
The local media continue to operate largely unmolested, though functional independence of the press would require a combination of legal and economic safeguards that are lacking currently.

LIBERIA

After 30 years of civil strife, beginning with the coup d'état of 1980 and the subsequent civil upheaval of the 1990s and early 2000s, Liberia is beginning to experience relative stability and modest progress. The current government, headed by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, initiated reforms geared toward boosting economic recovery, political reconciliation, and national development. However, serious challenges, including widespread corruption, a lack of transparency, and low public accountability have hampered progress. In 2008, the government unveiled its Poverty Reduction Strategy, designed to stimulate the national recovery process. But the relatively slow pace of implementation, coupled with the harsh economic reality, has left skeptics doubting the strategy's efficacy.

These attempts at reforms are being made as Liberia emerges from the relics of successive autocratic administrations, during which the government severely restrained fundamental human rights—notably the right to free expression. Still, the country continues to see respect for free speech and fundamental rights grow. The local media continue to operate largely unmolested, though functional independence of the press would require a combination of legal and economic safeguards that are lacking currently. The government's failure to date to pass three press-related bills, introduced in the parliament two years ago, is telling. Two of the bills (the Freedom of Information [FOI] Act and the Broadcast Regulatory Commission Act) appear poised to pass, unlike the Act Seeking to Transform the State Broadcaster to a Public Service Broadcaster. While Liberia's president publicly backed the FOI Act, she has remained conspicuously silent on the Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS) Act. The government of China recently invested more than \$1,000,000 to help LBS achieve a national footprint.

Meanwhile, the general economic situation in which the media is forced to operate has scarcely improved. Salaries of most journalists remain perennially low, even at state-run media outlets. Although government and international data point to overall economic growth, especially at the macroeconomic level, that growth has not affected the media significantly. In fact, the weak business environment, coupled with poor management, has largely stunted professional growth in the media.

However, Liberian media have made some important gains, including the rise of community radio stations across the country, serving to mitigate the urban-rural imbalance. The Internet is emerging as a vast source of news and information, in spite of the high cost, while the proliferation of mobile phones has added a new and powerful dimension to communication. Mobile phone companies have introduced digital EDGE technology, making the Internet accessible in some rural areas.

Overall, the second MSI study in Liberia indicates stagnation. The slowdown is especially concerning given the investment made in 2008-2009 toward improving media conditions, particularly with the level and scale of training programs. The most serious problems are reflected in the dips in Objective 2 (professional journalism) and Objective 4 (business management).

LIBERIA AT A GLANCE

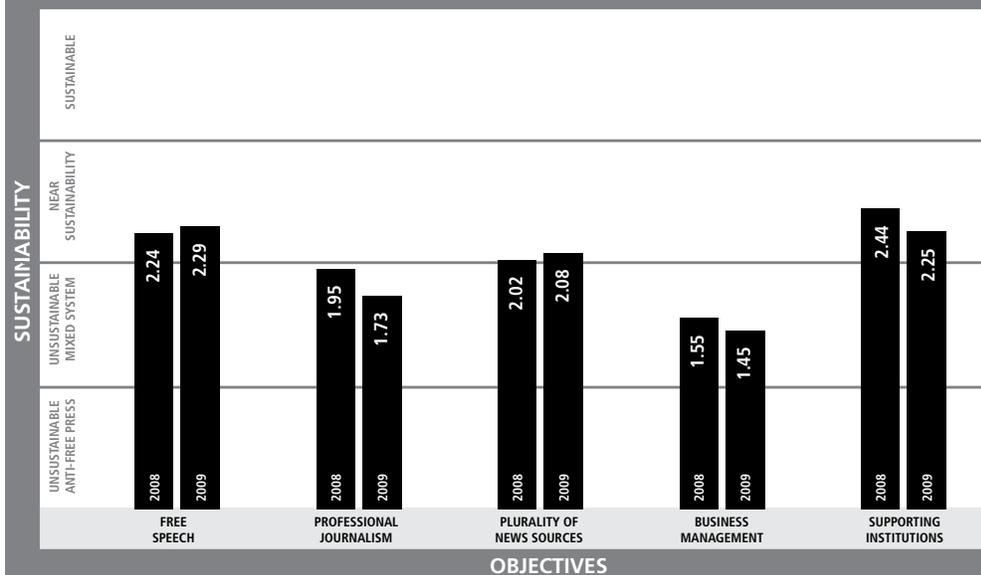
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,441,790 (July 2010 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Monrovia
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Kpelle 20.3%, Bassa 13.4%, Grebo 10%, Gio 8%, Mano 7.9%, Kru 6%, Lorma 5.1%, Kissi 4.8%, Gola 4.4%, other 20.1% indigenous African 95%, other 5% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 85.6%, Muslim 12.2%, traditional 0.6%, other 0.2%, none 1.4% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English 20% (official), some 20 ethnic group languages, few of which can be written or used in correspondence (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$648 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$290 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **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 (state-owned but largely not functioning)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 20,000 (2008 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: 2.29

After a series of brutal, repressive governments that rejected press freedom and free speech, Liberia's current laws reflect international standards and recognize free speech as an inherent right. The panelists acknowledged that the current Liberian government has shown unprecedented tolerance of freedom of speech and of the press, although a number of instances call into question its commitment to promoting these freedoms. While Liberians can now point to constitutional safeguards that promote and protect free speech, numerous statutes contravene the spirit and intent of those provisions. The regulatory power of the state inherently subjects the media to manipulation, if not direct interference and control.

The 2009 Objective 1 scores reflect very slight increase over the 2008 MSI study, though much is still left to be done. As seen in last year's MSI as well, Liberia's level of free speech and tolerance to media is appreciable, but a lack of editorial and financial independence still inhibit media freedom. As Estella Nelson of the Liberia Women Media Action Committee put it, "Presently, there is a general sense of respect for media freedom. Nevertheless, there are still reasons for concern, in terms of the degree of freedom and effect, taking into consideration reports of restrictions from some sector ministries on the publication of materials."

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.

Tete Karneh, formerly of the state radio broadcaster, ELBC, and now manager of the Liberia Women Democracy Radio, disagreed. "The legal and social norms do not protect or promote free speech and access to public information," she said.

Norris Tweah, deputy minister of information, offered a different perspective. "I think the current laws provide the environment for the practice of free speech. However, several cases reveal that it is a common practice among some journalist to ignore or abuse the legal framework," he said. Tete Karneh, formerly of the state radio broadcaster, ELBC, and now manager of the Liberia Women Democracy Radio, disagreed. "The legal and social norms do not protect or promote free speech and access to public information," she said. "Even if they exist, are they practiced? We have to be cautious and vigilant in detecting when lip service is paid to important issues, else we unknowingly join in the practice. We do hold the belief that there is a little light at the end of the tunnel, and we need to work continuously for things to change for the better."

As last year's MSI indicated, the panelists agreed that the procedure for granting licenses still reflects a measure of fairness and freedom from political considerations. But the panelists were also of the view that passage of the pending Broadcast Regulatory Act (which has been before the National Legislature, along with two other laws meant to liberalize the media sector) presents the best chance for ensuring the entrenchment of a culture of freedom of expression.

Since the inception of the current government, entry into the media market has generally been open to all who meet the basic minimum requirements stipulated by law. Panelists knew of no special tax levies on media institutions that differ from those of other comparable businesses. Any fully registered company that desires to run a media business is permitted to do so; it must simply follow the procedures for establishing a newspaper, radio, or television station by referring to the appropriate authorities. These procedures cut across the media sector.

Arguments continue in Liberia on whether to provide the media with economic incentives in the form of tax breaks and duty exemptions for print and broadcast equipment. Over the past year, stakeholders have made very little movement on this issue, least of all with regard to print media, although

The panelists agreed that over the last four years, attacks against journalists have subsided, although state operatives have perpetrated a few excesses against the media.

different interest groups have drafted and validated a community radio policy. On the policy front, the publication of a Media Assistance Strategy¹ (MAS) for the country has advanced the case for more support to Liberia's media sector.

The panelists agreed that over the last four years, attacks against journalists have subsided, although state operatives have perpetrated a few excesses against the media. The Center for Media Studies and Peace Building chronicled attacks against journalists in 2009, detailing harassment and physical attacks by police; security personnel; and in one case, the president *pro tempore* of the Liberian Senate on journalists.² The panelists agreed that such incidents have no official backing. The panelists also mentioned the chief justice of Liberia seizing a journalist's camera, and a similar incident involving police officers at a government non-military facility. Karneh summed it up when she stated that the "media is free, but its feet have been shackled."

Regarding preferential legal treatment for the state media, the panelists noted that the constitution has clear guarantees enshrined in Article 15 (d): "Access to state-owned media shall not be denied because of any disagreement with or dislike of the ideas expressed. Denial of such access may be challenged in a court of competent jurisdiction." Despite such assurances, it is widely understood that news deemed anti-government is forbidden on the state-owned radio, ELBC. The retention of this repression, a carryover from past Liberian official culture, has baffled many observers and journalists. Peter Quaqua, president of the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), agreed that the situation is not ideal, but insisted that it is not beyond salvage. He commented, "The public media have editorial independence—of course, not by law, but custom. This is why efforts are underway to transform the state radio into a public service broadcaster."

Some laws lingering on the books grossly undermine freedom of speech. Notable examples include the "Criminal

Malevolence" and "Criminal Libel" statutes, which public officials can invoke when they feel defamed by a publication—although until recently, the government has been reluctant to use these statutes. Libel, especially against public officials, continues to be treated as a criminal offense in the country, even though most members of the current government (including the president) once opposed such laws staunchly. Ironically, in 2009 the president brought civil and criminal libel suits against two tabloids: *New Broom* and *Plain Truth*. Both cases are pending. The outcomes will provide an informative window on how the courts will use these criminal statutes, which are obviously in conflict with constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of expression.

While the government has done absolutely nothing to redress the situation, the state has officially invoked these anti-speech/sedition laws and criminal libel charges in responding to unfavorable and critical media coverage of government activities—and the activities of the president in particular. Reflecting these concerns, the panelists scored the indicator assessing the handling of libel cases quite low, in the unsustainable, mixed-system range.

While currently the media enjoys unprecedented freedom in reporting news about government activities, it lacks the enabling operating environment for accessing vital information about the performance of public sector institutions. For example, in the Liberian public sector, it is common for government ministries and agencies to place unwarranted restrictions on media, especially following unfavorable press coverage of their activities. These public entities have instituted measures ranging from gag orders on their officials to outright refusal of access to public records. At times, as in the case of the Ministry of Gender and Development, these ministries restrict the publication of matters relating to the general work of their agencies. The aforementioned ministry is reputed to have decreed that no one is allowed to publish any material on issues related to gender without reference to or approval from the ministry. Though isolated, this example makes a strong case for the timely passage of the draft Freedom of Information Act.

The former news editor of the *New Democrat*, Othello Garblah, commented on the factors affecting information accessibility. "Over the years, access to information here has not had any legal backing, especially in the statutes, although there is a considerable level of free speech practiced today. I think another serious problem is that state and private institutions do not keep records. Even the communication lines between heads of ministries and agencies to their media relations officers are problematic," he said. For all of these reasons, the indicator assessing access to public information received very low scores, in the unsustainable, mixed-system range.

¹The Media Assistance Strategy, published by Humanity United and TrustAfrica, is an integrated development plan that covers the period 2009-2014 and captures the most pressing challenges facing the media. The strategy contains clear objectives, tangible performance targets, a monitoring evaluation plan, and a working budget.

²Intimidation: The Renewal of Censorship in Liberia. Center for Media Studies and Peace Building; 2009.

The panelists agreed largely that Liberian news media freely make use of international news sources, especially in covering international news items. Whether it is the relay of international news items on local radio or television or the culling and publication of articles from online newspapers/magazines, no local media institutions have reported government harassment for publishing or broadcasting such materials. But Joe W. Mulbah, professor of mass communication at the University of Liberia, argued that the high expense still restricts local media's access to these sources.

James Dorbor Sao, who manages Radio Super Bongese in Suakoko, in central Liberia, shared his view that entry into the journalism profession in Liberia is truly "free and unrestricted." Karneh agreed, but added that PUL is moving toward crafting standards for entry into the profession. Joe W. Mulbah argued that the "practice of journalism in any democracy should be unregulated [and] unrestricted, and it should not be tied to membership of any organization."

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Liberia Objective Score: 1.73

The score for this objective dipped from its 2008 score. Indicator 5 (pay levels for journalists) scored at the low end of the scale. All other indicators fell within a half point of the objective's average score.

Though the panelists reported some improvements in news reporting and news gathering, overall quality is below par, with low wages and the weak economic base of the media

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).

Nelson concurred that, "The quality of journalism in Liberia is still below average, despite improvements in the treatment of issues covered in the media. There are strong indications that editorial functions of the media are influenced by competition for audiences, leading to unwarranted sensationalized reporting and neglect of the social responsibility to peace."

frequently cited as causes. Nelson concurred that, "The quality of journalism in Liberia is still below average, despite improvements in the treatment of issues covered in the media. There are strong indications that editorial functions of the media are influenced by competition for audiences, leading to unwarranted sensationalized reporting and neglect of the social responsibility to peace." She said that this shortcoming is reflected in the media's reporting on the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report.

But Garblah said that the root of the problem is the environment in which the media are forced to work. "The conditions under which many journalists work are very difficult, and as such, it hinders them from producing their best. In terms of logistics and compensation, [Liberian] journalists are amongst the least equipped and worst paid in the world. This has a corresponding effect on the quality of professionals needed in the system, and as a result, affects the quality of output. Trained journalists desiring better pay often tend to seek greener pastures with NGOs. In my view, I will say the standard of journalism here is falling."

C. Winnie Saywah, a reporter with the *Inquirer*, attributes the problem to failures in all aspects of the media sector. "When one speaks of professional standards or quality in the profession, it only brings smiles of confusion to me. Quality should speak to all aspects of the profession. Quality in infrastructure, quality in level of employees, quality in employer, quality in salaries, quality in production, quality in gathering of information, and quality to the profession (policy). For me, not one news medium meets all of the above professional standards of quality. If we should agree, we will say, someday, we will get there."

Barshel M. Kiawu, the station manager of Radio Piso, in the picturesque coastal town of Robertspport, adopted a more optimistic view. He said, "Journalism is improving in the country. There are many professional journalists, and also

Joe W. Mulbah shared his opinion that the bleak economic realities have contributed greatly to the media's ethical transgressions; he said that this, coupled "with untrained individuals being elevated to positions of editors," has severely tarnished the image of journalism in the country.

high-quality journalists that Liberia can depend on by this time—but professional journalism depends on how well they are paid or taken care of.”

In response to the public outcry against journalists' unprofessional tendencies, PUL and other media development organizations continue to reinforce ethics and professional standards. PUL made the international code of ethics for journalists a part of its constitution, but, as last year's MSI underlined, there is little evidence that it is widely circulated. Recently, PUL launched an effort to disseminate the code to Liberian journalists.

As noted in last year's MSI study, some degree of self-censorship persists, but in recent years, it has not been attributable to the fear of state interference or retribution. Since the 2005 democratic elections, journalists have been free to cover nearly all news. However, journalists sometimes practice "civic journalism"—taking extra care when reporting on conflict-sensitive issues, out of concern for Liberia's fragile peace.

The media situation in Liberia can be described best as emerging. Media institutions and journalists in the country follow mainly political news and events that promise to sell papers, often at the expense of key issues such as development and the environment.

Again this year, the panelists expressed concern that the pay levels of journalists are insufficient to deter corruption. They noted that as recently as 2004, some media institutions paid staff members around \$30 per month. Journalists in urban areas receive better pay than rural community journalists, who largely work as volunteers. The already-low standards of pay have been exacerbated by the effects of the global financial meltdown on the Liberian economy, and the panelists suggested that low salaries play a significant role in tempting the journalists to bend to unacceptable ethical standards. Joe W. Mulbah shared his opinion that the bleak economic realities have contributed greatly to the media's ethical transgressions; he said that this, coupled "with

untrained individuals being elevated to positions of editors," has severely tarnished the image of journalism in the country.

As noted in the last MSI study, broadcast outlets in the country devote about 60 percent of their airtime to entertainment programming. LMC's media monitoring program arrived at the same conclusion regarding the broadcast sector's time allocations in 2009. The imbalance continues to be even more pronounced with community radio stations. The LMC media monitoring study noted also that the majority of newspapers in the county allocate more space to advertisements than news stories. Some newspapers, especially those devoted to sports reporting, simply plagiarize the contents of web-based sports news services. This practice can be chalked up to commercial motivations, as these newspapers depend on sales and advertisements to stay afloat. The LMC intends to launch a system for measuring media quality through a project called the "Media Quality Barometer," which TrustAfrica and Humanity United will support jointly.

Although most local radio stations and newspapers, and a few community-based media, have moved to embrace technological advances, many media houses still rely on old, outdated equipment. Many media institutions lack the resources to ensure quality production, and those benefiting from programs to develop the media sector may face serious challenges in terms of sustainability.

Niche reporting has not yet taken off, largely due to low professional capacity. However, LMC and the Canada-based Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) jointly manage a project aimed at increasing human rights and governance reporting. The project is training journalists and editors across the country, and providing prizes to reward stellar efforts.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Liberia Objective Score: 2.08

Most indicators scored within a half a point of the objective score, with two exceptions. Indicators 2 (citizens' access to domestic and international media) received the highest score, coming in about three-quarters of a point higher. Indicator 3 (state or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum) improved significantly from last year, reflecting the panelists' belief that state media is gradually doing a better job reflecting a variety of views.

Since the end of the civil war in 2003, the media sector has seen an explosion of privately owned institutions across the media spectrum. Liberia has roughly 38 newspapers, although only about 18 publish with regularity. In addition, around

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.

50 registered radio stations, including community radios, operate across the country. The national radio and television services that the government owns and manages have been resuscitated, with support from the government of China. Liberia has four commercial television stations, none of which provide national coverage. The television channel of LBS plans to provide national coverage in the future. People in the capital enjoy disproportionate access to media sources compared to their rural counterparts, but the proliferation of community radio stations across the country is mitigating this imbalance.

The panelists agreed that the media provide both local and national coverage, though the readership and penetration of print media is very low. The panel identified three reasons: low literacy levels among Liberians, the struggling economy, and poor distribution and circulation of newspapers in most parts of the country. As a result, most of the population relies on radio to meet their information and entertainment needs. Three of the country's radio stations operate some form of shortwave broadcast, though the trend is toward operating FM networks capable of a nationwide reach. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and LBS enjoy such nationwide FM reach, thanks to a network of relay sites.

UNMIL Radio is Liberia's most popular radio station in terms of listenership. The station provides news in simple Liberian English and the various vernaculars, and has close to national penetration. However, the state broadcaster has made significant inroads into UNMIL's monopoly, since the Chinese government assistance program boosted its nationwide capacity. LMC's 2009 survey on information perception found

"I would not say plurality of news outlets provides the citizens with credible, reliable, and objective news," Karneh said. "Yes, if you listen to all of them in a day, you will get the whole story. We all report from or with different interests."

that in Liberia's different communities, community radio stations draw the most listeners.

The Internet is also being popularized as a huge source of news and information, in spite of the high cost, and the introduction of mobile phones has added a new and powerful dimension to communication. Internet access is free and unrestricted as well. In the last year, Internet penetration levels have extended beyond Monrovia, with two of the country's largest mobile operators introducing EDGE technology on their networks, along with mobile Internet connectivity to most populated regions of Liberia and some rural parts of the country. Even with this increased availability, Internet usage rates are still very low, as the cost of access through the mobile network is out of reach for the vast majority of Liberians. The three mobile phone companies (LiberCell, Cellcom, and Lone Star) that allow Internet usage on their networks charge \$50 per month, \$60 per month, and \$1 per hour, respectively. With the average minimum wage theoretically set at \$100 per month, many Liberians cannot afford these charges.

Data is very scant on the actual number of Liberian Internet news websites, though an Internet search identifies roughly 21 web-based news outlets that target the Liberian diaspora. One of these, *Front Page Africa*, began as a newspaper publication within Liberia in 2009. All major Liberian daily newspapers continue to maintain web versions of their daily editions. The government also owns websites targeting diaspora Liberians. Three local radio stations (UNMIL, the state-owned ELBC, and Star Radio) maintain websites and provide some form of their content online. Among these, Star Radio maintains the most updated site. In addition, in 2009, some US-based Liberians established and now operate an online radio station devoted to Liberian news and information.

Blogging is still in its infancy, with very few members of the population taking up the habit. This low level of interest is blamed squarely on limited Internet access and the population's low literacy rate.

Quaqua was very critical of the state-owned media's approach to hearing alternative voices. "The public media are just not open to alternative views and comments, and journalists working there are forced to conform to the policy. For instance, once the state radio's director general released a memo stating that no journalists should report corruption stories relating to government officials."

Signals from the four operational television stations are confined basically to the capital city and its immediate environs. Though the majority of Liberians live in the capital, television viewing remains a luxury enjoyed only by a small proportion of the population. These stations have very little programming of their own, mainly relaying foreign content, with African soap operas and series dominating the channels.

All of the panelists acknowledged the boom in media coverage across the country, especially in Monrovia, and most agreed that the plurality of news sources provides a solid platform for diversity and choice, and limits the state capacity to restrict, restrain, or unduly regulate the media. However, several panelists doubted whether the increase in plurality has been of much service to the community. "I would not say plurality of news outlets provides the citizens with credible, reliable, and objective news," Karneh said. "Yes, if you listen to all of them in a day, you will get the whole story. We all report from or with different interests."

Saywah, too, said that she is not convinced fully of the value of plurality in the country. "For Liberia at present, our society is not mature when it comes to acceptance and objectivity," she said. "Therefore, multiple news sources are just otherwise used to spread disbelief and misinformation. Even some news media managers are not well informed...[and even] with our multiple news sources, we have failed to provide the citizens reliable and objective news and information. However, I am optimistic that things will improve, provided we keep our focus and devote some attention to underreported issues and areas, especially in the rural parts of the country."

Jasper Cumme, of the civil society organization AGENDA, agreed. "There are multiple news sources in the country... [but] they are saying the same thing," he said, adding that journalists in Liberia are heavily partisan. And according to Hector Z. Mulbah, "Multiple news sources don't provide citizens with reliable, objective news. The multiplicity of

news sources does not in any way guarantee reliability and objectivity. The cost associated with disseminating news from these has the propensity to deny citizens' information from these sources. Internet, newspapers, television, and radio stations are sources of information, but how many citizens have the purchasing power? This points to the fact that access to domestic and international information is restricted: restricted because of affordability problems."

Access to foreign media in the country remains free and open to everyone. The government imposes no restrictions, though the cost of access is prohibitive. Quaqua said, "There are plenty of news outlets in Liberia, so it is not clear yet whether the government has the will and the means to restrict citizens' access to media—domestic or international. Probably the only restriction would be to refuse to give access to information (on the local level)."

LBS and the *New Liberian*, published by the Ministry of Information, have served perpetually as the mouthpieces of whichever party is in power. While the radio and television services of LBS are now functional, the *New Liberian* has remained abandoned over the last few years. Despite the improvement in this year's score for the public media's reflection of views across the political spectrum, Quaqua was very critical of the state-owned media's approach to hearing alternative voices. "The public media are just not open to alternative views and comments, and journalists working there are forced to conform to the policy. For instance, once the state radio's director general released a memo stating that no journalists should report corruption stories relating to government officials. The state-owned media seems more like a propaganda tool for Liberia's president and the ruling party."

At present, Liberia has no independent news agencies servicing the media. Attempts to resuscitate the state-run Liberia News Agency (LINA) failed to take off properly over the past year. The agency's correspondents assigned to various parts of the country continue to languish in Monrovia. LINA has not truly operated in Liberia since the early stages of the country's civil war in the 1990s.

All independent broadcast media outlets, especially radio stations, produce some form of their own programming. But they produce very few news programs; most are entertainment-based programs or relays of foreign content—a problem that is especially acute with television stations.

Media ownership in Liberia is open to anyone who meets the requirements and registration procedures stipulated by the government. Ownership does not tend to be concentrated in the hands of a few individuals. The newspaper industry

continues to be run with sole proprietorships, owned and operated largely by journalists themselves; while television and radio stations are owned mainly by business people, politicians, or partnership interests. As the *Inquirer's* Saywah explained, the ownership of a media outlet reflects its editorial policies. "Look at the *Inquirer*, for instance, where stories are carried on the basis of consensus—especially critical stories reflecting the editorial independence of the paper, which is owned by the employees. Though the lack of external assistance has meant limited opportunities for growth and expansion, the paper has survived relying on sales and advertisements intake, staying afloat for over 18 years."

Given the diversity of media outlets and the convergence of political viewpoints, irrespective of tribal lineage, the panelists said the media show no institutionalized preferential treatment for tribal or religious interests on the national scale, especially not in the post-transitional era. No one group or interest enjoys media dominance, and radio and television stations in the country include daily news programs in different languages.

Gender-sensitive news continues to receive a high degree of coverage in the Liberian media. Over the last year, the media have devoted a fair amount of airtime and newspaper pages to the coverage of rape, domestic violence, and other forms of crimes against women and children. Training programs and enhanced awareness, promoted by the LMC and the Journalists for Human Rights Program under the British Governance and Transparency Fund, have especially helped these efforts.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Liberia Objective Score: 1.45

As with the 2008 MSI panel, Objective 4 received the lowest overall average—even slipping slightly from last year. Indicators 1 (efficient management of media outlets) and 2 (media receive revenue from multitude of sources) received the highest score for this objective, about a half point higher than the overall objective score. At the other end of the scale, indicator 7 (broadcast ratings and circulation figures) received the lowest score, more than half a point less than the overall objective score.

The Liberia Media Assistance Strategy addresses many of the factors that contributed to this objective's low score. According to the MAS, the media lacks an adequate technical base and other resources, which hinders the media's efforts to offer professional development programs. The poor conditions under which journalists are forced to work

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.

compromise journalistic ethics.³ Recognizing that private media are not as strong, viable, diversified, and financially independent as they might be, the MAS proposes various media business development programs.⁴

Tweah offered a different perspective, saying, "The environment provides the conditions [and] regulations for the establishment of independent media into full businesses. The level of management is mostly left to the organizers, while there are little regulations expected to be followed under the state and other professional bodies." However, Kiawu blamed the substandard business conditions on media managers. "Independent media are not well managed, because the managers are not fair to their workers," he said. "Some of them do not even have a bank account. Some do not have good management teams. Some of these stations receive a lot of advertising revenue, but do not reinvest it for the betterment of their institutions and the staff."

The panelists agreed upon the need for solid investment to help develop the print and broadcast sectors. However, cumbersome lending procedures and thick bureaucracy deter investors. As stated in the MAS, "Where investment opportunities exist, collateral requirements are 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.

³Arogundade, L. and Randall, L. Liberia Media Assistance Strategy; Humanity United/TrustAfrica; 2009: p.8. http://shelbygrossman.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Final_Copy_Media_Assistance_Strategy1.pdf (Accessed September 28, 2010.)

⁴ Ibid, p. 32.

Liberia has no laws or regulations governing the placement of government advertising, either—even though the government is inarguably one of the largest advertisers in the country, according to the panelists.

However, while capital infusion could bolster the industry, it is poised to make nominal impact if underlying market issues are unresolved.”

Ade Kekuleh, station manager of the Catholic Church’s Radio Veritas, said that proper management of media institutions “actually depends on the owners of the institution. When it comes to management, the independent media allow for a relative amount of editorial independence.” But Othello Garblah, formerly of the *New Democratic*, thinks that the lack of independence in media institutions is a reflection of their ownership, which impacts the management of the entities. “The management of the independent media has been a problem affecting the viability of the sector,” he said. “Most of the media outlets are owned by individuals who direct the editorial content of the institution.”

According to the MAS, some of the blame for the media’s financial management problems can be laid at the feet of the national government. “The government has the chief responsibility to create the enabling environment for the survival of the print media. In this light, government should provide economic incentives that would aid the print media in acquiring printing presses, cheaper newsprint, computers, and other useful tools of the trade. The process of placing adverts in the newspapers should be fair, open, and transparent.”

The media’s management situation in Liberia remains a reflection of the general state of the national economy. Investment activities expected to fill in the advertising void have not improved. Major foreign investors, such as Arcelor Mittal, that commenced operation in Liberia two years ago have been forced to downgrade their operations in the country because of the global economic crisis. Other medium-scale projects, like the Buchanan renewable energy production and distribution project, have yet to gain steam.

Liberia has no established or recognized advertising agencies. Vendors and procurement agents within various public and private enterprises front as agents for media outlets, paid in commissions ranging from 10 to 15 percent, depending on the volume of the contract. Few media outlets have viable

marketing units, while most newspapers rely on traditional contacts, private businesses, and a handful of political supplements. These patterns have limited the potential of the media to generate advertising opportunities—accounting for the media’s relatively weak financial standing. The panelists warned that unless a robust, sustained program is developed to provide incentives for media growth and expansion, especially capital infusion in the print sector, the industry will be unable to attract competent and credible journalists.

Liberian law has no provisions regarding government subsidizing of the media, although unsubstantiated reports have surfaced saying that some private media entities receive money from the government to serve its interests. Liberia has no laws or regulations governing the placement of government advertising, either—even though the government is inarguably one of the largest advertisers in the country, according to the panelists. The government places advertisements on a preferential basis and in seasonal newspapers that promote state policies and interests. In other instances, the government grants advertising revenue in response to critical reporting, with the intent of diluting unfavorable media content.

Media advocates have recommended that the government set up a scheme for competitive advertising. This type of system would discourage other advertisers, such as the mobile phone companies, from setting their own price levels outside the established minimum boundary. Through competition, the panelists opined, seasonal newspapers would be starved out of the market, thus providing the more viable and stable media institutions greater access to badly needed revenue and likely guaranteeing quality journalism. This policy would also ensure that advertisers cease using advertisements as weapons to discourage dissent in the media.

Karneh commented on the connections between media independence and income. “Some independent media are well managed, but editorial independence? We are not there yet,” she said. “Media institutions do receive revenue from multiple sources—government, NGOs, politicians, businesses, private individuals, and even sources outside the country—but a legitimate independent media organization should not accept support from government, especially where this would undermine the independence of the enterprise.”

Adequate market research remains a void that needs to be addressed. While the country has no independent market research firms, a number of NGOs, including LMC, offer some guidance to the media through reports they produce on consumer attitudes and perceptions of media products.

As reported in last year’s MSI, no one has made sustained efforts to measure broadcast ratings or print media

circulation. However, LMC conducted research on print media in three cities and published the findings in its *Media Reach and Penetration Study*. According to the panelists, newspaper circulation claims are accepted generally.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Liberia Objective Score: 2.25

The overall scores for this objective suffered a modest drop compared to last year's MSI. Most indicators received small reductions, but indicator 3 (supporting NGOs) received a score about a third of a point lower. Nonetheless, most indicator scores stayed within a half point of the overall objective score, the sole exception being indicator 1 (trade associations), which lagged by about two-thirds of a point.

Liberia has several active trade associations that work in the interests of media owners. Two prominent examples are the Publishers Association of Liberia and the Broadcasters Association, which have attempted—but largely failed—to keep advertising prices uniform.

The Association of Liberian Community Radios (ALICOR) serves the advocacy, lobbying, and business interests of community radio stations. The organization has also tried, with limited success, to function as an NGO and implement projects. Several organizations, both domestic and foreign, are working on building ALICOR's capacity to fill this role properly. TrustAfrica, the World Bank, LMC, and Radio Netherlands Training Center (RNTC) have offered and given assistance to the organization.

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.

PUL is the main umbrella organization for media professionals in Liberia; it provides both institutional and individual memberships. It had been operating simply as an association of journalists and was not recognized as a labor union, but recently, the Ministry of Labor granted it a permit to function as a trade union organization.

PUL is the main umbrella organization for media professionals in Liberia; it provides both institutional and individual memberships. It had been operating simply as an association of journalists and was not recognized as a labor union, but recently, the Ministry of Labor granted it a permit to function as a trade union organization. Media members hope that this will strengthen PUL's appeal for collective bargaining, improve working conditions for media personnel, and sweeten incentives to attract quality staff members. PUL is also known for its advocacy work and taking a stance on journalists' rights. In those efforts, it has joined recently with the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMSEP). The groups raise awareness on rights violations through regular alerts and the publication of a journal on media rights violations.

As part of its mandate, PUL also accredits journalists, though registration with the union is not required to practice as a journalist. Accreditation has been a contentious area for some time now, and Joe W. Mulbah expressed skepticism over this role of PUL. "Anyone should be absolutely free to practice as a journalist in any society, regardless of whether they are part of an association or not. In fact, no such institutions should exist to accredit journalists," he said.

Along with professional associations, several international and local NGOs support Liberian media. TrustAfrica, based in Dakar, Senegal, executed several projects in 2009 aimed at strengthening civil society organizations. It also helps LMC monitor media coverage of the Poverty Reduction Strategy. LMC and CEMSEP are two leading local media NGOs, and a number of other organizations contribute significantly to the landscape, in training and content production. The Liberia Media Initiative and the Institute for Media Development and Dignity are also involved actively with capacity development initiatives.

The LMC community radio project is making immense contributions across Liberia, in partnership with RNTC

Accreditation has been a contentious area for some time now, and Joe W. Mulbah expressed skepticism over this role of PUL. "Anyone should be absolutely free to practice as a journalist in any society, regardless of whether they are part of an association or not. In fact, no such institutions should exist to accredit journalists," he said.

and Journalists for Human Rights and their joint human rights reporting program. At least two organizations focus on women in the profession: the Liberia Women Action Committee (LIWOMAC) and the Media Women Center for Development and Democracy. LIWOMAC received funding from the United Nations Democracy Fund to operate a radio station devoted to women's programming. With technical support from LMC, the FM station Liberia Women Democracy Radio has started broadcasting.

Joe W. Mulbah is not entirely pleased with the work of the support organizations, however, and insisted that they do not go far enough. "While it is true that some NGOs provide technical training and meager financial support, it is not sufficient to meet the professional interests of the media. The community radio sector is a classic example of this situation. Most community stations across the country lack the kind of support required to function professionally. As a result, the stations do not provide their listeners with the kind of information and programming desired."

Three universities in Liberia grant mass communication degrees; that number has not changed since the 2008 MSI study. Considered the premier degree-granting journalism program in the country, the University of Liberia attracts the most journalism students, followed by African Methodist Episcopal University and the United Methodist University. Cuttington University, a private school located in central Liberia, launched a media program in 2009 that includes a television and radio broadcasting component, but it does not grant a degree. The University of Liberia, which runs LUX FM, is the only other university that offers broadcasting as part of its program.

Despite the professional academic training opportunities available to the Liberian media sector, standards have not improved greatly. The negative toll cast over the country

by 14 years of civil war cannot be erased in a short time, panelists said. However, they expressed hope that with some improvement to the curricula of these institutions, and better training for instructors, these programs could become strong catalysts to bring about the desired change.

Various organizations provide short-term training programs for the media. Usually, these programs are supported by international development organizations and implemented by local partners. The Christian Media Center and LBS run medium-term courses for journalists, but they account for a small fraction of students compared to the recognized universities. Furthermore, Quaqua said, "There isn't any shortage of short-term training across the country; there are plenty taking place almost every month, free of charge. The question, however, is whether or not these multiple trainings are making the desired impact on the performance of journalists."

Karneh, too, questioned current training programs and called for a new track. "I think we have had enough short term-trainings. More needs to be done to promote long-term trainings and practice, which really helps. Innovation should be the new target in providing training," she said. Kiawu suggested that the solution of the problem lies in external exposure. "The government of Liberia needs to create opportunities for journalists (scholarships) so that they can go abroad for training," he said.

Printing facilities are private, and serve everyone capable of paying for the service. Only two media institutions, the *Daily Observer* and the *New Democrat*, own printing facilities. Quaqua challenged the idea that the government steers clear of the printing sector, however. "Yes, printing is a huge private commercial activity, but it is not free of government interference... There was recent friction between the Ministry of Information and the press union over the printing of two newspapers; the ministry had warned printing houses not to print, for allegedly violating its regulations."

While the source of newsprint is private and basically apolitical, the high import duties charged by the government play a large role in making the cost of printing very high. To address some of these concerns, LMC is leading a proposal for the development and launch of a newspaper printing cooperative, expected to attract five newspapers in a joint production, distribution, and circulation partnership program.

It is generally accepted that media distribution networks are in private hands, apolitical, and not restricted by the government.

List of Panel Participants

C. Winnie Saywah, reporter, *Inquirer*, Monrovia

Joe W. Mulbah, professor of mass communication, University of Liberia, Monrovia

J. Dorbor Sao, station manager, Super Bongese, Gbarnga

Othello Garblah, freelance news editor, Monrovia

Hector Mulbah, station manager, Radio Gbezohn, Buchanan

Tetee Karneh, station manager, Liberia Women Democracy Radio, Monrovia

Ade Wede Kekuleh, station manager, Radio Veritas Monrovia

Barshel Kiawu, station manager, Radio Piso, Robertsport

Peter Quaqua, president, Press Union of Liberia, Monrovia

Estella Nelson, executive director, Liberia Women Action Committee, Monrovia

Jasper Cumme, executive director, AGENDA, Monrovia

Norris Tweah, deputy minister, Ministry of Information, Monrovia

Margin Kerkulah, journalist, Community Radio, Monrovia

Moderator and Author

Lamii Kpargo, coordinator, Liberia Media Center, Monrovia

The Liberia study was coordinated by, and conducted in partnership with, the Liberia Media Center, Monrovia.