

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Media Sustainability Index 2006-2007

Introduction

Overall Country Score: 1.23

The media landscape in the CAR was long dominated by the monopoly of the state-run media (Central African Radio, Central African Television, Central African Press Agency) before the private sector media began to flourish in 1997 – particularly due to the development of rural and community radio stations.

The CAR is one of the few countries in Central Africa where press offenses were decriminalized. Order no. 05.002 given on February 22, 2005 concerning the freedom of communication, amended by bill no. 06.008 passed on June 28, 2006 eliminated prison sentences, but not fines, for any press offense.

However, despite this slight legal improvement, journalists continue to bow down to the successive military regimes. This often leads to tensions between the authorities and the press, which claims its freedom ever so louder. For example, on April 2, 2007, Michel Alkhaly Ngady, president of the CAIPPG (the Central African Independent Press Publishers' Group) and manager of the daily paper *Temps Nouveaux* published in Bangui, was sentenced to 2 months in prison and to pay a fine of 300,00 FCFA (609 USD) by the Magistrate's Court of Bangui as he was found guilty of "*disobedience to the law and hindrance to the Higher Communication Council*," which is the public authority regulating the Central African media, as a result of a complaint filed by his president, Mr. Pierre Sammy-Mackfoy.

To curb these tensions, a convention of the Central African press was organized in July 2007 gathering all the media partners in the CAR. A number of measures were decided upon such as the inclusion of the state subvention to the private media in the annual budget, journalists' access to news sources (particularly at the level of the public authorities), the independence of the state-owned media, etc. However, many of these resolutions are still not in effect.

The following result ensued from this panel: Objective 2 showed the highest degree of strength whereas Objective 1 was the weakest.

Objective 1: Freedom of Speech

Score: 1.35

The Central African Constitution (effective December 27, 2004) and Order no. 05.2002 given on February 22, 2005, concerns the recognized freedom of communication and guarantees of the freedom of the press. However, these texts suffer from lack of enforcement, particularly in the inland territories. The issue in question is mainly the decriminalization of press offenses. "The judge disregards it and uses the Criminal Code to sentence journalists," Akhaly Ngady states. He is the President of the Press Publishers' Group and was a victim himself as he had been sentenced to two months in prison upon the complaint of the HCC.

Legal texts protecting freedom of expression are in effect. First, there is article 13 of the constitution of December 27, 2004 and the freedom of communication bill. These texts meet international standards. Yet they are not strictly, justly and equitably enforced. This happens more frequently out in the countryside where prefects and local administrators ignore the standards and violate the freedom of speech with impunity.

Momet Mathurin, manager of *Le Confident*, believes that journalists suffer constant threats, pressures and aggressions. Such as the case of Jules Yanganda, the editor-in-chief of the daily paper *L'Hirondelle*, who was attacked by the first vice-president of the National Assembly and a communication advisor of the head of state for having published a critical article.

The panelists pointed out that the main obstacles to upholding the freedom of the press are an exaggerated zeal manifested by authorities, impunity, ignorance of the law, and the dependence of the judicial power upon the executive power.

Granting licenses to the audio-visual press is a legally just and a competition-based action. "At first licenses used to be granted by the Department of Communication. Since 2005 the Higher Communication Council is in charge with this in collaboration with the Ministry of the Post and Telecommunications, the Ministry of the Interior and Public Safety and the Ministry of Defense," a participant specified. Out of the 9 members that make up the HCC, 3 are appointed directly by the President of the republic. So far no case of discrimination in terms of granting frequency licenses has been noted. A press outlet that is not granted a license has the right to appeal the decision with the Administrative Court. Finally, the validity term of a license is 5 years in the case of radio stations and 10 years in the case of television channels.

Press outlets are not taxed for lack of a law defining their legal status. For this reason, the fiscal regime of the Central African media is not determined.

Threats are the most frequent violations. For example, in November, 2006, the minister of mining and also the nephew of the chief of state threatened during a public event to kill the journalists he saw as spokespersons of the rebel movements "like flies." The authors of such declarations have never been prosecuted.

The law guarantees the independence of journalists. The public media is completely under the supervision of the Ministry of Communication and often enjoy the favors of political authorities (they are the first to have access to public information, they enjoy exclusive coverage of certain public events, etc.)

Defamation is stipulated by the criminal law and it is the party making the alleged defamation that must prove it. Corruption of judges is a known fact disparaged by society. In the CAR the trials against journalists always end either in prison sentences or fines.

Access to public information is free both for the public and the private media. There are cases (national security, etc.) in which access to information is strictly forbidden or reserved to the public media.

Access to information is naturally easier in the capital Bangui rather than in the provinces, but journalists encounter many difficulties as they attempt it. Among the difficulties, withholding information by authorities and financial hardships may be mentioned. Central African media broadcast or relay the news appearing in the foreign media (RFI, BBC). There is only one press agency, the CAPA (Central African Press Agency).

Access to the journalistic profession in the CAR is free and the government imposes no license or other restrictions.

Objective 2: Professional Journalism

Score: 1.38

From the tendencies observed among the panelists it appears that journalism in the CAR complies with professional quality standards. Ethical and deontological standards are in effect and accepted by all the media players. However, there are difficulties: small salaries, financial difficulties in terms of access to news sources, self-censorship practiced in the public media, obsolete equipment. On top of these, certain social (political and economical) players practice conscience buying among journalists (by offering gifts).

As a general rule, reports are insufficiently documented especially when they deal with official information. Journalists usually present one side of the facts. Balance is achieved in some fields by appealing to the voices and opinions of the public. The panelists justify this situation by stressing the difficult access to some news sources, the lack of logistical and financial means to conduct objective investigations. Some media often appeal to experts but the latter do not usually like to be quoted in the press for fear they might suffer repercussions from the regime when the topic is somewhat politically sensitive.

All the participants to the Bangui panel agree to recognize that there is an ethical and deontological code of the Central African press, published in 2002 by theUCAJ, or the Union of Central African Journalists. Also in Order no. 05.2002 given on February 22, 2005 there are 19 articles on aspects of ethics and deontology. Despite these professional provisions, the panelists regretted the questionable practices existing within the profession in the CAR. In particular, they mentioned the phenomenon of “Gombo journalism” referring to those journalists who accept gifts in exchange of producing a certain kind of event coverage. It has been noticed that this practice is more widespread among younger journalists.

Self-censorship exists especially in the public media. A participant states that: “Any news that might affect the president or the government is first examined by the minister of communication who in most cases does not authorize its processing or heavily modifies its content.” This practice *is justified* by the fear of hurting political authorities or losing one’s job.

In the CAR, all events are covered albeit in different ways according to the political contacts of the decision makers of the respective media. It must be pointed out that the treatment of subjects related to public safety or the rampant rebellion in the north-east of the country may cause problems to the author of such news. To illustrate, a panelist reports that “the residence of Zéphyrin KAYA, a journalist with Ndéké-Luka, a radio station sponsored by the Swiss Association Hirondelle, was recently raided by the military in search of said journalist, who was

in Cameroon. Three days before, that journalist had criticized one of the nephews of the president François BOZIZE who had cumulated several public offices simultaneously.”

Salaries of journalists are very small. In the private sector, the salary varies between 50,000 and 60,000 FCFA (100 and 120 USD). In the public sector, it is from 25,000 to 100, 000 FCFA (50 to 200 USD), according to rank and functions and varies between 30,000 and 50,000 FCFA (60 and 100 USD) per month.

In the Central African press there is a strong tendency to favor music and entertainment. Cultural shows are almost non-existent. Newscasts take about 15 percent of the time slots in the audio-visual scheduling. Entertainment takes almost 60 percent.

Central African media are mainly concentrated in the capital Bangui. No outlet – including the national radio and television stations – covers the entire national territory. This is due to obsolete installations and equipment at the press outlets’ disposal. Some private media (Ndéké Luka Radio, Notre Dame Radio, Néhémie Radio) recently received modern equipment (computers, cameras, etc.) from the European Union and can now cover half of the territory. The transmitters still in use are very low-capacity ones. Their replacement with newer ones could remedy this situation.

There are quality programs. According to their editorial policies, the media process some news better than others. The written press does a better job processing (particularly economic) news as opposed to other media and the private audio-visual press does a better job with newsworthy events than the public media.

Objective 3: Plurality of News

Score: 1.50

In the CAR there is a variety of news sources: television, radio, written press and the Internet. These sources are usually available since no measure restricts or forbids the population to access them. However, these media are essentially based in Bangui. Another factor limiting popular access to news sources is the very low income level.

There is a plurality of private and public news sources (television, radio, newspapers, Internet). Most of these media are based in Bangui. Nevertheless, there are rural radios covering parts of the country. The written private press is often bought by State agents and political authorities. In the rural areas community radios are much more present. There is a total of 8 community radios (based in 6 cities throughout the 16 prefectures of the country).

Citizens’ access to the national as well as international media is only limited by the poor living conditions.

In the CAR, just as in many other African countries, the public media are first and foremost in the service of the government, faithfully reproducing the latter’s opinions on every issue. However, Decree no. 92.207 allows any politician to have access to the state-owned media. But often the leaders of the political opposition and the civil society prefer the private media.

As indicated above, there is only one press agency, the CAPA (Central African Press Agency). Its activity is now suspended due to the lack of financing means. Press outlets often appeal to news appearing in the foreign press (AFP, Reuters, etc.) without quoting it.

The private audio-visual press produces its own shows and rebroadcasts foreign media productions. (For example, Ndeke Luka Radio rebroadcasts the BBC Africa shows). But the productions of the private press are not essentially different from the state-owned media productions.

There is no official information concerning media ownership. And there is no media conglomerate. Only the Catholic Church owns through its dioceses some 6 radio stations throughout the country. But these radio stations are owned by the dioceses, which are independent in respect to each other.

The media programs address a large area of social interests, with a more keen focus on issues concerning current political and economical events. In the CAR there are no programs covering minorities. Only the rural radio station *Voix de la Sangha* in Nola regularly broadcasts programs in all the languages spoken in the country. The other media only use French and Sango – the official languages.

Objective 4: Business Management

Score: .24

In the CAR, press outlets are not organized as veritable business operations. With the exception of the public media, the private outlets are managed without paying attention to any accounting or business standards. Journalists' salaries are exclusively at the discretion of their outlets' managers. There is no advertising market, no market research, no audience ratings, no print runs, no Internet usage statistics.

Media outlets are professional in nature but are not constituted as profitable business companies. These media only survive thanks to their owners' sacrifices as they never use balance sheets. There is no distribution network. In the past it was the travel agencies that were charged with press distribution from Bangui towards the inland territories. Lately distribution is non-operational due to the decay of the roads linking the capital to the rest of the country.

The most important receipts in the private media come from commercials (from United Nations agencies) and newspaper sales (written press). It is stipulated by law that the State must grant subventions to the private press but this obligation is often disregarded. In 2005 out of a total amount of 10,000,000 FCFA (20,000 USD) that was promised to the press, President BOZIZE only granted 5,000,000 FCFA. According to the law, local communities must support the community media. Since there are no means to do so, these media are left to find their own support and can only survive thanks to donations and the help of international organizations. Only the radio station *Voix de la Sangha* manages to attract contributions within the Nola community. The public media do receive governmental subventions, but given the widespread corruption they almost never reach their intended destination.

In the CAR there is no advertising agency or market. Advertisements in the Central African press are extremely rare. There are only announcements and communiqués from certain organizations, but they are often published or broadcast in exchange for a benefit to the respective media. For example, some newspapers accept to print ads for travel agencies while the latter carry those newspaper copies towards the inside of the country free of charge. The announcements often come from the UNPD (United Nations Program for Development), the European Union or the CAUNOB (Central African United Nations Observation Bureau) – the main sponsors of the media activities.

The advertising market being non-existent, advertising receipts are equally insignificant, if not null.

As a matter of principle, the freedom of communication bill provides for a State subsidy to the private media, but this subvention depends on the goodwill of the government or the head of state. In 2005, out of the promised amount only half was unblocked, and nothing else ever since.

There is no market research available in the CAR and no audience ratings or circulation figures.

Objective 5: Supporting Institutions

Score: 1.70

There are supporting associations that protect – with the help of international organizations – the journalists' interests by pressuring public authorities. There is still no school of journalism in the CAR.

Among the business associations the PIPPGCA (Private Independent Press Publishers' Group of Central Africa) is noteworthy – assembling the written press managers. Apart from its main mission to protect the interests of the written press owner, this association has become an influential union movement in the CAR and has campaigned, among others, for the creation of the HCC and the organization of the press convention in July, 2007.

The largest professional association of journalists in the CAR is theUCAJ (Union of Central African Journalists) assembling all the media professionals in the public as well as private sector. Apart from theUCAJ there are journalist associations active in specific fields (Union of Central African Sports Journalists, etc.). These associations offer services in terms of professional training, lobbying, teaching the rules of ethics and deontology, etc. The number of their members is constantly growing.

In the CAR there is no organization specialized in the fight for the freedom of speech. Usually the associations mentioned above, as well as the human rights NGOs (Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture and Death Sentence, the Central African Human Rights League, the Central African Human Rights Institute, the Movement for the Defense of Human Rights, etc.) are also involved in the defense of the freedom of the press. There are also international NGOs (RSF, JED, CPJ, FIJ) covering the CAR. All these organizations are active in the fight for the reformation of press legislation.

The quality of education in the CAR has dropped significantly in recent years, and this affects the quality of young graduates who usually provide below average performances. There is no school of journalism in the CAR. However, at the press convention of July, 2007 the creation of a sub-department of communication within the department of language and literature at the University of Bangui was proposed. This department should begin its activity as of next year. Journalists are often trained in the DRC, Cameroon or Côte d'Ivoire.

Short term training programs are offered by foreign or local organizations. They focus on reporting, editing techniques, news gathering, processing and publishing techniques thus allowing journalists to retrain and work at the same level as their foreign counterparts. The panelists expressed their wish that they also focus on deontology, journalistic writing and news processing courses. These training programs are free of charge.

In the CAR, there are 4 printing houses: AKRAM, CAPH (Central African Printing House), Saint-Paul Printing and EDI-FAMADI. The CAPH and EDI-FAMADI belong to the public sector. There is no restriction in accessing them.

The distribution network is not organized. Each press outlet finds its own way to organize distribution of its products. The public media distributors belong to the State, whereas those of the private media belong to private owners.