

The country's media—both private and state-run—mirror the desperate situation. Newspapers are produced on photocopiers and distributed on A4 paper. Print runs never reach 1,000 copies, despite owners' exaggerated claims. Radio stations work under slightly better conditions, but only one... has modern equipment and professional programs.



CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

F

Few countries have endured turmoil like the Central African Republic (CAR) since its independence from France in 1960. CAR has been ravaged by coups and wars and ruled by generals, revolutionist leaders, a despotic emperor, and, today, an elected leader. The political arena, the economy, and greater society still bear the scars of instability, and the country has sunk into abysmal poverty. Its largest employer, the state government, has been unable to pay salaries for years, regardless of who has been in power. The average income is roughly \$1 a day, and life expectancy is less than 50 years of age.

The country's media—both private and state-run—mirror the desperate situation. Newspapers are produced on photocopiers and distributed on A4 paper. Print runs never reach 1,000 copies, despite owners' exaggerated claims. Radio stations work under slightly better conditions, but only one, Radio Ndeke Luka, a project of the Fondation Suisse Hirondelle, has modern equipment and professional programs. Management of media outlets is substandard, and profitability next to impossible.

CAR held its first elections in 1993 and opened up to private media soon afterward. Even though parliament passed a law in 2005 that decriminalized media offenses, journalists are still tried according to the criminal code. They receive prison sentences according to the mood of the judges, yet the parliament has never protested these violations of the law. Journalists are also threatened, sometimes by government officials.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC AT A GLANCE

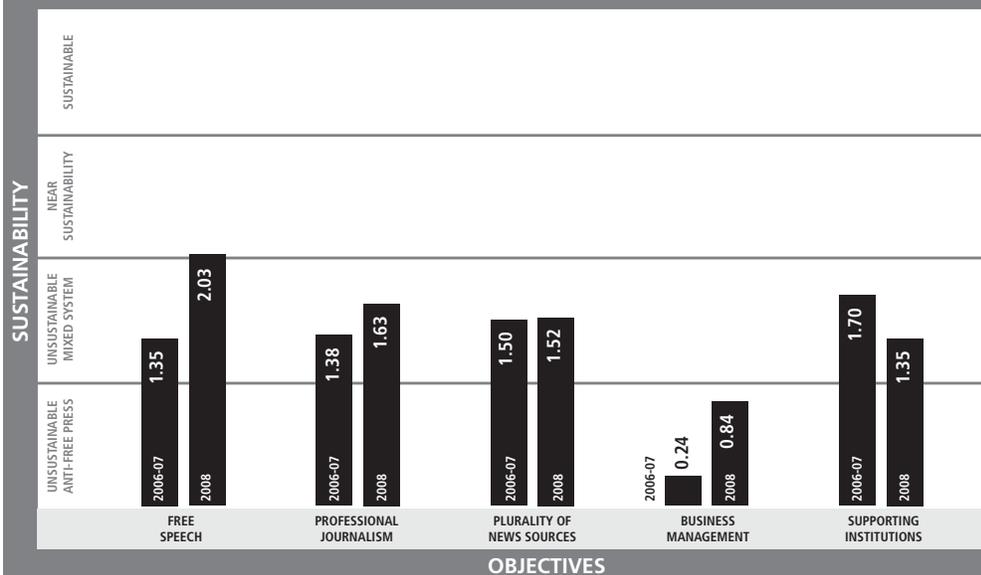
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 4,444,330 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Bangui
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Baya 33%, Banda 27%, Mandjia 13%, Sara 10%, Mboum 7%, M'Baka 4%, Yakoma 4%, other 2% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** indigenous beliefs 35%, Protestant 25%, Roman Catholic 25%, Muslim 15% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** French (official), Sangho (lingua franca and national language), tribal languages (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2007-Atlas):** \$16.67 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$740 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **Literacy rate:** 48.6% (male 64.8%, female 33.5%) (2000 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Francois Bozize (since March 15, 2003)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 43 newspapers; Radio: 2 main stations: Central African Radio, Ndeke Luka Radio; Television stations: 1, Central African Television (Source: HCC)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three most popular: *Le Citoyen*, *Le Confident*, *L'Hirondelle*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** CAPA (Central African Press Agency)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 13,000 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



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

CAR Objective Score: 2.03

The Central African Republic's 2004 constitution and subsequent laws guarantee freedom of speech and the press. In addition, the country is a signatory of the African Human and Peoples' Rights Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. But the MSI panelists said that those legal guarantees have been ignored by a succession of governments. "According to the law, the media is free," said panelist Eloi Bellonghot, a journalist with state-run Central African Radio. "In reality, that varies based on the ruling regime. Under Gen. André Kolingba and Ange-Felix Patassé, the pressure applied on public media was very apparent. They used to promote government events without balancing the information. That is true even today."

The Higher Communication Council (HCC), created at the end of 2004, grants publication and broadcast licenses, the latter in partnership with the Telecommunication Frequency Regulating Agency. According to panelist Pierre Debato II, a journalist with the Media Observatory of Central Africa, the government places no restrictions on granting a license, and the HCC is nominally independent. But he said that "in fact it is controlled by the state, since some of its members are appointed by various [government] institutions. Hence, there is a latent conflict between the HCC and professional associations."

Panelist Joseph Vermond Tchendo of the HCC said that the council "works to make sure that the way the media get [in] on the market is in accordance with legislation."

Debato said that the media are not taxed more than other private companies, but also do not receive tax breaks. For example, media companies are subject to the country's value-added tax.

The panelists agreed that the state's fight against criticism has led to inhospitable and even dangerous conditions for journalists. Crimes against journalists "are not prosecuted and go unpunished," said panelist Marie-Chantal Pani. She cited the example of panelist Marie Clotilde Azomolegba, a television journalist and the vice president of the Central African Journalists' Union. Azomolegba was nearly shot and killed by a soldier in 2005 while she was reporting in the field. The soldier was never questioned, Pani said.

Bellonghot said that journalists are roughed up at news events. "On March 15, 2006, in Mbaiki, a reporter was wounded in the presence of the chief of state, who was holding a speech," he said. "The reporter had dared to get too close to the president in order to get a better sound recording."

Government officials often threaten journalists—sometimes with death. "The Minister of Mines, for example, promised journalists that they would 'die like flies,'" said panelist Faustin Bambou. "Journalists are perceived as enemies due to the publishing of articles denouncing a bad government with respect to state affairs... The brave ones who try to do their job by presenting points of view that do not concur with those of the public authorities are often subject to fierce reprimands."

In 2005, the National Assembly passed Order No. 05.002, which decriminalized press offenses. It was hailed domestically and abroad as a major step toward free media. But the law has yet to be implemented. "There are obstacles preventing the enforcement of this legislation throughout the country," Pani said. "Legal provisions are not independent, but subject to pressure from authorities."

Some panelists said that the government has simply ignored the law, trying journalists under the country's criminal code and sentencing them to prison terms. Panelist Michel Alkhaly Ngady, manager of *Temps Nouveaux*, was handed a prison sentence by the judiciary and served time in the central prison of Ngaragba. He said that the decriminalization law offers little protection. "Judges tend to venture outside the scope of this special law so they can enforce the provisions of the criminal code when they have to deal with journalist-related libel," he said.

Tchendo agreed, saying that the judiciary "is often manipulated by the executive when a journalist trial is involved." Manengou said that journalists never win their court cases.

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.

Though the law does not distinguish between government media and private media, the reality is another story. "Journalists in the public sector enjoy special status, as they are public servants and they are treated differently," said panelist Chérubin-Raphael Magba-Totama, a freelance trainer.

Access to information, although guaranteed free and equal by law, is often restricted, according to Azomolegba. "The executive branch makes discretionary use of information in the public press. Information agents appointed by the executive branch enforce censorship both in the newsrooms and at the level of all public authorities," she said.

Other panelists agreed. "Access to information is very limited and basically does not go beyond press releases, press conferences, and official documents read on television," Bellonghot said. And Ngady said that journalists in the private media "are not allowed to cover certain official events. Journalists must find their own means to obtain information from government sources. On the other hand, the media are free to collect information from international news sources."

The government does not restrict who can become a journalist, panelists said. Debato said that the lack of guidelines has affected the quality of CAR's media, however, citing "the proliferation of titles and inevitable mistakes." He added that the government is addressing the problem by forming a committee that will issue press cards and founding a department for journalism training.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

CAR Objective Score: 1.63

The panelists were unanimous in describing the quality of journalism in CAR as extremely low, due principally to lack of training, low pay, poor working conditions, and low ethical standards.

Panelist Mathurin Constant Nestor Momet gave an overview of the issues. "In the Central African Republic, the journalism profession resembles the priesthood, inasmuch as the living and working conditions of media professionals are appalling. First, there is no school of training for journalists in this country. To cover this gap, press owners recruit their personnel from among university graduates. Then the lack of state subsidies, the difficult economic context, the problematic newspaper distribution in rural areas, and the scarceness of advertising have resulted in opposition from the owners to the setting up and adopting a collective contract. Finally, professionalism is affected because journalists succumb to corruption to make ends meet."

Objectivity and fairness received low marks from the panelists, who faulted both the state-run and private media. Debato said that journalists "do not treat key events and issues as they

should. Often they do not check their information, and they are not fair. The result is that their intentions seem malicious, harmful, and dishonest."

Because few journalists in the government press attended journalism school, Azomolegba said, "most of them were qualified on the spot or recruited by the various political regimes that followed one another for more than 20 years. Therefore, they are completely loyal to their causes. Journalists in the public media are state servants or agents."

Bellonghot noted that the private press covers "all the major issues, but it also excels at wheeling and dealing, and presents black as white, especially on political issues, in order to sell more copies."

Ferdinand Samba, a journalist with *Le Démocrate*, a private daily, agreed, but saw cause for optimism. "The independent private press has a huge issue with professionalism, given its youth and the lack of qualification of its workers," he said. "Still, things are evolving, and some of the requirements of the trade have been met." Pani noted that "journalists in the independent press do dare to speak the truth on events that are censored in the public media."

Ethics are given short shrift, the panelists said, and self-censorship is common. "It is often the case that journalists get paid for articles that trash ethical standards," Bellonghot said. "Key topics are addressed, but the news editor or the newspaper's owner decides if they are published. Journalists showing professionalism may be fired because they bother the shady sponsors of the respective media."

Magba-Totama disagreed. "There is no self-censorship in the private press, which is free to treat the news however

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).

it pleases," he said. "The public media practice excessive censorship, systematically concealing major issues that may generate debate."

The country's major media outlets, both state and private, focus on news about the government, leaving key topics uncovered. "Out of the total amount of news, 80 to 90 percent is official or protocol-related news," Azomolegba said. Debato said that the public media mainly cover national politics, with community and local outlets focusing on local news and events.

The panelists said that media salaries are appallingly low and are to blame for journalists' ethical breaches. Ngady went as far as to say, "Journalists do not receive salaries, properly speaking. A very few newspapers pay a small amount as a salary." Azomolegba agreed, saying that salaries of public and private media members alike are trivial. "Corruption has become their breadwinning source," he said.

Regarding the balance of news and entertainment programming, Azomolegba said that "on public television, mostly foreign entertainment shows and soccer make up the bulk of the programming. The quality of locally produced shows and news is not satisfactory."

The quality of equipment available to broadcast and print media was judged to be extremely poor by various panelists. "Technical equipment in newsrooms and studios is obsolete and scarce," said Manengou. Echoed Ngady: "There is no modern equipment to speak of. This situation directly affects the quality of reports." And Pani said, "Television stations have been slowly receiving donations from partners, but the donated technical equipment breaks down rather quickly, because its users are barely qualified in the field, if at all."

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

CAR Objective Score: 1.52

Panelists said that for a variety of reasons, citizens of CAR do not enjoy the variety of news sources that has become common in many developing countries in the 21st century. Neither government nor private domestic media reach all areas of the country. International media have a limited presence, and while the Internet offers the same abundance of information in CAR as it does everywhere, high costs and limited access have lessened its impact.

"The public is not well provided with news, for lack of certain informational channels, such as press agencies and independent private newspapers," said panelist Judes Zosse, a journalist with the private daily *L'Hirondelle*. "Citizens' access to the public media is so incredibly restricted that they are deprived of necessary and useful information. In most cases,

it is the private newspapers that provide the public with news. Given the newspaper prices, their audience is limited."

Manengou provided details on the distribution of media. "Media outlets are spread across the entire territory, but in the western parts, there is a higher concentration of radio stations. Television access is limited to the capital, and so are newspapers."

CAR citizens have access to foreign channels, including the BBC, RFI, TV5 and Canal Plus. The government places no legal restrictions on access these or any domestic or international media. But according to Pani, "not everyone can afford satellite television because of the high cost of the subscription."

Samba said that despite what he called "the progressive retreat of international press agencies [and] fewer and fewer opportunities to access multiple news sources," he sees slight progress with access. "In the last few years, the multiplication of media channels has managed to overcome this obstacle," he said.

Panelists said the media do not present information that reflects a broad range of interests and concerns. According to Debato, "The public or state-run media do not reflect the opinions of the entire political spectrum. They are not apolitical and do not serve the public interest. Their intentions are censorship and politicization. There are no private radio and television stations providing more in-depth and different programs on political affairs and more detailed reporting," he said.

With the exception of Swiss-funded Radio Ndeke Luka, which organizes debates on current events, government and private broadcast outlets avoid covering topics that could draw negative attention from the government. "The national radio and

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.

television stations are the public media, and unfortunately they never offer the opposition a chance to express themselves," Magba-Totama said.

The state-run Central African Press Agency is the only domestic news agency, and according to Momet, is plagued by problems. "It cannot accomplish its mission due to an all-too-well-known lack of financial, technical and logistical resources," he said.

Electronic media broadcast in French and Sango, the country's two principal languages. In addition, Azomolegba said, the HCC "has licensed a radio station with Muslim overtones that sometimes broadcasts in Arabic."

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

CAR Objective Score: 0.84

CAR's media outlets are badly managed, and in the case of the private media, unprofitable, according to panelists. In a country with a ruined economy and a history of turmoil it could hardly be otherwise, they said. "The context does not offer many possibilities," Samba said. "Everything is related to the economic and social situation."

Several panelists had strong comments regarding the business practices of the private media. Zosse described private media as "vulnerable companies with amateurish management." Debato pointed out that "independent media lack means and capital. They are sole-proprietor companies. They cannot afford to recruit competent human resources." And Momet said, "The Central African independent private press operates in a toxic social, economic, and political environment. This can only negatively affect its efforts to restructure and revitalize."

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.

Management of the government media also drew criticism. "The powers in place are not willing to help the public media become better organized," Pani said. Manengou said the state-run media "are subject to authoritarian practices," and Bellonghot noted that managers of the state media outlets are government appointees.

Revenue is scarce for CAR's media, and sources are limited. In particular, the economic situation precludes a healthy advertising market. "There is practically no advertising market to speak of, due to the economic crisis aggravated by the various wars that have torn at the country in the last decade," Bellonghot said. "These recurrent wars reduced the number of advertising producing companies."

Magba-Totamba said that virtually the only regular sources of advertising are UN agencies, which issue notices and communiqués and pay to place them in print and broadcast media.

Bambou suggested a solution for the advertising drought: "Public authorities should persuade [state-run] commercial companies, under the supervision of different ministries, to provide a minimum number of advertising offers to help the press."

A law passed in 2005 established a government subsidy for the private media, but after a partial initial payment, the money stopped flowing. Pani said that private media outlets are clamoring for the payments to resume, but are not receiving a response from the state. "The government will not discuss it. The issue is addressed in the budgetary commission but the subsidy is never included in the state budget," he said.

CAR has no agency to measure ratings, circulation, or Internet statistics, Debato said.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

CAR Objective Score: 1.35

Media business professionals are represented by two groups: the Central African Public Press Publishers Group and the Central African Independent Public Media Publishers Group. But according to Magba-Totama, both groups are ineffective. "These press management associations only exist in theory, as they painfully lack the means to build a strategy," he said.

Among journalists, professional groups include the Central African Journalists Union and the Central African Association of Women Communication Professionals. Magba-Totama was critical of the journalists' union, saying it is "packed with journalists working in the state media and who are not concerned about issues."

Many panelists praised a variety of NGOs for supporting media and individual journalists. Among those mentioned were the Central African Human Rights League, the Central African

Human Rights Defense Organization, the Christian Association Against Torture, and the Human Rights Defense League. "Human rights promotion and protection organizations strongly support the press," Magba-Totama said. "Their members who are attorneys represent journalists in court for free." Bambou noted that when he was arrested and imprisoned, NGOs "truly mobilized."

However, Debato described relations between journalists and supporting organizations as having "an atmosphere of distrust... Supporting institutions have begun to realize the lack of professionalism of journalists and have been having trouble supporting them. Professionals are wrong to assert their identity as journalists, because they are unqualified and disrespectful of ethics."

CAR has no degree-issuing journalism school, though Azomolegba and Magba-Totama said that a project aimed at creating a communications department at the University of Bangui is being pursued. Some aspiring journalists travel to other countries for training, and "persons with degrees obtained in other disciplines are accepted to work as journalists," Bellonghot said.

In the past, the government sent students abroad for training, but no longer. Debato said that the media is now paying the price for the lapse. "Many journalists were trained 30 years ago; no serious training programs have been organized since," Debato lamented. "These qualified journalists are on their way to retirement. Inevitably, the non-journalists, who are taking over, do not meet professional quality standards, nor respect the established and recognized ethical codes."

Short-term journalism training is only available sporadically. According to Zosse UNESCO or other United Nations agencies

will offer trainings, but Pani said that the courses do not provide adequate instruction.

"We need seminars or training workshops in order to enhance or strengthen the capabilities of journalists in the written and private press," Bambou suggested. "Educational travels should also be made available to them. They would then have the opportunity to meet their fellow journalists from other African countries and other continents."

Panelists listed four printing companies in CAR, two of which are state-owned. However, panelists decried the lack of a suitable printing plant for newspapers. "No printing house worthy of the name is available," Bellonghot said. "The newsrooms have photocopying machines, which makes possible the publication of newspapers."

Pani agreed that print and distribution conditions are poor. "Private press is confronted with the problem of small print runs, because there are no printing houses, newsstands, or distribution companies."

List of Panel Participants

Faustin Bambou, reporter, *Les Collines de L'Oubangui*, Bangui

Judes Zosse, journalist, *L'Hirondelle*, Bangui

Ferdinand Samba, publication director, *Le Démocrate*, Bangui

Pierre Debato II, journalist, Media Observatory of Central Africa, Bangui

Michel Alkhaly Ngady, manager, *Temps Nouveaux*, Bangui

Marie Clotilde Azomolegba, vice president, Union of Central African Journalists, Bangui

Eloi Bellonghot, journalist, Central African Radio, Bangui

Jean Ignace Manengou, journalist, Catholic Media, Bangui

Joseph Vermond Tchendo, reporter, Higher Communication Council, Bangui

Chérubin-Raphaël Magba-Totama, freelance trainer, Bangui

Marie-Chantal Pani, television producer, Association of Women in Communications, Bangui

Moderator & Author

Mathurin Constant Nestor Momet, manager, *Le Confident*, Bangui

The Central African Republic study was coordinated by, and conducted in partnership with, Journaliste en Danger, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo.

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.