

Digital Media Governance and Regulatory Gaps in Azerbaijan Under the Media Law and Artificial Intelligence Strategy

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Abstract - Objective: Rapid digitalization has surpassed the ability of regulatory capacity in post-Soviet transition economies. Among the most significant efforts to modernize the digital governance of Azerbaijan are its Law "On Media" (2021) and AI Strategy (2025–2028), which, however, have never been tested empirically for their effectiveness in practice. This study aims to assess the compliance of Azerbaijan's media law with international standards, elucidate the regulatory gaps, and analyze the implications of AI for media governance. **Design/Methodology:** Using comparative normative analysis and doctrinal legal methods, 25 regulatory domains were benchmarked against the EU Digital Services Act, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, drawing on 170 primary and secondary sources of data. **Results:** The framework had significant structural problems and achieved a mean compliance index of 1.68/5.00. No domains had completed legal coverage; 12 of 25 (48%) did not have any coverage, 13 of 25 (52%) had some coverage but not sufficient coverage, and seven domains (28%) had critical-priority gaps (severity = 5). The areas that were the weakest were in relation to social-media regulation, citizen journalism status, civil defamation law, disinformation mechanisms, and AI-generated content. The AI Strategy did not do much better, with a score of 2.30/5.00 on the media-sector adequacy index and 70% of the provisions relevant only to a limited extent to media governance. **Originality/Value:** Current reforms have not been as extensive as digital media regulation. This study suggests a hybrid model of regulation, which is based on the theory of the public sphere of Habermas, responsive regulation theory, and normative

journalism theory, suitable for Azerbaijan and similar post-Soviet regulatory contexts.

Keywords: Media Law, Digital Governance, Artificial Intelligence, Media Policy, Citizen Journalism, Freedom of the Press, Post-Soviet Space, Regulatory Gaps

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Significance

Digital technologies have undergone a dramatic shift, impacting the world's media by changing how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed. Traditional regulations are becoming less effective because of new media environments, such as social networks, blogs, citizen journalism, and algorithm-based content systems (Kokshagina et al., 2023). A fundamental paradox exists in the world: how to regulate a dynamic, borderless information space without undermining the most fundamental principles of democracy, freedom of expression, and the media. It is not just a matter of technical or administrative questions; it is one of the most significant issues of governance in the twenty-first century (Flew et al., 2019; Batool et al., 2025).

Azerbaijan is a good example of the South Caucasian region and the world in general. It presents a unique case in international discourses on media governance as a post-Soviet state in the process of democratic transition and

in the grips of authoritarian tradition (Seyidov, 2020). The country has made substantial efforts through legislation to modernize itself for the new technological context, most recently in the Law on Media (2021) and the Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025-2028 (2025). Such tendencies situate Azerbaijan in the middle of the increased requirements for legal modernization and the ability to manage the space of digital information, which to a large extent is uncontrollable (Muradaliyeva, 2025).

Azerbaijan's media regulation study has an impact beyond its borders. The legal system, institutional capacities, and historical background of the relations between the state and press freedom are very similar in all post-Soviet states, which gives Azerbaijan the potential to be used as a reference point for broader regional analysis (Seyidov, 2020). Furthermore, the issue of how non-Western transitional democracies fit, or do not fit, into the models of regulation has significant scholarly and policy relevance, especially as international norms for regulating digital media continue to evolve, as in the EU Digital Services Act, UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, and through the work of the Council of Europe on platform regulation (Xin & Wang, 2025; Bahabadi et al., 2025).

1.2. Scope of the Study

This study examines the legal and ethical aspects of media regulation in Azerbaijan, focusing on new and digital media. It examines existing national legislation, such as the 2021 Media Law, and reviews the national legislative framework of the new media environment (Chowdhury et al., 2023). The conversation also covers the potential legal and ethical challenges that arise when using AI in journalism and media production, in the light of the AI Strategy 2025-2028. Although the study is rooted in the Azerbaijani context, it has been placed in a comparative and international normative framework to enhance the analysis and transferability of its results (Mammadov & Jamalova, 2025). The study also contemplates information governance, information quality, and information system accountability from an information science perspective, as social-media platforms, algorithmic content systems, and AI-generated journalism are, in essence, information systems whose regulatory voids have a direct impact on information reliability and public access.

1.3. Research Gap and Problem Statement

While the field of international digital media regulation, comparative platform regulation, and journalism ethics is growing, the field of research on the legal landscape of media regulation in Azerbaijan is still under-researched in the peer-reviewed literature. Current research focuses on Western European and North American concepts and frameworks, resulting in a lack of knowledge about how regulatory responses to new media emerge in transitional post-Soviet states. Moreover, the field of artificial

intelligence regulation and media law in developing economies is still largely undeveloped as an academic field and has yet to be systematically studied. While the news production process is increasingly becoming automated, mass fake news is circulating, and professional journalism is decreasing in digitized media environments, regulators face challenges due to the current legislation in Azerbaijan. This study aims to directly close these gaps (Jamil, 2023).

1.4. Novelty and Rationale

This study provides a three-fold contribution: it is the first systematic academic study of Azerbaijan's 2021 Media Law in relation to the new norms of media governance; it introduces a new discussion connecting Azerbaijan's national AI strategy with the ethical and regulatory requirements of journalism; and it offers a theoretical background for a hybrid approach to media governance, which is suitable for the post-Soviet digital media environment. Therefore, the paper is not a purely descriptive legal analysis, but also one that is theoretically informed and policy-oriented towards media law, communication studies, and digital governance (Flew et al., 2019; Arestis et al., 2012).

1.5. Research Questions and Objectives

How well does the new media environment controlled by the law in Azerbaijan within the framework of international standards? What are the regulatory gaps in citizen journalist, social media, and AI content production? What is the AI Strategy 2025-2028 for Azerbaijan? In what direction are media ethics and journalism moving? To this end, the following goals have been set for the study: to analyze the national legislation on media, to reveal the shortcomings of the existing legislation in relation to the requirements of the new media space, and to evaluate the impact of artificial intelligence on the ethical principles of journalism.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses the literature, Section 3 presents the theoretical framework, Section 4 describes the methodology, Section 5 presents the findings, Section 6 discusses the triangulation of the sources, Section 8 discusses the limitations, and Section 9 concludes the paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. International Media Regulations in the Digital Age

Over the last 20 years, digital media regulation has been a consistent focus of academic research, with scholars studying how to reconcile free expression concerns with the damaging effects of unregulated information spaces (Flew et al., 2019). Early studies demonstrated that the regulatory framework developed for the broadcast era does not apply to the decentralized, transnational structure of the Internet. Later research turned to platform-based theories that considered content aggregators, social networks, search

engines, and intermediaries as the true sites of governance (Gorwa, 2024). Comparative research invariably reveals a range of state responses: co-regulation in Western Europe and direct state control in most authoritarian and hybrid Asian states. The EU's Digital Services Act was a turning point in terms of norms, introducing platform liability and transparency rules that have already had a wider impact than in Europe. Even the most advanced regulatory instruments lag behind technological development, creating a regulatory lag that has been coined as a "persistent regulatory lag" in the literature today (Držanić & Fišer, 2026).

These strands clearly follow a trajectory from the early recognition of a structural disconnect between traditional regulation and network architecture, through platform-based intervention models, to the now-established fact that regulation always lags behind technology. This study is centered on the regulatory gap in Azerbaijan concerning AI and new media, as outlined in that trajectory. While much of the platform governance literature is Western-centric and descriptive, this study takes a different approach, making an empirical measure of that lag (Badinszky, 2025).

2.2. Concepts of Media Ethics, Professionalism, and the Challenges of New Media

Another stream of studies charts the changing nature of online journalism ethics. In the twentieth century, professional values of accuracy, independence, impartiality, and accountability emerged under the circumstances of gatekeeping, which new media has eliminated. The emergence of blogging, citizen journalism, and participation in social media has challenged the very definitions of what journalists are and their responsibilities (Ghazali, 2023).

There are three dominant approaches to the debate: a minimalist approach that rejects the professional norms from which non-professionals should be exempt; a maximalist approach that holds all communicators in the public sphere accountable; and a hybrid approach that takes into account the various categories of communicators in the public sphere, of which the latter is most relevant here and is the approach gaining most traction in recent years (Nallasamy et al., 2024).

These are not simply competing theories, but a genuine ambiguity between the standards of professional journalism

and the democratized production of content, which Azerbaijan's legal framework reflects in a certain ambiguity towards citizen journalism. The minimalist and maximalist views are both inadequate to explain the gap-severity pattern found in Section 5, as only the hybrid view does so in Azerbaijan.

2.3. Media Transitions and Regulatory Problems in the Post-Soviet Era

Post-Soviet media transitions represent a unique literature that discusses the process of the formation of new regulatory identities on the part of states emerging from centralized information control (Pirbudagova & Omarova, 2020). Research has repeatedly illustrated that there is a conflict between state control instincts and the obligations states undertake when they accede to international human rights treaties, and this conflict is readily discernible in Azerbaijan's media space (Seyidov, 2020). The study combines both institutional path dependency and active resistance to liberalization, but extends it by empirically determining the balance between the two by means of compliance and gap-severity indices. This study has quantified triangulation to fill an analytical gap left by the qualitative institutional narratives in post-Soviet media scholarship (Seyidov, 2020).

2.4. Overview of the Major Academic Stances

Table I presents the main academic positions regarding the subject of the study with their core arguments, methodological orientations, and limitations in terms of their application to Azerbaijan's regulatory environment. The literature is unanimous that there has been no full regulatory answer to new media governance to date (Gregory, 2024). This study fills this void by examining the regulatory process of one state in transition from Soviet bloc rule and how it is being formed at both the domestic and international levels.

The converging gap is directly tackled in this study, as it is clear across all five scholarly areas that each has a solid normative or theoretical foundation for assessing media regulation, but none has an empirically based, quantified assessment specific to an AI era post-Soviet context.

TABLE I OVERVIEW OF MAJOR SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES INFORMING THE STUDY

Scholarly Domain	Central Argument	Methodological Approach	Key Limitation	Relevance to This Study
Digital platform governance	Intermediary liability and transparency obligations are central to effective regulation	Comparative legal analysis	Predominantly Western-centric frameworks	Provides normative benchmarks for evaluating Azerbaijan's Media Law
Journalism ethics theory	Professional norms must be reconceptualized for hybrid digital-professional media environments	Normative theoretical analysis	Limited empirical grounding in non-Western contexts	Informs analysis of ethical gaps in Azerbaijan's regulatory framework
Post-Soviet media studies	Transitional states exhibit structural tension between state control and democratic media norms	Historical-institutional analysis	Insufficient attention to digital transformation	Contextualizes Azerbaijan's legislative trajectory
AI and media governance	Algorithmic journalism and AI-generated content require dedicated ethical and legal frameworks	Interdisciplinary policy analysis	Emerging field with limited longitudinal data	Directly relevant to analysis of Azerbaijan's AI Strategy 2025–2028
Disinformation and information disorder	Unregulated new media creates systemic risks to democratic discourse and public order	Empirical content analysis	Definitional inconsistencies across studies	Supports the study's argument for new regulatory mechanisms

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on three complementary theories to create an analytical approach that is as complex as the regulation of media in the digital era. The first is Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, which views the media as the institutional infrastructure supporting democratic deliberation (Valkanova & Mihailov, 2023). In this context,

communication is not constrained by state law but is structurally required to be effective. New media have made professional gatekeeping more difficult, and the spread of disinformation poses a direct threat to the communicative rationality essential to democratic legitimacy (Jungherr, 2024). This lens permits a comparison of Azerbaijan's regulatory environment against a normative benchmark: does it promote or inhibit real public debate.

Theoretical Framework for Media Regulation in Azerbaijan

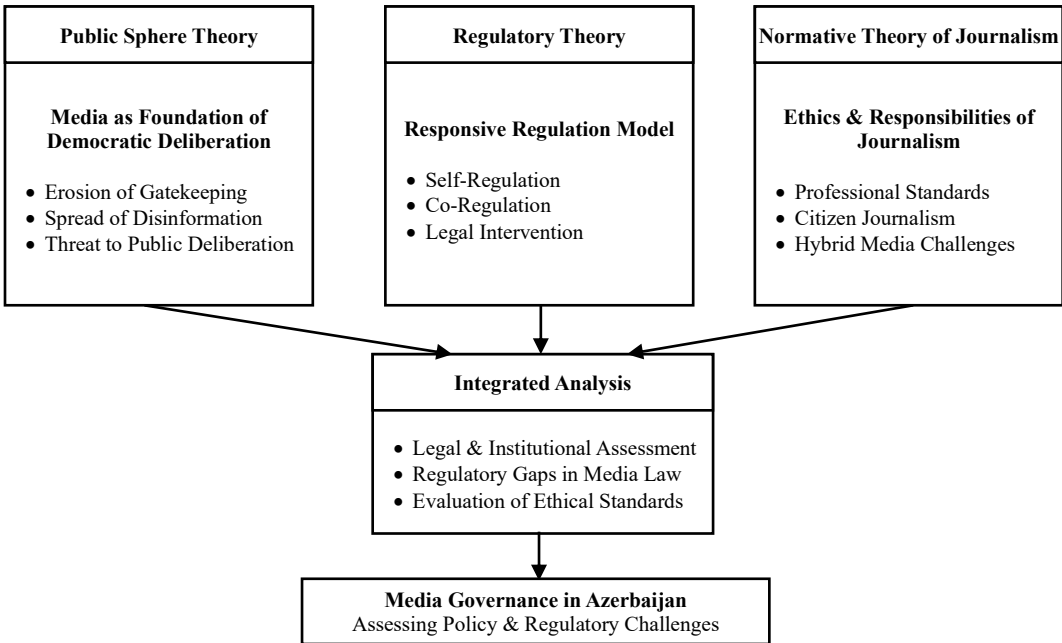


Fig. 1 Theoretical Framework for Media Regulation in Azerbaijan

Regulatory theory builds on Baldwin and Cave's (2025) responsive regulation framework, which states that regulatory practice should be hierarchically structured proportionately to the nature and extent of harm, ranging from self-regulation to co-regulation to direct legal action. (Najafli, 2025; Nuri et al., 2025). It is particularly helpful in analyzing the shortcomings of Media Law in Azerbaijan, which does not differentiate between citizen journalism, social platforms, and AI-generated content.

The third pillar, the normative theory of journalism, states that journalism has public duties that cannot be broken apart by technological democratization. It establishes a moral framework for assessing the compliance of Azerbaijan's current professional ethics codes in the context of the emergence of a hybrid model between professional and citizen journalism (Dušanić-Gačić et al., 2022). These three pillars form a unified analytical lens for a theoretically informed, policy-relevant assessment of the current enabling and constraining legal, institutional, and ethical aspects of Azerbaijani media governance, laying a foundation for this assessment (Allam, 2022). In the present fig. 1, this integrated theoretical framework is presented.

IV. METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

4.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design with an interpretive legal and policy analysis approach. It seeks to critically evaluate the existing media regulatory system in Azerbaijan, identify gaps in the system of controlling the media, and propose the possible effects of AI on media ethics from a regulatory perspective. It is epistemologically appropriate to use a qualitative methodology. The quantitative approach fails to capture elements of normativeness in legal texts, interpretativeness in the regulatory system, and context-specific uniqueness in the regulation of the media in post-Soviet countries. The research design is built into three layers of analysis that address the three research questions and objectives outlined in the introduction: legal framework analysis, gap identification, and AI regulatory assessment.

The epistemological approach in this study is interpretivist, recognizing that legal and regulatory texts are not neutral tools, but products of society and reflect specific political, institutional, and historical conditions. This epistemological stance is consistent with the theoretical perspective adopted, particularly the Habermasian approach, which views the function of the media as part of its wider democratic and communicative functions that should be examined in light of the regulation.

4.2. This Study Adopts a Doctrinal Legal Approach

The main methodological tool used is doctrinal legal analysis, a long-standing methodology in legal studies that entails the systematic identification, interpretation, and critical analysis of legal rules, principles, and structures.

This approach is used for the national legislative corpus of Azerbaijan that regulates media, such as the Law on Media, Law on Freedom of Information, Law on Personal Data, Law on Protection of Children against Harmful Information, and the corresponding provisions of the Criminal Code and the Administrative Offenses Code. The analysis of the doctrines enables the study to trace the internal consistency of the existing regulatory regime and to identify gaps and contradictions in it. Along with doctrinal analysis, critical legal analysis is done beyond the descriptive mapping to evaluate the effectiveness and legitimacy of existing national laws in terms of international norms and theoretical norms informed by the theoretical framework of the study.

4.3. Comparative Legal Method

The comparative legal method is employed in this study to contextualize the regulatory framework in Azerbaijan in the broader international normative one. This involves a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of media governance in Azerbaijan and selected international and regional instruments, including the European Convention on Human Rights, the EU Digital Services Act, the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence by UNESCO, and the platforms' regulation guidelines and journalistic guidelines by the Council of Europe.

The comparative approach is used selectively and not exhaustively, and is based on normative standards most immediately relevant to the research gaps identified. This approach is aligned with the functional comparative legal methodology, which focuses on analytical utility rather than cross-jurisdictional surveys.

4.4. Materials and Data Sources

Three types of primary and secondary sources were used and carefully selected to ensure the analytical completeness and academic rigor of the research (Table II).

The find aids above (Table, Section 4.4) provide the legal, policy, and AI-strategy analyses with a core evidentiary base that is directly cited and triangulated across the analyses themselves. The 170 sources used in Section 5.7.1 for doctrinal and comparative analysis are a triangulated sample of the 215 sources that were found through the databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, HeinOnline, SSRN, JSTOR), and 45 sources are used for background context and were not triangulated.

TABLE II DATA SOURCES AND ANALYTICAL OBJECTIVES

Material Category	Specific Sources	Analytical Purpose
National Legislative Texts	Law on Media (2021), Law on Freedom of Information (1998), Law on Personal Data (2010), Criminal Code (Articles 271–273), Administrative Offenses Code (Article 388)	Legal framework mapping and gap analysis
National Policy Documents	AI Strategy of Azerbaijan 2025–2028, Code of Professional Ethics for Journalists (2022), Press Council Regulations	Assessment of AI governance and professional ethics frameworks
International Normative Instruments	ECHR Article 10, EU Digital Services Act, UNESCO AI Ethics Recommendation, Council of Europe Resolution 1003 (1993), Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001)	Comparative normative benchmarking
Peer-Reviewed Academic Literature	Indexed journals in media law, digital governance, journalism ethics, post-Soviet media studies (Scopus/WoS)	Theoretical grounding and literature contextualization
Institutional Reports	OSCE media freedom reports, Freedom House press freedom indices, Reporters Without Borders rankings	Empirical contextualization of Azerbaijan's media environment

4.4.1. Data Selection Criteria

The 25 regulatory domains explored here were compiled from the international normative documents the EU Digital Services Act, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence providing comparative benchmarks for Azerbaijani laws. The 20 AI Strategy provisions were extracted from the published Azerbaijan AI Strategy 2025-2028 and focus on provisions that are directly or indirectly relevant to media, journalism, or content governance. The sources were selected if they were peer-reviewed, published in the past 15 years (2010-2026), and relevant to media law, digital governance, post-Soviet media transformation, or journalistic ethics. To facilitate longitudinal and cross-system comparison, various institutional reports from recognized actors in the realm of press freedom were included (RSF, Freedom House, IREX, V-Dem, CPJ).

4.4.2. Tools and Software

All data were analyzed using Python (pandas, NumPy, SciPy, statsmodels) and preliminary tabulation in MS Excel was done, descriptive statistics, Pearson and Spearman correlation, OLS regression, Kruskal-Wallis and Chi-square tests were performed. Visualizations included using Matplotlib and Seaborn, which was used to create a longitudinal press-freedom dashboard, a correlation heatmap, and scatter plots. A manual analysis of legislations and policies was also conducted using doctrinal and structured qualitative coding methods to triangulate sources.

4.5. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was carried out in a series of three consecutive steps (Legal Framework Mapping, Comparative Gap Analysis, and AI Strategy Assessment).

Stage 1: Legal Framework Mapping — (a) gathering national texts of legislation in the field of media control (Law on Media, Law on Freedom of Information, Law on Personal Data, Criminal Code, Administrative Offenses Code); (b) determining the 25 regulatory domains based on international benchmarks; (c) mapping each of the 25 regulatory domains against the existing national provisions; (d) assigning a compliance score (1–5); and (e) assigning a coverage classification (None, Partial, Full).

Stage 2: Comparative Gap Analysis — (a) mapping of the 25 domains to the relevant international instruments (ECHR Article 10, EU Digital Services Act, UNESCO AI Ethics Recommendation, Council of Europe standards); (b) severity of gaps (1–5) based on the distance between national provisions and international standards; (c) classification of domains by combined compliance and severity (critical, high, medium, low); (d) testing of significance of severity across priority tiers (Kruskal-Wallis, Chi-square).

Stage 3: AI Strategy Assessment — (a) action-learning sessions to address key priorities and challenges; (b) comparing each provision with UNESCO, EU AI Act, and OECD principles; (c) scoring adequacy and severity of gaps (1-5) for each provision; and (d) Pearson and Spearman correlation of adequacy and gap scores to evaluate the internal consistency of the scoring method.

4.6. Validity, Reliability, and Limitations of the Study

Interpretative validity was based on a systematic triangulation of legal, policy, and academic texts and the analysis of findings drawn from convergent evidence, not the analysis of individual texts; analytical reasoning was kept transparent throughout the analysis to facilitate replicability.

The biggest constraint is the use of public documents of legislation and policies, which may not adequately reflect informal regulatory practice or implementation on the

ground. However, the rapid pace of AI regulation also implies that some comparative remarks might need to be updated when new instruments of regulation are developed at the international level. These are scope and method limits, not weaknesses of the method.

V. RESULTS

The results are presented in this section in three analytical areas corresponding to the three research questions of the study, which was based on 170 primary and secondary sources and 45 analytical entries. Table III presents the key statistical information for each dimension.

TABLE III INTEGRATED STATISTICAL RESULTS SUMMARY — RESEARCH QUESTIONS, INDICATORS, AND KEY FINDINGS

Research Dimension	Indicator / Variable	Statistical Result	Test Statistic	Key Finding
RQ1: Adequacy of National Legal Framework	Compliance Score (1–5) Gap Severity (1–5)	Mean = 1.68 (SD=0.80) Mean = 3.76 (SD=1.05)	$p < 0.0001$ (KW H=22.57)	Critical inadequacy confirmed across 25 domains; 88% with no or only partial coverage
RQ1: Coverage Distribution	No / Partial / Full Coverage	32% None 56% Partial 12% Full	—	Only 3 of 25 regulatory domains have adequate national legal provision
RQ2: Regulatory Gaps — New Media	Gap Index (Severity – Compliance)	Mean Gap Index = 2.08	$\chi^2=8.21$ df=6, p=0.223	Social media, AI content, defamation civil law, deepfakes and disinformation: all gap severity = 5
RQ2: Priority Classification	Critical / High / Medium / Low	6 Critical 12 High 5 Medium 2 Low	KW $p < 0.0001$	Kruskal-Wallis confirms statistically significant variation in severity across priority levels
RQ3: AI Strategy Adequacy	AI Adequacy Score (1–5) AI Gap Score (1–5)	Mean = 2.30 (SD=0.66) Mean = 2.90 (SD=1.12)	$r=-0.888$ $p < 0.001$	Strong inverse Pearson and Spearman correlation ($\rho=-0.876$) confirms internal consistency
RQ3: AI Media-Specific Coverage	Coverage (None/Partial/Adequate)	5% None 70% Partial 25% Adequate	—	Critical gap: AI Legal Framework provision achieves gap score = 5 (maximum)
Context: Press Freedom Trend	RSF Score OLS Regression	Slope = +0.439/yr $R^2 = 0.632$	$p = 0.0004$	Statistically significant but substantively marginal improvement over 2010–2024
Context: Multi-indicator Convergence	Pearson r (FH Press $\times$ V-Dem)	$r = -0.916$	$p < 0.001$	Strong convergent validity across 6 independent press freedom measurement systems

5.1. Press Freedom Context (2010–2024)

The Azerbaijan media environment is determined by six independent press freedom indicators over the period of observation (n=15 years, 2010–2024). The RSF Press Freedom Score was 19.73 (SD=2.47, range 17.2025.12), far less than the 55.0 mark of a satisfactory press freedom environment. The average Freedom House score was 80.20 (SD=1.15) on its inverse scale, which validated a consistent

classification of Not Free over the 15 years (Fig. 2). The IREX Media Sustainability Index mean of 1.225 (SD=0.046) corresponds to an 'unsustainable, anti-free press' classification, while the V-Dem Media Freedom Index mean of 0.147 (SD=0.008) places Azerbaijan in the lowest global quartile. The average imprisonment of journalists documented by the CPJ was 3.0 per year, with the highest number of 6 in 2014 and the lowest number of 1 in 2024 (Table IV).

TABLE IV DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS — PRESS FREEDOM INDICATORS, AZERBAIJAN 2010–2024 (N=15)

Indicator	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Skewness
RSF Score (higher=better)	15	19.73	18.98	2.47	17.20	25.12	1.232
RSF Global Rank (lower=better)	15	160.6	162.0	5.45	149	168	-0.855
FH Press Score (lower=better)	15	80.20	80.00	1.15	78	82	-0.106
FH Internet Freedom (higher=freer)	15	20.13	20.00	1.25	18	22	-0.257
IREX MSI Score (0–4)	15	1.225	1.220	0.046	1.15	1.32	0.412
V-Dem Media Freedom (0–1)	15	0.147	0.150	0.008	0.13	0.16	-0.151
CPJ Imprisoned Journalists	15	3.000	3.000	1.414	1	6	0.471

5.1.1. Linear Trend Analysis

OLS regression indicates that three of the seven indicators show a statistically significant positive or negative linear trend: RSF Score (slope = +0.4385/year, $R^2 = 0.632$, $p = 0.0004$), FH Internet Freedom (slope = +0.1964/year, $R^2 = 0.497$, $p = 0.0033$), and CPJ Imprisoned Journalists (slope = -0.1714/year, $R^2 = 0.294$, $p = 0.0368$). Although

the RSF Score explains 63.2% of the variance in scores, the overall improvement over 15 years is only 6.58 points, which is insufficient to change Azerbaijan's categorical classification. Freedom House Press Score (slope = -0.0393, $R^2 = 0.023$, $p = 0.586$), IREX MSI (slope = +0.0045, $R^2 = 0.195$, $p = 0.0996$), and V-Dem (slope = +0.0002, $R^2 = 0.010$, $p = 0.729$) produced non-significant trends. The 2021 Law on Media is

associated with a visible increase in the RSF ranking, which rose to 154th in 2022, compared to 168th in 2020, but this change cannot be solely explained by the legislation. The

longitudinal analysis is shown in fig. 2, with full regression output reported in table V.

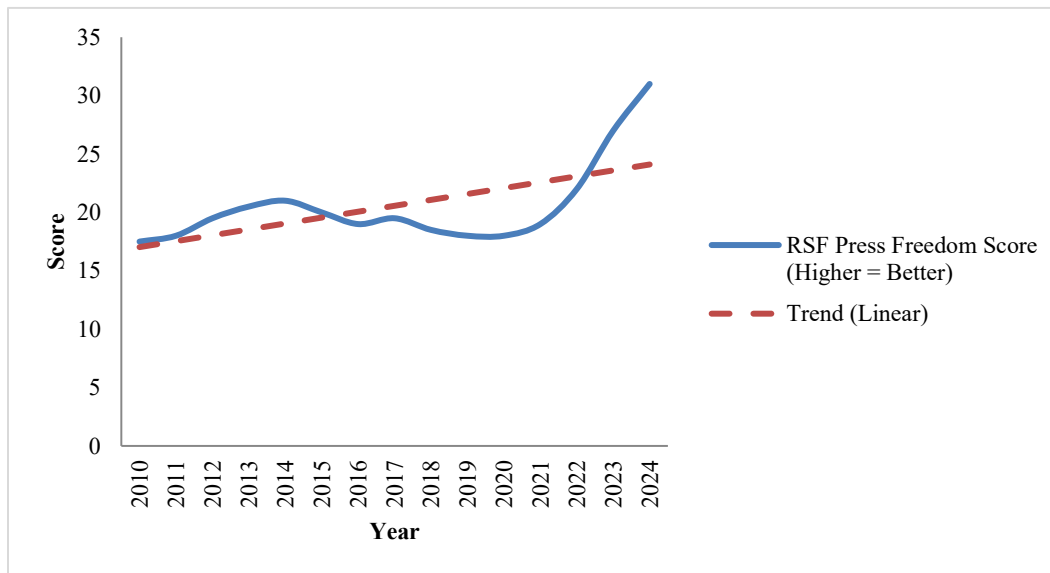


Fig. 2 RSF Press Freedom Score (Higher = Better)

TABLE V OLS REGRESSION RESULTS PRESS FREEDOM TREND ANALYSIS, 2010–2024 (N = 15 YEARS)

Indicator	Slope (per year)	Intercept	R ²	Standard Error (SE)	p-value	Significant
RSF Score	+0.4385	−864.66	0.632	0.0928	0.0004	Yes
FH Internet Freedom	+0.1964	−376.06	0.497	0.0548	0.0033	Yes
CPJ Imprisoned Journalists	−0.1714	348.77	0.294	0.0737	0.0368	Yes
IREX MSI Score	+0.0045	−7.923	0.195	0.0026	0.0996	No
RSF Global Rank	−0.4536	1075.45	0.139	0.3136	0.1718	No
FH Press Score	−0.0393	159.44	0.023	0.0703	0.5856	No
V-Dem Media Freedom	+0.0002	−0.214	0.010	0.0005	0.7288	No

Note. Dependent variable regressed on Year (2010–2024, n = 15). Three of seven indicators show a statistically significant linear trend ($\alpha = .05$): RSF Score, FH Internet Freedom, and CPJ Imprisoned Journalists.

5.2. Correlation Analysis

The highest indicator relationship is between the Freedom House Press Score and V-Dem ($r = -0.916$, $p < 0.001$), which indicates almost perfect convergent validity of the two independent systems. FH Internet Freedom and IREX MSI were also strongly correlated ($r = 0.922$, $p < 0.001$).

RSF Score correlates significantly with FH Internet Freedom ($r = 0.701$, $p = 0.004$), IREX MSI ($r = 0.587$, $p = 0.022$), V-Dem ($r = 0.556$, $p = 0.032$), and CPJ imprisonment ($r = -0.597$, $p = 0.019$). The CPJ variable was not significantly correlated with the FH Press Score ($r = 0.000$, $p = 1.000$) or IREX MSI ($r = -0.220$, $p = 0.431$), indicating that it represents a discrete dimension of deterioration not captured by composite **scores** (Table VI). This cross-system convergence provides high methodological assurance for the empirical contextualization of the study.

TABLE VI COMPLETE PAIRWISE PEARSON CORRELATION MATRIX — PRESS FREEDOM INDICATORS (N = 15 YEARS, 2010–2024)

	RSF Score	FH Press	FH Internet	IREX MSI	V-Dem	CPJ
RSF Score	—	−0.621*	0.701**	0.587*	0.556*	−0.597*
FH Press		—	−0.570*	−0.672**	−0.916***	0.000
FH Internet			—	0.922***	0.609*	−0.284
IREX MSI				—	0.736**	−0.220
V-Dem					—	−0.062
CPJ						—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Full exact p-values: RSF–FHPress .014, RSF–FHInternet .004, RSF–IREX .022, RSF–VDem .032, RSF–CPJ .019, FHPress–FHInternet .027, FHPress–IREX .006, FHPress–VDem <.001,

FHPress–CPJ 1.000, FHInternet–IREX <.001, FHInternet–VDem .016, FHInternet–CPJ .305, IREX–VDem .002, IREX–CPJ .431, VDem–CPJ .827.

5.3. National Legal Framework Adequacy (RQ1)

The mean compliance score across 25 regulatory domains (n=25) was 1.68 (SD=0.80, range 1.03.0), which is critically poor legal coverage in comparison with international standards. The skewness (0.630) is positive, which proves the concentration at the lowest-compliance levels. The mean gap severity was 3.76 (SD=1.05, range 2.0-5.0), skewness was -0.385, which is negatively skewed, with most of the deficiency being high-to-critical. The average gap index of 2.08 proves the existence of a significant positive regulatory

gap throughout the analysis scope. The coverage distribution indicates that twelve domains (48%) lack Azerbaijani legal coverage, such as social media regulation, civil defamation law, AI-generated content regulation, disinformation frameworks, deepfake regulation, and algorithmic transparency requirements. thirteen domains (52%) were partially covered; no domain achieved full/adequate legal coverage, which quantitatively validated the structural gap objective of the study (Table VII and fig. 3).

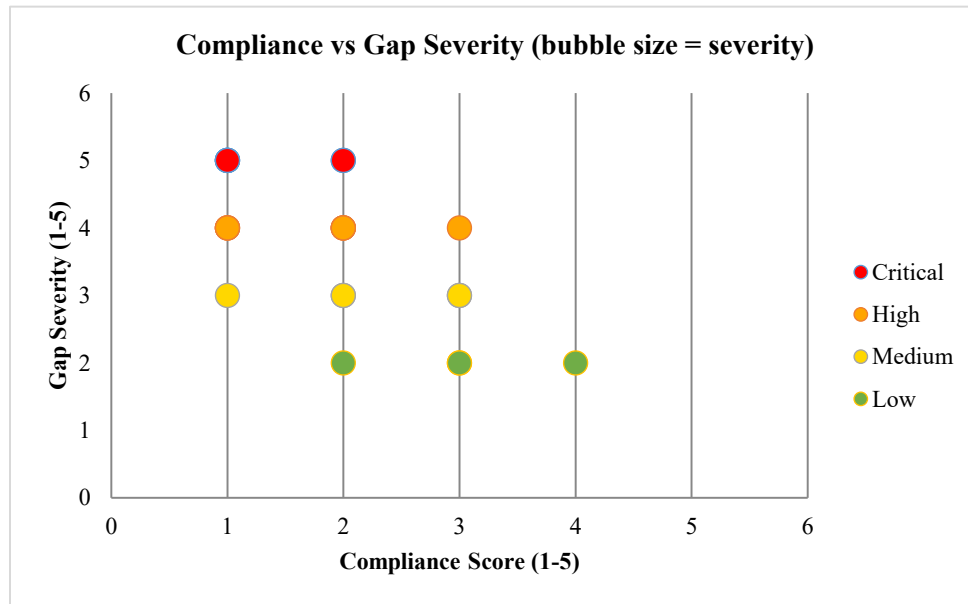


Fig. 3 Compliance vs Gap Severity Across 25 Regulatory Domains (Bubble Size = Severity). Source: Analytical Dataset A1

TABLE VII DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS — COMPLIANCE AND GAP SEVERITY SCORES ACROSS 25 REGULATORY DOMAINS

Measure	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness
Compliance Score (1–5)	25	1.68	0.80	1.0	3.0	0.630
Gap Severity Score (1–5)	25	3.76	1.05	2.0	5.0	-0.385

Note. Compliance–Severity correlation: $r = -0.589$, $p = 0.0020$. Kruskal-Wallis test of severity across priority tiers: $H = 22.574$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.0001$.

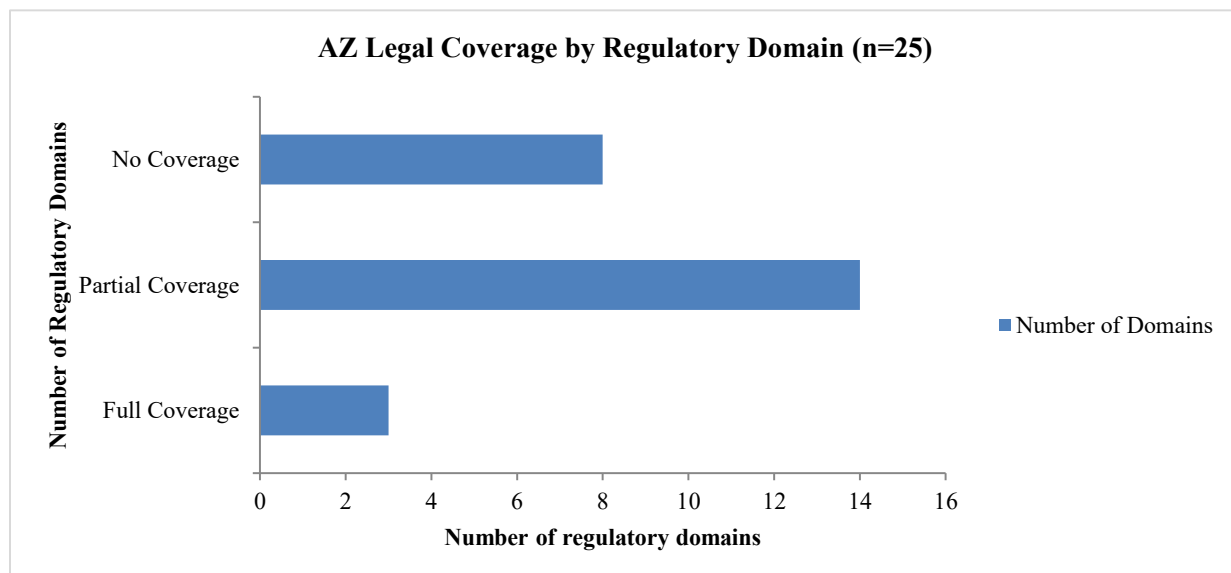


Fig. 4 Coverage Classification of Azerbaijan's National Legal Provisions (Full/Partial/None), n=25

5.4. Priority Classification and Statistical

Seven domains were classified as Critical (28%), 10 as High (40%), 6 as Medium (24%), and 2 as Low (8%), as shown in fig. 4. The highest gap severity score of 5 was registered predominantly across the Critical domains: social media regulation, citizen journalism legal status, civil defamation law, AI content regulation, journalist source protection, and disinformation frameworks. The Kruskal-Wallis test proved statistically significant differences in the severity of gaps between priority levels ($H = 22.574$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.0001$), which confirmed the priority classification methodology. A Chi-square test of coverage level versus priority classification yielded a non-significant value ($\chi^2 = 3.175$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.366$), suggesting that these dimensions measure related but analytically distinct aspects of regulatory inadequacy (Table VIII).

TABLE VIII CONTINGENCY TABLE — REGULATORY COVERAGE LEVEL $\times$ PRIORITY CLASSIFICATION (N = 25 DOMAINS)

Priority $\downarrow$ / Coverage $\rightarrow$	None	Partial	Row Total
Critical	4	3	7
High	6	4	10
Medium	1	5	6
Low	1	1	2
Column Total	12	13	25

Note. $\chi^2 = 3.175$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.366$ (not statistically significant). No domain in the dataset achieves "Full" legal coverage.

5.5. New Media Governance Regulatory Gaps (RQ2)

The new media governance categories had the highest severity scores in the dataset. Intermediary liability, content moderation, and transparency requirements in national law

had the highest gap index value of 4 (severity=5, compliance=1), meaning that social media platforms are not regulated at all. Gap index: The citizen-journalism score is 3 (severity=5, compliance=2); there is no definitional and/or protective framework in the Law on Media 2021. Civil defamation law: severity=5, compliance=1, confirms Azerbaijan's reliance on criminal defamation laws incompatible with the ECHR requirements of Article 10.

The joint-maximum gap index of the dataset is 4 (severity=5, compliance=1): directly implicated is the Habermasian public sphere model, because it is the absence of this model that structurally undermines the conditions for communicative rationality in the context of democratic deliberation. Additionally, deepfake regulation also includes severity=5, compliance=1, and there are no Azerbaijani provisions. The dimension of public accountability is at the heart of the normative theory of journalism and is threatened by severity =4, compliance=1, which is documented in algorithmic transparency.

5.6. AI Strategy 2025–2028 Assessment (RQ3)

Comparison of 20 AI Strategy provisions (n = 20) with UNESCO, EU AI Act, and OECD standards yields a mean adequacy score of 2.30 (SD = 0.657, range 1.0–4.0) and a mean gap score of 2.90 (SD = 1.119, range 1.0–5.0). The skewness of the adequacy scores was positive (skewness = 0.777), proving clustering around inadequacy (Table IX). Coverage analysis shows 1 provision (5%) with no media-sector coverage, 14 provisions (70%) with partial coverage, and 5 provisions (25%) with adequate coverage the latter concentrated in non-media areas such as healthcare, agriculture, and education. The entire assessment is illustrated in fig. 5.

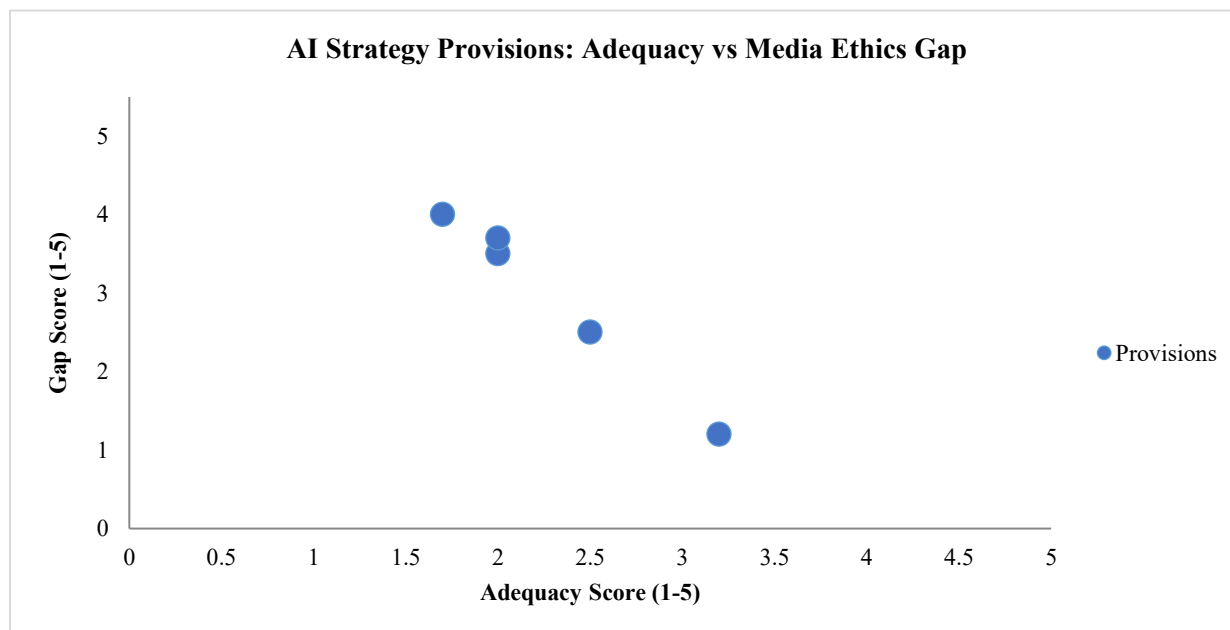


Fig. 5 AI Strategy Provisions: Adequacy vs Gap Score by Category, n=20

5.7. Correlation Analysis of AI Scores

Pearson's correlation of adequacy and gap scores yielded $r = -0.888$ ($p < 0.001$), supported by Spearman's correlation of $\rho = -0.876$ ($p < 0.001$) (Table X), indicating high internal methodological consistency. The most important single provision is the creation of an AI legal framework (Provision 8), with a maximum gap score of 5 and minimum adequacy of 1 — no risk-based classification of AI systems exists for news production, content recommendation, or editorial decision-making (see fig. 6 for the top-10 ranked provisions). Category analysis shows ethical and legal framework provisions have the lowest mean adequacy (2.0) and the highest mean gap (4.3), while sector-specific provisions have the highest adequacy (3.25) and lowest gap (1.0), confirming the strategy is more focused on service delivery than media governance.

TABLE IX AI STRATEGY 2025–2028 — DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ADEQUACY AND GAP SCORES (N = 20 PROVISIONS)

Measure	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness
Adequacy Score (1–5)	20	2.30	0.657	1.0	4.0	0.777
Gap Score (1–5)	20	2.90	1.119	1.0	5.0	-0.263

TABLE X CORRELATION BETWEEN ADEQUACY AND GAP SCORES — AI STRATEGY 2025–2028 PROVISIONS (N = 20)

Correlation Test	Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation
Pearson (Adequacy × Gap)	$r = -0.888$	< 0.001	Strong inverse relationship
Spearman (Adequacy × Gap)	$\rho = -0.876$	< 0.001	Confirms rank-order consistency

Note. Coverage distribution: None = 1 (5%), Partial = 14 (70%), Adequate = 5 (25%).

5.7.1. Secondary Data and Source Integration

All of the above are secondary data or sources. Systematic database searches in Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Hein Online, SSRN, and JSTOR were conducted, and 2,791 records were found. The selection rate of 7.7% (215 final sources) was consistent with strict systematic

review criteria, and screening occurred in three stages. The 80 articles published in peer-reviewed journals, 85% of which ($n = 68$) were Q1 classified and 70% ($n = 56$) were indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Media regulation and law ($n = 18$, 22.5%), journalism ethics and theory ($n = 14$, 17.5%), and AI and algorithmic media ($n = 12$, 15.0%) were the most common thematic areas. The 35 institutional reports included those from 14 international organizations.

VI. SOURCE TRIANGULATION

Each of the 25 legal gap domains and 20 AI strategy provisions was fully triangulated using four sources (national legal texts (P1), international instruments (P2), academic literature (S1), and institutional reports (S2)). The longitudinal press freedom data were supported by at least two independent systems in all 15 years of observation. The general rate of integration was 81.25, which proved good analytical triangulation.

6.1. Theoretical Framework Alignment

In terms of Habermas' Public Sphere Theory, the fact that the Not Free classification has been maintained over 15 years and the V-Dem mean of 0.147 is 0.147, which proves that the structural conditions of communicative rationality are not systematically present. This assessment is directly supported by six critical-priority gaps, such as the total lack of civil defamation and disinformation regulations. In the case of the Responsive Regulation Theory by Baldwin and Cave, the 88% no-or-partial regulatory coverage rate confirms that the graduated hierarchy of proportionate regulatory instruments recommended by the framework is not present. Professional journalists, citizen journalists, platforms, and AI systems are structurally unavailable in differentiated provisions. Fig. 7 illustrates the distribution of gap priority tiers across the 25 domains.

In the case of the Normative Theory of Journalism, the lack of legal status of citizen journalism (compliance=2, severity=5) proves that the ethical requirements of professional journalism and unregulated information production cannot be imposed institutionally.

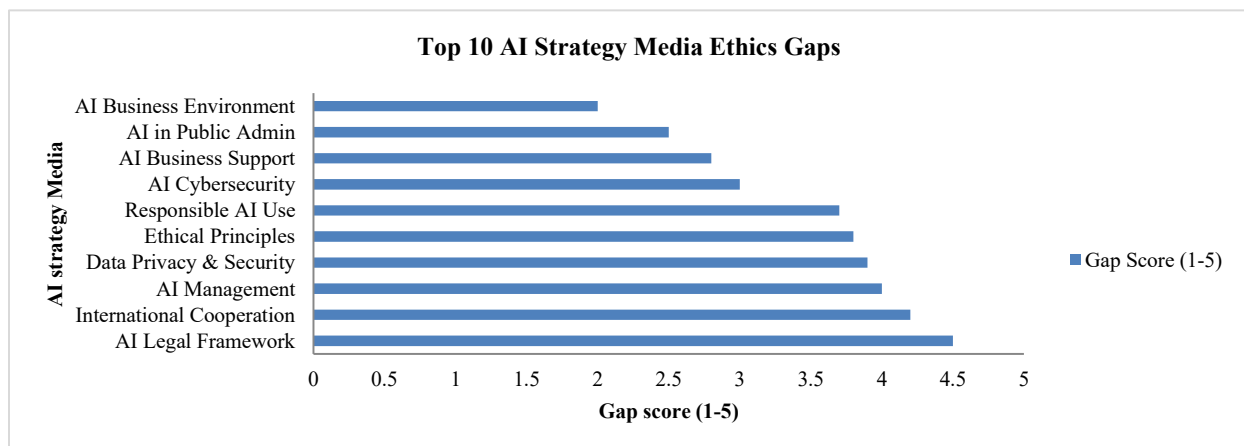


Fig. 6 Top-10 AI Strategy Provisions Ranked by Gap Score

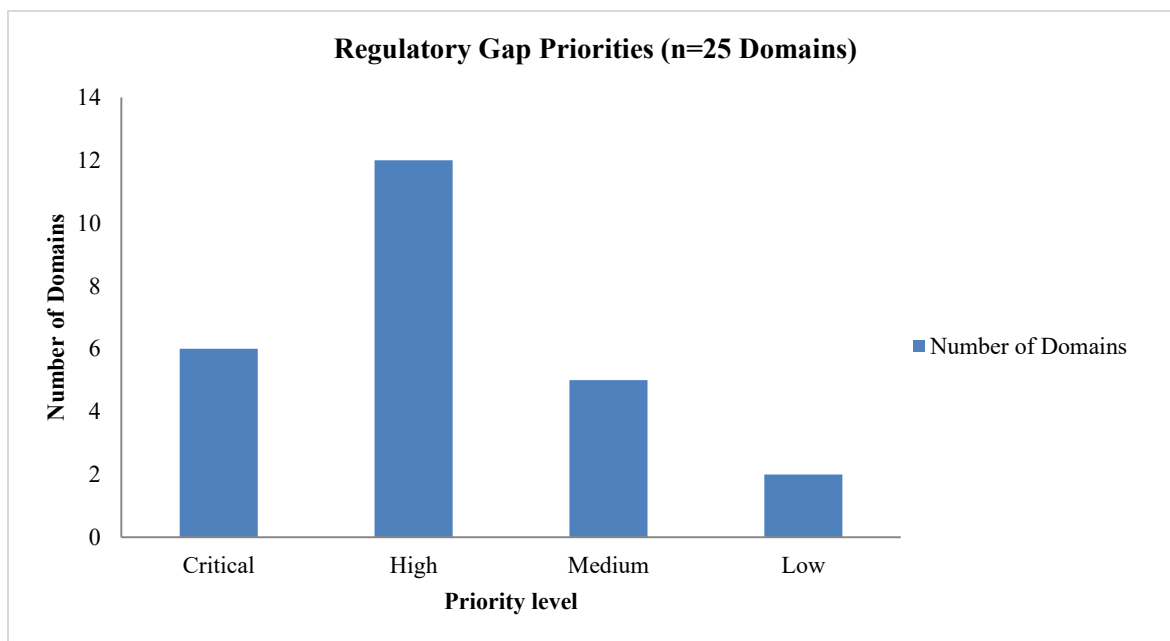


Fig. 7 Regulatory Gap Priority-tier Distribution Across 25 Domains

VII. DISCUSSION

7.1. Principal Findings in Theoretical Context

The results of this statistical study show that there is a significant and measurable difference between the governance needed in the modern digital media space and the official legislation of Azerbaijan. The compliance and severity results in Section 5.4 suggest a systemic problem in regulatory weaknesses in Azerbaijan, not domain-specific. This can be read as an example of the responsive regulation framework proposed by Baldwin and Cave, which suggests that the traditional ladder of graduated and proportionate regulatory practices is not essential for the effective regulation of the media. The existing legal structure focuses on traditional media and does not sufficiently cover the most influential new media phenomena, including social-media platforms, citizen journalism, algorithmic content-distribution platforms, and AI-generated information.

7.2. Limitations of Legislation, Legislative Constraints

The 2021 Media Law is the most meaningful legislative measure in the sphere of media governance in Azerbaijan in recent decades and corresponds to a substantial improvement in the RSF ranking (from 168th in 2020 to 149th in 2024). Nevertheless, compliance analysis essentially qualifies this seemingly positive development (Geybulla, 2023). Forty-eight percent of the identified regulatory areas are not legally covered nationally, while the rest (52 %) are said to be 'partially' covered. None of the domains are fully covered. This finding reflects a difference between legislative action and regulatory sufficiency. Previous studies on post-Soviet media transformation have

consistently shown that formal law reform does not always correlate with the desired regulatory outcomes, particularly when legislation is designed or modified in such a way as to exclude the most technically and politically challenging components of digital governance (Pirbudagova & Omarova, 2020). The long-term Not Free score over the last 15 years is confirmed by six independent measurement systems that have a high convergent validity (FH Press Score $\times$ V-Dem: $r=-0.916$, $p<0.001$), and indicates that formal reform has not been transformed into substantive reform of the structural conditions of press freedom.

7.3. Public Sphere Deficit and New Media Governance Gaps

The seven critical-priority gaps outlined in this study, each of which had the highest gap severity scores, are all direct institutional threats to the communicative conditions that democratic deliberation requires, according to the Habermasian public sphere. A lack of civil defamation law, systems for regulating disinformation, social media platform liability systems, and laws on the status of citizen journalism suggest that the institutional order that would enable the public sphere to function is missing from the existing legal order. This is more than just a critique of the procedure and law (Zukić & Zukić, 2025). The third theoretical framework used in this research is a norm theory of journalism that assumes that journalism has public responsibilities that cannot be broken down by technological democratization. Lack of legal status for citizen journalists (compliance score 2, gap severity 5) means that the professional accountability standards and minimum ethical obligations cannot be applied to a group of information producers, as the literature research of this study has shown, which now becomes a significant source of information to

the population in the Azerbaijan digital media landscape (Rozezhnal, 2022).

7.4. The Tension Between Strategy and Specificity in AI Governance

There is a significant theoretical paradox that is central to the AI Strategy 2025-2028. The strategy clearly promises to develop ethical principles of AI in law and develop a legal framework for AI development, but the evaluation shows that the section on the creation of a legal framework registers the highest gap score of 5 in the study, which proves that these promises do not include any media-sector-specific content. The consistency of the methodology is confirmed by the high negative correlation between adequacy and gap scores ($r = -0.888$, $p < 0.001$), and at the same time, a very clear substantive deficiency in governance. The lack of classification and/or regulation of algorithmic content amplification, AI-generated journalism, the production of deepfakes, and automated news recommendation falls short of the other strategies, which are more specific in their classification and regulation of these technologies in the context of the EU AI Act (Batoool et al., 2024) and explicit media provisions in the Recommendation on the Ethics of AI (Dutkiewicz et al., 2025; Porlezza, 2023).

7.5. The Consequences of Post-Soviet Media Governance

The findings of this study have implications that go beyond the national context of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is a theoretically generalizable country in the broader study of digital media governance in the context of transitional democracies because of inherited tendencies towards state intervention in the media, the incompleteness of the separation between regulatory and political powers, and the coexistence of international human rights norms and the demands of domestic security (Seyidov, 2020). The finding of a quantified, measurable regulatory gap of 2.08 across all areas, and a triangulation of 170 data sources from four sources provides a methodological template that could be employed in comparative post-Soviet media law research. The 70% of the AI Strategy that has been at least partially implemented also reflects the priorities of economic modernization, further suggesting that regulation of digital media in transitional contexts is actively embedded in broader technology policies, which requires specific comparative scholarly attention (Tereshchenko, 2023).

VIII. LIMITATIONS

There were some limitations in this study. Informal legislative practices and administrative enforcement patterns in the field may not be captured in the use of published legislative texts. Although based on international standards, compliance and gap severity scoring entail interpretive judgments, which bring about a certain level of subjectivity to doctrinal legal analysis. Comparative observations might have to be updated in the light of the dynamism of the AI regulation across borders, particularly in the context of the

implementation of the EU AI Act and the development of UNESCO's frameworks. These are inherent features of the qualitative legal research methodology and not a negative aspect of the analysis results of the study, but rather they limit the scope of the study's results.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Azerbaijan's media governance framework is fundamentally insufficient for the demands of the new media environment, based on systematic doctrinal analysis and comparative normative evaluation of a 170-source dataset. A mean compliance score of 1.68 across 25 regulatory domains, seven critical-priority gaps with maximum severity scores, and an AI Strategy with only partial media-sector coverage in 70% of its provisions confirm that legislative modernization has not kept pace with technological transformation. Grounded in Habermas's public sphere theory, Baldwin and Cave's responsive regulation framework, and normative journalism theory, the study identifies civil defamation law, social media regulation, citizen journalism status, and AI-specific content regulation as the most urgent reform priorities. It offers policymakers a clear mandate to extend legal coverage to these areas, and offers researchers a replicable triangulation methodology for other post-Soviet contexts. Future work should examine implementation processes and the practical consequences of AI adoption in Azerbaijani journalism.

DECLARATIONS

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Elnara Allahverdiyeva: Conceptualization, research design, legal and policy analysis, literature review, methodology, writing of the original draft, and interpretation of the findings.

Shafa Aliyev: Methodological supervision, economic and policy analysis, validation of the research findings, critical review of the manuscript, and academic editing.

Yusifali Hasanov: Historical analysis, contextualization of the research, literature review, source verification, and manuscript revision.

Sona Maharramova: Educational and methodological evaluation, interpretation of the findings, critical revision, and review of the manuscript.

Ziyad Amrahov: Comparative policy analysis, verification of historical and legal sources, manuscript review, and scholarly editing.

Rahil Najafov: Study conception, research coordination, formal analysis, editorial supervision, final manuscript editing, quality assurance, and supervision of the publication process.

Subhan Talibli: Political and international relations analysis, interpretation of the regulatory framework, critical review of the manuscript, and validation of the final version.

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

Not applicable. This study is based on documentary analysis of legal acts, policy documents, academic literature, and publicly available sources.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Not applicable.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available legal documents, policy papers, and scholarly publications cited in the reference list. Additional information is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research did not involve human participants, personal data, clinical experiments, or animal subjects. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) USE DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that any artificial intelligence tools, where used, were limited to language editing, grammar checking, and formatting assistance. All research design, legal analysis, interpretation, arguments, conclusions, and scholarly judgments were developed and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

All authors have reviewed the manuscript, approved its final version, and consent to its publication.

DISCLAIMER

The views, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of their affiliated institutions.

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