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## THE GAMBIA

The media landscape in The Gambia changed drastically after the military overthrew the democratically elected government in July 1994. Although military rulers were quick to label themselves as “soldiers with a difference” and urged the public to criticize them wherever they went wrong, they were equally swift in revealing their true colors. Within a short while, the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) pounced on the media.

The AFPRC regime metamorphosed into a civilian regime and rechristened itself the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC). Despite its promises to uphold and safeguard the democratic principles embedded in the country, it instead eroded and flouted every aspect of those principles. Journalists became the regime’s greatest victims, despite the fact that the regime had established the first television station in the country as well as given operational licenses to a number of media outlets. The president was quick to label journalists “the unworthy sons of Africa” and called on people not to buy newspapers, in order to put them out of business.

Economically, The Gambia is very weak, with the majority of the population living on less than one dollar a day. The country depends on tourism as its major income earner, particularly as drought has caused groundnut and cotton exports to decline over the years. The national currency, the dalasi, has seriously depreciated against major international foreign currencies, creating a negative impact on the media and other institutions.

Although the business sector has seen a tremendous boom in the last few years, with significant investment coming into the country, this has created very little impact on the media—even in advertising. Most businesses in The Gambia are not keen to advertise with the private media, for fear of reprisals from the government. Those who have dared to test the waters have been labeled “opposition sympathizers.” Similarly, no government agency places standard advertisements in the private press. These same agencies, however, are quick to fill the pages of private media with propaganda and congratulatory messages for the president on special occasions such as his birthday and the day he came to power, thus adding a negative political dimension to some advertising.

The MSI panel for The Gambia revealed that Objective 1, freedom of speech, is the weakest, and it pulled down the overall average. The rest of the objectives were closer to the overall average, with Objective 2, professional journalism, the highest at 1.88.

*Due to the repressive environment in The Gambia, most panelists agreed to participate in the MSI panel on condition of anonymity. A partial list of participants is included at the end of the chapter.*

# THE GAMBIA AT A GLANCE

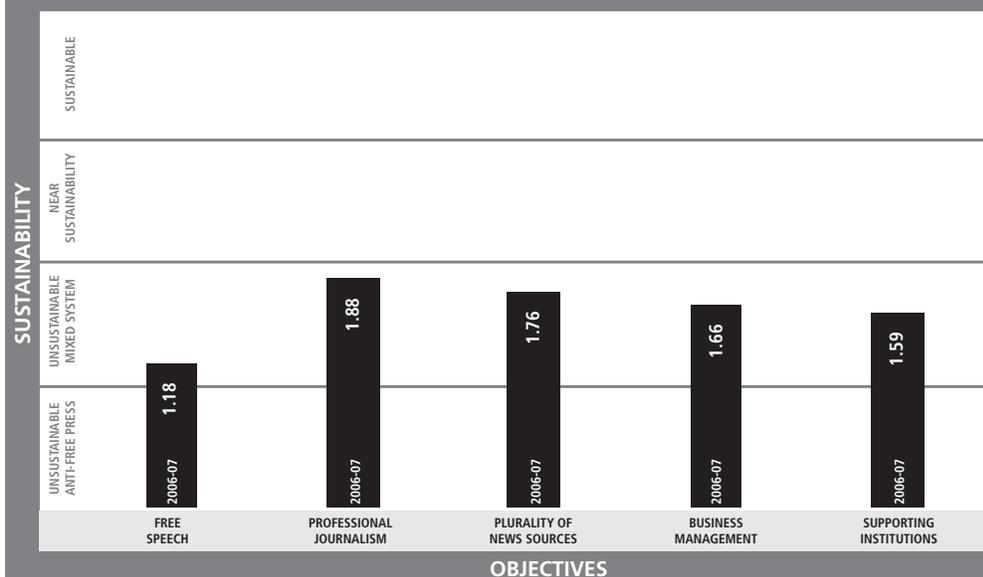
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 1,688,359 (July 2007 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Capital city:** Banjul
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** African 99% (Mandinka 42%, Fula 18%, Wolof 16%, Jola 10%, Serahuli 9%, other 4%), non-African 1% (CIA World Factbook)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 90%, Christian 9%, indigenous beliefs 1% (CIA World Factbook)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English (official), Mandinka, Wolof, Fula (CIA World Factbook)
- > **GNI (2006-Atlas):** \$488 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$1,970 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **Literacy rate:** 40.1% (male 47.8%, female 32.8%) (2003 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **President or top authority:** President Yahya A. J. J. Jammeh (since October 18, 1996)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 9 newspapers; Radio: 8; Television stations: 1
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top two by circulation: Foroyaa, News and Report
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Gambia News Agency
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 58,000 (2005 est., CIA World Factbook)

### MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: THE GAMBIA



#### 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

### The Gambia Objective Score: 1.18

Not surprisingly, this objective fared the worst of the five, and several indicators scored below a 1. Only Indicator 8, media access to foreign news sources, scored well, coming in more than 1.5 points higher than the overall average. Panelists pointed out in particular that constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech are ignored by the government, and most legal processes are not transparent, are applied unevenly, and often are used against private media.

Section 25 and 207 of the Gambian constitution guarantees freedom of speech, and Section 37 makes provision for redress in the case of violation of Section 25. However, the panelists said these provisions of the constitution are strictly cosmetic, and that despite the guarantees, freedoms of expression and the press are the most violated rights in the country. Such provisions are easily eroded by Decree 77 and other provisions and acts, most especially the Newspaper Amendment Act of 2004 and the Criminal Code Amendment Act of 2004.

Egregious legislation aimed specifically at crippling the media was enacted by the AFPRC government and its successor, APRC. The Media Commission Bill, which empowered a “kangaroo” commission to try and imprison journalists without any form of appeal, was successfully challenged in court by the Gambia Press Union (GPU). With the demise of the Media Commission Bill came two more draconian pieces of legislation in 2004: the Newspaper Amendment Act and the Criminal Code Amendment Act. The Criminal Code Amendment Act made the publication of what the government terms “false information” an offense. It established stiff penalties for sedition, libel, and “false publication,” imposing a fine “of not less than D50,000 and not more than D250,000 [\$2,500 to \$13,000] or imprisonment for a term of not less than one year or both.”

Redress, however, is hard to come by, as impunity reigns supreme. One panelist mentioned that the executive branch is not committed to the rule of law, and the public lacks confidence in the judiciary. Despite these misgivings, “Freedom of expression is valued and violations cause public outrage, but this is not overtly expressed for fear of retribution from the authorities,” said one panelist.

In contrast with this view, some panelists believe that Gambians are greatly affected by the “culture of silence” and hence are mostly reluctant to come out and fight for their rights.

Broadcast licensing in The Gambia is controlled by the Department of State for Communication and Information

Technology. Panelists described the procedures as biased and very unfair, without checks and balances, far from being transparent, and with no appeal process. Mostly, the decision whether to grant a license is the prerogative of the secretary of state, though it is obvious that the president pulls the strings. The entire process is highly politicized, and in certain instances, a successful application requires only an agreement that the licensee will not broadcast anything political.

Radio and television stations in The Gambia are licensed under the Telegraphic Act, which is a colonial legacy from 1913 that hardly addresses the present-day realities of the broadcast media. The legislation is simply suppressive, as it gives the Secretary of State for Communication and Information Technology the power to withdraw the licenses of any station, or even order its closure without due process of the law, as had happened in the case of Sud FM in 2006 and Citizen FM in 2001. These stations were the only two in the country that had been broadcasting independent news, and were closed by the government using thinly disguised legal justifications.

Overall, there is no guarantee against undue restrictions of media market entry. In fact, the government, using the infamous Newspaper Amendment Act, has attempted to silence the media by increasing license fees for newspaper registration from D100,000 to D500,000 (\$25,000) and forcing previously registered media to comply with this new requirement. This fee is in the form of a surety bond and is typically backed by personal property; it is used to guarantee

## 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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payment of any legal judgments made against the media outlet. Similarly, taxes were increased on newsprint and all imports of media-related materials. These measures effectively silence private media by keeping them out of the market.

Gambian journalists—especially those who work for the private media—live in perpetual fear and operate in a very hostile environment. For the past decade, the media environment has been characterized by harassment, intimidation, and brutalization of journalists by government security agents. Journalists have been arbitrarily arrested, detained incommunicado, tortured, and had equipment seized and destroyed. Numerous arson attacks have been carried out on media outlets and the homes of media personnel. These acts of intimidation culminated in the death of two journalists: Omar Barrow, who was killed by security forces in 2000 while reporting for Sud FM on a student demonstration; and *The Point* newspaper managing editor Deyda Hydara, who was gunned down on December 16, 2004 by unknown assailants. The panelists lamented that none of the perpetrators in either case have been brought to justice.

A significant number of Gambian journalists have fled into exile because of the repressive nature of the regime, while some of those who remain in the country have abandoned the profession out of fear.

The consensus of panelists was that state media are independent by law but not in practice. It was emphasized that in reality, the state media have no editorial independence; they have virtually submitted themselves to the dictates of the ruling party and hence fail in their obligation to give space to divergent views. The director of the state media is appointed by the president, without any regard to professional qualifications.

Journalists from the private media find it very difficult to access public information. In fact, reporters from the private media are barred from covering events at the State House and they are not invited to cover public events. However, these media outlets have unrestricted access to international news.

As mentioned above, libel has been criminalized in The Gambia with stiff penalties. It is an offense to “publish something false,” even if the statement does not undermine the reputation of the complainant. Lamin Fatty, a journalist working with *The Independent*, was the first victim of this legislation. He was found guilty by Magistrate Buba Jawo of the Kanifing Magistrate Court for “false publication” in August 2007. Fatty’s only crime was an article that he wrote in relation to the March 21, 2006 abortive coup, in which he reported erroneously that Samba Bah, the former director of the National Intelligence Agency, was arrested in relation to the coup. (The Samba Bah who was arrested was Sergeant Samba Bah of the Gambia National Army.) Even after issuing a correction in *The Independent*, Fatty was still arrested and detained by the NIA for 63 days and brutally tortured before being eventually dragged to court.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### The Gambia Objective Score: 1.88

Most indicators in this objective fell close to the overall average, although two did stand out. On the low side, panelists rated Indicator 5, pay levels for journalists, a half point lower than the average. On the high side, panelists felt that Indicator 1, fair reporting, warranted the highest mark, though it should be noted that panelists had in mind primarily the independent, private media when rating this indicator.

In deliberating on issues concerning professionalism in the media, the panelists emphasized that The Gambia has no media training institution, and that this is the most serious constraint in improving the quality of journalism. The

#### 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).

majority of those who practice journalism in the country have no basic training and simply expect to be trained on the job. Many even lack an adequate educational background. This has a great effect on the quality of reports and programs in the media.

Overall, reporting in the private media is very fair, mostly objective, and done in the public interest. However, on numerous occasions, stories have not been well researched and information has not been verified. This has led to several arrests and detentions of journalists, as had happened in *The Independent* case.

Panelists added that information sources are becoming hard to come by in The Gambia. Journalists working for the private media find it very difficult to get information from government officials. In fact, an official order bars civil servants from talking to journalists without the permission of the secretary general of their agency. This creates room for speculation, especially among young and inexperienced journalists assigned to cover these agencies.

Regarding ethical standards, the panelists pointed to the existence of the code of conduct developed by the GPU for its members. The code reflects recognized international standards. However, the panelists expressed different views as to why ethical standards are not strictly adhered to by the members of the GPU. Some said that members are simply unaware of the principles; most of the junior cadre of journalists have neither laid their hands on the GPU code of conduct nor had the chance to discuss the issue of ethics with their editors. On the other hand, some panelists said that they believe that ethical principles are flouted by journalists simply because they are very poorly paid, though the panelists did not view this as a legitimate excuse.

Though The Gambia has very rare cases of “check book journalism,” at least one of the panelists pointed out the emerging trend of journalists who write articles for certain interest groups in order to get extra money. Thus, ethical standards need to be improved.

Gambian journalists are always keen to cover events, especially those related to politics. They also have a great desire to cover such diverse areas as education, health, agriculture, economics, and religion. However, one certainty is that Gambian journalists have shied away from reporting on security issues. Decree 71 and the Media Commission Act prohibit coverage of security issues or matters likely to embarrass the state. Those who had been involved in investigative journalism became victims of abuse at the hands of the state security apparatus, while others have had no choice but to go into exile.

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In today's Gambia, self-censorship is the norm, both in the state and private media. Since the brutal murder of Deyda Hydera, journalists in The Gambia have deliberately engaged in self-censorship, for fear of being targeted by the government. Editors and media owners in The Gambia routinely apply self-censorship as a result of the frequent intimidation and harassment meted out to those that report on issues that are deemed unfavorable by the government. In fact, *The Point* recently removed the “Good Morning, Mr. President” column simply because the NIA informed the current editor that the president does not like that column. This was also the fate of “The Bite,” another very critical column that was run by Hydera.

Self-censorship is even worse in the state media, most especially the Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS). Its journalists have simply reduced themselves to serving as praise-singers of the president, disregarding every ethical principle.

Journalists are among the lowest paid professionals in the country. Some panelists argued that these payments are too low to discourage corruption. According to the panelists, some private media staff reporters receive salaries as low as \$50 a month, while freelancers, who form the bulk of the reporter corps, receive even less. In most instances, journalists in the private media are provided no social security benefits. One panelist mentioned that in some of the private media outlets, journalists are even owed back salaries. The salary structure within the state media is far better than in the private media.

State and private journalists alike continue to work with obsolete equipment. Facilities in most of the media outlets are limited to one computer for an entire newsroom. Proper technical facilities, such as telephone balance and profanity delay units for phone-in programs, are non-existent. The issue of vehicles for transporting staff was also raised as a critical issue that negatively affects the work of the media. Apart from the state media, no other media outlet can claim an effective

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transportation system for its workers. Even within the state media, transportation is erratic and frustrating, which leads to late coverage at newsworthy events. Panelists concluded that there is an urgent need for aid in securing equipment, especially for the private media, in order for journalists to achieve the goals that they have set for themselves.

The panelists expressed that information and entertainment programs are not balanced. About 80 percent of the content of private radio stations is dedicated to entertainment programs. Presently, no private radio station broadcasts its own news. Some of these stations simply relay the national news from state sources or international news from the BBC and RFI. On the other hand, the bulk of content in the newspapers is news. Niche reporting is mainly an exception rather than the rule.

### **OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS**

#### **The Gambia Objective Score: 1.76**

Indicator scores in this objective varied significantly. Scoring above a 2 were Indicators 1, 2, and 7: plurality of news sources, restrictions on citizen access to media, and a broad spectrum of interests reflected in the media. On the other end, Indicators 3 and 4, state media reflecting the political spectrum and independent news agencies, scored well below the average, with the former scoring less than 1.

The news sources available to Gambians are greatly limited. GRTS completely dominates the broadcast news, as no other private radio station in the country broadcasts its own news. Most of these radio stations relay the national news broadcast by the state radio.

Section 208 of the Gambian Constitution states, "All state-owned newspapers, journals, radio, and television shall offer fair opportunity and facilities for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinion." Again, this is a far cry

from the reality. The majority of the panelists said that they view state media as totally partisan in its reporting. Journalists working with the state media have entangled themselves in sycophancy as a means of maintaining their jobs. They see themselves serving the powers that be rather than the interests of the public. The services of the state radio are strictly controlled by the government, and opposition parties are almost completely barred from utilizing the state media.

Technically, independent media have the freedom to carry divergent views, but that right is greatly affected by self-censorship. The programming of private radio stations is limited to sports, music, phone-in programs, and commercials.

With the exception of three community radio stations, Gambian print and electronic media outlets are based in urban areas. Only the national radio and television outlets provide nationwide coverage, and the only television station is part of GRTS. All other radio stations cover about a 50-km radius. Community radio stations exist but their programs are centered mainly on issues that affect the community. They do not produce news, but do link up with the national radio for the relay of the national news. Of late, there have been growing concerns that supporters of the ruling party have used their influence to utilize community radio stations for political campaigns.

Due to bad road conditions, newspapers that are published in the greater Banjul area take almost 24 hours to reach rural areas, where readership is already very low due to illiteracy.

Regarding international news, some radio stations do broadcast news from international stations. People have access

### **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.

to satellite television, but the cost is far beyond the reach of the majority of Gambians. The Internet is easily accessible as an alternative source of news, but the high illiteracy rate and the cost involved mean only a very few Gambians use it. Internet cafés, however, continue to emerge in every corner of the country. Some panelists mentioned that the government has made attempts to restrict access to some Internet sites.

As most media houses cannot afford to pay for the services of international news agencies, the bulk of international news is culled directly from the Internet. There are stations in the country that still link up with the BBC and RFI to relay their news broadcasts. Presently, The Gambia has no news agency; The Gambia News Agency, which was run by the government, is now defunct.

The panelists stressed that media ownership in The Gambia is very transparent. The only exception is the *Daily Observer*, about which two panelists raised doubts. They indicated that its supposed owner has been used as a front by the president to purchase the paper. The Gambia has no media conglomerates.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### The Gambia Objective Score: 1.66

All indicators under this objective ended up within a half-point of the overall average. Notably, the lack of market research and reliable audience or circulation numbers had the greatest effect on the overall score.

The MSI interviews indicated that despite efforts, neither independent nor state media are well managed business enterprises. What came out clearly is the absence of

#### 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.

*Print media are not overly reliant on subscriptions for revenue, as the public mostly cannot afford to subscribe and literacy stands at about 30 percent. Interestingly, one paper may serve between one to 12 readers or more. No private newspaper in The Gambia can claim to sell 5,000 copies a day.*

professional human resources with the expertise to operate as efficient and professional businesses. While private media try to generate enough business to remain afloat, state media are woefully dependent on funding from the government and its agencies. Public media staff salaries are provided for in the national budget, which is accrued from taxes. Other costs are covered by parastatals such as GAMTEL, the Gambia Telecommunications Company that levies a special tax on its telephone customers to underwrite the operational costs of the GRTS.

Most newspapers have their own printing presses. The printing press of *The Independent* was destroyed by an arsonist believed to be a member of the Presidential State Guard in April 2004.

Even though Gambia has a government printer, private media face many obstacles if they want to use those facilities. There was a time when all used the government printer, but this ceased due to the hostile environment. Although there are private printers, the political situation causes them to avoid business with newspapers for fear of reprisals.

Formal distribution networks for newspapers are practically non-existent because there are no distribution agencies. Newspapers deal directly with individual vendors on a commission basis. All stations have their own transmitters, but some of the transmitters are not well maintained.

Media receive revenue mainly through advertisements and sold copies. Some programs and columns are sponsored by businesses. At times, they receive subsidies from embassies, NGOs (national and international), UN agencies, and partner organizations such as Reporters Without Borders and BBC. The local branch of Action Aid International recently bought transmitters and generators for two community radio stations.

Unlike the private media, community radio stations find it very difficult to attain sustainability. They mostly operate from areas where electricity supply is erratic, and must utilize a generator most of the time to be functional. This can be

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very expensive, given the cost of fuel for a 2.5 KV generator for more than six hours a day. In addition, funds generated from advertisements are minimal. Some outlets manage to raise limited funds within their communities.

There is a great lack of professionalism in the advertising area. Advertising agencies exist only for the billboard business. Media outlets receive their advertisements directly from clients who either prepare their own texts or have the stations and newspapers prepare the ads for a small fee or even free of charge. Electronic media work with some nascent agencies, but they lack state-of-the-art equipment and professionally trained human resources to do the job well. Outside the capital, there is little or no advertising.

Most media outlets in The Gambia employ marketing officials who continuously meet company agents in search of advertisements. Given the size of the country, and the few established businesses, the private press must compete among themselves for the relatively few consistent advertisements available. Some private media outlets claim that government agencies have become very selective in the way they issue advertisements: newspapers considered critical of the government do not receive advertisements from government agencies.

Advertisements take a portion of broadcast time but nowhere near the saturation point. The two major newspapers, *The Daily Observer* and *The Point*, have reached the saturation point however. In both cases there is three times more advert space than content space.

Print media are not overly reliant on subscriptions for revenue, as the public mostly cannot afford to subscribe and literacy stands at about 30 percent. Interestingly, one paper may serve between one to 12 readers or more. No private newspaper in The Gambia can claim to sell 5,000 copies a day. Dailies like *The Observer*, *The Point*, *The Independent* (when it was operational), and, probably, *Foroyaa* (published three times per week) sell 3,500 to 4,000 copies on a very good day. Some of these papers at times fail to sell more than 1,000 copies a day. Government subscriptions to private newspapers, apart from *The Daily Observer*, are now banned.

Because of the limited number of other sources of income, at least 70 percent of total revenue is from advertisements. But these advertisements generate barely enough revenue for newspapers to break even, thus the papers have to do other types of printing jobs to survive, such as business cards, funeral pamphlets, and wedding invitations.

The government provides no subsidy for independent media. The state media, however, receive a yearly budgetary allocation through the Department of State for Information, Communication, and Technology.

Market research, whether in-house or performed by third parties, is non-existent. Programming and content are not tailored to audience preferences. In the past, public media conducted some audience research on specific health programs. There are no audience ratings or circulation figures.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### The Gambia Objective Score: 1.59

Most indicators in this objective were close to the average. However, panelists voiced concerns over the lack of formal university-level journalism education, hence Indicator 4 was well below the average. On the high end, panelists gave modest scores—slightly above 2—to Indicators 6 and 7, covering sources of newsprint, printing, and channels of distribution.

The Gambia has no publishers' or broadcasters' associations. Several attempts have been made in the past to establish associations, but panelists said that media owners are their own worst enemies: much competition and mistrust exists among them. Further, due to the limited market size and

## 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.

resources, publishers did not see the need to come together to organize themselves into an association.

The only existing association related to media is the GPU. The GPU has been mostly dormant in the last two years and hence has accomplished very little in terms of defending the interest of its members. Although it has served as a watchdog and reacted to press freedom violations, these reactions are often ineffectual. The successful challenging in court of the Media Commission Bill in 2004 was one of the greatest recent achievements of the GPU. Other lobbying efforts have not borne fruit. The government has not shown interest in collaborating with the GPU; government officials, including the secretary of state, have refused invitations from the GPU. Currently, the government is attempting to hijack the leadership of the GPU, or at least to create a parallel union.

The GPU at times provides sponsored training courses, but these have been few and far between. The union depends on embassies and NGOs to survive—even to pay for its headquarters' rent.

Despite the weaknesses of the GPU, its present executive has been able to provide legal support for some of its members who found themselves in trouble with the law. In most of these instances, they have been quick to seek help from regional associations and other international media organizations, such as the International Federation of Journalists.

Presently, the GPU seems to be undergoing a leadership crisis, as the majority of the membership has decided to remain inactive or to leave the country. The current executive has not been able to hold the constitutionally required monthly meetings, and most members have failed in their obligation to attend monthly meetings or to pay their monthly dues. Panelists said that they felt the union's leadership has created a conflict of interest, as the president has formed his own media NGO that does the same work that the GPU should be doing.

Within the GPU are semi-autonomous associations including the Health Journalists' Association, Sports Journalists' Association, and the Human Rights Journalists' Association. The GPU remains the parent body of all media associations in The Gambia.

All the panelists pointed to the lack of proper organization regarding collective bargaining. Despite this issue, there is significant solidarity among media members, especially when violations of press freedom occur and attacks are made on individual journalists, whether private or public. "Trade unions are hardly involved in media activity and even if they are they typically stop at joint advocacy programs during commemoration of some international events," said Ebrima Sillah, an independent journalist.

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However, after Deyda Hydra was murdered in 2004 and especially since 2006, when the government cracked down on the media, some NGOs and civil society organizations have begun working directly with the media to address the appalling human rights situation and freedom of expression violations in The Gambia. Some organizations, such as Action Aid and TANGO (The Association of NGOs in The Gambia) have partnered with media outlets to provide institutional support and capacity building or promote issues such as HIV/AIDS.

Panelists said that one of the most disappointing aspects regarding the NGOs and agencies is that they have continuously failed to make statements in reaction to press freedom violations. NGOs are now showing more support for free speech and independence of the media, although not proactively yet. They do not promptly and fully react to violations, review legislation, provide legal defense, or work with international free speech organizations. Their involvement in legislative changes is very much limited and rarely has any significance at all. However, NGOs do show solidarity with the GPU in either marking free speech occasions or raising concern and awareness about press violations.

The participants lamented the fact that The Gambia has no formal journalism training programs. Only in-house training and occasional short courses are offered, most recently by UNESCO. Young people are not professionally prepared to enter the profession. According to panelist Baboucarr Gaye, "There are very few and far between opportunities for students to get journalistic degrees abroad, as they are expensive to pay for and neither the students nor the media houses can afford them. Most students opt for journalism as a last resort and invariably don't have the qualifications to do degree courses. Those recently trained have either left The Gambia or are in less turbulent fields related to journalism. Thus, there are very few journalism graduates to absorb or be satisfied with."

Media outlets in The Gambia often look for opportunities to train their staff; however, these are not easy to come by. Many media outlets do not have the requisite personnel on

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*According to panelist Sam Sarr, "Purchasing newsprint is strictly a commercial affair in the hands of private companies. The problem is that newsprint is expensive, accounting for more than half of Foroyaa's expenditures. Unlike other countries, import duties and sales taxes are imposed on newsprint, which is always imported. Printing machines are imported. They require very substantial capital, given the level of capital available to the print media in The Gambia."*

staff to conduct efficient in-house training. Other short-term and in-service training is sometimes set up by international and local organizations with funding from embassies and NGOs. These are usually short, basic courses. Media outlets are not in a position to fund courses, and journalists do not earn enough to fund their own training.

Panelist Ebrima Sillah identified other issues regarding journalism training. "Although the University of The Gambia had expressed interest in creating [a program], a recent remark by the president that his government will not commit resources to training journalists at the University has put the whole project to doubt," he said. "There are few others pursuing university degrees in journalism, but it is not clear whether they will come back home to work as journalists, owing to the repressive climate in the country."

In 2004, the GPU collaborated with UNESCO and the University of The Gambia to organize a three-month training program on basic journalism skills for cadet journalists. All media outlets within the country were given the opportunity to send at least one participant to the training program. The program was set up by a consultant that was hired by the GPU. News writing techniques were the most popular during the training. The training also had a practical aspect in which the participants were introduced to program planning, production, and presentation.

At present, sources of newsprint are in private hands and there is no restriction on its sale, apart from government taxation making newsprint costly for private media. According to panelist Sam Sarr, "Purchasing newsprint is strictly a commercial affair in the hands of private companies. The problem is that newsprint is expensive, accounting for more than half of Foroyaa's expenditures. Unlike other countries, import duties and sales taxes are imposed on newsprint, which is always imported. Printing machines are imported. They require very substantial capital, given the level of capital available to the print media in The Gambia."

As mentioned previously, the government does not allow private newspapers to use the government printer. Private printers are selective in the kind of facilities they provide to independent newspapers. Hence, private newspapers all have their own presses, using primitive analog equipment.

Newspapers distribute directly through vendors and broadcasters own their transmitters. While channels of media distribution are largely in private hands, the government does have a substantial share. However, at this time, political influence is not impacting distribution of private media.

So far, Internet access has been controlled by large companies, and not overtly controlled by the government. However, there have been cases of government interference. Online newspapers such as the *Freedom Newspaper* ([www.freedomnewspaper.com](http://www.freedomnewspaper.com)), *The Gambia Echo* ([www.thegambiaecho.com](http://www.thegambiaecho.com)), and *All Gambian* ([www.allgambian.net](http://www.allgambian.net)), perceived to be anti-government, have been blocked at various times. Following the abortive coup of March 2006, the website of the U.S.-based *Freedom Newspaper* was hacked into and details of its subscribers, including telephone numbers and addresses, were made public. Some of the affected people were arrested and tortured.

## List of Panel Participants

*Due to the repressive environment in The Gambia, most panelists agreed to participate in the MSI panel on condition of anonymity. A partial list of participants is included below.*

**Amie Sillah**, executive secretary, Women For Democracy and Development, Serrekunda

**Demba Jawo**, editor, African Press Agency, Dakar, Senegal

**Ebrima Sillah**, journalist, Gambia Press Union, Dakar, Senegal

**Samuel Sarr**, editor, Foroyaa newspaper, Serrekunda

### Moderator:

**Amie Joof**, executive director, The Inter Africa Network for Women, Media, Gender and Development, Dakar, Senegal

### Technical Recordings:

**Sheriffe Bojang Junior**, reporter, Radio Alternative Voice for Gambians, Dakar, Senegal

The Gambia study was coordinated by, and conducted in partnership with, The Inter Africa Network for Women, Media, Gender and Development, Dakar, Senegal

## IN MEMORIAM: Baboucarr Gaye



If anyone lived for and valued press freedom and the ethos of journalism in The Gambia, it was Baboucarr Gaye. Gaye began his journalism career with the national broadcaster, then Radio Gambia, where he became the broadcasting officer at age 25. He left to become the local correspondent for the BBC World Service from 1979 to 1992. He established several newspapers, including *The Senegambia Sun*, *The Point*, *Newsmouth*, and *New Citizen*.

In a bid to bring journalism closer to the people, Gaye set up The Gambia's first private radio station, Citizen FM, in 1996. Much to the dislike of the government, it broadcast news in local languages and served as an alternative source of information. The most popular program, *Kaira Lata/Jamangen Fanan (Good Morning)*, got people glued to their radios to hear translations into local languages of news and commentaries published by local newspapers in English.

He battled several attempts by the authorities to silence him, but in 1998 the government closed Citizen FM, saying it was being operated without a valid license. Gaye challenged this in court and, following a protracted legal battle, won the case. After a two-year hiatus, Citizen FM reopened with the same programming as before. However, in 2001, armed soldiers raided the station and shuttered it for good.

Gaye was a mentor to many people, and trained many young journalists. Gaye, 58, died peacefully on October 30, 2007, still writing memos and editorials. He is survived by his wife and five children. Gaye participated in the 2006/2007 MSI panel for The Gambia.