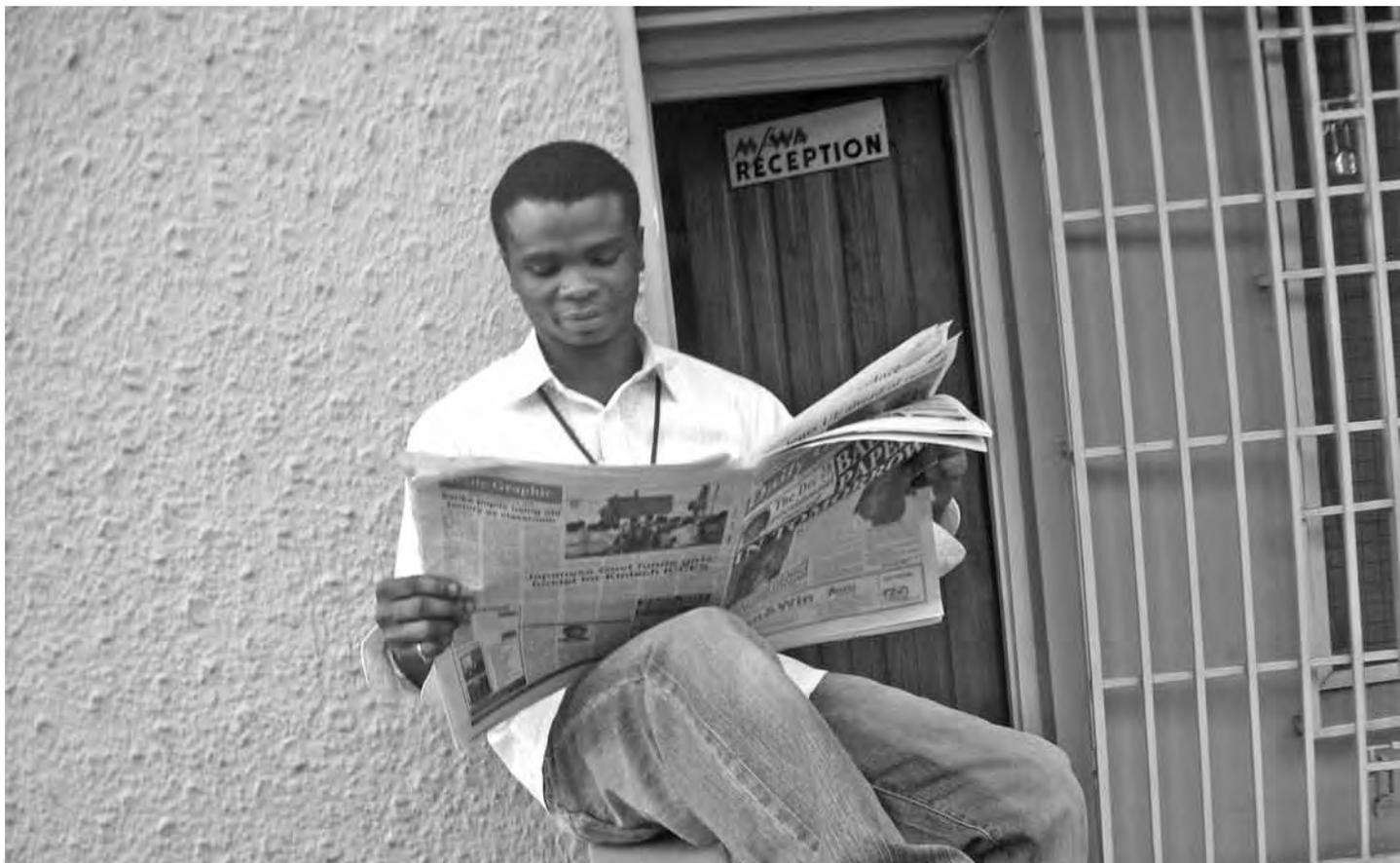

With the advent of democratic rule, the general media status in Liberia has improved somewhat appreciably, especially within the context of state interference and control. This relative tolerance notwithstanding, there remain huge challenges facing the sector, including business and professional development, which require a sustained period of development and resuscitation.



LIBERIA

Liberia enjoyed relative stability and modest progress until the 1970s, when political strife developed into full-scale civil upheaval in late 1989. The brutal civil war lasted 14 years and resulted in massive loss of lives and destruction of property. A peace deal was signed by the belligerent parties in August, 2003 and retired banker and economist Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won a run-off election in November of 2005 to become Liberia's, and Africa's, first elected female head of state.

For nearly all of the country's history prior to this brutal civil conflict, successive autocratic administrations succeeded in stifling fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of expression. These excesses were far more profound in the last 25 years when ordinary citizens and journalists were routinely harassed, intimidated, jailed, and sometimes killed for their views and criticisms of government policies and actions.

With the advent of democratic rule, the general media status in Liberia has improved somewhat appreciably, especially within the context of state interference and control. This relative tolerance notwithstanding, there remain huge challenges facing the sector, including business and professional development, which require a sustained period of development and resuscitation. Primary among these challenges is the state of the legal and regulatory frameworks governing the sector. It was only recently, in 2004, that efforts were initiated to reform the laws and statutes used in regulating the media to engender a free and conducive environment, leading to the drafting and submission of three bills on media sector reform.

This assessment by the panelists, the first time the MSI has studied Liberia, indicates that the country has seen a marked improvement compared to observations of the past. The overall average of 2.04 places Liberia in the early stages of "near sustainability," which attests to the level of investment that has been made in the sector by a host of donors and media development institutions since the return to democratic rule. Nonetheless, this overall score should be viewed with cautious optimism given the history of repression and economic stagnation. Further, the objective scores varied greatly: the highest score was 2.44 in Objective 5, Supporting Institutions, while the lowest score was 1.55 in Objective 4, Business Management. Others such as Freedom of Speech and Plurality of News Sources recorded promising ratings of 2.24 and 2.02, respectively, showing signs of stability and potential for growth in the sector. However, there are genuine fears that most of the gains might be overturned soon if immediate steps are not taken to redress issues of ethics and professional conduct: Objective 2 recorded a disappointing 1.95; deficiencies in this area have been used repeatedly in the past as a pretext for state control and undue regulation of the media.

LIBERIA AT A GLANCE

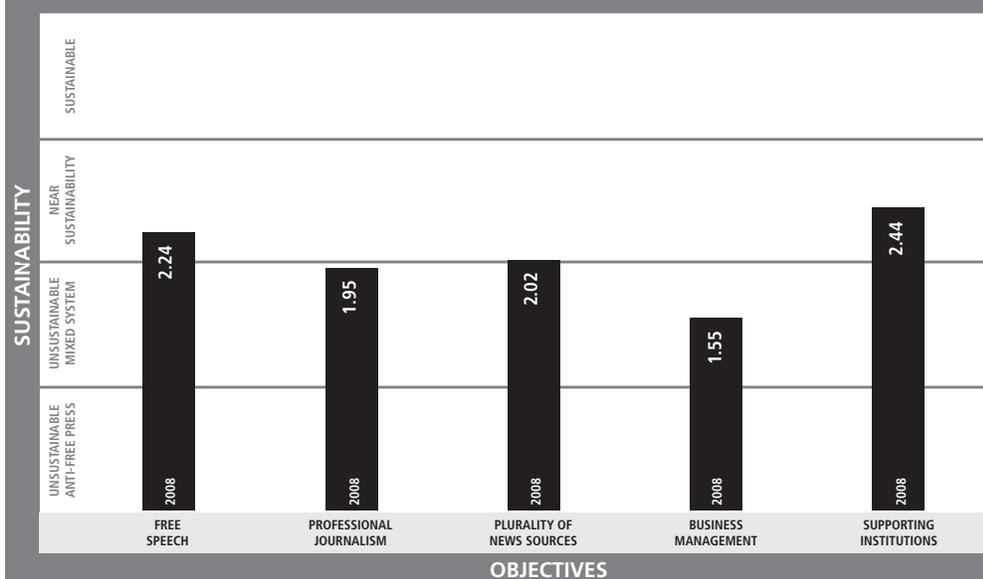
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,334,587 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Monrovia
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** indigenous African 95%, other 5% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 40%, Muslim 20%, indigenous beliefs 40% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English 20% (official), some 20 ethnic group languages, of which a few can be written and are used in correspondence (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2007-Atlas):** \$554 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$290 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **Literacy rate:** 57.5% (male 73.3%, female 41.6%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (since January 16, 2006)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 18 newspapers 8 of which are daily; Radio Stations: 16, 2 of which are nationwide; Television Stations: 6
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Daily Observer* (circulation 3,000), *New Democrat* (circulation 3,000), *Inquirer* (circulation 1,000) (Media Reach and Penetration Study, Liberia Media Center)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top radio station: United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) Radio Station (Media Reach and Penetration Study, Liberia Media Center)
- > **News agencies:** Liberia News Agency (LINA) (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 1,000 (2002 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: LIBERIA



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

Liberia Objective Score: 2.24

The panelists returned an average score of 2.24 for this objective. Most indicators received scores close to the objective average. Indicators 8 and 9, access to international news and entry into the journalism profession received scores roughly a point higher than the average. However, Indicator 5, preferential legal treatment for state media, received a score slightly more than half a point lower than the average; Indicator 7, access to public information, received a score nearly a point-and-a-half lower. The two extremes illustrate the paradox of a media sector that enjoys the freedom to report but lacks the access to obtain vital information about the performance of the government.

When Liberia was founded in 1822 by ex-slaves from the United States, they imputed to the country's laws and customs the values of freedom and liberty that they experienced in their former country. As a consequence, Liberia's first constitution adopted in 1847, in article I, section 15, provided for freedom of the press. Further, in a landmark freedom of expression case in 1861 (*Dennis v. Bowser*, 1 Liberian Law Review, p.5) the Liberian Supreme Court ruled that the "right to speak freely, write and print on any subject is a constitutional right which all may fairly exercise, but if the motive for so doing should appear to be malicious, a responsibility attaches for the abuse thereof."

The country's current constitution, adopted in 1986, provides the basic safeguards for the protection of journalists and the promotion of press freedom in Article 15. While the usual suspects of press freedom violations in the past have been state agencies and their proxies, Philip Ramah, president of SKY Choice printing house, noted signs of improvement. "The present government is not doing badly as it relates to the protection of media institutions and the rights of journalists, though in some cases politicians always cry foul when negative reports are carried about them in the media, resulting in threats of lawsuits," he said. Othello Garblah, news editor of *New Democrat*, one of Liberia's leading local dailies, was of the view that journalists and media institutions operate under an atmosphere of press freedom. "No journalist has been arrested or imprisoned for stories or pronouncements they have made or written while investigating corruption related issues," he said.

Alphonsus Zeon of the BBC World Service Trust noted a Liberian tradition of free speech. "[Although] numerous other laws that cramp free speech had been legislated during different periods of the country's political development, Liberians are used to speaking out and occasionally

individuals have been held for speaking out," he said. "It needs to be pointed out that while these draconian laws exist, there is reluctance on the part of most administrations to vigorously enforce them."

Olive Thomas, from the independent Star Radio, was cautious. "Article 15 of the Liberia Constitution certainly talks about free speech, which is being upheld, but sometimes people tend to abuse it, forgetting their responsibilities," she said.

On the question of licensing for broadcast media, the panelists generally agreed that the procedure for granting licenses has largely been liberalized since the 2003 establishment of the national transitional government of Liberia, the predecessor of the current government. More than 10 new radio stations have emerged in the last five years.

Some rights activists have questioned the policy of granting newspaper licenses and community radio permits. They have argued for some measure of preferential treatment in helping the newspaper and community radio sectors survive the high cost of operations. There have been a number of proposals, including reduction in tax levies on newsprint for newspapers and provision of tax breaks for fuel purchases for community radio stations.

Entry into the media market since the removal from office of the dictatorial Taylor regime has been easy and generally accessible to all. Once a fully registered company desires to run a media business, it must simply follow the procedures for establishing a newspaper, radio, or television station by referring to the appropriate authorities. There are also similar procedures for starting community radio stations.

The panel agreed that crimes against journalists are rare, most especially since the existence of a government with democratic credentials over the past three years. But panelists also agreed that while there have been a few excesses against members of the media since the inception of the current government, little if nothing has ever been done to bring to justice the perpetrators of these crimes against the media and journalists.¹

Nevertheless, the panel held the view that unless the authorities demonstrate the political will to bring perpetrators to justice, there will be tendencies for these acts of humiliation to continue, thereby eroding trust and confidence in government's commitment to respect its obligation under regional and international statutes and the Liberian Constitution.

Article 15 (d) of the constitution states: "Access to state owned media shall not be denied because of any disagreement with or dislike of the ideas express(cq). Denial

¹ Liberia Media Center. Media Reach and Penetration Study. February, 2008.

of such access may be challenged in a court of competent jurisdiction.” Despite this, the reality is that state media are not open to all political viewpoints.

There are no laws or regulations that give the state-run media any preference in the media market, though in practice state media do enjoy some advantages. Private and commercial media do not generally have access to import duty exemptions that their state-owned counterparts have. This makes running private media outlets relatively more expensive.

One example of a law that tends to undermine the freedom of the press provisions is “Criminal Malevolence,” which can be brought by a public official who feels defamed by a publication. Despite this, the statute provides that the publisher “must have maliciously and knowingly published the false information with the intent to defame,” Zeon said. Fortunately, as indicated above, the current government has shown restraint in resorting to these laws. However, they remain ominously on the books.

To guarantee access to information, the constitution in article 15 (c) states: “In pursuance of this right [freedom of expression], there shall be no limitation on the public right to be informed about the government and its functionaries.” However, the panel’s view was that there exists a culture of perennial denial by government authorities as witnessed by their usual refusal to provide the media and the general public information that they seek, especially as it relates to the financial operations of the government.

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.

But more interesting to some of the panelists is that, despite constitutional guarantees, no attempts have ever been made to challenge state authorities who deny journalists or citizens access to information. However, it should be noted that, the basic constitutional provision guaranteeing access to information aside, there is no legal framework to compel information from state agencies and private institutions acting on behalf of state agencies. The panelists agreed that the only hope of redressing the current challenges facing access to public information is the passage of the Freedom of Information Act.

Patmillia Doe of the Media Women Center for Development and Democracy said that government officials often refuse to disclose public information. She cited as an example the oil deal negotiated between the Liberia Petroleum Refining Corporation (LPRC) and a Nigeria based company. “The LPRC managing director failed to publish the full content of the agreement in spite of pressure from human rights, media and pro-democracy organizations,” she said. “Access to public information is a serious problem for journalists in Liberia and this situation would only improve if the current bill on access to information is passed by the legislature.”

In a study conducted by the Center for Transparency and Accountability in late 2007, the group cited corruption as the overriding impediment to accessing public information after a survey of 13 government ministries and agencies and three corporate entities. It also indicated literacy, the lack of institutional will, and disinclination to transparency and openness as factors working against access to information.²

Liberian news media freely make use of international news sources, especially their coverage of international news items. As Internet resources are widely available at the majority of media outlets and are commercially available around Monrovia, Liberian media have very little difficulty accessing international news sources. Local electronic media in Liberia usually rely on international radio and television, while print outlets largely rely on the Internet. No local media outlets have been harassed by the government or other parties because of news that they published from an international source since the end of despotism in Liberia.

Becoming a journalist in Liberia is largely free, perhaps too free in the views of many journalists. There are no educational requirements and largely no mandatory registration done by government or another public or private body. According to a survey of nine media outlets done by the Liberia Media Center (LMC) at the end of 2007, just 19.6 percent of all media workers in the print sector (editors, reporters, managers,

² Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia. Access to Information Monitoring Report: Piercing the Veil of Secrecy. 2007.

accountants, business managers, etc.) are college graduates, while nine percent of the 199 staff of seven electronic media outlets surveyed were college graduates. As a result of this low educational profile, the professional standard of journalism in the country has greatly suffered.

As Peter Quaqua, secretary general of the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) put it, entry into the profession is loose. "There has to be minimum benchmarks erected on how one can become a journalist," he suggested, but reckoned later that "regulating entry into the journalism profession would be counter-productive to the principles of freedom of expression and the press."

However, the office of the president does accredit journalists who are allowed to cover presidential activities; others may not do so directly.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Liberia Objective Score: 1.95

The indicators in this objective scored close to the overall objective average, with a few exceptions. Indicator 5, pay levels for journalists, scored more than a point lower than the average. Also faring poorly was Indicator 7, technical facilities, which scored more than a half-point lower. However, panelists returned a score of more than a point higher than the average for Indicator 4, journalists cover key events.

The panelists' assessment of the quality of reporting comes against a backdrop of a barrage of public criticisms over the professional and ethical conduct of journalists and some media outlets, especially the print media. For a long time the issue of adhering to proper professional standards has dogged the Liberian media and cost the media severely with respect to public confidence in its work. This situation has largely been blamed by the public on lack of training and, at times, the poor wage levels of journalists.

Some panelists observed that journalists were making little effort to produce quality reports, in most instances failing to follow up and provide multiple dimensions to their stories. Nyahn Flomo, station manager of Radio Kergheamahn community radio, remarked, "Most reporters do not follow up their stories either due to lack of resources or lack of will. As a result, most of these reports end up with the much over-used phrase 'efforts to contact Mr. X or Mrs. Y proved futile.' Additionally, most stories are not well researched. There is no media house with a technical expert on its staff payroll."

Ramah, of Sky Choice Printing House, thought that the professional standards of Liberian journalists are severely

compromised. "The media houses do not make enough money to hire and maintain reporters who will cover events," he said. "This pushes most of the reporters or even editors to doing public relations when serious issues are at stake. Journalists are selected to cover events out of the capital city by the organizers of the events, thereby limiting the competitive reportage."

For his part, Philip Wesseh, managing editor of the *Inquirer* newspaper, thinks the situation can be redeemed. "Journalism in Liberia is gradually progressing in terms of standards and quality, but there is a need for more training opportunities to help move the media to higher standards," he said.

However, Tete Karneh, a veteran broadcaster from state-run Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS), was not optimistic and very critical of the media's performance. He said reporting is not fair, objective, or well sourced, and that reporters seldom have access to facts. Ethical standards and professional attributes are often compromised because of low pay, he added. "Often because they want money or gratuity, journalists have to dance to the tune of the news makers or sometimes fine tune their stories to the detriment of the larger society," he said.

The Press Union of Liberia, an association of Liberian journalists, uses an international code of ethics to govern the affairs of journalists. While all journalists in the country are expected to be conversant with this code, there is little evidence that it is widely circulated. There is also widespread abuse of ethical standards among practicing journalists.

Self-censorship is evident in the media sector, though this is not, in recent years, attributable to fear of state interference or retribution. Journalists in Liberia have been free to cover

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).

pretty much any news issue since the departure of former president Taylor, the subsequent disarmament of the warring factions, and the holding of widely acclaimed democratic elections between October 2003 and October 2005. Nevertheless, some media houses and journalists have been practicing “civic journalism,” ensuring that conflict-sensitive issues are treated with a reasonable measure of care. This was especially noticeable during the coverage of public hearings of the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Another rationale behind this form of cautious reporting is the need for Liberians to consolidate the gains recorded over the last few years of transition to a stable environment; the country’s peace is still viewed as fragile. Other journalists have to practice self-censorship because of the tight economic realities in which they have to operate.

The Liberian media largely follow stories and issues that help them sell papers. Because political news is responsible for selling the most copies, such issues usually receive more coverage in the local print media. Development, environmental and other reporting do not usually get the kind of sustained reporting that they deserve.

Panelists agreed that journalists receive low wages insufficient to discourage them from being corrupt. An average reporter in Liberia earns between \$30 and \$40 per month, while a 50 kilogram bag of rice, the country’s staple food, costs that much or even more.

Broadcast outlets in Liberia are mostly saturated with entertainment-based programming. Entertainment, especially music, accounts for more than 60 percent of the airtime of four radio stations currently being monitored daily by the LMC. This situation is even more acute among rural based community radio stations. Conversely, the media center has established that there is a preference among audiences for news and feature programs over entertainment. In a study covering eight radio stations in two of the country’s provincial cities and Monrovia, 48.5 percent of respondents said they listened mostly to news; while 31 percent said they tuned in for entertainment.³

Most local radio stations, a few community-based media, and all newspapers have moved to embrace technological advances but, notwithstanding these modest strides, most of the equipment available is still relatively old, thus impacting the quality of print and broadcast products.

Niche reporting is rare, due in large measure to the low institutional and professional capacity of the media. Most media outlets do not have the resources to invest in content generation and almost all practicing journalists follow

³ Liberia Media Center. Daily Broadcast Monitoring and Tracking. 2008.

political and government news, eroding any serious prospects of specializing in thematic reporting. Quaqua pointed to both the lack of training and assignment inertia. He said media outlets usually fail to allow their reporters to remain on one assignment long enough to develop a measure of expertise for that area.

While a number of NGOs⁴ have embarked on developing journalists’ expertise in a range of reporting areas like transitional justice, huge deficits abound and the media will require a sustained period of engagement to fully adapt to this brand of reporting.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Liberia Objective Score: 2.02

In this objective the panel scored an overall average of 2.02. The highest score was for Indicator 5, media produce their own news programs, which scored more than a point higher than the average. Citizens’ access to both domestic and international media also received a positive review by the panelists, and Indicator 2 scored nearly a point higher than the average. The panel was of the view that there is still a lot to be desired for the work of independent news agencies in the country, and Indicator 4 received a score more than one-and-a-half points lower than the average. The panel also thought that state media do not do a good job reflecting the views of the political spectrum, giving Indicator 3 a score more than half a point lower than the average.

Since the end of the country’s civil crisis in 2003, there has been an explosion of privately owned media institutions across the media spectrum. According to figures contained in an April 2007 report “Strengthening Liberia’s Media: A Review of Media Support in the Post-Transitional Period and Recommendations for Future Actions” by the Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa, there are roughly 38 newspapers in Liberia, although only about 15 publish with some degree of regularity. In addition, there are close to 50 registered radio stations, including community radios, currently broadcasting, representing almost four times the pre-war figure. There is no national public service broadcaster, though a number of stations strive to fill this void. They include UNMIL Radio, Star Radio and the Catholic-run Radio Veritas. The national radio service owned and managed by the government is currently being resuscitated along with its television component, largely through Chinese direct investment. There are four commercial

⁴ The BBC World Service Trust and the International Center for Transitional Justice, through their “Communicating Justice” project seek to develop a cadre of professional Liberian journalist on transitional justice issues

television stations and none provide national coverage, although the television channel of LBS hopes to provide national coverage in the future.

Ramah said that while the public has a variety of choices of information outlets, not all facets of the media are “well-represented” outside the capital. “The print media for instance do not circulate out of Monrovia either due to the cost of transportation or because there is a complete absence of printing presses in the hinterland,” he said. Flomo, of Radio Kergheamahn, told the panel that newspapers are equally poorly distributed. He said Nimba County, the second-most populated county in Liberia,, has no newsstand for any of the print media. “Newspapers arriving in the county are always at least a day old,” he said. Research by the LMC showed that newspaper circulation is quite low; the leading papers do not exceed 3,000 copies. Many other popular newspapers only carry sports reporting.

Because there is no newspaper distribution network and most papers only circulate in the capital, a large majority of the population access radio more than other media. Radio Veritas, ELWA and Star Radio are the only stations to operate both on FM and shortwave, while just one station—the United Nations Mission’s UNMI Radio—has a national FM network able to reach nearly the whole country. The state-run ELBC is testing its national FM capacity.

The most listened to radio station in most of the country is UNMIL Radio. UNMIL provides news in simple Liberian English and the various vernaculars. Competitors including Star Radio and Radio Veritas depend on designated hours of shortwave broadcast to reach other parts of the country

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.

and are faced with difficulty in signal reception due to problems associated with shortwave signals. The rural population of Liberia is thus extremely dependent on these four Monrovia-based outlets or their local community radio station for their information needs.

Ade Wede Kerkulah, station manager of Radio Veritas, said that access to local and foreign media is largely a function of consumers’ purchasing power, especially with regards to print materials like magazines and use of the Internet, than it is of political or state restrictions. Television access follows the same rule, she said. “The only hindrance is that most Liberians cannot afford local television or cable television,” she said. “The supply of electricity to most parts of Monrovia, not to mention other parts of Liberia, is non-existent.”

The Internet is freely accessible in Liberia but penetration levels beyond Monrovia are extremely low. A recent LMC survey shows that less than one percent of respondents in two of the country’s busiest provincial cities (Kakata and Buchanan) have access to the Internet. On the whole, far fewer people access the Internet in Liberia. However, strides are being taken to establish commercial cyber cafés in other parts of the country. In this regard, the country has made progress since the introduction of Internet technology around a decade ago. Today the Internet is available on the country’s two biggest mobile telephone networks, which means it is now available nearly throughout Liberia.

There is no direct data on the actual number of Liberian Internet news Web sites in existence. But a cursory search of the Internet identifies roughly 21 Web-based news outlets that target the Liberian Diaspora. While a lot of these sites are based outside the country, several are domestically located. Notably, all the major Liberian daily newspapers maintain Web versions of their daily editions. There are also government-owned Web sites to put out news-related information targeted at the country’s diaspora. Three local radio stations, UNMIL, the state owned LBC and Star Radio maintain Web sites and provide some form of their contents online.

Blogging is a relatively new phenomenon in Liberia and very few members of the population participate; there are also no statistics on Liberian blogging.

The LMC survey further noted that the more people have to pay for the Internet, the less they access it. The survey also indicated that people use the Internet more for intellectual reasons than for any other. This is significant, considering the fact that the majority of people in Liberia are illiterate. This may mean that the Internet remains the exclusive preserve of the intellectual class.

The state-owned media in Liberia—LBS and one newspaper—have perennially served to propagate the views of the

government in power. In times past, especially prior to the civil war, LBS had a virtual monopoly over access to the general population since it was basically the only broadcaster that provided coverage on domestic and international events and issues. With the liberalization of the industry following the conflict, there exists a host of alternatives, although the state-run radio station has continued to largely propagate the views of the government with limited coverage of dissenting political opinions, especially coverage of opposition events.

At present, there exists no independent news agency serving the media. The state-run Liberia News Agency has been derelict since the beginning of the civil conflict and requires solid investment to be resuscitated. As things stand, various local and international projects are trying to fill this void. An example is the BBC World Service Trust transitional justice reporting project. This project has deployed Liberian and Sierra Leonean journalists to cover the trial of former president Taylor and syndicates their news content and feature stories on several commercial and community radio stations.

All independent media institutions, the state-owned broadcaster and UNMIL Radio produce their own news programs. Some of them produce just a few news broadcasts of their own, while most of the time they either only play music or relay news from foreign sources, such as the BBC, VOA, and Deutsche Welle Radio.

Media ownership in Liberia is open to anyone who meets the standard requirements and procedures of registration stipulated by the government. Ownership is not concentrated in the hands of a few people. Most newspaper institutions are sole proprietorships, owned and operated by journalists themselves. Broadcast institutions on the other hand are predominately owned by business people, politicians or partnerships. As indicated above, newspaper ownership is largely known to the public, but the financiers behind many of the country's media organizations are often kept as closely guarded secrets, especially if there is a political interest.

Liberian society is not predisposed to give any one group an advantage over another, not at least since the coming into being of the present government. As a result of this, no one group has a monopoly over the media. Radio and television stations in the country include daily news programs in different vernaculars. All of the major stations employ presenters knowledgeable in various languages. However, Liberia has a small but influential Lebanese population that receives very little media coverage and does not possess its own media.

There is a lot of coverage of women and children's issues since sex crimes have become a major issue in the country, but activities relating to people who are physically challenged receive little coverage.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Liberia Objective Score: 1.55

This objective received the lowest overall average, 1.55, from the panel. This is largely due to mismanagement of media businesses and under-capitalization of the sector. Most indicators scored close to the average, with only Indicator 4, the proportion of advertising revenue to other sources of revenue, distinguishing itself with a score a half-point higher than the average.

Garblah, a news editor, said not all media institutions are well managed, citing as examples the seasonal appearances of some newspapers on the newsstand and the closures of radio stations such as Ducor Radio, a local FM station which closed down just before the 2005 general elections. "Most media houses, on the other hand, are not vibrant in terms of running as well-established business entities," he said. "Some are run as a one-man show, thereby hindering their viability considering best practices." This last sentiment is particularly true of newspapers, most of which are sole proprietorships, owned and operated by the journalists themselves. A lot of media outlets in the country operate at break-even.

Quaqua of PUL said that management is "a huge challenge" for the Liberian media. Though it is generally accepted that the media is a business, he said, most media managers devote little or no attention to the substance of their operations through an effective business plan. "Most of them lack basic accounting and management principles, which accounts for the sporadic appearance of, especially, newspapers on the newsstand," he said. "Some newspapers go to press only after securing advertising funds. The electronic media have made a mark of improvement in the area of management, notwithstanding."

To develop, the print and broadcast sectors require solid investment to address a number of business expansion opportunities. Impeding such investment is that lending procedures have a history of being quite cumbersome and are often entrenched in bureaucratic malaise. Where opportunities existed, collateral requirements were colossal and rules stringent, preventing small businesses from accessing these facilities. Further, practicing journalists operating sole proprietorships often lack the full managerial and business skills necessary to attract huge capital investments and have limited access to loans from banks and lending institutions. However, while capital infusion could bolster the industry, it is poised to make nominal impact if underlying market issues are unresolved.

For example, Zeon thought the problem is not just the result of a lack of proper management. He said Liberia's poor media

market environment mirrors the national economy, in that major investment is lacking and that the small media market is not characterized by vigorous competition and is drained of cash. Under the circumstances, getting business to advertise is difficult, he said.

"The handful of businesses that do advertise use their revenue power to weaken editorial content," he continued. "They threaten to withdraw advertising revenue from papers that tend to launch a critical pattern of reporting. Many highly critical papers have collapsed after advertising revenues were withdrawn on the basis of lack of cooperation from editors. Critical news organs face the danger of economic reprisal from state institutions and politicians as the government remains the major advertiser for now. A comparative analysis of revenue flow for a few papers will find a grossly disproportionate[ly low] share to those of the critical papers. So the question is how one balances reporting the news and doing business?"

The private media do receive revenue from multiple, if limited, sources. Funding comes in the form of advertisements, sales, and sponsorship. A few outlets, like Star Radio, Radio Veritas, and the *New Democrat* newspaper receive grants and other funding from foreign sources. Political and economic interests also fund some outlets. During the election of 2005, it was widely believed that politicians funded the media either for promotional purposes or to influence stories. The panel was in agreement that dependence on a few private ventures and the state was unhealthy for the growth and independence of the sector.

The advertising market on which the industry relies is relatively small. Often, scrambling for advertisements denied the industry the real market value of their space, leaving advertisers to ultimately determine and impose low prices. This market largely revolves around the four mobile phone companies and the national government. Research conducted by LMC suggests that a number of these cellular phone companies were fixing advertising prices for the media outlets. The advertisers had threatened to deal with media offering larger coverage if smaller radio stations refused the offer. A combined price proposal from the stations was reportedly rejected, resulting in individual stations offering concessions in their price lists. A more compact media industry could effectively deal with this and promote healthier and more productive competition. There is also a need for a market survey aimed at developing supplementary services to media, including advertisements.

The media is making strides tapping into existing markets; however the absence of viable advertising agencies has impacted the media's penetration of the vast array of medium and small businesses in the market. Further, the rise

of tabloids has served to make advertising by print media even more difficult. In an interview with radio and television stations as part of the LMC research, most of the respondents concurred that proliferation of media outlets was affecting unified negotiating power within the industry.

Newspapers depend heavily on advertisements despite their limited availability and low sales returns. This situation, as is widely agreed, has served to lower standards and principles. There are more advertisements than news. A recent desk review randomly checked three copies per month from eight newspapers, including five dailies and three weeklies, in order to evaluate the papers' news content compared to advertising space. The results showed that the ratio of news content to advertisements ranged from as low as 0.91 to as high as 3.39. The review also showed that these ratios were inconsistent. Flomo had observed such irregularity as well: "In an instance where some [newspapers] are lucky to receive more ads on a day, far less pages will be devoted to information and other stories," he said.

It is worth adding that advertising has become a weapon to suffocate critical newspapers. It is difficult to establish and authenticate reports that some private media entities receive money from the government to serve as pro-government papers. However, at the end of 2006 there developed a major split among the country's media as to how to respond to a Christmas gift given the country's media by President Sirleaf. While some opted to return the money because in their view it would compromise their independence, others gladly accepted it. Otherwise there are no provisions for government subsidy of the media, and there are no laws or regulations governing the placement of government advertising.

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

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

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

Media support institutions lack the requisite expertise to provide business advice and development strategies for the media sector, though a number of NGOs, including the LMC, have produced research reports on consumer attitudes and perceptions of media products. However, skills development and investment will be required over time to enhance the media support sector's capacity to fill the existing void.

There are no sustained efforts to measure broadcast audiences or circulation of print media. However, research of print media in three cities has been conducted by the LMC and the results were made public in their publication *Media Reach and Penetration Study*. Panelists reported that the circulation claims made by newspapers are more or less realistic and generally accepted.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Liberia Objective Score: 2.44

The panel was of the general view that supporting institutions are working within the country to help build the capacity of the local media. Most indicators scored similarly well, although two were clear laggards. Indicators 1 and 4, trade associations and academic journalism programs, both scored a half-point below the average.

There are a few trade associations that work in the interests of media owners, including the Publishers Association and Broadcasters Association. These have attempted in times past to serve as a collective bargaining forum for the business interests of their constituent members, but have made little progress. Most initiatives have usually faltered since the few major business ventures operating in the country have usually

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.

just ignored or circumvented such initiatives and dealt directly with individual media and received self imposed cutthroat rates. Many associations are largely inactive.

There are at least two organizations that represent the interests of the community media: the Liberia Community Radio Broadcasters Association and the Association of Liberian Community Radios (ALICOR). ALICOR seems to be the bigger of the two. Flomo was critical of ALICOR, of which he is a member. He said it is "a rather weak association" of community radio stations which since its formation in 2005, has yet to make a "significant impact" in advocacy for its member stations. "It has no offices or a functional secretariat," he said.

The PUL is the main umbrella organization for the media in Liberia. It has both institutional and individual members. However, the PUL, which has been in existence for 44 years, is not a trade union. It accredits Liberian journalists. There is also an Editors Association and a Reporters Association.

Flomo was also critical of how the PUL is run. He noted that while its presence is felt in the capital, its advocacy role for media organizations in rural areas is limited. "A case in point was in February of this year: the superintendent of Grand Gedeh County dismissed the entire management team of a local FM station, Smile FM, and replaced it with his own people. The PUL response was the issuance of a mere press release."

Over the past few years several international organizations have made positive contributions that have helped improve the media. Significant among them is the establishment of the independent Star Radio and International Alert's investment in community radio development. In recent years the Radio Netherlands Training Center, through a Dutch Foreign Ministry grant, provided support to community radio. The project, which is being implemented by the LMC, is providing support to 10 community radio stations that reach approximately 1.5 million people. Open Society Initiative for West Africa invested in Lux Radio, owned and operated by the University of Liberia's mass communications department.

There are a few local NGOs involved in working to improve the media sector. The LMC is the largest of the local ones, established under an initiative of the Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa⁵ and the PUL. Other organizations include the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP), the Liberia Women Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC), and the Media Women Center for Development and Democracy (MEWOCEDE). CEMESP is largely focused on press freedom and journalism training

⁵ The Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa is a loose network of media development and free expression organizations that work collaboratively on issues of media development, media law reform, media safety, and press freedom.

activities. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy, CEMESP produces an annual publication on press freedom and conducts a series of intensive journalism training workshops. LIWOMAC and MEWOCEDE are involved with mainstreaming gender in media development activities but focus also on gender-related subjects.

There are three recognized degree-granting departments of journalism in the country. These are offered by the University of Liberia (UL), African Methodist Episcopal University and the United Methodist University. In spite of this seemingly robust media training infrastructure, standards of journalism have been considerably low, underscoring the effects of the prolonged civil conflict. Most of the curricula of these institutions are outdated and instructors are in dire need of professional development opportunities. There is also a lack of equipment and on-the-job training. Only UL has a radio station for practical training for broadcast students.

A lot of short-term training programs exist in the country. These programs, which are usually supported by international development organizations, are implemented by local partners. The themes of these workshops and training sessions usually cut across the journalism profession. There are also a few short-term refresher training programs available to Liberian journalists in foreign countries. These programs are largely supported by a number of local NGOs, most notably the LMC and Center for Media Studies and Peace Building.

Printing facilities are private and they serve everyone who can pay. The *Daily Observer* and the *New Democrat* are the only newspapers that have their own printing facilities. Unlike during the reign of Charles Taylor, there are a lot more options available to the print media for printing their newspapers. Newspaper headlines are no longer unilaterally changed at the printing presses by government agents simply because they seemed to be antigovernment.

The government does not interfere with or subsidize the importation of newsprint. However, the high tariff in place on imports into the country has contributed to make the cost of printing astronomical. The importers of newsprint, usually foreign or Lebanese businesses, are routinely accused of creating artificial shortages to justify the prices they charge.

It is widely accepted that the means of media distribution are private and devoid of political consideration or favoritism.

List of Panel Participants

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Tete Karneh, senior newscaster, Liberia Broadcasting System, Monrovia

Ade Wede Kerkulah, station manager, Radio Veritas, Monrovia

Quaqua Miller, station manager, Radio Zorzor, Zorzor

Philip Ramah, president, SKY Choice Incorporated, Monrovia

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