

# **MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX**

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## **2006/2007**

**The Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
in the Middle East  
and North Africa**



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The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in the Middle East and North Africa

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IREX

2121 K Street, NW, Suite 700

Washington, DC 20037

E-mail: [msi@irex.org](mailto:msi@irex.org)

Phone: (202) 628-8188

Fax: (202) 628-8189

[www.irex.org](http://www.irex.org)

**Project manager:** Leon Morse

**IREX Project and Editorial Support:** Blake Saville, Mark Whitehouse, Christine Prince

**Copyeditors:** Carolyn Feola de Rugamas, Carolyn.Ink; Kelly Kramer, WORDtoWORD Editorial Services

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## **USAID**

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an independent agency that provides economic, development, and humanitarian assistance around the world in support of the foreign policy goals of the United States. The agency works to support long-term and sustainable economic growth and advances US foreign policy objectives by supporting economic growth, agriculture, and trade; global health; and democracy, conflict prevention, and humanitarian assistance.

USAID provides assistance in four regions of the world: Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia and the Near East; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Europe and Eurasia.

With headquarters in Washington, DC, USAID's strength is its field offices around the world. They work in close partnership with private voluntary organizations, indigenous organizations, universities, American businesses, international agencies, other governments, and other US government agencies. USAID has working relationships with more than 3,500 American companies and over 300 US-based private voluntary organizations.

## **MEPI**

The United States Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative provides tangible support to reformers in the Middle East and North Africa so democracy can spread, education can thrive, economies can grow, and women can be empowered. In four years, this presidential initiative has devoted \$293 million to more than 350 programs in 15 countries and the Palestinian territories to support the aspirations of those working to build a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Examples of the initiative's work includes campaign schools, independent media training, civic education, entrepreneurship skill building, youth leadership development, trade transparency promotion, business hubs for women, and judicial and legal reform training.

## **UNESCO**

UNESCO, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, maintains a Communication and Information (CI) sector that is guided by the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press as basic human rights. Since 2003, the CI sector has supported the Iraqi people in their transition to democracy. Among other projects, UNESCO facilitated initiatives to develop a national media policy and provided practical guidance for journalists and civil society prior to the elections. Training and networking opportunities were made available to more than 550 media workers and professionals.

## **IREX**

IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.

Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of \$50 million and a staff of over 500 professionals worldwide. IREX and its partner IREX Europe deliver cross-cutting programs and consulting expertise in more than 50 countries.

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UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The United Arab Emirates made history in December 2006 when it held its first parliamentary elections. Though turnout was low, and the elections filled only half of the 40-member Federal National Council, the event in itself was favorably received as an emblem of the reforms promised by the country's new leadership.

The country witnessed impressive real GDP growth of about 10 percent in 2006, one of the fastest in the Arab world. Dubai is continuing its fast-paced transformation into a global commercial hub with a rapid infrastructure development plan that includes the building of the Dubai Tower, which will be the tallest building in the world.

However, some observers criticized lack of progress in other areas. For example, Human Rights Watch issued one of its harshest reports on human rights conditions in the country. Titled "Building Towers, Cheating Workers," the New York-based organization urged the country to improve conditions for the hundreds of thousands of poorly paid workers brought in mostly from the Indian subcontinent.

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Unlike last year, this year's MSI panel comprised mostly Emiratis. They were critical of the state of press freedom on the ground when compared to reforms promised by leaders including Sheikh Mohamed al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai who is also the UAE's prime minister and vice president.

Although there were no noticeable crimes committed against journalists, stringent laws continue to put them at risk, panelists said. Firing, prosecution, high fines, suspension of advertisements and other means of punishment constitute daily threats to media professionals and owners. The panelists agreed on the need to encourage more critical reporting, but noted that this would require an overhaul of the 1980 Printing and Press Law.

It is worth noting that the moderator of this year's study, a Yemeni national, was subjected to an inspection at the airport while leaving Dubai after completing the panel discussion. His luggage was returned to him more than an hour after it was requested for inspection, but without the completed questionnaires of all UAE MSI panelists. Repeated requests by the moderator for an investigation into the missing questionnaires and an official explanation have gone unanswered by UAE authorities.

# UAE AT A GLANCE

## GENERAL

**Population:** 4,621,399 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

**Capital city:** Abu Dhabi

**Ethnic groups (% of population):** Emirati 19%, other Arab and Iranian 23%, South Asian 50%, other expatriates 8% (1982 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

**Religions (% of population):** Sunni Muslim 80% Shi'a Muslim 16%, other 4% (*CIA World Factbook*)

**Languages (% of population):** Arabic (official), Persian, English, Hindi, Urdu (*CIA World Factbook*)

**GNI (2006-Atlas):** \$103.5 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)

**GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$31,190 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)

**Literacy rate:** 77.9% (male 76.1%, female 81.7%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

**President or top authority:** President Khalifa bin Zayid al-Nuhayyan (since November 3, 2004)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

**Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 10 daily newspapers, dozens of magazines and periodicals; Radio: 22; Television stations: 40+, most based in Dubai Media City

**Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top 3 by circulation: *Al-Emarat Al-Youm* (state-owned, circulation 100,000), *Gulf News* (private, circulation 91,000), *Al-Khaleej* (private, circulation 85,000) (source: *Arab Press Network*, arabpressnetwork.org)

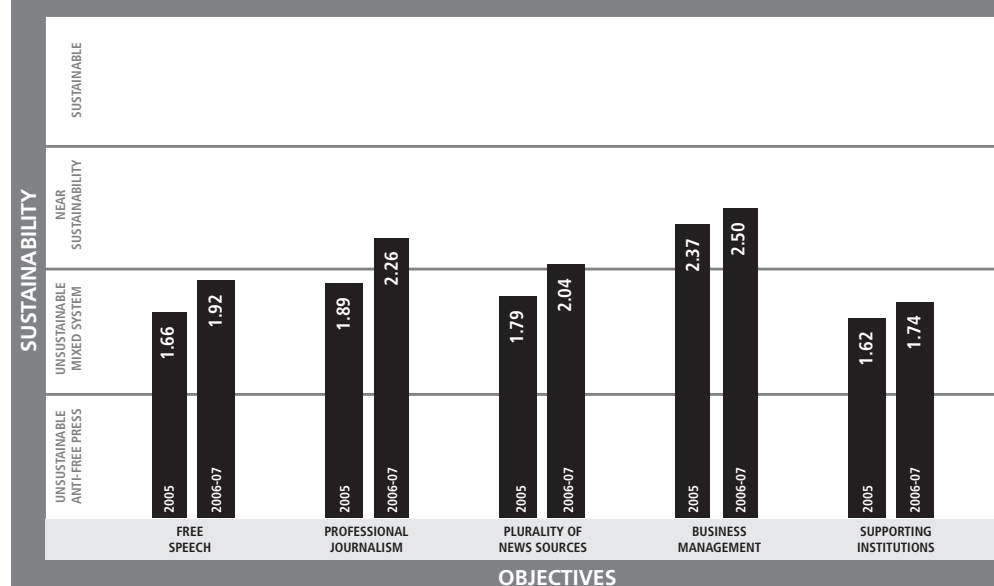
**Broadcast ratings:** Top 3: Emirates Media Inc (state-owned), Dubai Radio Network (state-owned), Arabian Radio Network (state-owned) (source: indexuae.com)

**News agencies:** Emirates News Agency (state-owned)

**Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A

**Internet usage:** 1,709,000 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UNITED ARAB EMIRATES



### Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

### Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

### Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

### Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### UAE Objective Score: 1.92

The government of Dubai eased restrictions on media licensing in the Dubai Media City (DMC) free zone, which was established in 2001 to encourage media corporations to establish a presence there. Citing this development, panelists gave this objective a score of 1.92, which is noticeably higher than last year's figure of 1.66. But they also expressed frustration that developments in press freedom remain lower than anticipated. Panelists rated most of the individual indicators rather differently than the overall objective score. On the low end, Indicators 2, 6, and 7, related to licensing, libel laws, and freedom of information, all scored about a point or more lower than the average. On the high end, panelists recognized strength in Indicators 3, 4, 8, and 9, market entry and taxes, attacks on journalists, media access to international news sources, and entry into the journalism profession.

Panelists agreed that the present UAE Printing and Publishing Law (Law 15 of 1980), is restrictive, outdated and does not protect freedom of expression, which is clearly acknowledged in article 30 of the UAE constitution: "Freedom of opinion and expressing it verbally, in writing or by other means of expression shall be guaranteed within the limits of law." The law contains a full chapter (no. 7) listing 16 articles (70-85) that cover prohibitions from publishing anything that could be critical of the rulers of the emirates to printing stories that "could result in the befuddlement of ideas concerning the country's economy."

The same restrictive press law that regulates local media also applies to media in the free zone, but with some exceptions; for example, media in DMC have unfiltered access to the Internet, unlike outlets in the rest of the country. Responding to complaints of double standards, authorities in the UAE are considering applying more stringent laws for DMC instead of easing restrictions for media outside the free zone.

The Emirates Journalists Association undertook efforts to replace the law with a less restrictive one that could effectively promote freedom of expression. But panelist Moza Matar, a journalist with the state-owned *Al-Ittihad* daily newspaper, noted that the proposed changes were not publicly discussed and the opinion of stakeholders was not taken into consideration. Meanwhile, panelist Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti, a prominent lawyer with experience in media-related cases, argued that the law could be described as "backward" and updating it would be useless. "In my opinion, there should be total elimination [of the press law]," he said.

In 2006, a Cyber-Crime Law (no. 2/2006) was enacted, extending the prohibitions mentioned in the 1980 press law to the Internet. In addition to hacking, forgery, fraud and online theft crimes, speech "transcending family principles and values" or "calling for, facilitating and promoting ideas in breach of the general order and public decency" could result in penalties ranging from fines to prison.

In 2006, MSI panelist and prominent human rights advocate Mohamed Al-Roken was detained by UAE state security personnel for two days in July and three days in August, but released without charge both times. The U.S. State Department's 2006 Human Rights Report claimed he was detained because of his public lectures and speeches criticizing the human rights situation in the country.

A major hurdle in promoting press freedom and other human rights is the lack of a vibrant political and civil society. Because major cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi are home to large expatriate communities that have come to the country for economic reasons, their residents tend to be uninterested in social issues like freedom of expression. Even nationals seem to be unprepared to fully accept the notion of free speech, panelists said. Panelist Saeed Shalash, the UAE correspondent of the Cairo-based *Al-Ahram* daily newspaper, said he believes that civil society organizations are "nonexistent or ineffective," which further inhibits efforts to expand freedom of expression.

Media licensing in the UAE operates on two parallel systems: one in DMC free zone and the other in the rest of the country. Free zone media have more of a global or regional reach, while media outside DMC caters to nationals and expatriates within the country. This results in highly disparate barriers to entry. Obtaining a license for a media business in the free zone is relatively easy, while establishing a newspaper outside the free zone can be a frustrating bureaucratic ordeal.

Given that the panelists were more interested in domestic media, most agreed that licensing for media is restrictive and difficult. Panelist Mohamed al-Roken, a law instructor at UAE University, said that despite the abolition of the Ministry of Information in 2006 and the subsequent formation of the Media Council, obtaining a license remained an extremely challenging task, particularly for a daily newspaper. The Media Council, which is appointed by the president, is the only body with the authority to license publications. Al-Roken argued that "for the issue of licensing to have to reach to the top of the executive body in the state, which is the ministerial cabinet, signals the extreme level of sensitivity in this issue."

For those media business owners who successfully obtain a license, market entry is comparable to other types of

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businesses. Given that operating a business in the country is tax-free, running a successful private media enterprise is a generally profitable and long-term success. Panelist Abdulhamid Ahmed, editor-in-chief of the *Gulf News* daily newspaper, said he supports the idea that the media should be treated with the same standards as all other businesses and should not be given any preferences that would make them vulnerable to pressure, unless such preferences are unconditional and based on the law.

Crimes against journalists are rarely heard of or reported, but authorities respond swiftly if they do happen, panelists said, contributing to the UAE’s being ranked second only to Kuwait by the Paris-based Reporters sans Frontières in its 2006 World Press Freedom Index. But panelists emphasized this was basically a consequence of the low number of critical reports that would raise the public’s ire; journalists shy away from sensitive issues for fear that the consequences could affect their careers, said the panelists.

#### LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

##### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

Panelists said that despite the low number of crimes committed, journalists may be penalized for their critical writings in other ways. For example, powerful elites who own massive conglomerates in the country may easily withhold advertising from any outlet that attempts to report critically about them. And panelist Aysha Sultan, a writer and board member of the Emirati Human Rights Association, said that journalists face several ways of being “beaten without being touched.” Panelist Saeed Shalash, who is one of hundreds of expatriate journalists working in the UAE, described the firing of journalists as one of those methods. “There is no greater crime committed against a journalist than causing him to find himself, in an instant, outside his establishment and on the street,” he said, referring to a case of a journalist he would not name who was fired for making a typographical error relating to the business of a powerful entity.

Panelists agreed that state-owned media do not receive preferential treatment in courts of law. The case that was won against Jaber Obaid, manager of state-owned Abu Dhabi Radio Station, was cited as evidence of the government’s equitable treatment of public and private media, although the lawsuit itself was filed by a state-owned company. And panelists also emphasized that many private media owners, like state-owned media, have close ties to the ruling class. According to panelist Al-Roken, many of the privately owned newspapers belong to individuals with close ties to the authorities, and “some of them were ministers and officials in government bodies.”

Though panelists agreed that there is no preferential legal treatment, they did acknowledge that English-language newspapers appear to get away with more critical reporting than their Arabic-language counterparts. *Gulf News*, which is among the top English-language dailies in the UAE, has been subject to several legal battles. Its editor-in-chief, Abdulhamid Ahmed, said the newspaper won many of those cases. He added that he had been called by the police for questioning on a number of occasions. “When I’m called to the police I respond and do go to see them,” he acknowledged, adding that awareness among police forces of the role of journalists needs to be raised. “A couple of days ago, a policeman confiscated cameras of a female photographer who was taking photos... It was an act by a single policeman. But after we carried out some phone calls with police officials, they were released,” Ahmed said.

One of the biggest fears of journalists in the UAE is prosecution for libel, particularly if it involves government officials. Based on article 84 of the 1980 Printing and Publishing Law, defaming a public employee is a crime that is punishable with one to six months in prison and/or a fine between AED 1,000 and AED 5,000 (\$273 to \$1366). Apart

from the press law, the UAE Federal Penal Code of 1987 also carries with it a host of potential punishments for libel. In articles 372, 373 and 378, the punishment for publishing material that is considered libel could result in two years' imprisonment and a fine of AED 20,000.

Panelists stressed that although no journalists were sentenced to prison thus far for violating media laws, those laws still present a constant threat. According to panelist Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti, "several journalists were held and questioned in front of the court based on the libel and insult [laws]." According to the law, libel cases may be filed against both the writer and the writer's media outlet, potentially resulting in the temporary suspension or even revocation of the outlet's license. Panelist Aysha Sultan recalled a personal experience when she wrote articles criticizing a medical doctor and was called by police for questioning, after which her newspaper supplied a lawyer for her case.

Another problem of journalism in the UAE is the difficulty of obtaining reliable information from relevant sources. The right to access information is not mentioned in the country's laws, and journalists have limited options in retrieving needed information, particularly when it might be used in an investigative report tackling a religious, social or political problem. Access to information "may depend on the mood [of the source] and on 'kissing the noses,'" said panelist Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti, using an slang term for flattery. The difficulty in obtaining information may often result in the story being cut back or even dropped altogether. Panelists also mentioned that if a newspaper publishes accurate but sensitive information, it may be pressured to reveal its sources.

On the international level, news and sources are generally accessible, panelists said. However, Internet filtering in the country is widespread except in DMC. Panelist Helmi Noman noted that this lack of filtering in DMC gives an advantage to media there. Furthermore, the fact that Internet service is monopolized by a state-owned company (Etisalat), subscribers outside DMC face difficulties accessing filtered Web sites, some which are political or social in nature. This might change; Noman added that UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority said in February 2007 that it will extend its nationwide Internet filtering to the free zones, including DMC and Dubai Internet City.

Panelist Al-Roken described a recent incident in which the authorities blocked a video clip posted by a subscriber who captured himself complaining of an unpaid debt that the government allegedly owed him. "Not the whole YouTube.com was blocked, but only this particular video clip," Al-Roken said. Panelists also added that foreign publications may occasionally be blocked from entering the country

*Entry into the profession of journalism is mostly unrestricted for the country's nationals. Because nationals can enter journalism without any experience or academic qualifications, about half of all UAE journalists come from non-journalistic backgrounds.*

because of content deemed unlawful based on article 20 of the 1980 press law.

Entry into the profession of journalism is mostly unrestricted for the country's nationals. Because nationals can enter journalism without any experience or academic qualifications, about half of all UAE journalists come from non-journalistic backgrounds. "This phenomenon, in my opinion, severely damages the UAE press because they commit practices that disgrace true media professionals," Shalash said. As is the case in most Arab countries, however, foreign correspondents require licenses that must be renewed annually. Non-nationals must meet several conditions to work in the country, including having a university degree or at least three years of experience, as well as being affiliated with a professional entity in their home country. Despite the panelists' general agreement that the 1980 press law applies to all journalists working in the UAE, those working in DMC seem to be treated differently and are given more leeway in practicing their profession.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### UAE Objective Score: 2.26

Like several other undemocratic countries in the region, the lack of political opposition parties in the UAE has affected the overall standards of journalism. To raise standards, many foreign journalists are brought in, boosting the average level of proficiency and giving a more professional touch to news reporting. This is particularly true for English-language newspapers such as *Gulf News* and *7Days*, which exhibit a higher level of professionalism than Arabic-language newspapers. MSI panelists gave this objective a score of 2.26, a noticeable increase over last year's score of 1.89. Most indicators scored close to the overall average, with two exceptions: Indicator 3, self-censorship, scored nearly a point lower than the average, and Indicator 7, use of modern equipment by media, received a strong score well above the average score.

*Panelists agreed that professional journalism in the country is below desired standards. Panelist Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti, who regularly reads daily newspapers, said that objectivity in most reports is nonexistent and reports are generally “used to serve a specific purpose.”*

Panelists agreed that professional journalism in the country is below desired standards. Panelist Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti, who regularly reads daily newspapers, said that objectivity in most reports is nonexistent and reports are generally “used to serve a specific purpose.” The politically restrictive, economically competitive environment is partly to blame, panelists concluded. Panelist Mohamed Al-Mutawa, senior supervisor at *Al-Bayan* daily newspaper, stressed that low salaries and excessive working hours, especially for expatriates, contribute to biased reports that serve an agenda, pointing to a case in which a journalist accepted money from a hospital to write a report criticizing a rival hospital. However, the much-criticized 1980 press law does have an article (no. 85) prohibiting writing reports that reference different parties without reaching out to each one involved.

One negative aspect of recruiting foreign journalists is the fact that local talent may be neglected or lost. And since foreign journalists tend to be more reluctant to tackle critical news, this results in generally non-critical media coverage that focuses more on official acts, foreign reports, and politically and socially innocuous reporting.

#### JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

##### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

Panelists agreed that there is no common code of ethics for journalism in the UAE, but they acknowledged efforts by the Emirates Journalists Association to formulate such a code. Panelist Moza Matar, a founding member of the association, said she and other colleagues presented a draft Code of Ethics to the association, “but this code was never implemented,” she said. Aysha Sultan, who is also a founding member of the association, added that when authorities received the registration application for the association, they threw out the Code of Ethics, saying that “this is a segment that is irrelevant to the main charter or the license.”

Some panelists noted that individual media usually have their own set of ethical standards that are supposed to serve as a guidelines for journalists to follow. Some panelists suggested that foreign journalists need to take crash courses to make their ethical standards compatible with the conservative Muslim UAE, which is sensitive to certain issues that need to be considered before publishing. Some prominent newspapers such as *Gulf News* have an internal code of ethics to which its journalists must adhere, according to the paper’s editor-in-chief Abdulhamid Ahmed.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the cultural gap between Western expatriates, who constitute a significant portion of the journalists working for English-language media, and conservative UAE society, was the near-shutdown of *7Days*, a daily private newspaper with 60 percent of its shares owned by UK-based Associated Newspapers, publisher of the *Daily Mail* and *Metro*. *7Days*, which is known for its critical reporting and opinion pieces, avoided being closed in 2006 after it published an story about women’s assertiveness training in Russia under the headline “Bitch School.” The article was deemed offensive to UAE culture, subjecting the newspaper to immense pressure. Despite apologizing for the error, the newspaper suffered from a temporary decline in advertising revenues and its circulation shrunk considerably. Part of the blame for the crisis went to rival papers that called for a boycott of *7Days* by readers and advertisers.

As a natural result of its restrictive environment, the UAE suffers from a very high degree of self-censorship among its journalists and publishers. Panelist Saeed Shalash said “there is a censor within every journalist and every newspaper writer. He knows the line that he cannot cross,” he said, adding that “official statements given by some officials claiming that there is freedom of the press and expression is irrelevant to the reality on the ground.”

Journalists’ chief fear is the career damage that can result from writing something deemed offensive by the authorities or other powerful individuals, society at large or even a prominent advertiser. Journalists may not necessarily be prosecuted or physically harmed because of their writings, but

may suffer pay cuts, firing or other negative consequences. Prosecution is also an important factor behind self-censorship, and indicted journalists may find themselves sentenced to high fines that could take years to pay off.

Panelists disagreed, however, on whether expatriates or locals practice more self-censorship. Despite a general understanding among panelists that locals enjoy more freedom to be critical because they do not face the risk of deportation, panelist and Egyptian national Saeed Shalash said Arab and foreign journalists often tackle critical issues more than locals. But panelist Aysha Sultan, who is an Emirati national, argued that nationals fired from their media institutions have great difficulty finding a new job, while expatriates who are deported from the UAE can easily find work at one of the many media outlets in their homeland.

On the management level, panelists agreed that publishers and editors-in-chief of independent publications understand that their businesses depend on the flow of advertising from the UAE's powerful conglomerates. Angering those companies with critical reports could result in suspension of advertising, threatening the survival of the offending media outlet. A chain reaction could also be triggered if the affected company enjoys strong ties with other advertisers, who may in turn withdraw their ads in sympathy with their partner companies or shareholders. This complex and delicate situation results in multifaceted self-censorship that maintains a minimum of journalistic objectivity while avoiding provoking advertisers.

Panelist Helmi Noman, a researcher in online journalism and electronic media, noted that self-censorship has also extended to the Internet. "On several occasions, I notice that some sensitive posts are deleted the next day," he said, adding that he noticed this only in Arabic forums and not English ones.

Panelists also agreed on the need to better guide journalists on which issues to cover. Working in an economically booming country, journalists naturally narrow their focus to business news surrounding the various investments and commercial projects in the country. Furthermore, most expatriate journalists tend to avoid provocative issues, preferring instead to cover events and issues that further their personal gains. Apart from that, the definition of "important" is usually provided by the top editors and decision-makers at each outlet.

Journalist pay in the UAE is relatively high by the region's standards. Salaries vary widely between low-level field reporters and photographers to nationals holding senior positions. But for the same qualifications, local journalists are usually paid more than their foreign counterparts, though they basically perform essentially the same tasks. This may

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occasionally encourage corruption in certain situations. "When you have a journalist working for eight or twelve hours and you give him five thousand dirhams, he will look for other means to make a living," said panelist Mohamed Al-Mutawa, adding that while nationals may not experience financial pressure, expatriates probably would. But panelists noted that corruption also depends on the individual journalist, as some journalists with high salaries could still be corrupt, while expatriates with low salaries may shun bribes because they risk being prosecuted and deported if caught.

UAE media generally balance entertainment and news content. But some panelists noted an increasing tendency to feature more entertainment content, particularly when targeting young readers. An increasing number of entertainment-only media is emerging in the UAE, especially in DMC. Panelists said this phenomenon may not be unique to the UAE, as music- and contest-based television channels are spreading throughout the pan-Arab and global satellite networks. There was general agreement that the proportion of entertainment content in the UAE media depends on the UAE public.

"There is competition, so the commercial aspect has sometimes become more important than the media message," panelist Al-Mutawa said. The trend towards entertainment programming has also been noticed online according to panelist Helmi Noman, who said that a study he conducted showed that posts and contributions on Islamic and entertainment subjects topped other areas in Arabic-speaking Internet forums based in the UAE.

Regarding technology and modern journalism tools, panelists agreed that the UAE is home to the most technically well-equipped newspapers and media enterprises in the region. All major media enterprises, whether in DMC or other parts of the country, possess advanced technology to retrieve, compile, edit and disseminate information.

The sheer number of specialized magazines and publications published in the UAE is an indication of how niche reporting

has become part of the country's media spectrum. Panelists emphasized, however, that most of those publications exist mostly for their high profit potentials and may consist of syndicated content translated from other services. Panelist Saeed Shalash stood out among all panelists in requesting to limit the publication of such specialized publications, which he said "do not do the profession any good." This view, however, was opposed by other panelists who defended these publications, adding that it is the readers who decide which publications are worth continuing and which are not.

Extra supplements specializing in "light" content such as entertainment, sports and family affairs, have also become a common feature of most daily newspapers and are viewed as integral profit-generating sections with high popularity among the various groups they target.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

#### UAE Objective Score: 2.04

As a regional economic and commercial hub, the UAE has slowly become an information hub as well. MSI panelists gave this objective a score of 2.04, citing the unprecedented expansion of DMC as a key factor for the score's increase from 1.79 last year. Most indicators scored close to the overall score. Indicators 1 and 2, multiple news sources and citizen access to news sources, scored noticeably higher than other indicators, with scores approaching 3. However, the score for Indicator 4, private news agencies, was almost three-quarters of a point less than the average, reflecting the lack of a local private agency.

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

The UAE's booming business environment enables the country to serve as a platform for various media in print, broadcast and other electronic forms. There are dozens of publications in various languages, affordable means of telecommunication and Internet services. However, most of those media do not cover local events adequately, particularly those based in DMC. An example was given by panelist Saeed Shalash, who said that the Al-Arabiya satellite news channel, which is owned by a Saudi firm, broadcasts from Dubai but does not critically cover any local issues and events. "For instance, the channel [Al-Arabiya] can criticize any regime in any country that has enmity towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," Shalash said, explaining that because the UAE is on good terms with Saudi Arabia, it would not be covered critically by Al-Arabiya.

Residents are able to access international information freely by watching satellite television and browsing the Internet, whose penetration rate of 35 percent is the highest in the Arab world. However, the government still bans some publications from entering the country if they are found to have content that violates the country's laws. The government has banned Voice Over IP (VOIP) services, citing concerns that it may affect the government-controlled telecommunication sector, hence VOIP sites such as Skype are filtered. News reports are increasingly available on mobile phones, whose use among residents is very high.

With the exception of connection requests from within DMC, the government's sole Internet service provider Etisalat filters various Web sites that contain pornography or political, religious or cultural content thought to be in violation of the law. All Israeli web sites are also blocked. Some panelists noted that there are instances of over-filtering, which blocks out many Web sites and links that do not contain banned content. Some of the popular multimedia content-sharing and blogging Web sites are occasionally blocked by Etisalat. The Open Net Initiative described Etisalat's social filtering as pervasive.

In contrast to UAE media consumers with access to sources like the Internet, the UAE's poorly paid labor force—a significant portion of the population—does not usually purchase newspapers or have easy access to other news sources.

Coverage of diverse political opinions on domestic affairs is rarely observed in state-owned media, which does not allow voices critical of the government to be heard. Some panelists said this was natural due to the fact that the UAE's political system does not allow political parties, so there is no opposition activity that could have a say on local politics and events. Increasingly, however, there have been efforts by some journalists to push for more diversity of opinion in news and talk show programs broadcast in the official

media. Nonetheless, panelists noted that residents do not seem to miss opposing points of view as long as they are economically prosperous.

There are no independent news agencies in the UAE. Local media use content provided by the country's sole news agency Emirates News Agency (*Wakalat Anba'a al-Emarat* in Arabic, or WAM), which covers business, official news and other domestic news that usually does not contain critical reporting of the government. Though there are offices and representatives of independent international news agencies in the UAE, their coverage of local news is limited and follows lines similar to those of WAM, particularly since the 1980 press law applies to them just as they apply to all media outside DMC.

The UAE similarly lacks independent broadcast media. Some media companies have radio and television channels that are not purely state-owned, but that are also not purely independent. While there are independent media in DMC, they are restricted by the country's tough press law and rarely cover local news or do critical reports on the UAE. Panelists emphasized, however, that there have been no means to measure the government's response to independent critical reporting in any of the media corporations within DMC because none have issued noticeably critical coverage of domestic affairs thus far. Panelist Mohamed Al-Roken noted that local news programming in some DMC private media do tackle local news and analysis in sectors such as the economy and regional news that is essentially not critical of the UAE.

Despite the UAE's being an open market economy, panelists noted some difficulty in retrieving detailed information about shareholders and their interests, which also include the media. Furthermore, the fact that DMC has its own laws adds several more layers of bureaucracy to any such search. With such difficulty in discovering the individual owners of media corporations' parent companies, the public finds it difficult to assess the objectivity of those media, leaving much room for rumor and speculation. One good example is the case of the daily *Emirates Today*, which claims to be independent although its main shareholder is the government of Dubai.

Because the expatriate community in the UAE constitutes about 80 percent of the population, covering their news and activities has become a necessity for the country's media. There are English-language newspapers that give substantial coverage to the different communities, including expatriates from the Indian subcontinent, who constitute the bulk of the UAE's foreign work force. Panelists noted the availability of newspapers and periodicals in Persian, Hindi, Urdu and other foreign languages. Some television and radio

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programs are also broadcast in English and other non-Arabic languages. Furthermore, UAE media also give considerable coverage to events in the countries of origin of the majority of expatriates such as India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Iran, Iraq and so on.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### UAE Objective Score: 2.50

The UAE is known to be a land of opportunity for investors and entrepreneurs wishing to make tremendous profit, and independent media owners are no exception. Panelists agreed that media companies seem to do relatively well, particularly after their first few years of operation. Not surprisingly, this objective stood out with the highest score of 2.50, slightly higher than last year's score of 2.37. But they noted that the bulk of revenue for those companies comes from advertising, as other means of income remain limited. Most indicators scored close to the overall average, with Indicator 7, broadcast ratings and audited circulation figures, showing the only glaring weakness; that indicator scored more than a point lower than the overall average and was the only indicator scoring below a 2. Indicators 3 and 4, the role of advertising agencies and advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue, showed particular strength; each scored solidly above a 3.

Most panelists agreed on independent media's profitability in the UAE, noting the favorable market conditions that allow media businesses to thrive. The conditions are suitable for media businesses with sufficient capital to grow and prosper, particularly as human resources are widely available. The fact that the importation of newsprint and other materials is tax-free only serves to increase media companies' profits. These conditions have allowed many commercial magazines and publications to emerge.

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Panelist Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti, however, said some newspapers that claim to be independent, such as *Emirates Today* and *Al-Emarat Al-Youm*, belong to companies that may be partially or totally owned by the government and thus are not profitable because they are mostly financed by the government.

Panelist Saeed Shalash said that newspaper owners and managers occasionally prefer advertising material over content, pushing profit even higher. "If you look at newspapers that have taken this approach [focusing on income generation only], you'll notice that they have failed editorially but succeeded commercially," he said. Because advertising is the biggest source of income for independent media, daily newspapers such as *Al-Khaleej* often expand beyond one hundred pages per edition to accommodate the massive amount of advertising. Despite Shalash's comments, most daily newspapers seem to have developed an understanding that the need for advertising should not result in shrinking the news content. Consequently, there are some massive daily newspapers with various editorial, advertising

#### INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

##### **BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:**

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

and advertorial content along with quality specialized commercial and editorial supplements.

With the exception of state-owned media, privately owned media in the UAE failed to generate multiple sources of income, panelists agreed. State-owned media rely heavily on state funding and, increasingly, on advertising, resulting in a more balanced approach in funding their operations, while the bulk of private media's income comes from advertising. While the amount of advertising and advertising revenue is high, it is concentrated. Panelist Al-Roken underlined the potential damage that advertisers could have on newspapers in terms of objectivity and neutrality. He said, for example, that newspapers fear running anything critical of Dubai-based Emaar Properties, one of the world's largest real estate companies, because it has a massive advertising budget and may retaliate against adverse reporting by suspending its ad buys.

The vibrant economic activity in the country has naturally boosted the role of advertising agencies, which have become powerful institutions with links to various media corporations in the UAE and the region. Advertisements reach newspapers directly or through agencies, which have invented various ways to maneuver for discounts from newspapers, taking advantage of the tense competition in the market. Panelist Saeed Shalash added that advertisement agencies usually give the bulk of any advertising budget to the largest daily newspapers such as *Al-Khaleej*, *Gulf News*, *Al-Ittihad*, *Al-Bayan* or *Khaleej Times*, while newer, smaller outlets receive little, if any, advertising.

At first glance, it would appear that the split between advertising and other revenue are in line with international norms. Given the concentration of advertising, however, the reliance on such revenue comes with a price: self-censorship and pressure from advertisers. Panelists said sales and subscriptions are still too low to serve as an alternative income that could substitute for advertising. Panelist Abdulhamid Ahmed, who leads *Gulf News*, said his newspaper has expanded its circulation with the goal of developing alternative revenue streams. Such measures could potentially reduce advertiser pressure and enhance editorial independence and objectivity.

Panelists agreed that there is no official government subsidy for commercial media. But they also stressed there are various ways for the government to support and potentially influence the local media, notably by advertising for government tender announcements and state-owned businesses and institutions. They acknowledged that such support is healthy as long as it is used without practicing any sort of pressure and is distributed equally to the various media.

To cope with an increasingly competitive market, UAE newspapers frequently hire specialized agencies to conduct market surveys and analyses. But panelist Saeed Shalash noted that doubts have been cast on those agencies, which have been accused of inventing or manipulating numbers in favor of the highest bidding newspaper at the expense of its rivals. Panelist Helmi Noman also stressed the lack of credibility and transparency in the agencies and their methods.

Panelists also stated that newspapers carry out market research because of the lack of statistics on circulation and sales figures. No independent or governmental body compiles or verifies such statistics, and media owners are not legally required to disclose them to the public. Panelists noted that the lack of transparency in this respect confuses readers and advertisers, since multiple newspapers claim to be the leader in circulation and reach. Panelist Abdulhamid Ahmed went further by saying that when it comes to numbers, not only is there no transparency, there is also “deceit and cheating” in the process. He recommended that all newspapers publish all their figures.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### UAE Objective Score: 1.74

Despite the vibrant business activity in the UAE, civil society organizations supporting the media are weak. This was also clearly reflected in the MSI panel score, which rated this objective at 1.74, the lowest among all objectives. The score is slightly better than last year's score of 1.63, which may be attributed to the launch of the Emirates Human Rights Association in 2006. Panelists noted that there is no trade association representing independent media, and there was no initiative to establish one. Panelists did acknowledge that the Emirates Journalists Association made efforts to defend journalists and raise professional standards, but the panelists also noted that such efforts fall far below their aspirations. Panelists also pointed to a serious deficiency in NGO support for the media, but did not arrive at a conclusion as to why.

Most of the indicators scored close to the final objective score. However, Indicator 1, trade associations, scored nearly a point lower than the average. Indicators 6 and 7, access to printing facilities and newsprint, and media distribution, both scored well above the average.

Media corporations in the UAE have not established any form of union or association to promote their interests. The main reason is the inability of rival private newspapers to find

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common ground among themselves. Even if they were willing to do so, a series of cumbersome steps would have to be taken to obtain a license, making it a distant ambition.

Unlike media owners, UAE journalists succeeded in establishing their own professional body, the Emirates Journalists Association (EJA). Panelist Ehab Mabrouk, who works as EJA's secretary, said it has more than six hundred members, about half of whom are nationals. It has also been working on a draft press law to replace the current 27-year-old law and remove the many restrictions that exist today. Panelists Aysha Sultan and Moza Matar, two of EJA's founders, noted that the association has its own volunteer lawyers to defend journalists in court and contributes positively in promoting the level of press freedom in the country. In March 2004, EJA declared a boycott of news coverage of the Ministry of Education after the ministry prevented journalists from entering its premises in Dubai. Though such efforts were appreciated by panelists, more was demanded of the association.

## SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

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*Panelists agreed that the UAE's open market economy had allowed newspaper publishers to freely import and purchase newsprint directly and through private companies. They said that the government had no influence in the process.*

Panelist and lawyer Al-Roken reminded the panel that the EJA is not a syndicate and does not necessarily represent the interests of its members; rather, it is a service-oriented civil society organization with limited powers and influence bounded by the country's restrictive 1976 Federal Law No. 6 on Public Benefit Societies.

Amid the tremendous business activity in the UAE, civil society has been somewhat marginalized for a long time, panelists said. Despite the fact that there are about 100 registered NGOs, the laws governing them remain well below international standards, said panelist and legal expert Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti.

Established in early 2006, the Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA) is attempting to fill the void by tackling issues dealing with human rights, including freedom of expression. Though panelists did not fully agree that the EHRA is a totally independent NGO, Aysha Sultan said the EHRA is "governmental" in terms of being confined by regulations set by the Ministry of Labor. However, unlike the government-subsidized Jurists' Association Human Rights Committee, the EHRA has "never received a single penny from the state," Sultan said.

Panelist Moza Matar noted that pressure from outside the country occasionally influenced the advocacy work of NGOs and professional associations. In response to a three-day conference organized by the EJA to call for the boycott of American goods, "the government was exposed to extreme pressures from the U.S. ambassador to ban the conference and stop it," she said. This view was supported by panelist Saeed Shalash, who said that the U.S. government indirectly or directly imposes restrictions on the activities of advocacy organizations if those activities are at odds with U.S. interests.

On the academic level, the few university departments that offer journalism studies are not up to international standards, panelists said. This opinion was not based on a lack of equipment or qualified professors so much as the deficiency in practical courses and excessive focus on theory. "There is a rift between what is taught at those universities and the local

reality," said panelist Saeed Shalash, adding that qualified local and expatriate journalists who could serve as instructors in local universities are intentionally ignored.

Panelists agreed that the divergence between reality and what students are taught at universities has had negative effects on graduates entering the job market. This explains why a large portion of new graduates fail tremendously when starting their careers. Panelists suggested that additional emphasis needs to be placed on practical courses, preferably in the form of on-the-job training.

The picture is not much brighter for short-term training courses despite a visible increase in the number of professional development opportunities for media professionals. More media institutions are now aware of the need for regular staff training, and many have established their own departments for this purpose. Such efforts have helped compensate for the deficiency in the academic curricula at UAE universities. Panelist Helmi Noman, who is also a trainer, said he realized that many new university graduates have poor Internet skills, which explains why it is important to have more frequent training courses.

But what is more important in the success of such training courses is the desire and motivation of journalists themselves, according to some panelists. The EJA has provided short-term training courses, but, according to its secretary Ehab Mabrouk, "out of the 635 members of the association, not even 20 people actually apply, and even when they do attend, only 15 end up attending the [whole] first day, and perhaps merely 10 remain on the second day."

Panelists agreed that the UAE's open market economy had allowed newspaper publishers to freely import and purchase newsprint directly and through private companies. They said that the government had no influence in the process.

Similarly, panelists acknowledged that the government does not dictate how and where newspapers and other media productions are sold. Broadcasting of live and recorded content via satellite is also unrestricted provided that it is done by a licensed broadcast media establishment and takes place inside the boundaries of the Dubai Media City.

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## List of Panel Participants

**Aysha Sultan**, representative, Emirates Human Rights Association, Dubai

**Helmi Noman**, new media researcher and trainer, Abu Dhabi

**Mohamed Al-Mutawa**, senior editor, *Al-Bayan*, Dubai

**Mohamed Al-Roken**, law instructor, Emirates University, Dubai

**Moza Matar**, journalist, *Al-Ittihad*, Dubai

**Abdulhamid Ahmed**, editor-in-chief, *Gulf News*, Dubai

**Saeed Shalash**, correspondent, *Al-Ahram*, Dubai

**Abdulhamid Al-Kumiti**, human rights and freedom of expression lawyer, Dubai

**Ehab Mabrouk**, secretary, Emirates Journalists Association, Dubai

## Moderator

**Walid Al-Saqaf**, media consultant, Gulf Forum for Citizenship, Sana'a, Yemen

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