

---

---

*In the past few years, there has been a tremendous boom in the business sector with many investments coming into the country. However, this has not had much impact on the media, especially in relation to advertisements. Most companies in The Gambia prefer not to advertise with the private media for fear government reprisals.*



THE GAMBIA

In July 1994, the military overthrew the legitimately elected government of Alhagi Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara. The new Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) was quick to label themselves as “soldiers with a difference” and urged the public to criticize their missteps. But this was short-lived; within a very short period they swallowed their words and revealed their true colors. The AFPRC wasted no time in suppressing the media with the introduction of Newspaper Decree 70 and 71.

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 that were embedded in the country, it instead eroded and flouted them. 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 gave operating licenses to a number of media outlets. This period witnessed the advent of legislations that were specifically aimed at crippling the media. The Media Commission Bill, which empowered a “kangaroo” commission to try and imprison journalists without any form of appeal, was challenged in court by the Gambia Press Union (GPU).

Economically, The Gambia is very weak, with the majority of the population living on less than one dollar a day. Tourism is the country’s major income earner. Groundnuts and exports have declined over the years because of poor rainfall. The national currency, the dalasi, had seriously depreciated against major international foreign currencies over the years, creating a negative impact on the media and other institutions.

In the past few years, there has been a tremendous boom in the business sector with many investments coming into the country. However, this has not had much impact on the media, especially in relation to advertisements. Most companies in The Gambia prefer not to advertise with the private media for fear government reprisals. Those who have dared to do so have been labeled as supporters or sympathizers of the opposition. Similarly, the private press do not receive much advertising revenue from the government. However, government departments are quick to fill the pages of private media with propagandistic congratulatory messages for the president on special occasions, such as his birthday or the anniversary of the day he came to power.

The panelists’ scores resulted in little overall change for the Gambia compared to last year, and individual objective scores did not change greatly, either. The leading objective is Objective 2, Professional Journalism, with a score of 1.96; Objective 1, Freedom of Speech, received the lowest score of any objective with a 1.38.

# THE GAMBIA AT A GLANCE

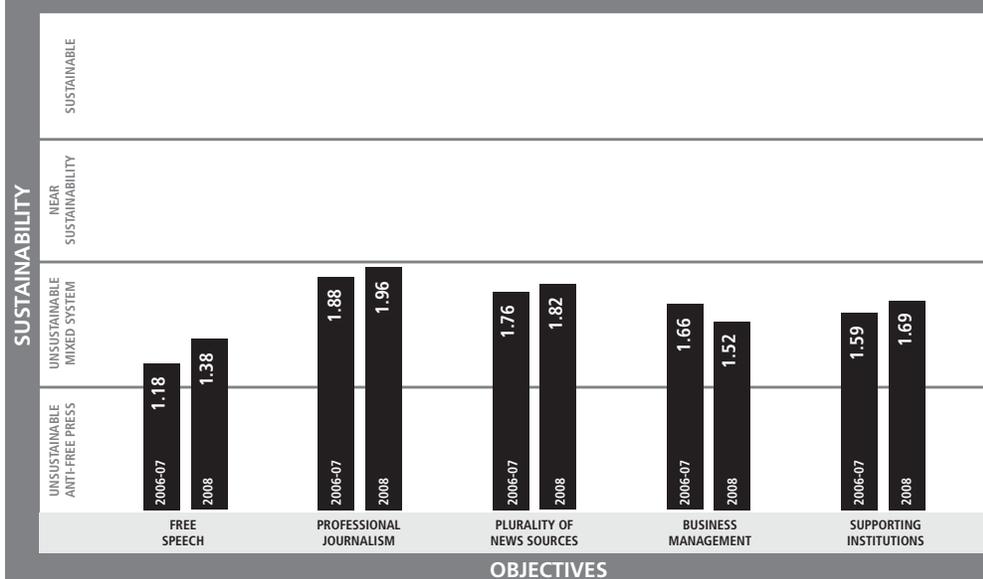
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 1,782,893 (July 2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Banjul
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Mandinka 42%, Fula 18%, Wolof 16%, Jola 10%, Sarahule 9%, other 4%, non-African 1% (2003 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 90%, Christian 8%, indigenous beliefs 2% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English (official), Mandinka, Wolof, Fula; Jola; Sarahule and Krio (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2007-Atlas):** \$541 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$1,140 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **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: 8 newspapers; Radio: 9; 3 community radios and Television: 1
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top two by circulation: *The Point, Daily Observer*, and *Foroyaa*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Gambia News Agency
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 100,200 (2007 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

### Gambia Objective Score: 1.38

The constitution states explicitly in Section 25 that “every person has the right to freedom of expression” and, in Section 207, that “the freedom and independence of the media is guaranteed.” But there is no provision for freedom of information in the constitution or any law. The closest to this is the responsibility given to the media by Section 207 of the constitution to scrutinize the executive.

The right to freedom of expression is not respected by the executive, as exemplified by disappearances, threats, arrests, trials, and conviction of journalists and others for what they say or publish. One panelist said, “In relation to the Gambian constitution, there are provisions that guarantee freedom of expression. However, there are legislations passed by the parliament that run contrary to the freedom of expression provisions. The Criminal Code Amendment Act and the Newspaper Amendment Act are examples of such legislations.” The Newspaper Amendment Act and the Criminal Code Amendment Act of 2004 continue to be the two most negative pieces of legislation that affect the work of the media. Further, said another panelist, “In relation to the international conventions that The Gambia has signed and ratified, the harmonization of these laws are not reflected in practice. The government does not respect the existence of such conventions.”

In short, criminal laws that are inimical to the constitution and were introduced in this decade or during the colonial era are still being actively applied. They include the law on sedition, false publication, publication of false rumors, and libel. Penalties may be as high as \$12,500 in some instances. In a libel case, the prosecution need not prove the falsity of the allegation. The defenses open to the defendant are truth, public interest, good faith, and privilege.

Fatou Jaw Manneh was convicted of sedition this year because she expressed an opinion critical of the president in an interview that was published in a newspaper. She was fined GMD 250,000 (\$12,500). In late October, three people were convicted of spreading false rumors because they told their colleagues that the president said people should not wash their hands, which was found to be untrue. At least on three occasions journalists have been charged for “publishing false information” under the Criminal Amendment Code. Both Lamin Fatty and Manneh were found guilty under this code on very dubious terms by the Kanifing Magistrate Court under Magistrate Buba Jawo. They were fined very heavily or were required to serve a period of at least six months in jail.

The editor of *Today Newspaper*, Adul Hamid Adiamoh, was arrested and charged with sedition. Most recently, in February 2009, the editor of *The Point Newspaper*, Pap Saine, was charged for “false publication and broadcast.” The government dropped the charges on April 7, but Saine still faces other charges, questioning his citizenship. The authorities also charged him with obtaining Gambian documents by “false pretense and declaration” while accusing him of being a noncitizen of The Gambia. Ironically, prior to being charged, he was awarded an honor in recognition of his work as a Gambian journalist.

The general situation concerning the media remains very fragile, as the authorities have continued to be very intolerant when it comes to issues concerning the private media. Journalists are continuously arrested without being charged and are forcefully held in detention beyond the stipulated period of 72 hours. The government has launched a serious intimidation tactic against the media, through the use of brute force on journalists who criticize the government. Journalists have been tortured, held incommunicado, and received threatening messages through their phones simply for reporting the news. Those who perpetrate these crimes against journalists are never brought to justice.

Panelists described the judiciary as having lost all its independence and integrity. The president has randomly fired judges on his own will without consulting the Judiciary Commission. These acts, though unconstitutional, remain unchallenged by the chief justice. Amie Sillah, executive

## 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.

*Sam Sarr, editor of Foroyaa newspaper, summed up the government's motives: "Broadcasting is too important for the executive to let someone with dissenting political views have access to electronic media."*

director of Women for Democracy and Development, said, "The president has eroded all the arms of government that should have provided checks and balances. The judiciary is compromised, and the Chief Justice is not efficient."

Very few lawyers are willing to defend journalists when they find themselves in conflict with the law, even if they are wrongfully accused. The majority of lawyers shy away from such cases for fear of government backlash. In this regard, though the Gambian court provides the necessary means for individuals to seek redress when wronged, the majority of the population has lost faith in the courts. While the courts remain the last resort for those whose rights have been violated, it is difficult to obtain justice in the courts. Indeed, while violation of the law is resented, it hardly causes any outrage in society, due mainly to the fact that the people are not adequately knowledgeable about legal issues.

All nongovernmental media houses must be registered, but starting a media house is full of problems. The licensing of broadcast media houses is the prerogative of the Department of State for Information, Communication, and Technology and is supported by the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority. However, it is evident that all applications for any broadcasting outfit are strictly vetted by the president himself, and his word remains final. Recently, one of those granted a license to operate an FM radio station was required to take up part-time appointment with the Gambia Radio & Television Service (GRTS), even though he had resigned from this institution earlier on.

The process does not have any checks and balances. There is no transparency or independent body one can appeal to or even a provision to appeal. The law relied on was enacted before the First World War. Cases for redress when fundamental rights are violated can be filed at the high court, but ignorance and lack of confidence in the judiciary deter many from exercising this entitlement. Sam Sarr, editor of *Foroyaa* newspaper, summed up the government's motives: "Broadcasting is too important for the executive to let someone with dissenting political views have access to electronic media."

Market entry for the media is particularly stricter than for the rest of private business. It is neither fair nor transparent, both for the print and broadcast media. For instance, the Newspaper Act, which was recently amended to include broadcast media, requires all private media to enter into a bond of GMD 500,000 (approximately US\$22,000) for the registration of a media house. Administrative bottlenecks unnecessarily prolong registration for months. For the print media, newsprint is often quite expensive because of the heavy taxation levied on it by the government. This poses a serious question of their viability. The price of newsprint is much higher than in other countries in the sub-region. In addition, sales tax and import duty on newsprint are also paid. Sarr said, "There should be no import duty/sales tax on newsprints. This is a battle that needs to be fought. Once import duties and sales tax on newsprints are free, the whole landscape for the print media will change, because newsprint constitutes about 50 percent of expenditures."

With regard to crimes against journalists in The Gambia, for the past few years private journalists and their media houses have been subjected to numerous forms of intimidation and harassment with hardly anything being done about it by the authorities. These harassments include the burning down of media facilities as well as the houses of journalists, culminating in the killing of Deyda Hydara, managing editor of *The Point* newspaper, in 2004 by yet unknown assailants. Speaking about this case, Sarr said, "I am not impressed with the way the government is handling the case. I have not seen any interest shown in bringing the perpetrators to justice."

In July 2006, a journalist with the *Daily Observer* newspaper, Ebrima "Chief" Manneh, was arrested from the premises of the *Daily Observer* by people believed to be members of the security forces. He has not been seen since, and the authorities have denied holding him. The matter has been taken to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Community Court. In July 2008, the court delivered its verdict, calling for Manneh's "immediate release." The court also ordered the Gambian government to pay Manneh as compensation for arbitrary arrest and detention the sum of \$100,000. However, the Gambian government defied the court order.

On April 6, 2009, The Gambia's Justice Minister and Attorney General, Marie Saine Firdaus, admitted the court's ruling before The Gambia's parliament. "It is true ECOWAS court ruled in favor of journalist Chief Ebrima Manneh against the Republic of The Gambia in suit number ECW/APP/04/07." However, she quickly added that government agents never arrested Manneh.

"I have enquired from the Director General of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), the Inspector General of Police,

and the Commissioner of Prisons, and to the best of their knowledge, information, and belief, Chief Manneh is not in their custody. The state can only release a person from custody if he or she is, in fact, in the custody of the state." She reportedly went on to add: "As far as my office is concerned, the family members of Chief Manneh and their cohorts did not take legal action against the government in the High Court in accordance with legal procedure against the alleged unlawful detention of Chief Ebrima Manneh by agents of the state security apparatus."

The Justice Minister said the ECOWAS court is created by treaty and is subject to application of certain rules and procedures, one of which is the exhaustion of local remedies. She further expressed the government's grievance over the case. According to her, the Gambian government has "set in motion some political steps" in a bid to take the matter to another level and get "the decision set aside."

While crimes against journalists cause some public outcry, it is just for a short period and people tend to forget about it, apparently knowing that nothing would ever come of it.

The state media have no editorial independence and are tightly controlled by the ruling party. This is despite section 208 of the constitution, which specifically guarantees that "all state-owned newspapers, journals, radio, and television shall afford fair opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinion."

Due to the harsh laws and attitude of the executive, journalists at the state media tend to engage in self-censorship. The state media are not impartial and independent and have completely submitted themselves to the dictates of the ruling party, hardly carrying any divergent views. The management and even some of its journalists are appointed by the minister of information and treated as civil servants instead of journalists.

Another distinction between the state and private media is that the state media do not require any license to operate, and neither do they sign such a bond. Therefore, there is clear discrimination in favor of the state media.

In The Gambia, libel is a criminal offense. While no journalist in the recent past has been imprisoned for libel, the threat is always hanging over their heads. In Gambian law, the proof of guilt for libel always rests with the accused. Cases of corruption against judges and prosecutors are hardly pursued. Public officials are hardly held accountable to the public for their actions, but instead their fate rests entirely with the head of state, who usually hires and fires public officials at will.

Access to public information is not guaranteed to journalists and media houses. There is no access-to-information law,

*One panelist said, "In relation to the Gambian constitution, there are provisions that guarantee freedom of expression. However, there are legislations passed by the parliament that run contrary to the freedom of expression provisions. The Criminal Code Amendment Act and the Newspaper Amendment Act are examples of such legislations."*

therefore nothing compels a public official to divulge any information to a journalist. As such, journalists of the private media find it extremely difficult to access official information. There was even a time when journalists of the private media were banned from coverage of official functions at the state house. The private media still cannot attend the president's press conferences.

For the past few years, the government has been very jittery about news items on the Internet. Thus, the government has always attempted to block certain sites, especially *Freedom Newspaper*, which is very critical of the government. Presently, reports emerging from Banjul state that the IP address of *Freedom Newspaper* has been blocked in The Gambia. Even though there is officially no restriction on using the Internet, occasionally those living in The Gambia can not access certain online newspapers.

While foreign journalists require some official accreditation to report from the country, no special license is needed to report on any particular area. There is no restriction in reproducing or reprinting international news.

Entry into the journalism field is quite free, and there are no government restrictions. While journalists are free to organize themselves into unions and associations, those working for the state media are restricted by law from belonging to trade unions, and there are also attempts to prevent them from interacting with the local journalists' union.

## **OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM**

### **Gambia Objective Score: 1.96**

The main problem with many reporters is lack of training. Reporters are normally recruited directly from high school. This is why their professional standards are low. Up until this year, there has been no institution offering courses

*The president has made several statements in which he categorically intimidated journalists: "Journalists must have it right or face the music. We cannot allow a few cockroaches to tarnish the image of our good country and its hard-working citizens. They are agents of the West and are seeking political asylum. Let them go and leave us in peace."*

in journalism. One college is now offering certificate and diploma courses in mass communication, while another institution is offering certificate and diploma courses in journalism. Professional bodies are also making an effort to start a certificate course in journalism. These are signs that things may improve.

Generally, reports that appear in the Gambian private media are quite objective and fair. Despite their lack of training, most journalists are still very objective and carry out their work based on public interest. News sources are almost drying out due to fear of government reprisal, however. Only very few people working with the government will give information to the private media, and this is often done under strict terms of anonymity. However, this is quite the opposite in the state media. Objectivity has ceased to exist here in the past decade.

Meanwhile, it is the exception rather than the rule for reporters to check as many and varied sources as possible. They

#### 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).

sometimes even publish a one-sided comment without seeing the need to get the other side to comment. Getting experts to comment on issues is not a habit, but it is done occasionally. However, getting experts to comment is sometimes a problem because of the lack of freedom of speech. For example, not a single doctor was willing to comment on the president's HIV/AIDS program. Even the Bar Association never uttered a word when some judges were unlawfully dismissed.

The Gambia Press Union has developed its own code of conduct, but it is hardly used by journalists. Therefore, many journalists do not strictly adhere to accepted ethics and norms. There have been no serious violations of internationally accepted journalistic ethics, but there are always some problems with adherence to ethics. In certain instances, journalists accept incentives for coverage in the form of fares and per diems. The practice is accepted as a norm in the country. Therefore, the only instrument in place for the profession is the Code of Conduct of the Gambia Press Union (GPU), which the GPU has developed for its membership. This code reflects the ideals of the Code of Ethics of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), of which the GPU is an affiliate. In most instances, journalists have great respect for the ethics of the profession, and it is rare to hear of journalists who accept gifts in order to write stories.

Efforts are being made toward self-regulation and the establishment of an independent complaints body for the profession.

According to some panelists, some businesspersons or politicians do offer incentives to reporters to write articles that favor them. This is partly due to reporters' low pay. Within the private media, the pay is more or less the same. But there is a significant difference in pay between those in the privately owned media houses and the state-owned media houses.

Self-censorship is rampant, and it is due mainly to fear of the consequence of offending the president and finding oneself arrested or one's media house closed. Many Gambian journalists are in self-imposed exile abroad because of fear of persecution. The president has made several statements in which he categorically intimidated journalists: "Journalists must have it right or face the music. We cannot allow a few cockroaches to tarnish the image of our good country and its hard-working citizens. They are agents of the West and are seeking political asylum. Let them go and leave us in peace." Very few newspapers, such as *Foroyaa*, have the confidence to write and make objective analysis on most issues.

Sometimes business interests lead to self-censorship. If the president or those close to him have an interest in certain businesses, they become untouchable to journalists.

Government intolerance of the media has definitely limited what the media can cover. Issues concerning security or the military in general cannot be covered very well. The state media are strictly controlled in what they can report; as a result, they mostly carry press releases from the government and cover only official functions. There have been instances when journalists have tried to cover such issues and were strictly warned to desist from such reporting. A case in point is that of the *Foroyaa* reporter, Modou Jonga, who reported on the landmines around particular villages in the Western Region, where at least one child was killed.

As a survival strategy, most journalists tend to report on workshops and conferences conducted in the country, state visits, press conferences, court proceedings, or stories that have been covered by the state media. Due to the risks involved in broadcasting news, especially by the private radio stations, there are more entertainment programs than news items. To play it safe the private stations do not produce their own news; the few stations that do broadcast news simply link with the state media (Gambia Radio and Television Services) or other international news stations, such as the BBC, RFI, or VOA. Recently, three privately owned FM stations opened up, but almost 90 percent of their programs are entertainment-based.

Journalists in The Gambia are very poorly paid, especially those who work within the private media. The average journalist earns about \$50 a month. Those just entering the profession receive far less. Journalists working for the state media receive more or less the same salary, but it is based on a government pay scale. The only difference is that journalists working with the government also receive some benefits, including transport allowances.

Journalists, especially those working in the private media, lack basic tools to help them to deliver news efficiently. Most journalists in The Gambia cannot boast of a personal laptop. Newspaper houses lack adequate computers, which to a large extent delays production work, as four to five journalists might line up to use one computer to file in their reports. This is also true of the printing facilities. Most newspaper houses do not have their own printing press. On the other hand, the state media can boast of modern equipment that can facilitate their work, especially at the national television station.

As Sam Sarr put it: “Lack of equipment is a headache for media houses. Sometimes even the computers are lacking or are far below capacity. Servers are rarely seen. In some instances, networks are not available. Fast and more reliable Internet services are expensive—at least \$250 a month. Situations like this make life a hell for media houses. Efficiency becomes a problem. A UN project is to equip three media houses very soon. The project covers the national radio and

*As Sam Sarr put it: “Lack of equipment is a headache for media houses. Sometimes even the computers are lacking or are far below capacity. Servers are rarely seen. In some instances, networks are not available. Fast and more reliable Internet services are expensive—at least \$250 a month. Situations like this make life a hell for media houses.”*

two privately owned media houses. This will go a long way in solving the problems of media houses as far as equipment is concerned. Efforts are under way to establish a press house that will meet the printing needs of all the media houses.”

Panelists argued that Gambian journalism, especially in the print media, still revolves around reporting the news and simply ending there. Most news stories by the papers, both state and private, do not have any follow-up reports unless there is a new development, which is also reported only as news. What is lacking is interpretative analysis of the news that will shed more light on what is said in the news. In the same vein, only a very slight attempt has been made in relation to investigative journalism. Very few papers dare to venture into this area because of fear of government reprisal. During the past year, the *Foroyaa* newspaper has been instrumental in this area and was able to report on the conditions of numerous detainees, including Chief Manneh, whom many now fear dead.

Amie Sillah feels that to some extent the newspapers try to separate the issues: “Some media do it better than others. The print media cover issues deeper than the electronic media. The private broadcasters are more into social issues than politico-economic sensitive ones. That is left to the state media, which is engaged in propaganda. Capacity-building training is inadequate to produce that type of specialized reporting.”

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Gambia Objective Score: 1.82

The majority of the panelists stated that sources of news and information in the country include radio, television, print media, and the Internet. Radio is the cheapest and most accessible source; there is hardly any village without at least one radio set, which is normally placed at the village center for whoever cares to listen. It is unfortunate that even the

*As one anonymous panelist puts it: "Access to the Internet is still low, and its use is expensive for the average Gambian. Access has generally improved, especially in the Greater Banjul area. The advent of GPRS Internet services is also facilitating access to the Net. For instance, I can now read my e-mails and access all Gambian online newspapers using my mobile phone."*

state-owned radio, which is the most accessible, does not cover the entire country. It is believed that efforts are under way to address this situation, but it has been such for a long time.

Privately owned radio stations provide local coverage. Those in urban areas are mostly commercial and serve as a source of entertainment. But a few carry programs (including phone-in programs) in the local languages on health and safety, youth, gender, and sports. They do not broadcast news, although one of them relays a BBC news program daily.

"Community-based" radio stations cover rural areas. Their coverage on health, agriculture, education, gender, and sports is limited, as they tend to follow the footpath of the commercial radio stations. None of them produce their own local news. However, some do hook up to the national media at specific hours to broadcast the national news. Most of the

#### 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.

community radio stations have diverted from their original mandate and have delved into politics.

The state-owned television station is the only television station in the country. It does not cover the entire country. Electricity outages also restricts accessibility. Though accessibility is on the increase, it is still below the 50 percent, even in the urban area.

News and information on the Internet are available to those who have access in their offices and to some individuals at home. There are several Internet cafés, but most people use them to access their e-mail rather than news and information. In short, those who access news and information from the Internet form a tiny minority. However, it is important to note that news from websites operated by Gambians abroad is always big news in the country because of an internal lack of freedom of expression and access to information. These online papers serve as an alternative news source for Gambians at home, although the government has blocked them on numerous occasions.

As one anonymous panelist puts it: "Access to the Internet is still low, and its use is expensive for the average Gambian. Access has generally improved, especially in the Greater Banjul area. The advent of GPRS Internet services is also facilitating access to the Net. For instance, I can now read my e-mails and access all Gambian online newspapers using my mobile phone. These services are available to thousands of Gambians, who are increasingly relying on online newspapers, especially the ones in the diaspora. In the absence of reliable news stories on relevant issues in the country, the online newspapers are becoming more popular, even though the people are not comfortable reading and discussing their stories in public."

In addition to the Internet, there is access to satellite news in The Gambia. As in the case of the Internet, these facilities are mainly concentrated in the Greater Banjul area, where many people can access international news stations, such as the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, RFI, France 24, and so on. Apart from homes, most banks and businesses have satellite facilities and thus contribute in providing access to diverse news sources. In fact, some of these news reports are broadcast by local FM radio stations, which link up with these foreign media houses. The same applies for the foreign print media. A lot of these items are sold at different spots in and around the capital. But some panelists observed that foreign print editions, cable television, and satellite television are not generally affordable.

The state media are not independent and impartial. National news carried by the state media—including the monopoly state television—is generally biased material prepared to please the president and his administration. Opposition

parties or candidates are rarely given the opportunity to express their views on the state media. Journalists in the state media, particularly television, outdo each other in promoting the ruling party and slamming the opposition. Educational programs are limited, and cultural programs are tinted with politics.

One example is the issue of the president's HIV/AIDS treatment. The president claimed to be able to treat HIV/AIDS and had pictures of people living with HIV shown on national television to prove his assertion. It is now clear that the president cannot treat HIV/AIDS, as those who attended his treatment program have returned to the clinics for antiretroviral treatment. Since the president made his claim, all HIV/AIDS programs on the radio and television by health experts and other civil-society organizations have been stopped, thus denying Gambians the right to accurate information. Once again, for fear of prosecution and being tortured and/or killed, everyone is silent.

The only news agency in The Gambia is Effective Communication. It provides sports news exclusively to West Coast Radio, which is managed by the proprietor of Effective Communication. Local media houses do not buy news items from international news agencies.

The disclosure of media ownership in the country is very questionable. Newspapers are mostly owned by partnerships or sole proprietors. Some of the owners are known, while some remain in doubt. Today, there are at least three newspapers whose ownership has raised serious concerns. These are the *Daily Observer*, *Today Newspaper*, and the *Daily Express*. Most people still believe the president owns the *Daily Observer*. However, business tycoon Amadou Samba has often been seen publicly demonstrating the mantle of ownership. This puzzle can only be solved by the Attorney General's office, where these papers have made some form of registration.

Second, a bizarre trend has emerged in the ownership of newspapers in The Gambia within the past year or so. Nigerian immigrants claim to own *Today Newspaper* and the *Daily Express*. Considering the age of these owners and their earlier engagements with the media, one doubts whether they are the real owners. Most likely they have been used as fronts.

Some panelists feel that gender issues and children are getting growing coverage and interest. However, Sillah said, "A lot of broadcasting outfits have mushroomed in The Gambia, but what are they telling the public? They are not taking women's views. Radio stations should help in liberating the minds of the people in The Gambia."

Most media houses pay little attention to persons with disabilities. There is increasing use of minority languages by broadcasting media houses, but a lot more must be

*A bizarre trend has emerged in the ownership of newspapers in The Gambia within the past year or so. Nigerian immigrants claim to own Today Newspaper and the Daily Express. Considering the age of these owners and their earlier engagements with the media, one doubts whether they are the real owners. Most likely they have been used as fronts.*

done. The print media use English, the official language. On rare occasions, French, Arabic, or a major local language is used. However, some panelists pointed out that even though minority issues have never been of concern in The Gambia, unprofessionalism has weighed heavily on the state media, where journalists trying to win some favor from the president have often engaged in highlighting the issues of a particular tribe.

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

#### **Gambia Objective Score: 1.52**

MSI panelists revealed that most managers of media houses are not well trained in management, and as such, their management is not always efficient. Media houses in The Gambia can be categorized as small-scale businesses, and it

#### **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.

*The private media try to operate as commercial ventures, but because of their poor capital base and lack of managerial skills, they make little profit. Most often, very little is made from the sale of newspapers, while advertising revenue has yet to yield the desired effect.*

is common to see family members or friends manning the positions of accountant, marketing manager, and human resource manager. However, they usually lack the required qualifications. Two hurdles need to be overcome—the meager income of the media houses and the culture of abiding to strict business principles. Editorial independence is often compromised because of business interests.

The private media try to operate as commercial ventures, but because of their poor capital base and lack of managerial skills, they make little profit. Most often, very little is made from the sale of newspapers, while advertising revenue has yet to yield the desired effect. Community media operate on the basis of sponsorship. The business is donor-driven, which is not sustainable.

The state media are operated purely as part of the civil service, with its operating budget being provided by the government and some revenue through advertisements. The state media are therefore subsidized by the government. However, state media are poorly funded by the government, and they are secretive about how they use their funds.

The private media are mostly financed through the revenues they raise from advertising and the sale of newspapers. It is very possible that some of the private media may receive some form of funding from outside or multiple sources, but this cannot be proved. Media outlets and supporting firms in the country are at a formative stage.

The private media have many problems. They pay sales tax and income tax. The sales tax is enormous. Business at the print level is not lucrative. Companies, the government, and other institutions owe arrears and do not regularly pay on time. Business plans for the print media have yet to be developed. Some are beginning to put their accounting and finance practices in line with international standards.

Revenue sources for the state-owned television and radio stations are sponsorship, taxation, subsidies, and commercials. Advertising comprises a substantial part of air time—up to 30 minutes before the news, during intervals at news time, and for about 15 minutes after the news. The privately

owned commercial radio stations rely on commercials and sponsorship. Community radio stations rely more on sponsorship and less on commercials.

The privately owned print media outlets rely mainly on sales and advertisements and less on sponsorship. For the print media, the percentage of revenue from advertisements is higher than accepted standards. Unless sales increase or operational costs decrease, the need for more advertisements will rise. Two print media houses and the two dailies—the *Daily Observer* and the *Point*—operate websites. This is a potential source of revenue.

Advertising agencies are few, inexperienced, and weak. Most advertising arrangements are done directly through locally based agencies. However, advertising is playing an increasingly important role. For the time being, the focus is on billboards and television. Radio, the print media, and flyers also have some share. Advertising is concentrated in the urban areas.

The big companies that give out a large part of the advertisements do sometimes succeed in influencing reports concerning them.

Some panelists pointed out that advertising alone cannot give the media the funds required to survive. Perhaps this also explains why the media industry in The Gambia is still very poor. Despite the fact that the country has made some gains in relation to the financial sector, some companies have yet to realize the benefits of advertising, while at the same time the media have failed to convince the business community that advertising can help their businesses grow. Most companies feel that by advertising in a particular paper, they are doing a favor for that paper. In other words, the benefits of advertising are not yet fully realized in The Gambia.

The Gambian government does not provide any form of subsidy to the private press. Most of the panelists are skeptical of government subsidies to the media out of fear that the government will not implement them fairly and will expect favorable reports. Considering the economic state of the country and the situation of the private media houses, it would be worthwhile for the government to at least grant tax rebates on materials like newsprint, which cannot be produced locally. Instead, the government has placed heavy taxes on the importation of such materials. One panelist strongly believes that the government should be able to give subsidies to the private media, but without any form of intimidation to compromise their independence.

Market research is not the norm in The Gambia. It is mostly conducted under projects and not by the media houses. It may become apparent in call-in shows, but these are not done purposefully for research. Certain newspapers have readers' columns, and some radio stations do enquire about

their listeners' geographic locations; however, these are not done in a strategic way. In other words, media programming is not based on the needs of the people.

There is no regular collection of statistics, and the figures obtained in any survey cannot always be said to be accurate. The data are usually collected by surveys conducted by projects funded by international agencies.

The level of circulation is the prerogative of the newspaper publishers, and this can rise or fall at any time. There are no audited circulation figures to verify those presented by publishers. Newspapers in The Gambia are still very much concentrated around the capital and its environs, with few papers penetrating the hinterland. Despite the small size of the country, these papers often arrive in the hinterland at least 24 hours after publication. This is partly due to the poor road network.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Gambia Objective Score: 1.69

In The Gambia, there is no association of proprietors of media houses for either the electronic or print media. There was an attempt some years ago to form an association of newspaper publishers, but this did not succeed. There is hope that one may be set up one in the not too distant future.

The GPU, an association of journalists from all media houses, is the strongest and most active of organizations fighting for the rights and protection of journalists in the country. It has members from both the state and private media. Despite the fact that journalists in the state media shy away from the association, its membership has been growing over the years. It now has new leadership and is currently reorganizing itself so that it can better represent the interest of its members.

There are other associations with specific interests, such as the Health Journalists' Association, the Sports Journalists' Association, the Network of Human-Rights Journalists, and the Association of Young Journalists. These associations are affiliate members of the GPU, which remains the parent body of all journalists' associations in the country. An editors' forum is being established, and it is expected to endorse its constitution soon.

For the past two years, there have been suggestions that the GPU needs to put in place a regulatory body that will professionally monitor the work of journalists in The Gambia. This has yet to be fully realized.

Panelists noted that the GPU has for the past two years been keenly involved in attempts to train young journalists locally.

*Due to the government's hostile behavior toward journalists, the GPU has also found itself in and out of court, trying to defend members who found themselves in conflict with the law. At least on two occasions (Lamin Fatty and Fatou Jaw Manneh), the GPU had to pay heavy fines to protect its members from being sent to jail.*

To some extent, this has been successful, and there is a need for such training to continue in order to improve journalism standards in The Gambia.

Due to the government's hostile behavior toward journalists, the GPU has also found itself in and out of court, trying to defend members who found themselves in conflict with the law. At least on two occasions (Lamin Fatty and Fatou Jaw Manneh), the GPU had to pay heavy fines to protect its members from being sent to jail.

It is common for human-rights NGOs to condemn human-rights abuses in general terms or in other countries but not in The Gambia. NGOs tend to sit on the sidelines while journalists are being persecuted. They do not even issue statements condemning the act.

An NGO has just completed a review of all media and human-rights-related laws in The Gambia and is expected to hold a validation workshop on the issue. Recommendations will be forwarded to the executive, and a plan of action will be worked out.

## 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.

*Professionals with journalism degrees acquired them abroad and they are rarely employed by media outlets because they cannot afford to pay them, so they find their way into other institutions.*

According to Sarr, human-rights NGOs in The Gambia have failed on numerous occasions to condemn the flagrant violation of the freedom of expression and of the press. These include the arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists, detention incommunicado, torture of journalists, arson attacks on journalists and media houses, and the shooting and killing of at least two journalists. The entire NGO community has not issued any statement on this, including the Gambia Bar Association. However, there are some associations, like Action Aid, who, despite not being able to issue statements, have supported the journalists' union financially in times of need.

The NGOs do work with international free-speech organizations, which are concentrated around the capital. There is currently no local organization that funds the defense of journalists on trial. Only the GPU has been active in pursuing cases of unlawful detention and supporting its members morally and financially in their defense. One NGO has occasionally accompanied the GPU leadership in meeting the authorities in pursuit of cases of journalists who have been murdered, assaulted, or detained, or who have disappeared or encountered arson attacks. An NGO is being founded that will promote the profession and set up a defense fund. The GPU has similar plans. However, organizations such as IFJ, the Media Foundation for West Africa, the Media Defense Program of the Open Society Initiative, and the Doha Centre have helped to pay legal fees for some court cases concerning journalists.

The availability of training institutions offering journalism or mass communication is still a serious concern in The Gambia. Recently, one or two institutions have surfaced, including one that claims to be affiliated with Stanford University. Most of the panelists expressed concern that there is currently no school of journalism and no degree course on journalism offered in The Gambia. Two institutions now offer training on journalism at the certificate and diploma levels. Professionals with journalism degrees acquired them abroad and they are rarely employed by media outlets because they cannot afford to pay them, so they find their way into other institutions. The University of The Gambia has not yet started any program on journalism despite repeated calls. There are also

indications that Insight Training Institute, in collaboration with the Media Agenda, will soon start a training program. Opportunities exist for students to study journalism abroad; however, these are hard to come by, as scholarships are largely politicized.

Short-term training of journalists range from one- or two-week workshops to courses that last up to three months. There have been one or two one-week workshops on basic journalism, but many of these deal with health (particularly HIV/AIDS), youth, children, gender, and human rights. Some media houses also conduct in-house training. All these forms of training, though inadequate, have been very useful and have affected the performance of journalists. Journalists at the state-owned media do have the opportunity for short-term training that lasts for three months or more.

The importation and sale of newsprint are in the hands of private businesses. They are nonpolitical and not directly restricted. The problem is that the importers sell at forbidding prices because of the desire to maximize profits. This impinges on the viability of the print media. Taxation on imported newsprint is another problem.

Independent media are discriminated against when it comes to printing. Some printers are afraid to print for them. The state-owned printing press refuses to print for the private media, which was a bigger problem before privatization.

Each of the four leading newspapers has its own printing machine and prints its own newspaper. They also rely on each other as backup in cases of breakdown. The newspapers with lesser circulation rely on these press houses to print their newspapers.

Channels of newspaper distribution are in private hands—vendors who roam the streets or stand at strategic points to sell newspapers. Distribution is handled by individuals who see it as a business that provides them their daily bread. They flock to the media houses to collect their supply of newspapers at a reduced price, which they sell themselves for the cover price. Supermarkets, bookshops, hotels, and other shops also sell newspapers. In smaller towns and cities, individual distributors and some shops sell newspapers. However, due to the fact that all the newspapers are based in the greater Banjul area, coupled with the poor transportation system, low readership and the financial constraints of the media houses, distribution of newspapers is very limited. There are no distribution firms. One or two attempts have been made to establish them, but without success.

Each radio station has its own transmitter. Internet service providers channel their data through the state-owned service provider. One service provider claims that it has a direct satellite link with that bypasses the state provider.

---

---

## 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 director, Women for Democracy and Development, Serrekunda

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

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

## Moderator

**Amie Joof**, executive director, FAMEDEV= Inter Africa Network for Women, Media, Gender, and Development; coordinator, Radio Alternative Voice for Gambians, Dakar, Senegal

## Assistants

**Momodou Lamin Jaiteh and Sheriff Bojang Jr.**, producers/reporters, Radio Alternative Voice for Gambians, Dakar, Senegal

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