



**queeradar**  
QUEER MONITORING OF MEDIA

## Monitoring hate speech against LGBTIQ+ in Azerbaijani online media

Edition 2 / August 2021

E: [queerradar@gmail.com](mailto:queerradar@gmail.com)

W: [www.queeradar.com](http://www.queeradar.com)

Fb: [facebook.com/queeradar](https://facebook.com/queeradar)

IG: [@queerradar](https://instagram.com/queerradar)

This review is based on the “Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial” license. You are free to copy, distribute and display this work, as well as to use quotes or excerpts as long as these conditions are followed:

- 1. Credit is given to QueeRadar*
- 2. This work is not used for commercial purposes*

# INTRODUCTION

QueeRadar is the first ever LGBTIQ+ focused media monitoring project of its kind and has been monitoring online media in Azerbaijan for over a year. Our activities include analyzing hate speech, discriminatory language and style circulating in online media, as well as news stories and articles that have played a role in undermining the ability of LGBTIQ+ people to live as free and dignified citizens in Azerbaijan. The goal of our monitoring activities is to systematically study hate speech against vulnerable groups as it appears in Azerbaijani media and to not only bring attention to the specific instances of this hate speech, but also the ways this language stigmatizes LGBTIQ+ people.

"Hate speech is a form of speech targeted at others, which denies the basic principles of human dignity and equality and aims to belittle the status of individuals or groups of population in the eyes of society."

"Hate speech" here refers to any expression or language that threatens public safety, triggers hatred and degrades the human dignity of certain groups of people. Based on the hate speech we have documented in Azerbaijani media, there are three main types or groups speech we've identified. They include:

- directly inciting hatred, discrimination and violence.
- spreading discriminatory threats and insults.
- expressing statements that are discriminatory and intended to stigmatize.

Research shows that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTIQ+ people around the world have become particularly vulnerable. One major reason for this is that the social and economic hierarchies that existed before the pandemic have deepened and

sharpened during the crisis. According to a joint statement issued by a coalition of [187 organizations](#), including ILGA-Europe, the pandemic has exacerbated already existing discrimination and violence towards LGBTIQ+ people and other vulnerable groups.

In order to try and contain the unpredictable threats that emerged at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020 Azerbaijan introduced a strict quarantine regime and severely restricted people's movement. The government shut down jobs, for a long time, that were deemed unnecessary. QueeRadar conducted a survey in order to better understand the psychological, social and economic problems LGBTIQ+ people experienced in Azerbaijan during the first wave of the pandemic. The results showed that the situation for queer people was tense in all respects. For example, in June-July 2020 alone five transgender women were attacked in Baku. One of them was killed.

This year's review presents how these events were highlighted by the media; the media's transphobic and homophobic silence towards the persecution and killing of LGBTIQ+ people; the context within which the news was written, who was and who was not interviewed, which points were exaggerated, and which points were pushed into the background or erased altogether.

This report is intended to help guide journalists toward producing more fair, informed and sensitive coverage of LGBTIQ+ people, their issues and related subjects in Azerbaijan.

# METHODOLOGY

Through a year-long study, QueeRadar documented the frequency of mainstream media reporting on LGBTIQ+ related issues and the representation of LGBTIQ+ people in the documented coverage. We searched through the online versions of 23 media outlets in Azerbaijan for examples of hate speech based on gender identity and sexual orientation from January until the end of December 2020.

We selected media outlets based on the following criteria:

1. It has a website.
2. It reaches a wide audience.
3. It publishes material on socio-political topics.

Searches were performed using keywords. To identify LGBTIQ+ related stories we used keywords such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, sexual orientation, gender identity, homophobia, transphobia, queer, as well as as well as Azerbaijani pejoratives towards LGBTIQ+ “mavilər, üzdəniraqlar, azlıqlar” .

When we came across relevant articles, we asked the following questions:

- Are the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people being violated in the text?
- Is there a space for the views of LGBTIQ+ people in the text, or space mostly (or entirely) given to people who reject LGBTIQ+ people or are hostile to them?
- Who/what are the main sources of information for the story? Did authors use a variety of sources?
- What local terms are used to describe LGBTIQ+ people?
- Does the story provide background information about the social and political conditions of LGBTIQ+ people in the country?
- Is there any prejudice against LGBTIQ+ in the text?

## INFOGRAPHICS AND RESEARCH RESULTS

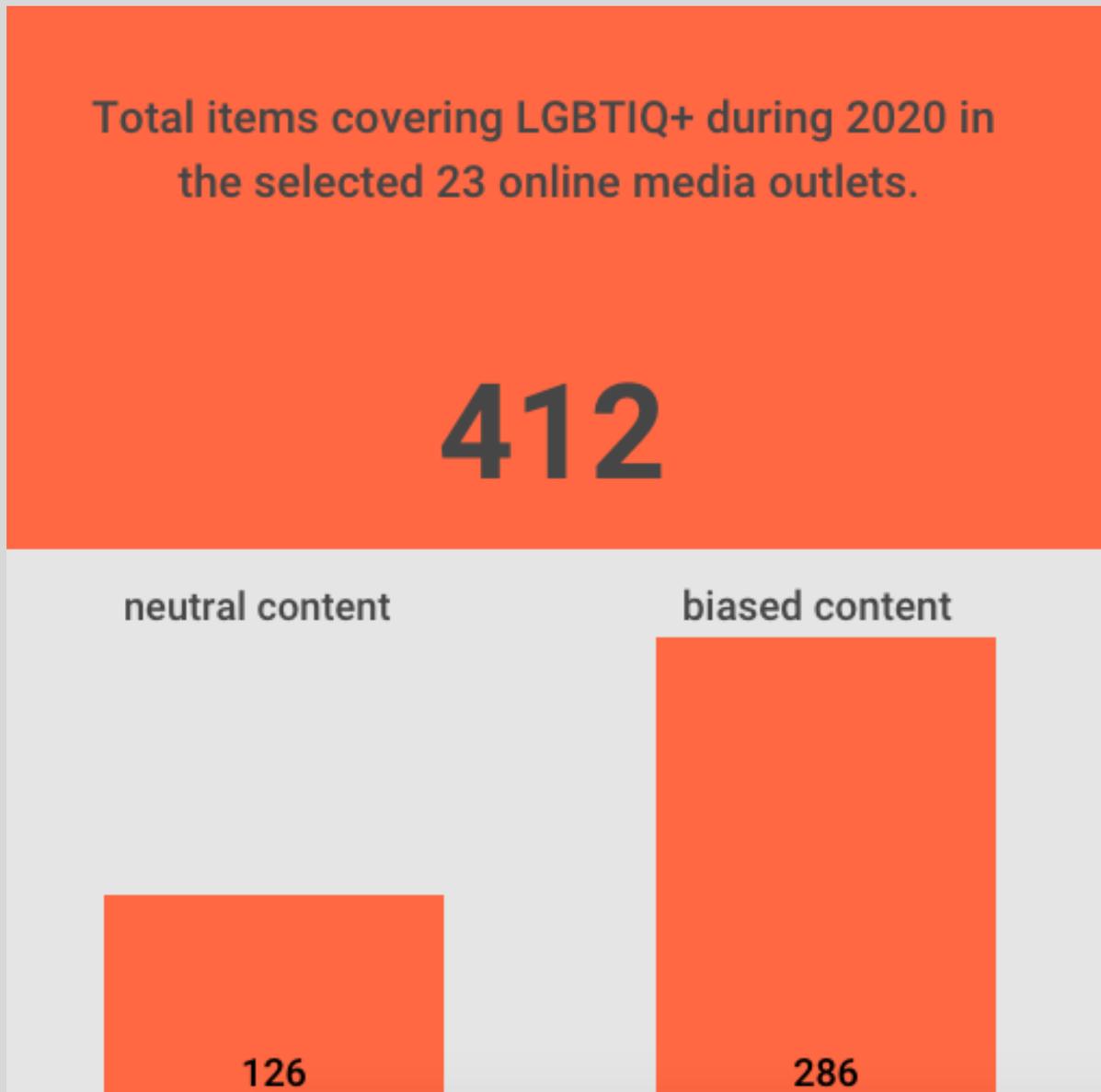
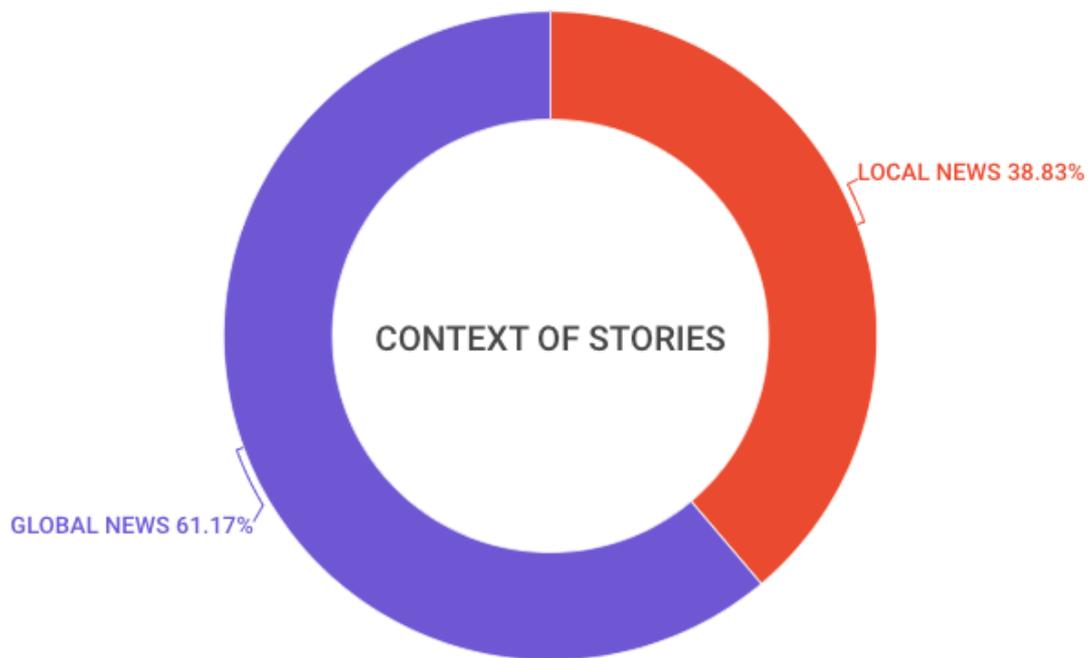


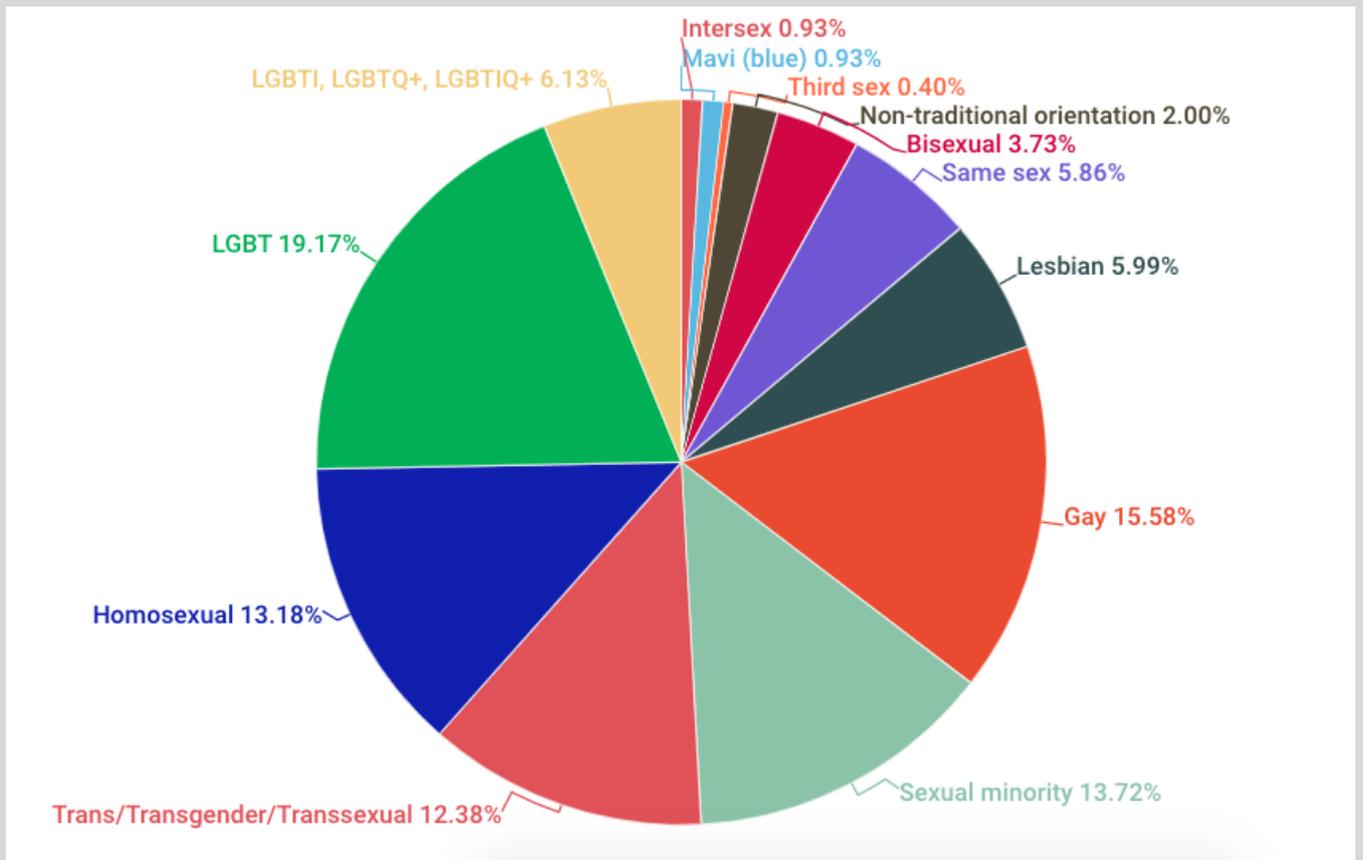
Figure 1.

Our internet search found 412 different pieces of material from 23 media outlets. Evidence shows that reporting on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people is often sensationalized and demeaning, or LGBTIQ+ persons are ignored completely by the media. Reporting was also inaccurate: sexual orientation and gender identity were regularly conflated and confused. According to our analysis, any attempts to create a more balanced picture were absent in the coverage.



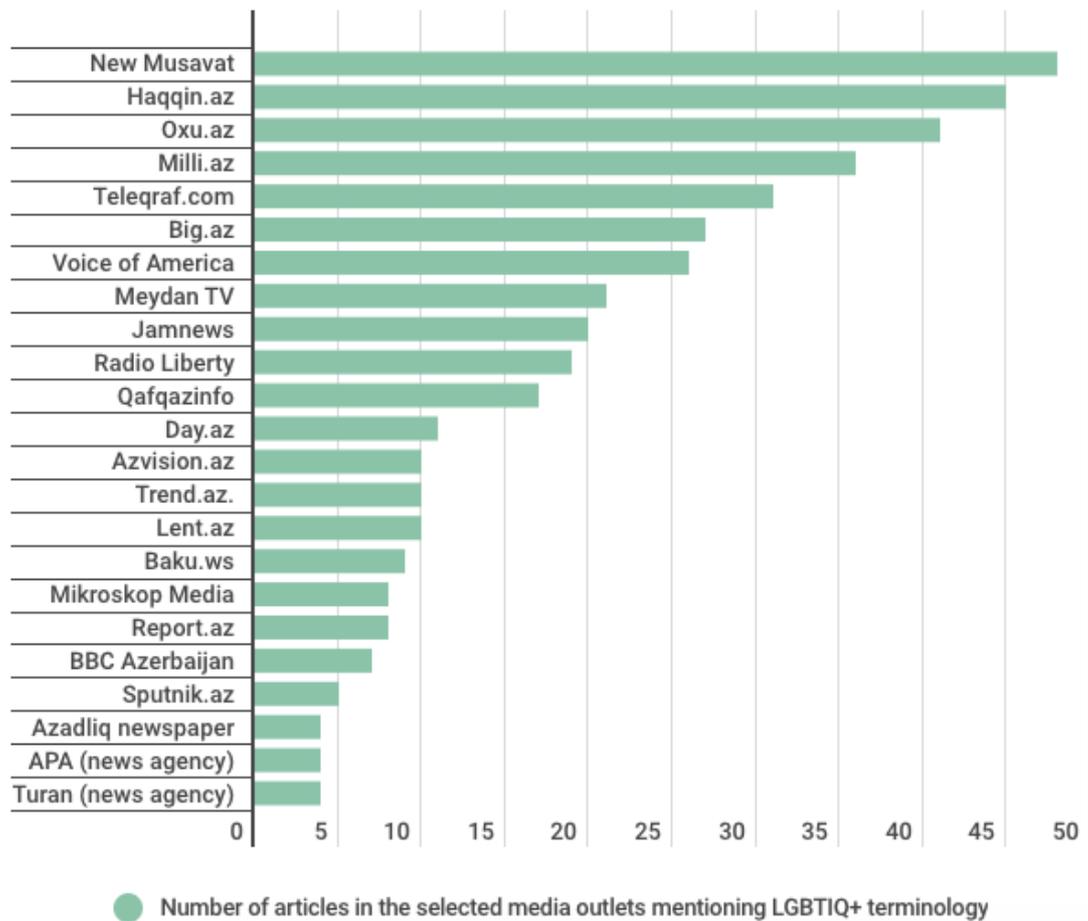
**Figure 2.**

Some 160 of the stories we found were directly related to developments in Azerbaijan. Foreign news sources make up 252 stories, which accounts for roughly 61% of the total.



**Figure 3.**

The diagram shows that in 2020, the media continued to use inappropriate expressions such as “üzdəniraq”, “mavi”, “minorities”, “non-traditional orientation” when describing LGBTIQ + people.



**Figure 4.**

Based either on terms relating to LGBTQ+ people or the number of articles/publications that include the keywords we searched for, the top five media outlets (as seen in figure 3 above) are all closely associated with the government in terms of funding sources and/or political views. The media outlets at the bottom of the graph have produced less stories about LGBTQ+ people, and mainly focus on human rights and freedoms, and their role as a "representative" of society - in other words they function, in their own self-understanding, as "watchdogs" of democracy. At first glance, it may come as both a paradox and a surprise. However, if you take a closer look at how some media outlets cover the issues, it becomes clear that quantity has nothing to do with quality in this case.

## What is the year 2020 remembered for?

The main topics the media covered in connection with LGBTIQ+ people in 2020 are as follows:

- The homophobic views voiced at a closed meeting of the opposition-led National Council and a subsequent statement issued by the Council leadership;
- The "8<sup>th</sup> of March - Free streets are ours" rally held in Baku on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March - International Women's Day;
- The circulation of the story of a soldier who lost his life in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in the context of "martyr's identity" and "gay identity";
- LGBTIQ+ issue in discussions over the Istanbul Convention; show business and related scandals.

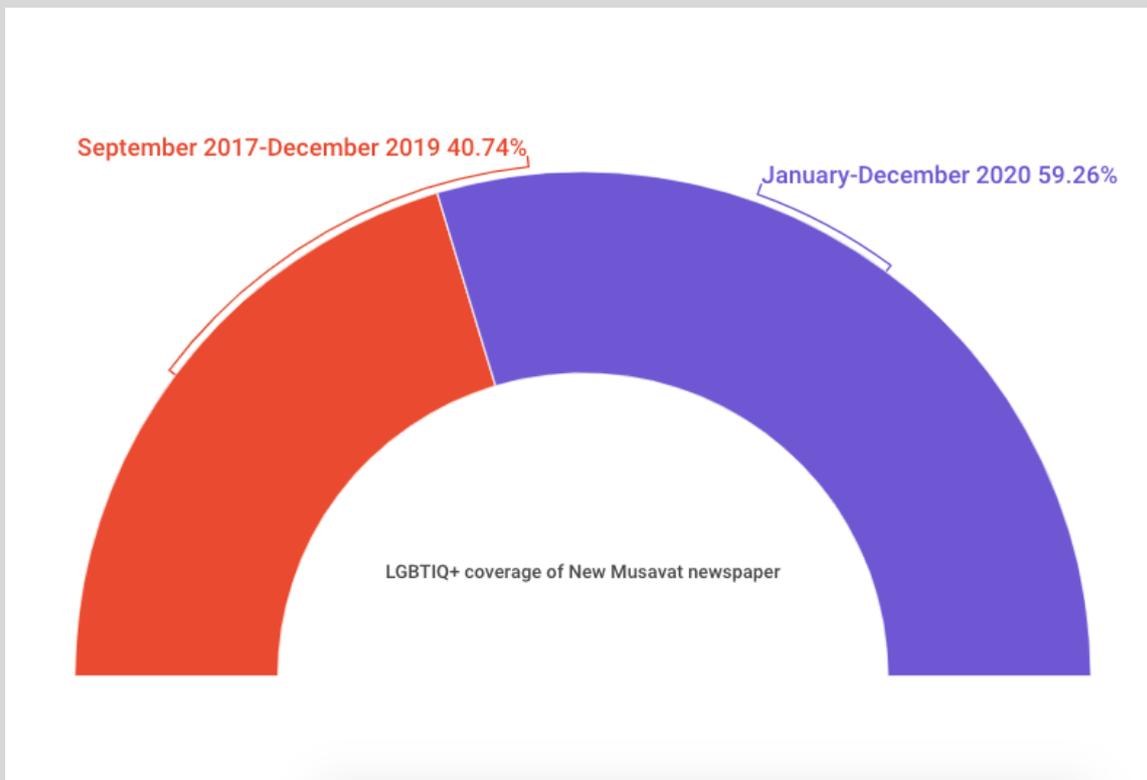
"National Council and homophobia" was the topic most consistently highlighted by the media among others mentioned above.

Insulting remarks about gay people were made during an online meeting of the National Council of Democratic Forces held on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May. The footage shows some members of the National Council discussing the Azerbaijani journalist Ismayil Jalilov who lives in the United States. The members of the National Council were discussing the posts he shared on social media him and repeatedly insulting gay people. In the video, Gultakin Hajibayli, a member of the National Council, a former Member of Parliament and a former member of the Azerbaijani delegation to Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, uses the phrase "üzdəniraq" when talking about gays. "Because you need to know that the number one priority of the West is the rights of these minorities and these "üzdəniraq" people. Therefore, they

have a very sensitive approach," Gultakin Hajibayli said at the meeting. Rafiq Manafli, Chairman of the Supreme Assembly of the Civil Solidarity Party and a member of the National Council, also voiced insulting remarks about the journalist at the meeting, adding that "I regret that Hitler did not kill all the gays at that time."

Chairman Jamil Hasanli, who did not object to any of the remarks made during the meeting, said on his social media account following the criticism that the footage was "deliberately" edited to cut out the part which contained protests voiced against Rafiq Manafli's statements. He described Manafli's statements regarding sexual minorities as "unacceptable."

This event resonated deeply not only with LGBTIQ+ activists, but with the LGBTIQ+phobic media in Azerbaijan. For the latter, this situation was a golden opportunity to spread homophobic rhetoric and discourse. In Azerbaijan, where LGBTIQ+ citizens are still subject to regular violence, beatings, torture and murder, where there is no solid legislative framework for LGBTIQ+ people and where politicians constantly target the LGBTIQ+ population in demeaning and hateful speeches, the media in Azerbaijan kept this story on the headlines for several months. The Yeni Musavat newspaper is one such example. Yeni Musavat, which was once affiliated with the nationalist-liberal opposition Musavat Party, is now clearly pursuing a pro-government policy.

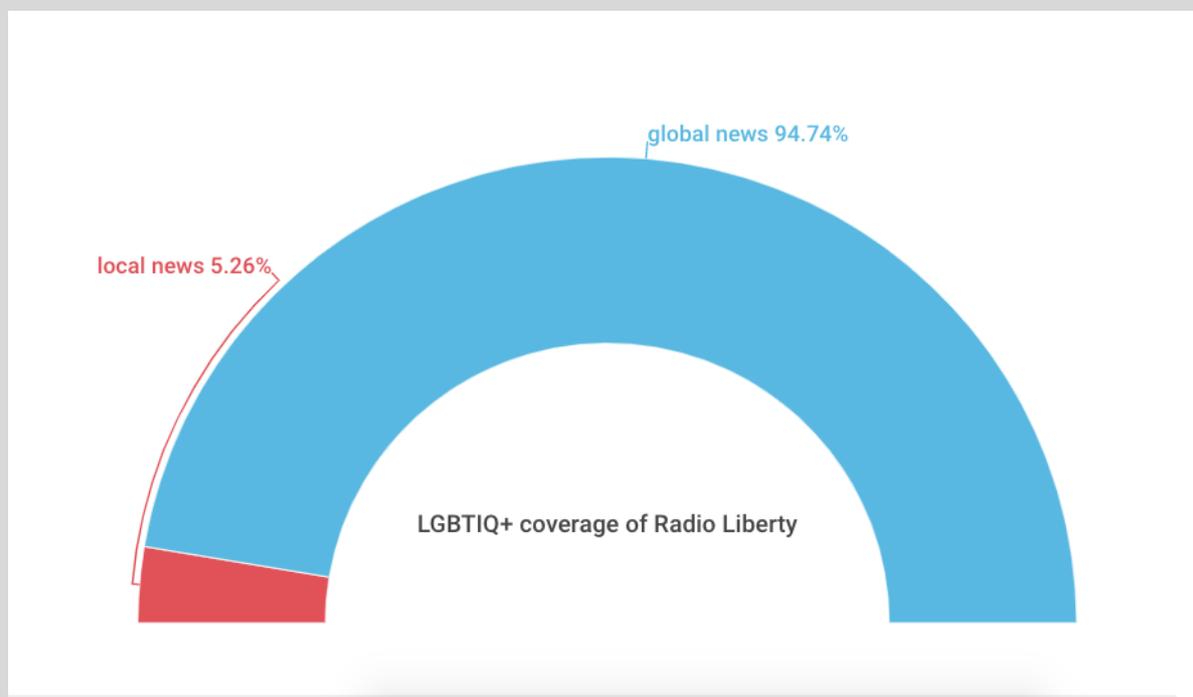


**Figure 5.**

According to the report which covers the period from September 2017 to December 2019, the Yeni Musavat newspaper published 33 articles (18 foreign, 13 local) that touched on LGBTIQ+ people or issues over the course of 16 months. However, over the course of 12 months in 2020 the number of articles on topics relating to LGBTIQ+ people or issues went up to 48. What caused this rise? Looking at the figures, it becomes clear that precisely 17 out of 27 or 62% of the articles published in Yeni Musavat are distorted re-tellings of the homophobic views voiced at the online meeting of National Council and its aftermath. What the outside observer may not know is that the National Council are the political rivals of the pro-government Yeni Musavat. As a result, an increase in the use of LGBTIQ+ related terms in Yeni Musavat throughout 2020 is not linked with raising awareness to the issues that face LGBTIQ+ people and their rights (or lack thereof), but rather using LGBTIQ+ people and their issues as a tool to slander political rivals.

Moreover, another reason why the topic of LGBTIQ+ suddenly made headlines on Yeni Musavat was the "8<sup>th</sup> of March" rally - held by feminists for the second time ever in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The newspaper made use of this rally to humiliate LGBTIQ+ people and feminists. But Yeni Musavat should not be singled out - they are not the only newspaper that was publishing this kind of material. A total of 62 out of 412 articles related to LGBTIQ+ people published in 23 different media outlets were devoted wholly to the meeting of the National Council, which comprises 13% of total published materials.

Monitoring we undertook shows that public figures and political opponents are very much aware of the strong homophobic sentiments of the Azerbaijani public and therefore widely jumped at the opportunity to use this issue for political purposes.

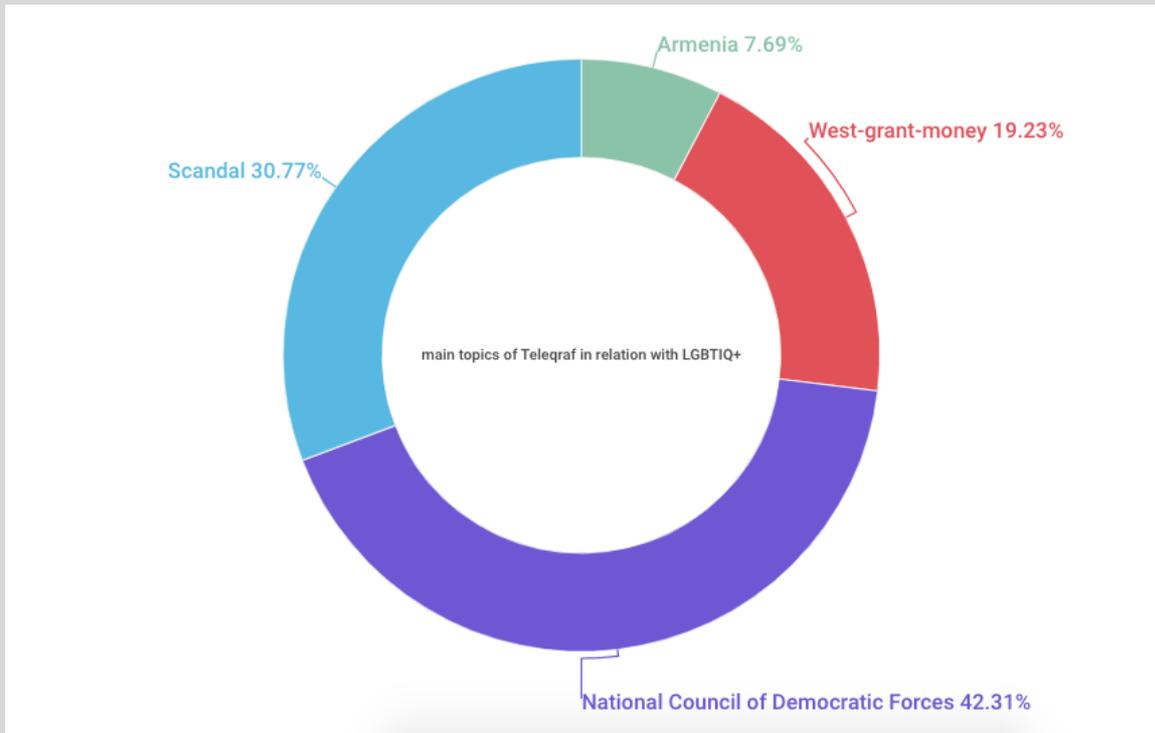


**Figure 6.**

A search on the website of RFERL's Azerbaijani service found that in 2020 there were 19 different instances where an article (or other type of publication) contained terms and expressions related to LGBTIQ+. A total of 18 of these examples were related to news in other countries, while only one of them ("What does the LGBT report say about Azerbaijan") covered the situation of LGBTIQ+ people in Azerbaijan. According to Radio Liberty's journalism standards, "The mission of Radio Liberty is to support democratic values and institutions and to protect human rights by disseminating news in countries where free media is banned and has not yet emerged."

Despite Radio Liberty claiming those principles, there's blaring inconsistencies when it comes to serious issues facing Azerbaijan's LGBTIQ+ population. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2020 a trans woman was stabbed and murdered in Baku. Another trans woman was evicted from a house she bought due entirely to transphobia. This event led to a one-man protest in front of the Ombudsman's Office, and the proliferation of hate speech and rhetoric targeting LGBTIQ+ people by leading political figures.

Although these instances were covered by many media outlets in Azerbaijan, as far as Radio Liberty was concerned, they were not considered a violation of human rights and therefore Radio Liberty did not cover the events.



**Figure 7**

Our monitoring of Telegraf, a government-backed website, revealed that 16 out of 31 stories found were dedicated to local news in 2020. In 11 of the stories, various social and political figures were asked to comment on the developments around the National Council. This circulated hate speech and homophobia and five of them contained allegations like "grants, money, the West." Interviews with former human rights activists have portrayed LGBTIQ+ activism as a "Western dictatorship" attempting to overshadow and discredit people's struggle for their rights and freedoms and for a right to live.

## Columns as an obvious source of hatred

Our monitoring revealed that columns provide media outlets with more opportunities to use hate speech, discriminatory language and a degrading rhetorical style than elsewhere.

For example, the title of the column published by Yeni Musavat newspaper on 08.06.2020 under the signature of Aynur Jamalgizi (former MP, journalist, director of "Daily Telegraph" LLC, head of publika.az and telegraf.com websites) reads as follows: ["Jamil Hasanli revealed secrets: "gay" scandal, betrayal..."](#)

The article is about the discussions, which started following derogatory remarks voiced against a journalist, who was targeted for his sexual orientation during an online meeting of the National Council, which unites opposition forces. The author notes: "Historian, scholar and a professor, don't you understand that with your love for LGBT people and betrayal of values, this nation will not even select you as a head of ZhEK (Housing Maintenance Office)? Who instructed you to undermine the morals of this nation and attack its gene pool? In general, what kind of politics, morality and struggle is this? Do you think you will remain in the political arena in Azerbaijan by demonstrating that you are tolerant of LGBT people? Or you are fulfilling the instructions of your bosses who give you grants for this, aren't you?"

Both the government and opposition figures in Azerbaijan have repeatedly voiced anti-LGBTIQ+ statements. In this regard, it seems that that they do not accept queer citizens as "primary" citizens of Azerbaijan. Therefore, they use queer citizens as a tool to humiliate each other as part of rivalry and conflict between them, which in turn pushes problems related to the accessibility of social and political rights by queer citizens to the background. Thus, queer citizens become the "battlefield" the two political parties use in the media to reinforce existing stereotypes in society even further.

The major topic of the columns was the "Free streets are ours" rally held by the feminist movement on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. For example, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, Azvision.az published an article titled ["Proxy Opposition in Women's Attire: What Is the Purpose of Feminists?"](#). The author of the article was Vusal Mammadov, editor-in-chief of the website. The article includes attacks on personalities and personal lives of the protesters as well as degrading and inappropriate comments targeting them throughout the article. The author notes: "If we take a closer look, we can see that it is not only about women's rights, but also sexual minorities, "blues", "pinks", LGBT ... - all mixed up together. I wonder what kinds of problems they experience in Azerbaijan." Journalist Zhala Mutallimova is also one of those who constantly targets LGBTIQ+ people with her writing in Azerbaijan. She is a journalist, but constantly confuses columns with articles, unable to properly distinguish between an opinion and a fact. For example, in the Yeni Musavat newspaper, she wrote an article titled ["Feminist children of loveless families: a sensational interview with Narmin Shahmarzade's father ..."](#). In it, Mutallimova reveals an important "secret" related to the 8<sup>th</sup> of March protest: on the same day a similar rally was held with the same demands and the same slogans in several countries [...] The protesters had similar behaviors and lifestyles. Only the nations are different... Does anyone believe in this kind of coincidence? Can all these things be simply a coincidence? Never ever! Most likely, all those events were managed from a single center. Strange enough, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Russia were the major targets." In the column, Mutallimova tries to manipulate the audience by distorting reality. By portraying queers/feminists/activists as "grant-eaters", they keep the problems experienced by these people behind the scenes and manipulate the public. It is as if there was no homophobia in Azerbaijan at all and the problems experienced by queer people were unrealistic issues invented by queers themselves. It, in turn, serves a policy that undermines and discredits queers struggle and estranges queer people from Azerbaijani society.

## **Emphasis on gender and sexual orientation**

In most stories dealing with queer people, journalists focus more on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or body diversity rather than on the incident being written about or the topic itself. For example, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 2020, the “Qafqazinfo” news website published an article titled [“Sexual minorities promoting drugs on Tik-Tok detained - Video.”](#) If the law prohibits the promotion of drug use, anyone, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, can be held legally liable for breaching this law. So, would you write the headline "Heterosexuals promoting drug use on Tik-Tok detained"? If the answer to this question is "no", then you are trying to strengthen the negative perception of LGBTIQ+ people by emphasizing the gender identity of the people, labeling them as "drug addicts" and humiliating them in the eyes of the public.

Besides this, while reporting about the murder of LGBTIQ+ people, the media puts more emphasis on gender identity than on any specific criminal investigation.

# Humiliation

Azerbaijani media frequently displays degrading attitudes towards queers. This happens in several ways.

First, the media very often and enthusiastically circulates openly homophobic statements by government officials or other public figures and quotes distorted or wrong information as told by certain celebrities thus failing to provide an alternative opinion regarding the accuracy or criticism on that information.

Second, the media itself sometimes uses derogatory language against LGBTIQ+ people; For example, a word like "üzdəniraq" is still circulated by the media.

Third, political figures try to humiliate their opponents with words or phrases that refer to LGBTIQ +, while the media expands such degrading contexts by allowing the people to be insulted for the purpose of a clickbait. Such queerphobic stories are circulated right away, without any notes.

## A disease or unnatural concept

Azerbaijani media often promotes the views of those who describe queerism as a disease or unnatural experience without providing any scientific basis. The views of those who make such statements are rarely questioned. Regardless of experience of interviewees, they are presented as "experts", thus manipulating the public in a capacity of some sort of a "guide", "wise man" and promoting wrong perceptions and LGBTIQ+ phobic ideas.

# Conspiracy theories

In the article [“Неоконченное ЛИБРЕТТО по Айсель НАШЕ ПОСЛЕСЛОВИЕ”](#) published on the Haqqin.az website on 11 March, 2020, the author Ilgar Huseynov writes: “In the course of the last decade, numerous foreign funds and institutions have allocated billions of dollars to protect the rights of different sexual minorities and promote the notorious gender equality. These funds are channeled precisely to the countries where the traditional foundations of society are still strong. These destructive forces lure mainly young people without life experience into their networks with beautiful promises and calls to create a society of people with boundless freedoms, including a sexual one. First and foremost, they lure young women who have not got married yet for some reasons and feel themselves alone which is characteristic of girls at a certain age.”

One prevalent conspiracy theory in the Azerbaijani media is the idea that LGBTIQ+ people aim to destroy both the traditional family model and the nation, and that they are directly funded by certain people in service of these aims. By presenting LGBTIQ+ people as inherently possessing a moral and spiritual disorder, the media sows anxiety and concern in Azerbaijani society when LGBTIQ+ are discussed. These ungrounded conspiracy theories are circulated and reinforced by journalists by quoting homophobic officials or celebrities without also providing any criticism.

Another popular conspiracy theory is based on the idea that "a large amount of money flowing from the West" is what is funding LGBTIQ+ activity. Thus, the media, which is accustomed to publishing commissioned articles that are neither real analyses on the struggles of LGBTIQ+ life nor meant to raise awareness on the social or political condition of LGBTIQ+ people in Azerbaijan, is constantly looking for "commissioned

acts" or other externally funded political activity in the country. For example, organizing a protest in order to "please the West", "get a grant" and "move abroad" are widespread accusations made in the Azerbaijani media. On 14.05.2020, the Telegraf website published an interview with columnist Elchin Aliyoglu entitled "LGBT money was first brought to Georgia and then transferred to Azerbaijan after cashing...". "When sexual minorities rallied in Baku, they always stood up for the rights of the LGBT community. It is not a matter of protecting their rights, but of preparing a ground for large sums of money. Until now, some of these funds were obtained, brought to Georgia by couriers, where they were cashed and transferred to Azerbaijan." Alioglu's views were presented as undeniable truth without presenting any counterarguments or alternative perspectives.

The fact that conspiracy theories are built upon ideas that simultaneously call for the elimination of deep-rooted inequality and yet still promote violence against LGBTIQ+ people show a clear misunderstanding of how society, both domestically and in a larger international context, works, but also shows the real intention of the conspiracy theories: to remove even the slightest positive opinion about LGBTIQ+ people in the context of human rights. This is not only limited to the Azerbaijani media, but is part of a larger, globally reaching conspiracy theory about LGBTIQ+ people.

# Scandal

Ana səhifə / Şou  
**Neymarın anası 31 yaş kiçik sevgilisini evindən qovdu - Şok səbəb/Foto**

27 Aprel 2020 20:28 1 206 Beğən 0

---

Ana səhifə / Dünya  
**“O görüntülərə görə atam infarkt keçirdi” – Məşhur müğənni intim video haqda**

31 Yanvar 2020 16:12 2 000

---

Ana səhifə / Şou  
**Məşhur aktrisadan ilginç etiraf - Cinsi oriyentasiya...**

5 İyun 2020 21:45 1 255

---

Ana səhifə / Dünya  
**Əsədin ən güvəndiyi komandan gey çıxdı – Şok fotolar**

13 Fevral 2020 18:25 3 464

---

Ana səhifə / Dünya  
**Dünya bu qızdan danışır: Prezident açıqlama yaydı – Şok gəlişmə**

13 Fevral 2020 12:27 3 312

Figure 8.

Research shows that the media applies a sensational approach when reporting on issues related to LGBTIQ+ people. Thus, many media outlets focus on stereotypes. For example, the media often uses pictures of pride parades, cross-dressers, or transgender women with makeup. They even use this imagery in stories, which have nothing to do with gay parades, carnival costumes, or transgender identities. For example, such pictures are used when reporting about a crime or a political event. Media reports highlight queer identities as something exotic as if they have been imported into the country from elsewhere.

By using the words "shock" and "scandal" in the headlines and creating a "scandal" context, the media reinforces deeply entrenched negative perceptions and stereotypes society believes to be true.

## **Anything positive?**

The monitoring shows that the positive coverage of LGBTIQ + people in the country's media, in other words, the coverage of the issue in the context of rights and freedoms is directly related to the efforts of civil society groups working in this area. In other words, as the struggle for equal opportunities advances, so does the number of positive news stories in the media.

# CONCLUSION

The study reviewed 412 materials (news, articles, interviews and opinion) published in selected online media outlets from January to December 2020. 30 percent of them can be considered acceptable while 70 percent - unacceptable. The stories on LGBTIQ+ people published within these 12 months were reviewed and it was clear that the fundamental rights of LGBTIQ+ people were breached.

The results of our monitoring show that many media outlets reinforce negative stereotypes that can lead to violence against LGBTIQ+ people. Important stories about this community—policy issues and concerns about exclusion—or those that should depict them engaged in positive activities, were largely ignored by the media. Overall, the media coverage created an unbalanced, inaccurate and largely unflattering picture of the community.

Researchers noted the use of words, phrases, graphics, images and videos that contribute to the public perception of LGBTIQ+ people and how these reflected or resembled anti-gay rhetoric.

In most cases, incorrect terms and expressions are used. For example, the media's use of the term "sexual minority", a term with a negative connotation, increased in 2020. The same can be said of the the expression "LGBTIQ+ community." Although it was once considered acceptable, it is now considered an outdated and latently negative term. This is because the term "community" is associated with ghettoization and social isolation. The use of the term "community" encodes queers as individuals with identities that are alien to society and its norms. This is one of the reasons why society sees queers as an "alien element".

The study shows that LGBTIQ+ people are mainly used as a rhetorical tool to insult political opponents in the Azerbaijani media.

Media coverage of LGBTIQ+ people from the perspective of the law and principles of equality is very limited.

Journalists tend to report people's sexual orientation or gender identity even in cases when it has nothing to do with the news story or article. However, they never write stories with titles like "Deputy Chairman of X Party is Heterosexual."

Transphobia is more dominant in the media. Expressions such as "transgender", "formerly male/female" or "male/female born" are used to describe transgender people. Or the media persistently uses the names on the person's ID card instead of the ones they have chosen for themselves.

All the problems cited above show that journalists do not do proper research and use queer resources to constantly update their knowledge.

© **QueeRadar** is an initiative to identify, publicize and combat LGBTIQ+ phobias in the Azerbaijani media. The aim is to show LGBTIQ+ phobic content, to create an archive and to achieve improvement of the media on this topic.

Contact:

[www.queeradar.com](http://www.queeradar.com)

E: [queerradar@gmail.com](mailto:queerradar@gmail.com)

F: [facebook.com/queeradar](https://facebook.com/queeradar)

IG: [@queerradar](https://instagram.com/queerradar)