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# SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone has undergone profound social, economic, and political changes over the last 15 years. After one-party rule, characterized by tribalism, nepotism, widespread corruption, and political harassment, Sierra Leone was plunged into what the UN described as the most brutal civil war on the continent of Africa. During the war, which started in 1991 and lasted for 11 years, thousands were killed or lost limbs to amputation. Many thousands more fled into exile in neighboring countries. The socio-economic fabric of the country was destroyed completely.

Today, Sierra Leone has to rely on donor support, in the form of direct budgetary support, for more than half of its recurrent expenditures. The nation's productive capacity is destroyed. Direct foreign investment is almost non-existent. To raise domestic revenue to meet donor requirements, the government has resorted to increasing the tax burden on the few, mostly Asian-owned businesses, which have then passed the burden on to the average Sierra Leonean.

By the formal end of the war, the media had become one of the most high-profile casualties. Journalists were divided, with some openly supporting the rebels, the government, or the remnants of the defeated Sierra Leone army. Some journalists fled abroad. Newspapers were replete with journalist-on-journalist squabbles. As a result, journalism was overtaken by petty infighting. High school drop-outs became journalists and editors overnight on newspapers set up by faceless and unscrupulous politicians to settle scores or project their images for political appointments or lucrative government contracts. The media lost whatever credibility it had. To the ordinary citizen, the message was no longer credible if the messenger was a journalist.

However, in the years following the war, a lot of work has been done to restore the image of Sierra Leone journalism, ranging from physically rehabilitating media institutions to training the personnel. As the MSI assessment clearly shows, the international attention that Sierra Leone received helped lead to a commitment by the then-ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to promote free speech and freedom of the media. Except for a few cases, the media became free to write or say anything about the government. The panelists reflected progress here, by giving their highest score (2.31) of the five MSI objectives to Objective 1, freedom of speech.

Many newspapers are published on a daily basis and community radio stations have come on air. International interest in the media as a tool to check the excesses of government and its agencies has increased support for media development. That created more news sources, although the professionalism of journalism suffered badly as the nation now had to contend with a flood of people who found their way into journalism in their search for jobs or to fulfill a politician's agenda. Even weaker are the business skills of media owners, leading the panel to deliver their lowest score (1.34) to Objective 4, business management.

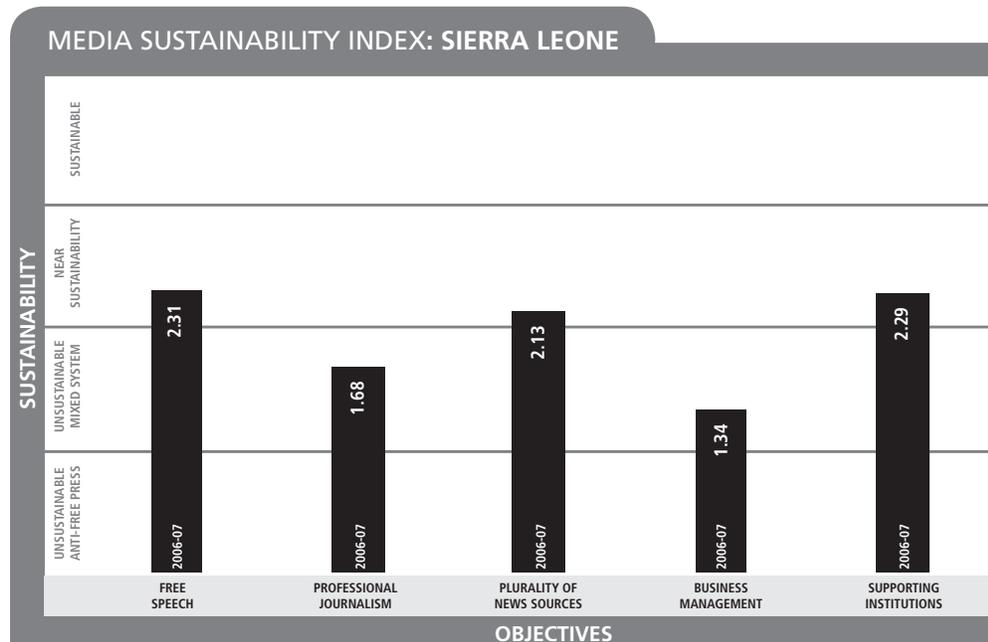
# SIERRA LEONE AT A GLANCE

## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 6,165,000 (Statistics, Sierra Leone 2005 est.)
- > **Capital city:** Freetown
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** 20 African ethnic groups 90% (Temne 30%, Mende 30%, other 30%), Creole (Krio) 10%, refugees from Liberia's recent civil war, small numbers of Europeans, Lebanese, Pakistanis, and Indians (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 60%, Christian 10%, indigenous beliefs 30% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English, Mende, Temne, Krio (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2006-Atlas):** \$1.357 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$850 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **Literacy rate:** 35.1% (male 49.6%, female 24.4%) (2004 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Ernest Bai Koroma (since September 17, 2007)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print outlets 33, Radio stations 47, Television 1 (*Independent Media Commission, 2007*)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Sierra Leone News Agency (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 10,000 (2005 est., *CIA World Factbook*)



### 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

### Sierra Leone Objective Score: 2.31

Panelists rated the first four objectives close to the final average. However, their scores for Indicators 5, 6, and 7 show that several details still need to be worked out to make further gains in this objective. These indicators cover preferential legal treatment for state media, libel laws, and freedom of information; the last one scored more than a point below the average. However, panelists appreciated the freedom of media to access international news sources and the lack of restrictions on entering the journalism profession, and rated Indicators 8 and 9 more than a point higher than the average.

The laws of Sierra Leone and the 1991 Constitution, largely modeled on the United States Constitution, promote free speech. Section 25 (1) guarantees the freedom to express views and impart knowledge. In section 11 of the Constitution, the media is obliged to "... uphold the fundamental objective contained in this Constitution and highlight the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people." Panelists largely agreed that the common law and the Constitution provide enough guarantees for the promotion and protection of free speech in Sierra Leone.

However, there exist a number of inhibiting common law provisions brought over from the period of British colonial rule, contained in the Public Order Act 1965, which the government could invoke against the media; this includes criminal libel provisions. The panel agreed that even though there are other Constitutional and legal instruments curtailing media freedom, governments in recent times have refrained from using them except in few cases.

Generally, there is very little public sympathy, however, for media practitioners in cases of infringement of press freedom guarantees. Cases receive wide coverage from both radio and television, at least in Freetown, principally because they impact the media. Outside of the capital there is hardly any knowledge about cases of infringement.

Dennis Nelson Streeter of the media advertising agency Media Magic pointed out, however, that "the reality on the ground [regarding media freedom] shows a lot of progress from what we used to know about the media, especially with the advent of community radio stations .... In terms of the libel and malicious provisions, we also know that there is another school of thought, which believes that there is still a lot of irresponsible journalism around and there has to be some check to ensure some maturity is shown."

In 2000, the government set up the Independent Media Commission (IMC) in consultation with the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) to oversee registration of media organizations and regulate content. In the past, this was the responsibility of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The establishment of the IMC was the result of years of agitation by journalists at home and abroad and a botched attempt at introducing the so-called Media Practitioners Act and the Newspaper Registration Act of 1997. Both acts provided for university qualifications and practical experience for editors and reporters. Parliament passed both bills but the president refused to sign them into law.

The IMC has received wide-ranging powers from the outgoing parliament, including strengthening its powers to suspend publications. Because of lacking expert personnel capacity, the work of the IMC is limited to Freetown, meaning that it cannot regulate more than 20 radio stations outside the capital. In Freetown it deals with complaints about taste and decency issues regarding both private and state media that are formally reported to it from both the public and government. In court cases it becomes involved only to testify that a particular media organization is duly registered. However, the IMC may decide petitions on its own, and has recently received statutory powers to levy fines. This does not, however, prevent the aggrieved parties from seeking redress in court. Indeed, in the Paul Kamara case (described below), former President Kabbah petitioned the IMC, won the case there, and then proceeded to the High Court.

## 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.

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Panelists agreed that the IMC has been largely fair in doing its job to date, particularly in the registration of broadcast media. Sallieu Kamara, of the NGO Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), which operates a community radio station in Kenema, noted that "... some radio stations started broadcasting before even applying for licenses, but they were never stopped. Rather they were asked and encouraged to regularize their license application and they continued broadcasting. So I think that is a very big plus."

Other panelists were concerned that a few radio stations appear to enjoy special privileges. David Tam-Baryoh, of the Center for Media Education and Technology, said that such developments ought to be taken seriously: "An individual applies for a commercial license and it is not given. But eight months down the line, you just wake up one morning and you hear a political radio and they [the operators] say they have applied, they have got their license and their frequency. On the whole ... it is open. But sometimes, when the times are not normal, which maybe happens in any society, you discover that they are swayed by political considerations."

Joshua Nicol, of Initiative for the Mobile Training of Community Radio, argued that for the IMC to be fair to everyone, "frequencies should be auctioned ... nobody should hold a broadcast license till kingdom come ... The idea is to ensure that people who have the competence and the resources to go into the business of broadcasting are the ones that are issued with licenses."

According to statute, the commissioners of the IMC are appointed by the president on the advice of the SLAJ and then approved by Parliament. Despite this, there have always been arguments about the political neutrality of the commissioners once they are approved by Parliament. The media, however, more or less contends with the IMC because it serves as a bulwark against direct government regulation.

The panel noted that registering a newspaper normally takes less than two weeks from the date an application is made to the IMC. It costs less than \$50 in fees, and this accounts for the almost daily increase in the number of newspapers on the streets of Freetown. To set up a media business, the proprietor must register a company with the Registrar General's Office. This involves paying income tax and other registration expenses that are separate from the IMC registration fee. For radio and television stations, the proprietor also pays an annual registration fee of not less than \$1000 to the National Telecommunications Commission in addition to the other fees.

Taxes are a very serious issue in Sierra Leone. The government is required to collect an agreed amount of money to be able to attract matching funds from international donors.

However, the panel agreed that media organizations have found a way of evading taxes. Lawyer Mohamed Pa Momoh Fofanah said he was disappointed that the media is not doing its part. "In all honesty, in response for free speech, there is also an obligation to show some responsibility by being fair with the system. A lot times ... people do not pay tax at all or they ignore it." Mohamed Samoura, director of the Sierra Leone News Agency, made the same argument: "Most of our media institutions are not well established and managed. You go to most of these media houses, it is just the editor or sub-editor ... They do not have a system so how can you impose taxes on them? If you impose taxes, the journalists will say they want to muzzle the press."

For Streeter, the problem is that the country's tax system "is very weak in terms of tax collection. Tax evasion is one of the simplest things in Sierra Leone." Panelist Mariama Khai-Fornah added, "Another thing is that most journalists do not receive salaries ... How can the community be supporting the government or the state when the community is supporting the radio? Most community radio have volunteers. They do not have paid staff."

Except in the war years, when journalists were deliberately targeted by all the fighting factions, including the government army, the panel was unanimous that crimes against journalists are very rare in Sierra Leone now. The killing of journalists during the conflict was prosecuted together with all other war crimes and crimes against humanity in the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone.

One unresolved case involves a journalist with the private *For Di People* newspaper, Harry Yansanneh. He died in the hospital several weeks after a May 2005 fight with the children of the paper's landlord, Fatmata Hassan, member of parliament with the former ruling SLPP. Hassan's children were attempting to evict *For Di People* from a building housing more than 20 newspapers. The MP's children fled abroad and, although a coroner's inquest indicted all three children and Hassan for involuntary manslaughter, there has been no further action. Hassan has lost her seat in parliament and is out of the country, and there appears to be no will to pursue the matter vigorously. Journalists in Sierra Leone believe that *For Di People* was being singled out for its critical stance and, at the time of this incident, its editor Paul Kamara was in prison.

There was no disagreement among panelists that state media enjoy absolute legal immunity. There is no record of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS) being sued even for the most unprofessional conduct. Fofanah suggested the bias in favor of the state official stems from the fact that "the government will find a way to block anyone with a case against the state media. But when they have a case against

you it goes easily.” State media are also free from paying all taxes to the IMC and have exclusive access to the State House as the only media organization accredited to cover the work of the president at home. However, state media’s editorial independence is not guaranteed by law. The very structure of the organization makes it difficult for it to be independent. The director is appointed through normal civil service procedures. Invariably, the government of the day must be pleased with whoever becomes director.

In Sierra Leone, libel is both a civil and a criminal issue. Sometimes, public officials have pursued both options. In one case, involving *For Di People* editor Paul Kamara and the former president of the Sierra Leone Football Association, Justice Tolla Thompson, the latter sought both options. Kamara accused Tolla Thompson, who was also the president of the Appeal Court of Sierra Leone, of corruption in the management of the football association and of holding the office in contravention of the Sierra Leone Constitution of 1991. Kamara was convicted and jailed for six months in a criminal trial. Later, the high court granted Tolla Thompson damages of \$30,000 in a civil trial. The most recent case, in 2004, again involved *For Di People*. The editor was accused and found guilty of defaming former President Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and served 13 months of a two-year sentence before being freed on appeal.

Juries are not included in such trials and the burden of proof rests with the accused, panelists noted. Even then, proving truth is not always a successful defense, according to Fofanah. Panelists argued for a total repeal of the criminal libel laws. David Tam Baryoh of the Center for Media Education and Technology added, “For the fact that they [the criminal libel laws] are not being [overly] utilized does not mean that they are not in the law books .... While we accept what exists now because of democratic tolerance, we must also attempt to look back and say, these laws could be used by a bad leader.” Since 2002, SLAJ has engaged the government in discussions to have criminal and seditious libel provisions repealed. These efforts are still on-going.

The Constitution is silent on the specific issue of access to public information, and there was very little discussion about the issue. The panel concluded that public information definitely was not easily available to any person or organization, public or private. Government officials often hide behind the Official Secrets Act, another colonial legacy used as a tool to stonewall journalists, panelists said. In the last two years, a freedom of information coalition involving many civil society organizations and the SLAJ has been lobbying parliament to enact a freedom of information law. The document received thousands of signatures across the country but had not come before parliament by the end of President

Kabbah’s government. In his maiden speech to parliament, the new president, Ernest Bai Koroma, made no mention of the issue, merely asking the media to be “more responsible.”

There is no restriction on accessing and using foreign news from any source. There is no record of the government attempting to control access to foreign news. People are only restricted either because they do not know where to find it or have no money to pay to access it, panel members said.

After the former government failed in its attempt to push through the Media Practitioners Act and the Newspapers Act of 1997, both of which required editors to hold university degrees backed by substantial hands-on experience, there has been no official attempt to restrict entry into journalism. A former minister of information from the recently defeated government, Julius Spencer, was the main proponent of the idea of opening up the field to all. He argued that there was no educational qualification required to practice freedom of speech. Fofanah said, “There is a difference between free speech and journalism. When it comes to journalism, it is a profession that we must respect. That is why we have laws against reckless writing, defamation, or what have you.”

Recently, even some journalists have complained that their profession is being invaded by quacks and have advocated for academic requirement to be included for membership in SLAJ and other affiliated bodies such as the Reporters Union of Sierra Leone.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Sierra Leone Objective Score: 1.68

Panelists were critical of the quality of journalism in Sierra Leone. In particular, they rated Indicators 1 and 8, reporting is fair, objective, and well-sourced and niche reporting poorly, just above 1. Indicators 4 and 6, journalists cover key events and entertainment news balance fared the best, but only Indicator 4 barely exceeded a score of 2.5.

Fair, objective, and well-sourced reporting is one of the most problematic areas in Sierra Leone journalism. A major problem in Sierra Leone, even among some senior journalists, is how to draw a line between news and comment. The two mix freely and, in too many cases, journalists fill their pages with highly opinionated, one-sided stories, panelists said. While there are examples of quality journalism at a few outlets, panelists felt that these are “a drop in the ocean.”

It has taken a long time to agree on a set of ethical standards, but in late 2007 an ethics code was agreed to in cooperation with the IMC. The code is very much in line with international

standards, but enforcing it remains a challenge. Even a much-trumpeted code for election reporting introduced for the last general and presidential elections was widely violated with no consequences. Sallieu Kamara of NMJD admitted, "I do not think editors are doing much to stop this ... because they know that reporters are doing something unprofessional .... These people are not paying reporters well ... the ID card is your tool to go out and fend for yourself."

Mohamed Samoura, managing editor of the Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA), said ethics violations are more "prevalent among newspapers," and Joshua Nicol made that case that "It's a whole culture thing ... you become 'aculturized' ... it cuts across all ages and levels of professionalism...."

Self-censorship is also a problem. "We in the government media normally practice self-censorship because you may want to keep your job ... you have to go by the dictates of your principals and as a government journalist, there are certain things you cannot report," said Samoura. Sallieu Kamara, who for many years worked as editor of *For Di People*, thinks that even so-called private newspapers are guilty. "Sometimes you look at the story and look at the person behind the story. That person might be your friend ... or because of the support you've been getting from the people involved in the story, you decide to just shelve it."

With their limited capacity, such as lack of enough well-trained personnel and operating funds, the media are restricted in the number of key issues they can cover, panelists said. Events taking place outside the capital are largely ignored or are covered from the perspective of the organizers, who often spin the coverage. Most coverage

outside the capital concerns NGOs opening a new school or fighting cholera in a remote rural community. There are a number of secret societies, the activities of which are virtually taboo for the media. The relevance of these bodies and their impact on governance at the national level should be noted, panelists said. Politicians are known to openly flaunt their membership in these societies to win votes.

David Tam Baryoh said a problem occurs when "the government will be concerned, for example, about the rights of children. Then they [secret society groups] take a three-year-old boy to a society, [the initiation] has an adverse effect on the child's health and the government wants to come into that based on media reports. It is going to clash with that society .... On the side of the media, a reporter could be warned by his editor to go slow on such matters. Even when the media report such matters, they are not consistent to effect change. We lack follow up mechanisms. It appears time is not on our side and we practice fire brigade journalism: get in and get out as soon as possible." Sallieu Kamara added that avoiding coverage of secret societies is not laid out in any policy "but there are sensitive issues when you cover them [and] you should be ready to face problems."

State media journalists are paid but very badly. Williette John, managing editor of *Salone Times* newspaper, called salaries "outrageous." The average pay is \$50 per month and only a handful of media outlets actually pay a salary. The rest of the media pay absolutely no money to their staff and that impacts negatively on what passes off as news on a daily basis. Media owners expect journalists to make a living once they receive accreditation in form of an identity card. It is customary in Sierra Leone for a journalist to receive money for covering a news conference or taking part in a media training project. Also, journalists who interview politicians and business executive customarily receive transportation and gifts. SLAJ only frowns on such gifts and payments made as a precondition for reporting. In community media most of the staff are local volunteers who supplement their income by working for local NGOs or as teachers. In these circumstances such reporters find it difficult to meet deadlines or perform painstaking investigations that produce critical stories.

"When some information is leaked to some reporter, instead of going on to write the story, the reporter will take the document to the person concerned and that person will give them money," said Sallieu Kamara. "The sources of the leak would now be scared to continue. It is really happening, let's not fool ourselves." "Local journalists practice what is called attack-collect-defend-collect journalism. They are paid to attack politicians or business rivals and they are employed and paid to defend them again," said Joshua Nicol.

## 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).

There is no guarantee that people will get the news when they need it. More often than not, on radio stations that broadcast news at all, the news is late or completely absent. The majority of the radio stations carry no news at all. Newspapers are almost always late. Recently, a helicopter crashed at the international airport, killing Togolese nationals returning home from a football match in Freetown. Because it happened at 8 pm, most papers reported the event 48 hours later. In the absence of the capacity to be up-to-date with the news, entertainment takes over, panelists said.

The two dozen community radio stations located in the rural areas of Sierra Leone are equipped with reasonably modern broadcast facilities provided by foreign donors. Although appreciated, this also creates a problem: most of the local journalists using the equipment are coming in contact with it for the first time. Should that equipment be damaged or improperly maintained, replacing it will be difficult, if not impossible. State radio and commercial stations have very old equipment, panelists said, and the newspapers face an even worse situation.

The panel concluded that there is no evidence of niche reporting. Most journalists are generalists, trying to do everything, and there are no foundations promoting excellence in journalism that would have inspired specialization, the panel agreed. While there are a few existing associations for specialized journalists (see Objective 5), and from time to time these journalists try to produce good quality reports in their niche areas, they are nonetheless limited by the lack of training and experience.

As mentioned previously, Sierra Leone has an intricate web of secret societies that are taboo areas for journalists. Their interaction and influence on governance would be a good area for investigative journalism, but exploring that topic could lead to self-destruction.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Sierra Leone Objective Score: 2.13

Panelists scored indicators in this objective varyingly. Indicators 3 and 4, state media represent the political spectrum and independent news agencies, equally low, more than a point less than the average. On the other hand, Indicators 5 and 6, private broadcasters produce their own news and transparency of media ownership, scored noticeably higher.

Coverage in both print and broadcast is normally restricted to a media outlet's area of operation. For newspapers, Freetown is the main market, despite the fact that some efforts are

made to cover issues outside the capital. No newspaper maintains an active bureau in rural areas.

Normally, one journalist covers an event and syndicates it to several newspapers. Sometimes, newspaper copy is transcribed from news carried on radio stations. Mariama Khai Fornah, producer with Eastern Radio in Kenema said, "We have evidence that some journalists working for the print in Kenema copy news from our programs and send it to their newspapers in Freetown. The only thing wrong with that is that they never credit our station." The radio stations broadcast news from their operational areas and frequently copy international news from international broadcasters' websites and air it without crediting the original source, panelists said.

The panel agreed that Freetown residents have a larger choice of radio stations. All newspapers are produced in Freetown and only about 15 percent of the population actually reads them. Radio is the most popular source of information in Sierra Leone. One reason for this is that literacy in Sierra Leone stands at only 35 percent. Radio established itself as the most effective way of accessing news during the war years, when every Sierra Leonean in refugee camps in neighboring countries had a cheap portable radio to follow the news. Only the elite and students use the Internet, but that use is severely restricted by poverty. Internet cafes are everywhere—in fact they are the fastest growing business in Sierra Leone today—but at \$1 per hour, it is very expensive for the average person.

Television sets are very expensive, and only the middle class or above can afford it. One television set may serve four or

### 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.

five houses in one area. Local television, owned by the state, is largely ineffective and broadcasts only between 6 pm and midnight. It serves mostly government and the upper class people. ABC/TV collapsed early in 2007. During its live time it served only parts of the capital, but it was very popular, with 98 percent foreign programming. It recently came back on-air in January 2008 only with rebroadcasts of international programs.

There is no government restriction on accessing local or foreign news broadcasts. The BBC, RFI, and VOA all have transmitters in Freetown operating 24 hours per day. They also have re-broadcast arrangements with local broadcasters. Foreign newspapers, mainly from the United Kingdom, are available at shopping centers that upper middle class Sierra Leoneans and the huge expatriate community access. Less than 10 percent of the population can afford satellite television.

State media institutions are firmly in the hands of the ruling party, and the views of other political parties and critical civil society groups are not encouraged. During election periods, with the presence of international observers and diplomatic pressure, some opposition rallies and events are covered on a limited scale. Mohamed Samoura noted, "Public interest in the true sense of the word is normally not what we look for. We reflect the views of the government." The president and his ministers lead every news bulletin without any respect for the event and its relative newsworthiness. However, state media are grossly under-funded and have lost trained personnel to commercial broadcasters and public relation outfits. The consequences of this staff attrition for program quantity and quality is devastating, panelists said. Electricity also is a major problem, and providing diesel to run generators is expensive. Educational and cultural programs are not priorities during the six hours of daily state television broadcasting and 18 hours of radio.

The panel noted that Sierra Leone has no record of independent news agency operations. The closest the country came to that, panelists said, was when the Sierra Leone News Agency SLENA was set up in the late 1980s with UNESCO support. SLENA had correspondents across the country and sold news to foreign missions and media organizations. Once UNESCO funding dried up, the panel said, SLENA started its decline and its operation has been scaled back considerably to one-quarter of its original capacity. International news agencies are not used by local media.

Most broadcasters produce their own programs, which differ considerably from state media programs in terms of approach to controversial topics. This is particularly true when covering governance issues. Community radio stations depend heavily on syndicated programming from independent producers who pay for air time. In fact, more

than half of broadcast time at community stations is taken by such programs, up to five of eight hours daily, according to Mariama Kahi Fornah. The other three hours are filled with local programs and entertainment.

On the face of it people know those who own the media, in the sense that there is somebody registering a newspaper or radio station at the IMC. However, in Sierra Leone, there is a culture of powerful faceless people using others to set up media to achieve a business or political objective. Sallieu Kamara said that from "1997 onwards we saw the emergence of a lot of newspapers and some of those newspapers faded away after the return to democracy and some are still publishing. Some of us who were around know how some of those papers were established. They were established as a coordinated force to build up the propaganda machine of the government then in exile .... Even today, you can see that kind of relationship clearly in their stories." It is not easy to discover the true owners of media and there are no laws compelling full disclosure. In Sierra Leone, individuals, as opposed to business conglomerates, own and control the media.

There exists no resistance to the inclusion of a broad range of social issues in the media. There are no specific media organizations dealing with minority issues in Sierra Leone. Almost every media activity as far as newspapers are concerned is done in the mainstream. Community radio stations are the only outlets that may target specific groups with their information. Another example is Voice of the Handicapped, covering part of Freetown and a few nearby areas. However, such stations prove difficult to sustain in a niche format. While this station is still in existence, recently it only broadcasts on Saturdays. It now carries a mixture of BBC programs, local music, and a talk show. As far as panelists could remember there have been no programs in the last two years specifically targeted at handicapped people.

#### **OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

#### **Sierra Leone Objective Score: 1.34**

In this objective, most indicators fared equally poorly, a result of the poor economic and business climate. Although no indicators scored above a 2, Indicator 3, advertising agencies and the advertising market, scored best. Indicator 7, audience and circulation measurement, scored poorest, more than a point lower than the average.

The business aspect of the Sierra Leone's media is extremely weak. Panelists noted that effective management is almost completely absent, particularly at newspapers. The proprietor

is business manager, editor, reporter and all other roles. There are perhaps only two examples of reasonably well-managed newspapers in Sierra Leone: *Awoko* and *Concord Times*. Because setting up a radio station and keeping it on the air is expensive, owners are a little more prudent in their financial dealings. With newspapers, the editor is normally the owner and fills almost all other rolls. Sallieu Kamara noted that: "almost all the media houses, newspapers specifically, are not run as business entities ... even in terms of recruiting people... you get the best of your staff if they have security of employment, ... most of these papers are owned by one man and the same man doubles as the editor and proprietor, the accountant and everything. Most of the editors who are perpetuating this thing find themselves also as executives of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists." Most private media groups are only able to break even, panelists said.

David Tam Baryoh had a different take on the issue: "I want to situate the very poor management of media in Sierra Leone into the normal economics of the country itself because in as much as the management aspect is there, resources also help... the reality is that the media is very impoverished in Sierra Leone and because it is impoverished people [journalists] offer themselves for work in a mismanaged system. It is a general trend."

Only three newspapers have a printing press, *Standard Times*, *Concord Times*, and *Awoko*. The rest have to queue at private printing houses. Sometimes newspapers miss certain editions because of breakdowns or the private printers being simply overwhelmed. All radio stations have their own transmitters.

Newspapers are financed principally from advertisements. Sometimes, newspapers barely break even in the fierce

competition for scarce advertising resources. This affects the quality of journalism in more ways than one, panelists noted. They said if one depends on one NGO or a public official, then one is disinclined to make them the subject of any critical story.

The same applies to radio, even though radio stations carry more advertisements and also arrange sponsorships for lengthy periods. Sponsorship ebbs and flows, but the four mobile phone companies and UN agencies are the most constant sponsors of radio programs. Other NGOs provide sponsorship based on specific programs they advocate for. This type of support is particularly important at community radio stations, as the communities that support the stations are too poor to supply the resource to keep them operational. This makes sustainability a major concern, the panel said, since donor funds are bound to dry up at some point.

In recent times a few advertising agencies have come on line. Advertising has always been produced and broadcast by radio stations and newspapers, but now agencies specifically established for this purpose have contracts with the biggest advertisers: mobile phone companies and government agencies. The agencies produce and distribute advertisements across all media outlets. Because radio stations are not too strict on timing for advertising and fear of losing out to less scrupulous rivals, large segments of a broadcast schedule can be taken over by advertising. Many newspapers do not care how many pages go towards advertising as long as their clients are satisfied. Panelists said that if clients demand half of a radio station's broadcast time or the pages of a newspaper, the outlets will be ready to do business because they need the money for transportation, fuel to generate electricity, and other overhead costs.

The government does not subsidize private media, but, as mentioned above, is an important source of advertising revenue. "If your paper is deemed to be anti-establishment, you do not get advertising on the scale of those pro-government papers," said Joshua Nicol. Community media enjoy some government assistance in the form of tax exemptions but these are sporadic and small.

The panel recognized the benefits of market research but regretted that there is no market research tradition. On the issue of circulation and audience figures, no measurement organizations exist in Sierra Leone. Listening to radio stations and reading papers in Freetown, panelists said, can give the feeling that all of them are taking the audience for granted. "The editor tells you what he wants you to believe so that you know that his paper is the highest selling," a panelist said. "Everybody just claims supremacy, whether it is in print or on radio."

#### 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.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Sierra Leone Objective Score: 2.29

With the exception of Indicator 1, trade associations, all indicators scored close to the average. The lack of unity among media owners precludes an effective trade association and panelists' low scores reflected this reality.

SLAJ is the main body recognized by law as representing the interest of all journalists in the country, both broadcast and print. There are subgroups such as the Guild of Newspaper Editors and the Sierra Leone Reporters Union, which are affiliated with SLAJ. SLAJ has the responsibility to work in the interest of all journalists and is independent of the government, although the government sometimes supports its activities with funding. When journalists are arrested for their work, SLAJ intervenes by lobbying or, as a last resort, providing legal services.

There also are a few organizations representing specific sectors of the profession, such as health reporters, education reporters, etc. Community radio stations are linked organizationally by the Community Radio Network.

SLAJ Secretary General Ibrahim Karim Sei said activities undertaken to improve the media profession include advocacy for constitutional review, pushing for a freedom of information law, and court challenges to the constitutionality of the criminal and seditious libel provisions. A freedom of information law was proposed in a wide-ranging constitutional review document that could be put to a referendum, held concurrently with local elections in 2008.

NGOs supporting media development exist and provide training, equipment, and general advocacy for media freedom. Such organizations are located mainly in Freetown. No organization specifically targets media freedom and free speech as a core activity, the panel said. When international free speech organizations have programs to implement in Sierra Leone, they link up with local groups and representatives, who report violations to them.

The School of Mass Communications in the Faculty of Arts at Fourah Bay College at the University of Sierra Leone offers diploma and degree programs in journalism, which are internationally recognized. The practical side of the Faculty is not very strong, as the institution has only recently acquired radio and newspaper teaching facilities, the panel said. Demand for admission to the university nonetheless far exceeds what it can offer, and spaces are keenly contested. Students wishing to study journalism abroad make private arrangements, but obtaining scholarships or visas is a significant obstacle.

David Tam Baryoh said the impact of the training available to journalists still is not being felt in the market place because "there are not many media house to absorb them. Even if they are taken in, many would not be able to pay these guys." Mohamed Samoura noted that the new graduates "have the theoretical background, but when it comes to practical work, they find it difficult." Williette agreed, but then argued that unless organizations taking interns for their six-month work experience are "honest enough in their evaluation, the university will be unable to improve its practical course requirements." Sallieu Kamara found that young graduates are sometimes frustrated in the new workplaces because "you are taught something and when you want to put it in practice—when you try to be professional—you step on the toes of your boss." Panelists said that many graduates up in public relations jobs at NGOs and government agencies.

There are an increasing number of short-term training opportunities for journalists, and they are quite open. They are mostly arranged by international organizations, with training modules developed abroad. David Tam Baryoh said that "usually, it is what suits the international donor. The need may come from the ground [but the local organization does] not have the money—you may have 10 aims but they take two." Joshua Nicol added that "to some extent, they [the trainings] are sporadic and thematic. They are not predictable. They come as and when funds are available from external donors."

Media outlets do support staff wishing to attend such trainings merely by putting their names forward. It is a different matter altogether if payment is required, but no fees are normally charged. The journalists attending trainings always expect per diem at the end of such exercises, which is

#### 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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sometimes foreign to international organizations not familiar with the West African situation.

The panel was unanimous that sources of newsprint and other supplies required by the media are largely apolitical in Sierra Leone, but government taxes impact heavily on the final cost of newsprint and hence the cover price of newspapers. Private printing facilities are very selective about which newspapers they print. The criminal and seditious libel laws cover printers and even vendors (to date, however, this principle has not been applied to Internet service providers). A controversial story could only be printed in-house, and very few newspapers own their own presses. The state has no newspaper, but ruling parties have always had their own papers, which operate basically like others newspapers, although they always enjoy a lot of government advertising.

Newspapers are distributed exclusively by an association of vendors, which is well-organized. All newspapers are based in Freetown, but the vendors' association has members across the country. Newspapers are always hours, and sometimes days, late in reaching rural areas. All radio stations own their own transmitters. The Internet is operated by private businesses, apolitically, and the government makes no effort to control it.

## List of Panel Participants

**David Tam Baryoh**, executive director, Center for Media Education & Technology, Freetown

**Dennis Nelson Streeter**, executive director, Media Magic Advertising, Freetown

**Ibrahim Karim-Sei**, secretary general, Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, Freetown

**Joshua Nicol**, program coordinator, Initiative for the Mobile Training of Community Radio, Freetown

**Mariama Khai Fornah**, producer, Eastern Radio, Kenema Province

**Mohamed Samoura**, managing editor, Sierra Leone News Agency, Freetown

**Pa Momoh Fofanah**, private legal practitioner, Defense for Children International, Freetown

**Sallieu T. Kamara**, head of communications and knowledge management, Network Movement for Justice and Development, Freetown

**Umaru Fofanah**, correspondent, BBC Radio, Freetown

**Williette John**, station manager, ABC Television, Freetown

**Richie Awoonor Gordon**, managing editor, *Peep Magazine*, Freetown

## Moderator

**Isaac Massaquoi**, lecturer, Mass Communication Department, Institute of Library and Communications Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Freetown

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