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MAURITANIA

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania, a former French colony, gained its independence on November 28, 1960. From 1965 to 1978, this country that borders the Arab Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa was ruled by a single-party regime controlled by Mokhtar Ould Daddah's Mauritanian People's Party. After Ould Daddah was deposed by the military on July 10, 1978, the country fell into an unprecedented cycle of political turmoil and coups.

In the 1980s, the first multiparty elections were nevertheless held, and with the promulgation of a 1991 law on press freedom, a free press, in Arabic and French, began to blossom. However, freedom of the press proved fleeting, as the regime of the time began to censor the independent press—particularly those titles that balked at accepting the establishment line.

In June 2006, soon after another coup and democratic transition, the 1991 constitution was amended and put to a referendum. Major changes were initiated in the media sector, led by the official establishment of the National Consultative Commission for the Reform of the Press, Radio, and Television. To help the reforms along, the sector was to be regulated from then on by an October 2006 press law, which repealed the extremely controversial ordinance of July 25, 1991. The new law authorized the publication of newspapers based on a simple statement before a court, set forth the principle of state assistance to the press, and created a regulatory media body, the High Authority for the Press, Radio, and Television (HAPA). For the Mauritanian press, it was as if spring had come to the desert.

In March 2007, Mauritians elected Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi as the new president. The elections were judged transparent by observers and by the international community. However, after leading the country for 15 months, Abdallahi's regime was hit by a political and institutional crisis, and internal dissent. On August 6, 2008, Abdallahi was overthrown in a coup d'état led by a sacked former general, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, and two of his fellow officers. He set up the High Council of State to lead the country. However, he was put under strong pressure by the democratic opposition and the international community, which both called for the constitutional order to be restored. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz finally gave up some power by accepting the International Contact Group's crisis plan, which had been patched together in Dakar. The crisis plan included presidential elections in July 2009. Aziz won, with more than 52 percent of the vote.

A notable change in the landscape of the Mauritanian media is the growing use of the Internet and blogging—there is even a Union of Mauritanian Bloggers. These activities have attracted the attention of the authorities, and in 2009, two cyberjournalists tied to the online news website taqadoumy.com were arrested, and the website was shut down for 24 hours. The incident exposed a legal vacuum to protect the rights of online journalists.

MAURITANIA AT A GLANCE

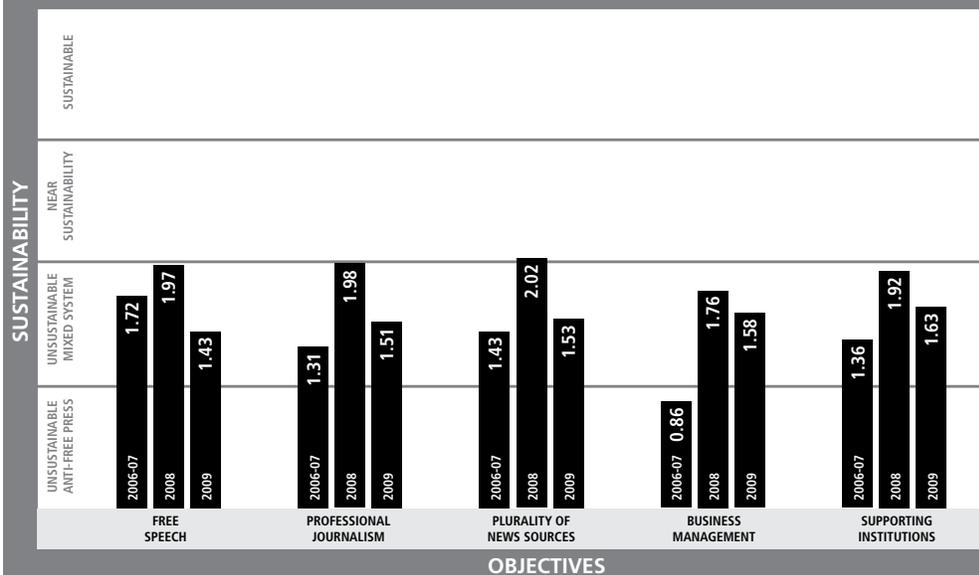
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,205,060 (July 2010 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Nouakchott
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** N/A
- > **Religions (% of population):** 100% Muslim (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** Arabic (official and national), Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof (all national languages), French, Hassaniya (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$3.159 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$1,960 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 51.2% (male 59.5%, female 43.4%) (2000 census est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (since August 5, 2009)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 97 (67 in Arabic, 29 in French, 1 in English); Radio Stations: 3; Television: 2 public channels; 1 private
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top four by circulation: *Le Calame*, *L'Éveil Hebdo*, *La Tribune*, *L'Authentique*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Mauritanian News Agency, Agence Nouakchott d'Information
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 45,000 (2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: MAURITANIA



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

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.43

The score for this objective dropped dramatically from the 2008 MSI. Several components of media freedom suffered as a result of the political turmoil, as evidenced by lower scores for indicators 2 (media licensing), 3 (market entry), 4 (attacks on journalists), 5 (legal guarantees of editorial independence for state media), and 7 (access to information). No indicator scored so badly as to lag behind the objective score by more than half a point, but then no indicator scored more than half a point above the objective score, either.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Mauritanian constitution. Article 10 clearly guarantees all citizens the freedom of opinion and of thought, and the freedom of expression. However, according to the panelists, the legislative and regulatory framework of the information and communication sector in Mauritania proved unable to keep up with the rapid development of the sector, and that enabled the authorities to control it better.

Laws or regulations related to the freedom of speech and communication had been promulgated over the past 20 years. A law passed in 1994 regulates certain public activities in the radio and television field, while a 1999 law governs all telecommunication activities. Some of the current legal and constitutional provisions are harmonized with international law and conventions protecting journalists and the freedom

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.

Seydi Moussa Camara, editor-in-chief at the weekly La Nouvelle Expression, said there is still little public support for free speech and the right to information.

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of expression, but a 2006 law criminalized offenses committed by the press. In the view of the panelists, the legal and social protections that journalists and media and communication professionals were supposed to have are inadequate in theory, and in practice hardly applied at all. A law on private radio and television, sketched out between 2006 and 2008, was awaiting promulgation through the National Assembly when the panel discussion was held.

Seydi Moussa Camara, editor-in-chief at the weekly *La Nouvelle Expression*, said there is still little public support for free speech and the right to information. The panelists were unanimous that the principles of free speech are not yet well established and accepted in Mauritanian society. Certain taboos persist, making journalists' jobs difficult.

Mamadou Alassane Thiam, regional correspondent for the monthly *Lumière du Nord*, said that social pressures hamper freedom of speech. Journalists in the public and the private media are subject to pressures from clans, tribes, and ethnic groups. They are rarely able to carry out their work in complete freedom. As an example of the risks of reporting, the panelists cited the case of Mohamed Ould Zeine, editor-in-chief of the independent Arab-language daily *El Watan*—and star presenter of Radio Mauritanie. In May 2009, at about midnight, just after he presented his news bulletin, he was beaten badly by two strangers armed with cudgels. The journalist was wounded seriously, and his attackers were never apprehended. The panelists stressed that although attacks against journalists are not always pursued vigorously, such attacks remain rare in Mauritania. When they occur, only journalists, the independent media, and journalist defense organizations mobilize and show solidarity with the victims.

The panelists also called for better training for Mauritanian jurists in defending media rights. To date, there are no media law specialists in the country, even though the number of journalists taken to court for “procedural misdemeanors” is large. The panelists cited the detention of Abou Abass

Another example of that kind of incongruousness in the justice system was the arrest on June 21, 2009, of the journalist Sidi El Moktar Ould Sidi, without explanation even of the grounds for his arrest. His lawyer was barred from visiting him.

Ould Braham, cyberjournalist and administrative manager of the online news website taqadoumy.com, in May 2009, and the arrest of the site's publication director, Hanevy Ould Dehah, in June 2009. Ould Braham was released after a few days, but Ould Dehah was tried and sentenced to six months imprisonment for defamation. The complaint against him was lodged by a candidate in the presidential election, Ibrahima Moctar Sarr, chair of the opposition party Alliance for Justice and Democracy/Movement for Renewal, who was close to the military junta in power. However, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) reported that after serving his sentence, Ould Dehah was held illegally in prison and subjected to another trial because of procedural flaws in the first trial—then sentenced in a second trial to two years' imprisonment for "scandalous conduct, rebellion, and press misdemeanor." He owed his release in February 2010, together with about a hundred inmates of the Dar Naim prison, only to a presidential amnesty.

The panelists noted that the two arrests demonstrate successfully the power of the Internet as a new medium. The case clearly highlighted the legal vacuum surrounding the Internet and the online press in Mauritania. When Ould Braham and Ould Dehah were arrested, there were scarcely any specific legal texts regulating the freedom of expression on the Internet, or which were applicable to violations of the law committed by the electronic press. Nevertheless, the legal system had accused those in charge of the taqadoumy.com site of spreading information that was "false and libelous," contributing to a violation of journalistic ethics, and attacking national unity through "defamation and incitement to hatred." In a communiqué that was made public in the context of this case, RSF warned that the closure of the Internet site and the arrest of those in charge of it were actions without precedent in Mauritania. RSF considered the case to be particularly worrying, as it had been made possible by the legal vacuum surrounding the electronic press.

Another example of that kind of incongruousness in the justice system was the arrest on June 21, 2009, of the journalist Sidi El Moktar Ould Sidi, without explanation even

of the grounds for his arrest. His lawyer was barred from visiting him.

In Camara's view, the judicial system's lack of independence is a core problem in Mauritania. On the question of whether the executive branch pressured the judges to impose a heavy sentence, one panelist revealed that Ould Dehah was arrested by a man in civilian clothing who had turned out to be a gendarme. He had then been taken in handcuffs to a gendarmerie brigade post and from there to a police station, where he had no access to his defense counsel or to his family—rights guaranteed by law.

The heads of the public media (radio and television stations, etc.) and other media-related bodies are appointed by decree of the Council of Ministers—in other words, by the government. The panelists discussed the way in which the chairman of HAPA, the so-called independent regulatory body for the public and private press, radio, and television, was appointed and raised concerns specifically about the degree of independence possible in any HAPA chair appointed by presidential decree and subject to the authority of the president. The panelists also questioned the way in which the nine HAPA members are nominated, as it excludes civil society, and journalists' defense and social and professional bodies and associations. The president appoints three HAPA members, the speaker of the National Assembly (from the opposition) appoints three, and the speaker of the Senate (from the presidential majority) appoints the final three. In Thiam's view, this excessive politicization condemns HAPA to fail to fully play its role of independent regulator.

Furthermore, the panelists said it is not only HAPA: the directors of the three public media bodies, i.e., Radio Mauritanie, Télévision de Mauritanie (TVM), and the Agence Mauritanienne d'Information (AMI) press agency, have little to no independence. According to the panelists, the president has taken over much of the oversight powers of the Ministry of Communication by appointing their directors-general and issuing instructions as to their policies and editorial lines. The panelists also condemned the often arbitrary sackings of the leaders of the public news bodies. Between the seizure of power on August 6, 2008, and the end of 2009, three directors-general of TVM and two directors of Radio Mauritanie had been stripped of their posts.

Under article 2 of the Ordinance on the Press and Press Misdemeanors, journalists have the right to access sources of information and the duty and the right to protect their sources under all circumstances. However, in reality, journalists in the public media receive preferential treatment, including greater access to information than their colleagues in the private press. The panelists said that for some key events, journalists face a dearth of information, or restrictions on it.

Access to sources of public, administrative, or governmental information was also fraught with pitfalls for journalists in the private media. Thiam said that the public authorities keep critical information under lock and key, and investigations run up against a wall of silence. Mohamed Salem Ould Haiba, director of publication of *Le Véridique*, speaking on the subject of the inequitable and very often inexplicable treatment on the part of the public authorities, said that at the National Assembly, journalists from public media enjoy easy access—while private press journalists are blocked at the steps. Only two independent journalists have succeeded in crossing that particular Rubicon, and only after vigorous intervention by some Assembly members.

Libel is defined in article 37 of the Ordinance on the Press and Press Misdemeanors as being any attack on the honor or the reputation of a person or body. In its chapter on the development strategy for the print media sector written in 2006, the National Consultative Commission for the Reform of the Press, Radio, and Television insisted that the principle of decriminalizing press misdemeanors, particularly in respect of defamation, insult, or publication of false information, should be observed to the extent possible. With the promulgation of the ordinance, those offenses are punishable by fines and/or disciplinary or professional sanctions handed down by HAPA, also the only body authorized to rule whether defamation had occurred in the first place, before it became a matter for the court. Defamation against the courts, tribunals, armed forces, security forces, publicly constituted bodies and administrations, and individuals is punishable by fines of between MRO 500,000 and MRO 1 million (approximately \$1,750 to \$3,500). Depending on the seriousness of the misdemeanor, the fine could be accompanied by withdrawal of the journalist's press card for three to six months, and a temporary suspension of the publication.

The development strategy document for the print media sector said that defamation must be shown and proven first before HAPA, and possibly before the courts thereafter, and a defamation finding should not come down only to attacking the image of a public figure, body, or company. The field of what could be considered as defamatory must be interpreted restrictively and, to the extent possible, be restricted to statements of facts and not expressions of opinion. However, despite this guidance, and also despite the international conventions protecting journalists, HAPA is very often short-circuited by the Mauritanian Supreme Court, whose judges are very often eager to get their hands on the cases of journalists who had been cautioned in defamation cases—before they come before HAPA.

The panelists said that there had so far been no reported cases of corruption among judges and prosecutors handling libel cases. In its 2009 annual report on the situation of the

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private press, HAPA noted that over the year in question, only three newspapers had been taken to court, a dramatic decline from 18 in 2008. The report added that nevertheless, several titles had been summoned without any sanctions being taken against them.

The government does not restrict Internet access, and journalists, as well as regular citizens, may access national and international news freely on the Internet. Media outlets and their employees received no special price on access.

According to the panelists, entry into the journalism profession remains free. The press law of 2006 defines a professional journalist as anyone whose principal remunerated activity is the collection, handling, and publication of information. The law also stipulates that professional journalists must hold a higher degree in journalism or communication, or a diploma from an institute providing professional training in journalism or communication, or a higher degree with professional experience of at least 12 months to five years in a public or private printed press, radio, or television media organization. However, Camara said that that freedom of access to the profession had unfortunately given rise to sloppy journalism. Currently, almost anyone could set himself up as a journalist and have his own newspaper.

The panelists also discussed hiring procedures for beginning journalists in the public media. They noted that some less qualified people with political connections receive positions at the expense of others with diplomas, experience, and competence.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.51

The overall score for this objective fell significantly from last year's report, and scores for some indicators tumbled nearly a point. The most dramatic dips were seen in indicators 1 (balanced and well-sourced reporting), 5 (pay levels for journalists), 6 (balance between entertainment and news), 7 (modern facilities and equipment), and 8 (niche reporting).

Others, though, felt that journalists in the editorial offices of private newspapers practice self-censorship against their will, as self-censorship was most often imposed by the director of publication, who is often also the paper's owner. Those panelists said that generally, such self-censorship is dictated more by commercial interests than political influence.

Indicator 4 (media cover key events) showed noticeable improvement, but could hardly overcome the losses in other indicators. Most of the indicators scored close to the objective score, although indicator 5 lagged behind by three-quarters of a point and indicators 3 (self-censorship) and 4 exceeded it by about the same magnitude.

Journalism in Mauritania still hardly meets professional quality standards. Thiam expressed the view that the lack of training has led to journalists who are often completely ignorant about professional ethics and standards.

In its 2009 report on the situation of the private press, HAPA pointed to the lack of professionalism, which remained one of the major defects in the sector. Most journalists working in the private sector lacked not only professional training, but often do not have the level of general knowledge required to grasp the issues of the day or to understand and abide by the rules of the profession. The panelists said that the lack

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).

of professionalism is reflected in journalists' output, which reflects a near total lack of investigative journalism and is made up instead of gossip and rumors, called *esh'tary* in the Hassaniya dialect.

The panelists pointed to ethical lapses as well. They said that media professionals in both the public and the private sectors, regardless of age and experience, had a tendency to accept, in one way or another, payments or gifts in exchange for favorable coverage. Panelists also described the near-universal practice among correspondents for foreign press organs of claiming per diem expenses after covering certain events.

According to Guèye Birome, a HAPA executive, the practice of accepting payment for coverage is very common among journalists. Although press freedom was of course a right governed by legislation, there was nothing in those laws to guide the journalist in his or her professional activities. Respect for professional ethics and standards must also be taken into account in guiding journalists in their work if the press is to gain credibility, Birome noted. Indeed, in his view the current situation very frequently gives rise to serious ethical problems. Camara agreed, saying that the trend was to ensure that one got paid for writing an article. However, he added that some journalists complain about that practice, which many of their so-called *Peshmerga* colleagues engaged in. In local Mauritanian press jargon, the term "*Peshmerga*," borrowed from the Kurdish fighters in Iraq, refers to people who hold authorized titles as journalists but who rarely publish and are widely suspected of racketeering and blackmail.

Since May 2001, the print media in Mauritania have had a charter of professional ethics and standards that included five rights and 15 duties of journalists that were aimed at making the press more worthy of its readers' confidence. A committee for the observance of professional ethics and standards (CRED) had also been set up, comprising journalists and representatives of a number of ministries. The panelists said that this charter does not differ in its major outlines from the norms recognized and developed by international professional associations of journalists. The only difference lay in the fact that there are regular and serious violations of those norms by Mauritanian journalists; CRED has proved timid in its responses, as it lacks the power of enforcement to ensure respect for professional ethics and standards on the part of newspapers and journalists.

In 2006, the National Consultative Commission for the Reform of the Press, Radio, and Television adopted another code of professional ethics and standards, which included no fewer than 20 duties and six rights. However, as in the past, the worst practices and the lack of professionalism won out over principles, best practices, and conscientious journalism.

A number of panelists expressed the belief that journalists and editors practiced various forms of self-censorship. Camara said that they did so sometimes for their own safety. Khalilou thought that they did so rather to protect their own interests and their own connections. Others, though, felt that journalists in the editorial offices of private newspapers practice self-censorship against their will, as self-censorship was most often imposed by the director of publication, who is often also the paper's owner. Those panelists said that generally, such self-censorship is dictated more by commercial interests than political influence.

During the August 6, 2008, period when Abdallahi was overthrown by a group of generals, and following the outcome of the political crisis that followed it in June 2009, there were newspapers favorable to the military men who had carried out the putsch and others that favored restoring the overthrown president to power. In the editorial offices, publication directors kept a very close eye on what their journalists wrote and steered the direction according to which camp they were in. One panelist alleged that in return for their editorial support, some publication directors and some journalists received significant sums of money from the military junta in power.

Birome said that in the state media, in contrast to the private media, self-censorship is imposed systematically and journalists are afraid to broach certain subjects. Diagana Khalilou, editor-in-chief of *Quotidien de Nouakchott*, pointed out another source of self-censorship, noting that social, parental, and ethnic affinities often drive journalists into silence to avoid reprisals.

The panelists linked these shortcomings not only to the lack of professionalism and basic observance of professional ethics and standards, but also to the fact that journalists live on the edge in terms of pay and conditions. They said that salary levels for journalists and other communications professionals, in both the public and private media, are so low that bribery and corruption are unavoidable. Journalists are paid a bit less in wages than a primary school teacher and a bit more than a nurse. Wages for independent journalists were in the range of MRO 50,000 (\$175) for a proven journalist and up to MRO 150,000 (\$520) for a director of publication. Khalilou expressed the opinion that journalists often write to please powerful or wealthy patrons or to excoriate those who refuse to pay. Journalists, because of their poverty-level wages, are not only vulnerable to corruption, but worse, are on the way to becoming real professional panhandlers, in his view.

Workers in the state media are no more affluent or less exposed to corruption and poverty-level conditions than their colleagues in the independent press. Since 2007, the

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Coordination of Union Chapters of Workers in the Public Press (AMI, Radio Mauritanie, and TVM) had, through sit-ins, press communiqués, and petitions, unceasingly demanded better conditions for workers in those establishments. In particular, it demanded payment of salary arrears and the right to wage increases of 50 percent and 10 percent, awarded by the state to all public officials and agents.

The private press, in particular, suffers from outdated equipment and facilities. HAPA's 2009 survey of conditions affecting the press showed that equipment is scarce; only the minimum needed to work is available, and none of it is new. Under these conditions, Khalilou said that there is almost no investigative material published, and very little real reportage.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.53

Like Objectives 1 and 2, the score for Objective 3 fell compared with 2008. Only indicators 1 (plurality of news sources) and 2 (access to domestic and international media) held fairly steady, and the latter was the only indicator to

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.

Although Mauritians who live in urban areas frequently use the Internet to obtain news and information, there are few reliable statistics for Internet usage in Mauritania. However, the panelists believe that the Internet is restricted overall by the country's poor electricity supply and widespread illiteracy.

score much differently than the objective score, exceeding it by about a point.

Most panelists agreed that Mauritania now enjoys a plurality of news sources. More and more, Mauritians are exposed to diverse news sources (newspapers, television, radio, Internet, mobile telephones, etc.) at more or less affordable prices. The current radio and television landscape in Mauritania includes three public radio stations—Radio Mauritania and two FM radio stations (one based in Nouakchott and the other in Nouadhibou)—and two public television stations—TVM and TVM 2 Plus—which so far have a complete monopoly over domestic broadcasting. In 2009, during the presidential electoral campaign, Dava TV, a private television channel broadcasting solely by streaming over the web, had been launched. Its promoters were close to the party in power.

The Internet appeared in Mauritania in 1997. There are now at least three Internet service providers in the country, in the hands of Mauritanian private individuals and their foreign partners (Moroccans, Tunisians, Sudanese, etc.). Also, local Internet content is developing. Every year, a dozen or more information sites or blogs in Arabic, French, or both come on the scene. Some, such as taqadoumy.com, cridem.org, and saharamedia.net, have proven really successful. The panelists were of the view that by creating a diversified, modern, and interactive supply side, those sites, which were real goldmines of information, are perhaps pushing the traditional pay-per-copy printed press into the background. In addition to the Internet, other telephonic applications and services are now developing and becoming widespread in Mauritania. A local SMS news alert service for users who had a subscription had been started in 2006 by AMI in partnership with the premier provider in the country, Mauritel mobile. A similar 24-hour service has been started by the same operator with the Al-Jazeera satellite channel.

The private print media mainly cover Nouakchott and a very few other towns, such as Nouadhibou and Rosso. The same is true of the government print media. AMI, which puts out two

dailies, *Al Shaab* in Arabic and *Horizons* in French, has not set up in all Mauritania's 12 regions; it has only two regional bureaus in the whole country, in Nouadhibou and Rosso. Most of its journalists work at its headquarters, in Nouakchott. The only communication support media that are more or less available to rural people are cellular telephones, radio, and to a lesser extent, television. A few community radio stations exist in two regions, Gorgol and Trarza. These provide people not with news per se but with local information on subjects relating to their health, for example, and their immediate environment, and so on.

Thiam said it is difficult to say how objective and reliable news sources are, but the most reliable news sources are international media. Also, he said, local political actors favor those media, because of their reach and penetration. It is not uncommon to see the president, ministers, Mauritanian political leaders, and other high-level public figures choosing to speak or appear on the pan-Arab channels, in particular Al-Jazeera and Al Arabiya, or on French-language channels, such as TV5 or France 24, rather than in the Mauritanian public media or in print in the independent press.

Currently, there is no law governing publications in foreign languages, and the government does not restrict citizens' access to national and international media. Nevertheless, the panelists noted that in rural areas the reach of news is restricted because of economic, technical, and geographical constraints. Because of the high illiteracy rate, around 50 percent according to some statistics, a large part of the Mauritanian population, particularly in the rural areas, cannot yet access all media sources. Foreign print media (essentially in French, Arabic, and English) publications are available, but the cost is prohibitive for many.

Although Mauritians who live in urban areas frequently use the Internet to obtain news and information, there are few reliable statistics for Internet usage in Mauritania. However, the panelists believe that the Internet is restricted overall by the country's poor electricity supply and widespread illiteracy. As a result, over the whole country, access to Internet services remains restricted to the main urban centers, including the 12 regional capitals.

Since the appearance of the web in Mauritania, no local website (or website hosted internationally) had so far been banned, nor had those responsible for any such site been arrested—until the 2009 arrest of Abou Abass Ould Braham, journalist and administrative manager of the online news site taqadoumy.com, along with the site's publication director, Hanevy Ould Dehah, who was arrested and jailed for defamation. The taqadoumy.com site was shut down for 24 hours.

ANI, which is private, is owned by the Mauritanian Press, Publishing, Communication, and Printing Company, and in 2009 it remains the only private press agency in Mauritania. Other than Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, it has no agencies in the country's interior. AMI produces between 150 and 170 stories per day, in French or in Arabic, for its subscribers. It also receives and disseminates the general news feed and the economic news feed from Agence France-Presse. However, only a very small number of independent newspapers subscribe to its newswire, paying a monthly rate of MRO 40,000 (\$140); most of its clients are state enterprises. The types of service available from the two agencies are basically restricted to news copy; there is still no audio or video production. According to the panelists, independent newspapers can pick up stories from AMI and ANI without charge, but within the limits of copyright laws.

The panelists took the view that the public media are characterized by the weakness of their coverage of some areas of the country, and also by a strong feeling among the public that their reputation is poor. They often perceive them as exclusively government mouthpieces because of the way the various political regimes in power make use of them. Awa Traoré, a freelance journalist, said the state media provide very little information on what is going on in the backcountry. Generally, only news about the government's and the president's policy and life is shown on a loop.

The panelists agreed that the same tendentious and selective treatment was a leitmotif of the state media's programs and columns. The panelists said that both TVM channels focus on the activities of the government or elected representatives in the presidential majority than on the opposition. Egyptian soaps also take up a large part of their programming, at the expense of current affairs and reportage, which rarely goes into any depth of coverage. The same is true for the public radio channels, where little broadcasting time is devoted to reportage from journalists in the field.

According to some of the panelists, information on the owners of independent press businesses is available and often known to the public through word of mouth. Khalilou, however, said that there is no transparency concerning the ownership of the private media. While politicians or businesspeople are sometimes rumored to be behind various publications, as a general rule, newspaper publication directors also own and direct the businesses. Birome said that publication directors might wear several other hats: editor, perhaps chief editor, accountant, financial manager, etc. From editing to publishing, they often control all the newspaper's activities—which can detract from its independence and the independence of its journalists.

In addition to scarce equipment, salaries are very low, outlets are inadequately staffed, and newspapers, which depend primarily on advertising, barely make any income. Therefore, newspapers that can be called independent are on thin ice.

In terms of reflecting a broad spectrum of social interests in the media, including minority-language information sources, the panelists saw much room for improvement. TVM broadcasts mostly in Arabic and in the Hassaniya dialect no fewer than 12 hours of programming—reportage, debates, television news—a day, focused solely on Mauritania. Yet the only program in French was the daily news at 21.30 UTC. National languages such as Pular, Soninke, and Wolof air no more than 50 minutes a day in total, which panelists stressed is insufficient. One panelist, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that public media do not appear to meet the aspirations of all Mauritians, as they are aimed only at those who spoke Arabic, with minority languages sidelined almost completely. The panelists agreed that media in minority languages are almost nonexistent. Currently, there is only one independent minority-language newspaper, Foyere Bamtaré, which prints between 500 and 1,000 copies in Pular. Its limited distribution is restricted to the minority it represents.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.58

The score for this objective received a somewhat lower score compared to 2008, as a few indicators received lower scores. These include indicators 1 (media are well-managed enterprises), 4 (balance of revenue types), and 6 (market research). All indicators scored within a half point of the objective score.

The panelists said that press enterprises in Mauritania are still not professional or profit-generating businesses. The National Consultative Commission for the Reform of the Press, Radio, and Television noted in its 2006 report the absence of any legal text that defines a press enterprise, or describes its collective legal responsibilities or expected commitments to its staff.

According to a survey by HAPA in January 2008, many private press enterprises are on shaky footing because they lack employment contracts for their employees, show

Outside Nouakchott, the capital, there are no real advertising services, agencies, or companies. According to a HAPA document, the advertising sector is severely lacking in competency, organization, and transparency. As a result, publication managers, editors-in-chief, and journalists themselves can end up as door-to-door salesmen—which seriously damages their credibility.

no sign of proper accounting departments, do not have a body of shareholders, work in under-equipped offices, and do not contribute to national social security plans on behalf of their employees. HAPA's 2009 study describes the very gray-economy nature of these businesses. In addition to scarce equipment, salaries are very low, outlets are inadequately staffed, and newspapers, which depend primarily on advertising, barely make any income. Therefore, newspapers that can be called independent are on thin ice.

In the panelists' view, the state media (radio, television, and AMI) do not responsibly use the public funding they receive; their annual budgets are estimated at nearly MRO 1 billion each (approximately \$3.4 million). As evidence, panelists pointed to the many irregularities in the management of those bodies, which are reported on each year by the private press. For example, according to the weekly *Le Divan*, on October 25, 2009, the director of Radio Mauritanie, Hama

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.

Ould Soueilim, was sacked. *Le Divan* had noted also that the last three national public radio directors have been accused of misappropriating public funds and were ordered to pay back on the order of MRO 400 million (\$1.4 million).

The panelists agreed that the financing of the private media, the print media in particular, remains a very complex issue. The sector does not receive any direct subsidy from the state. The fate of the Press Assistance Act, which had been eagerly awaited by the sector, has languished in the hands of the parliamentarians since 2008. Meanwhile, any funding or material assistance to the private press has come in part through a number of partners in development, principally the United Nations, France, Germany, and the European Union. Panelists reported that to date, the only form of subsidy is an indirect subsidy granted by the state to the National Printing House, a publicly owned company. That subsidy is reflected, for the independent press titles that benefited from it, in subsidized printing costs. However, for three years now, the state has struggled, delayed, or balked at paying the subsidy to the National Printing House. The Printing House, running a chronic deficit, threatens every year to increase the newspapers' printing fees. In both December 2008 and December 2009, Mauritanian press directors ceased printing for a day to protest the increases.

The panelists agreed that the advertising sector in Mauritania remains disorganized. Outside Nouakchott, the capital, there are no real advertising services, agencies, or companies. According to a HAPA document, the advertising sector is severely lacking in competency, organization, and transparency. As a result, publication managers, editors-in-chief, and journalists themselves can end up as door-to-door salesmen—which seriously damages their credibility.

The panelists also said that independent press managers often complain that announcements and calls to tender by the state and public enterprises appear exclusively in *Al Shaab* and *Horizons*, the two state dailies put out by AMI, whereas they ought to benefit the country's private newspapers as well.

Panelists found that in the absence of a real advertising market structure, independent press outlets nevertheless manage by many and varied ways and means to find other income sources, such as so-called support subscriptions. However, the panelists said that the private media have become too dependent on such subscriptions to secure revenue and ensure their financial stability year round. However, according to HAPA's 2009 report on the situation of the private press, such support subscriptions are paid out, against all management rules, by public administrations and publicly owned enterprises—sometimes in very large amounts. They are also sometimes paid out for political,

tribal, or family reasons. The same HAPA report noted also that in 2008, the General Inspectorate of State deemed such subsidies to the press a form of misappropriation of public funds. The panelists agreed that if the state did finally decide to start granting subsidies to the private media, such subsidies could affect their independence—as is the case already for the public media.

The panelists found that market-research studies in the media field in Mauritania are still either very few in number or even nonexistent. The panelists were aware only of studies sponsored in the past by international organizations, such as UNICEF, World Vision, and so on. Such studies focused mainly on exposure rates to the public media, principally national radio and television. Since 2008, informal online polls on certain websites that provide news about Mauritania have cropped up, but the panelists cast doubt upon their reliability and said their results were fragmentary.

Research on the media sector is equally thin. Carried out mainly by students or sometimes sponsored by international bodies, it is scarcely used for commercial strategic planning purposes.

The panelists noted the absence of reliable, formal circulation figures, Internet statistics, audience figures, or household penetration rates for the public media. In the print media, print runs vary between 500 and 2,000 copies for dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and other periodicals in Arabic or French. No public or private body is tasked with collecting audience figures for national television or radio.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.63

The lower score for this objective is the result of lower scores in indicators 1 (trade associations), 3 (supporting NGOs), 4 (academic journalism programs), and 5 (short-term training). No indicator scored more than half a point different than the objective score.

Since the emergence of the independent press in 1991, newspaper editors and journalists have expressed keen interest in forming associations. Between 1991 and 2000, several bodies, such as the Mauritanian Union of Independent Press Professionals, the Independent Press Association (API), the Mauritanian Association of Independent Journalists, Independent Press Publishers (EPI), CRED, and the National Independent Press Association (ANPI), were born. However, ill-defined and lacking in vigor, and undermined by enmity and rivalry between groups of newspapers and media

In the panelists' view, the type of support and the services these bodies provide to their members is limited, amounting to little more than organizing protest sit-ins against the government or in support of a colleague, and launching petitions for Mauritanian journalists or illegally detained politicians to be released.

professionals in a media environment lacking organization, these bodies and associations have mostly disappeared.

Among the shortcomings of these associations, said the panelists, membership conditions are often too lax and membership remains more or less static. The effectiveness of the organizations in terms of legal and professional advice or lobbying is, according to the panelists, difficult to pin down. Some of the organizations represent specific sectors of the profession; for example, the Union of Mauritanian Bloggers, which was set up in March 2008 by almost 400 bloggers to protect, in their words, the essential rights of the community of bloggers in Mauritania—including the right to publish their comments without risk of censorship or other form of interference by the authorities.

In the panelists' view, the type of support and the services these bodies provide to their members is limited, amounting to little more than organizing protest sit-ins against the government or in support of a colleague, and launching petitions for Mauritanian journalists or illegally detained

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.

The panelists agreed that short-term training in the workplace and in institutions, together with training programs, enables journalists to improve their skills. However, in the panel's view, it is becoming rarer and rarer for journalists to receive such training.

politicians to be released. Like their predecessors, today's professional associations do very little to help protect journalists' rights, generally only on an ad hoc basis in response to specific events. Camara said that their role had turned out to be ineffective or very limited in working for journalists' interests—and often attempted to adversely influence journalists' work. He cited the example of the powerful ANPI, which was set up in 1991. ANPI is both a group of newspaper publishers and an association of journalists, and for a long time it was close to the outlook of the dictatorial regime of President Maouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya that held sway over the country from 1984 to 2005.

In 2006, the National Consultative Commission for the Reform of the Press, Radio, and Television, learning the lesson from the failure of ANPI, noted in its report that ANPI had no clear legal status, although it did have a building provided by the Mauritanian State. The same report claimed that the rivalry between groups of newspapers stymied any action by ANPI and gave rise to a profusion of organizations of mutually antagonistic newspapers. ANPI has not been able to set itself up as a legitimate, credible interlocutor, representative of the independent press in Mauritania that could stand up and dialogue with the Mauritanian authorities and/or outside bodies wanting to come to the aid of that independent press.

Diop Mountaga, regional correspondent of *L'Éveil Hebdo* in Boghé, commented that the professional bodies often turn out to be incapable of acting jointly when it comes to standing up for the interests of the profession in the face of the authorities.

The panelists felt that two associations of newspaper publishers and associations of journalists are now the most representative of the profession: the Union of Mauritanian Journalists (SJM) and the Mauritanian Press Group (RPM). Since 2008, SJM has been active principally to ensure that journalists' professional interests, and the independence and professionalism of the media, both public and private, are respected. It held sessions of its first constitutional congress in December 2009. RPM, also set up in 2008, represents newspaper publishers and owners. It had been created out of the merger of pre-existing organizations such as EPI and

API, but it also brought together leading lights of the private press, including, among others, *L'Éveil Hebdo*, *Le Calame*, and *L'Authentique*.

RPM sometimes plays the role of a pressure group with the government and public-media bodies, such as HAPA and the Ministry of Communication. The panelists' said that RPM has proven itself to be active in the discussions with the government for instituting future state subsidies for the private press. RPM helped organize the December 2008 and 2009 days that halted newspaper printings to protest the decision to increase the cost of printing private newspapers.

Thiam also noted that in the absence of an advertising company, HAPA, which was set up in 2006, has so far done nothing to ensure the equitable distribution between the various public and private media of the advertising revenue from government enterprises and institutions.

The panelists said that Mauritania has a few NGOs and international bodies that actively support the freedom of speech. Located mainly in the large cities, these NGOs and international bodies are generally quick to react to reported violations of media freedoms and are often in close contact with international organizations that focus on the freedom of speech. Thiam said that some NGOs and organizations, such as the Forum of National Human Rights Organizations, the anti-slavery organization S.O.S. Esclaves, and the Mauritanian National Order of Attorneys, have a reputation of sparing no effort to help the press be heard.

In 2009, there was still not one institute or public or private school offering training for careers in the press, radio, and television—not even a journalism or communication section at the University of Nouakchott. However, back in 2006, the National Consultative Commission for the Reform of the Press, Radio, and Television advocated that the government set up a national center or institute to provide training for such careers. While Mauritania waits for that project to become reality, basic and advanced training for Mauritanian journalists takes place abroad, in Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, France, and elsewhere—or even on the job locally. Since the end of the 1990s, there have been very few opportunities for Mauritanian students to obtain government scholarships for training in journalism and communication, or to obtain diplomas from journalism colleges abroad.

The panelists agreed that short-term training in the workplace and in institutions, together with training programs, enables journalists to improve their skills. However, in the panel's view, it is becoming rarer and rarer for journalists to receive such training. As a general rule, such programs are put in place by local or international organizations, some offered through distance learning. The training courses are free and offered by the World Bank

Institute (which covers investigative journalism, governance, and information), the French Cooperation Mission (which covers management of a newspaper and reportage techniques), and the US Embassy (which focuses on the electronic press), among others.

There are now 20 or more printing houses in Mauritania. Except for two, they are all located in Nouakchott. Apart from the state-owned National Printing House, the printing houses are in private hands. The National Printing House prints the government dailies *Horizons* and *Al Shaab*, along with 40 or so independent newspapers, which receive preferential rates.

The panelists found that press distribution remains very poorly organized. Three distributors now share the market: the Mauritanian Press, Publishing, Communication, and Printing Company, Librairie 15/21, and Star-media. Print media are on sale only in the central part of Nouakchott city. No kiosk or newspaper sellers can be found in the capital's outer districts. Except for cities such as Nouadhibou, on the northern frontier, and Rosso, on the border with Senegal, press distributors completely neglect the country's interior. Broadcast transmitters are in the private sector hands but are nonetheless controlled—in a nonpartisan manner—by the Regulation Authority, a government institution.

List of Panel Participants

Mamadou Alassane Thiam, regional correspondent, *Lumière du Nord*, Nouadhibou

Mohamed O. Med Lemine, regional correspondent, *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, Kaédi

Guèye Birome, executive, High Authority for the Press, Radio and Television, Nouakchott

Seydi Moussa Camara, editor-in-chief and director of publication, *La Nouvelle Expression*, Nouakchott

Ibrahima Dia El Hadj, director-general of the editorial office, *Mauritanies1*, Nouakchott

Awa Traoré, freelance journalist, Nouakchott

Houcein El Middou, chair, Union of Mauritanian Journalists, Nouakchott

Diagana Khalilou, editor-in-chief, *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, Nouakchott

Kissima Diagana, editor-in-chief, *La Tribune*, Nouakchott

Mamadou Thiam, journalist, *Le Calame*, Nouakchott

Diop Mountaga, regional correspondent, *L'Éveil Hebdo*, Boghé

Moderator and Author

Mamoudou Sy, director of publication, *Éveil Hebdo*, Nouakchott

Assistant

Dewa Dianifaba, IEC supervisor, Health and Nutrition Support Project of the World Bank, Nouakchott