls most media in Bosnia and Herzegovina	20%	75%
Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina spread political propaganda and disinformation	20%	74%
There is a strong polarization in Bosnia and Herzegovina between media controlled by the government and the opposition	20%	68%
Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina spread hatred	32%	62%
Social networks spread political propaganda and disinformation	26%	58%
Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina are free to collect and publish information about all relevant issues	40%	55%
Social networks spread hatred	30%	54%
Media (TV channel, radio station, newspaper or news web portal) in Bosnia and Herzegovina serve democracy and public interest very well	46%	48%

Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Regarding perceptions on media freedoms and the media's public service role, respondents are divided. Namely, approximately one half agree that media in BiH are free to collect and publish information about all relevant issues, as well as that they serve democracy and the public interest very well

(55% and 48%, respectively), while about two fifths claim the opposite (40% and 46%, respectively). Those who trust the media in general more often believe that the media in BiH are free (64%) and that they serve democracy and public interest very well (61%). However, such attitudes vary across different demographic data; more respondents from Republika Srpska and in Brčko District agree that there is a lack of independent and impartial media in BiH (88%; 86% respectively) than those in the Federation (72%). They also agree that there is a strong polarization between media controlled by the government and the opposition (77% and 74%) than those in the Federation (62%). These differences can be explained by stronger polarization of the media in RS along political party lines in comparison to the Federation and strong centralized control of the leading SNSD party's influence on the media. The government does not openly censor the media, but studies have pointed to the large presence of self-censorship among the media for fear of retribution and denial of access to information to journalists (Irex, 2019: 4-6), which worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although in recent years the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has gained popularity and played a very important role in debunking disinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, two thirds of respondents are not aware of the existence of the platforms that deal with checking the accuracy of news and information in BiH (65%). One third of them have heard about fact-checkers (33%), of which one tenth also followed their announcements (11%). Percentages are similar in different age groups, but differences can be seen in income and place of residence. Eighty-one per cent with lower income have not heard about them, compared to 41% with higher income, while 77% have not heard about them in RS and 59% in the Federation. These results point to the need for media and information literacy education but also that the fact-checking platforms, together with the investigative media outlets, should do more to promote their work.

3.7. Attitudes towards journalists – female journalists often the targets of attacks

The majority of respondents perceive the position of women journalists in BiH as unfavourable. More precisely, more than three quarters of respondents believe that women journalists in BiH are often the targets of attacks, threats, insults, and harassment (78%) and that the state bodies (police, judiciary) should protect women journalists when they are threatened or attacked (87%). However, more respondents agree that such attacks are the result of revealing the truth while reporting on politics, corruption and crime (80%) and two thirds of them agree that attacks, threats, insults and harassment stem from gender prejudices and stereotypes (69%).

Studies have pointed to the overall precarious situation of journalists in the country and frequent verbal and physical attacks, online and in-person threats, smear campaigns, mobbing, and hate speech against them (RSF, 2021; BH

Journalists Association 2020). Female journalists are often the targets of harassment, and gender inequality is still present in managerial positions in the media (Sokol, 2020a: 6). There are examples of hate narratives in the media and social networks that target and demonize journalists, especially those who write critically against their own ethno-national group or the ruling structures (Sokol, 202b: 12-14). The focus group participants agree that such narratives influence the public's trust and their attitudes towards the media, which are especially exemplified in the results of the poll of the Association BH Journalists that around 20% of the respondents believe that attacks on journalists can be justified (19% in 2020, BH Journalists Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung).

The focus group participants agree that the position of female journalists has been particularly difficult but that there is a lack of efficient protection mechanisms of journalists in the country and a lack of solidarity among the journalistic community. According to one focus group participant: "It is true that female journalists … are more exposed to attacks, but what is crucial and I think it must be given importance when it comes to the protection of female journalists, but also journalists in general … is that her entire media house stands behind her". [17]

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17   *Focus group participant 3.*

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the opinion poll conducted by Ipsos for the Resilience project in March 2021 show a sharp polarization of the BiH public regarding their trust in the media – half of the respondents, in sum, claim to not trust the media, while nearly as many claim they trust the media.

Results also demonstrate that trust in specific media outlets and public service broadcasters is polarized along ethno-national and political party lines, which attests to the overall polarization of the media sector and the public in BiH. Some respondents listed as the most trusted media outlets organizations that previous studies singled out as examples of propaganda and disinformation models.

Respondents have highly negative attitudes towards the media that are mainly in line with commonly held beliefs that the media are under the influence of political parties and are controlled by governments. Although studies have pointed to political parties meddling in editorial affairs, such overgeneralizations can negatively influence the public's trust, even in professional and independent media outlets. The results show that investigative media outlets do not rate as high as television when it comes to the public's trust in specific media formats.

The focus group participants emphasized that a set of measures should be introduced for the improvement of professional journalism in BiH and consequently the public's trust in the media, ranging from education, efficient (self)regulation of online media and financial sustainability of professional media outlets and the public service broadcasters. The focus group participants indicated the presence of many anonymous websites and the lack of financial sustainability of professional media as the main reasons that influence the public's trust in the media. According to them, it is important to prevent the influence of political parties on the media's editorial policies and to improve the overall media reporting.

Results also point to the lack of media and information literacy skills among the respondents, due to which it is necessary to work on education and find systematic solutions for the introduction of media and information literacy into formal education.

5.   POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

• The Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH and ministries of education on the entity and cantonal levels should put efforts into introducing media and information literacy into formal education in all levels of education, including primary and secondary. Civil society organizations should work on the education of citizens, including all age groups, about media and information literacy and capacitating teachers to work with pupils and students. Particular attention should be paid to teaching pupils and attendees about journalistic standards and professional media reporting.

• Media outlets should be supported, including financially, by the public sector and the donor community to enable quality reporting, presentation of pluralistic views, and regular verification of information from multiple sources. Models for financial sustainability for professional journalism could include grants from governments on different levels based on transparent procedures, expert commission selection and precise criteria that serve the public interest. In addition, specific grants for investigative journalism could be introduced on the state level and given based on transparent procedures, precise and measurable criteria and evaluations from expert commissions.

• The ministries of communication and finance, including those on the cantonal, entity and state levels (Ministry of Communications and Transport of BiH and the Ministry of Finance and Treasury of BiH), should adopt regulations that will include provisions on the transparency of media ownership and precise criteria for the allocation of public funds to the media in consultation with the media industry and civil society organizations, to restrict the influence of political parties on editorial policies and increase the public's trust in the media.

• Professional media outlets should engage in the promotion of professional media reporting and education of the audience. Professional media should seek ways to engage the public, build supportive communities, involve them in dialogue, and gain support, including financial. They should also seek ways to attract younger audiences.

• Investigative reporting media outlets and the fact-checking platform should engage more in promoting their work to citizens to gain wider recognition and more trust. They should also be engaged in educating the audience to recognize professional media reporting.

• The governments on the state and entity levels should find ways to resolve the financial sustainability of the public service broadcasters and introduce measures against the political influence on their editorial policies and the appointments of steering boards and managerial staff. The CRA should introduce stricter fines for breaches of codes by the public service broadcasters, especially in relation to reporting on war events, which affect the overall process of reconciliation.

• The regulator and ministries of communication should adopt a strategy and concrete steps to prevent organized systems from spreading disinformation. The CRA and the Press Council codes should be amended to include different types of disinformation and its precise definition, taking into account their growing presence and spread. Civil society organizations should regularly monitor the media and report disinformation, propaganda and hate speech to the self(regulator) or other institutions and organizations.

• The police and prosecutors' offices should process cases of attacks against journalists, while journalists and media organizations should work on unifying the media community and strengthening solidarity among journalists.

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FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:

Participant 1: editor of a local radio-television station (male).
Participant 2: editor of a popular online media (male).
Participant 3: editor of a regional newspaper (female).
Participant 4: editor of a public service broadcaster (female).
Participant 5: editor of an investigative reporting media outlet (male).
Participant 6: journalist of a popular online media (male).
Participant 7: journalist of a media watchdog (male).

About the author

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