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THE GAMBIA

Despite constitutional guarantees of the freedom of expression and the independence of the media, journalists and citizens in The Gambia live under starkly different circumstances. Soon after a group of military officers overthrew the democratically elected government of President Dawda Kairaba Jawara in 1994, it took aim at the media. Upon transforming itself into a civilian regime and renaming itself the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), it introduced a series of decrees aimed at gagging the media. Its pattern of harassment, intimidation, and censorship continued throughout 2009.

In June 2009, seven journalists, including three executive members of the Gambia Press Union (GPU), were arrested and charged with seditious intention, defamation, and the publication of false information simply because their work criticized the Gambian president. Six of the journalists—among them a nursing mother—were subsequently tried, found guilty, sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, and fined GMD 250,000 (\$10,000) apiece. In response to this and other instances of intimidation and harassment, and through the advocacy efforts of the GPU and other organizations, awareness of and sympathy for the cause of journalism has grown significantly this year. Still, much work needs to be done to encourage the positive promotion of journalism to the public.

The Gambian economy is very weak; most people live on less than one dollar a day, placing newspapers—at about \$0.50—out of reach. Investments flowing into the country have not had much impact on the media, especially in relation to advertisements. Most companies prefer not to advertise with the private media for fear of government reprisals, while others still regard advertising as a favor to the newspapers, rather than a promotional opportunity for their business. It is especially hard for community radio stations to operate as efficient, sustainable organizations; they are mostly sponsored by donors and have become highly politicized. Despite the challenging business environment, some better-established media houses are now working to improve the management side of their businesses; a number of management courses were conducted for media personnel this year.

On the new media front, the Internet can still be considered a novelty in The Gambia, but access is improving with the emergence of new mobile-phone Internet service providers—a sign of hope in a country with only one, government-controlled television station. The recent introduction of SMS news alerts has proved particularly attractive to young people. In addition, Gambians outside of the country have set up online newspapers, radios, and blogs. Although no registration is required to access online news content, the government frequently blocks websites it deems hostile.

THE GAMBIA AT A GLANCE

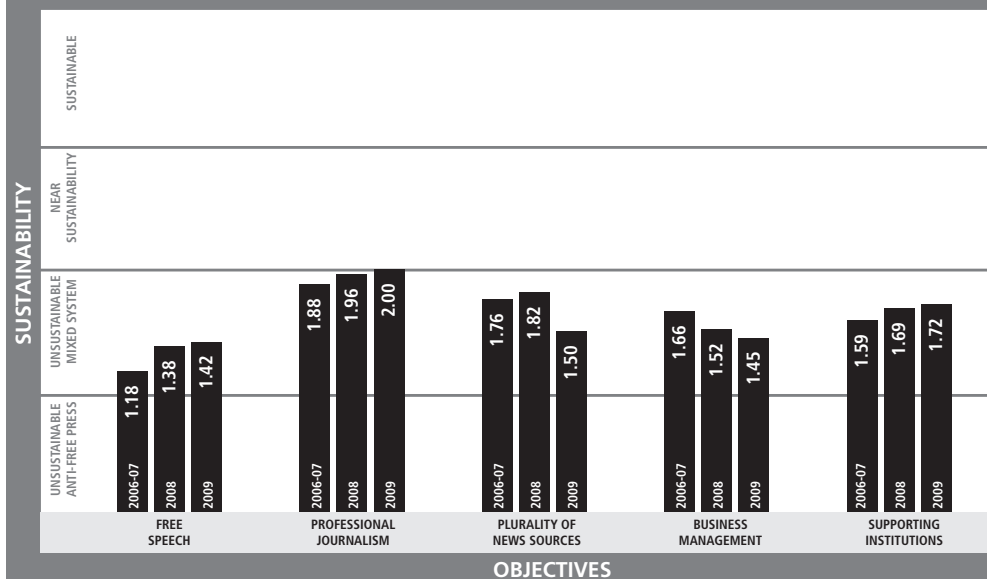
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 1,824,158 (July 2010 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Banjul
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Mandinka 42%, Fula 18%, Wolof 16%, Jola 10%, Sarahule 9%, other 4%, non-African 1% (2003 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 90%, Christian 8%, indigenous beliefs 2% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English (official), Mandinka, Wolof, Fula; Jola; Sarahule and Krio (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$743 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$1,330 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 40.1% (male 47.8%, female 32.8%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Yahya A. J. J. Jammeh (since October 18, 1996)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 8 newspapers; Radio Stations: 9 plus 3 community; Television Stations: 1
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *The Point*, *Daily Observer*, and *Foroyaa*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Gambia News Agency
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 130,100 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: THE GAMBIA



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The Gambia Objective Score: 1.42

The constitution protects freedom of expression, stating explicitly in Section 25 “Every person has the right to freedom of expression” and, in Section 207, that “The freedom and independence of the media is guaranteed.” In practice, however, it is not enforced, and additional laws further inhibit freedom of expression. Jailing, fining, detention, and threats by the authorities continue to define the lives of journalists, and as a result people are afraid to speak their minds. While the constitutional provision is comparable to international standards, there is no freedom-of-information law. The constitution does provide for redress in cases where the freedom of expression is violated, but the lack of independent and impartial courts deters journalists from pursuing those rights. As Sam Sarr, editor of *Foroyaa*, explained, “The constitutional instrument guaranteeing free speech is like dead wood; the judiciary is not independent, and laws have been enacted to persecute and jail journalists.”

As an example of how laws are used against journalists, the panelists mentioned the case of Pap Saine, the editor and co-proprietor of *The Point*. During the course of 2009, Saine was harassed and intimidated continuously, enduring one legal tussle after another—ranging from false publication to the questioning of his Gambian citizenship. He was eventually acquitted of all these charges, only to be arrested again, with

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.

Unlike previous years covered by the MSI, the panelists did not report any serious crimes (such as arson and murder) against journalists in the past 12 months. They could think of only one incident, an assault, which was reported by the media, and they noted that there was no public outcry.

six other colleagues, and charged with seditious intention, defamation, and the publication of false information.

Regarding legal restraints on Internet access, the panelists agreed that no registration is required to access online news content. Nonetheless, the government frequently blocks certain websites it deems hostile.

Broadcast licensing is the domain of the Department of State for Information, Communication, and Technology, with support from the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority—but the president has the last say. According to the panelists, it is virtually impossible for an opponent or critic of the government to obtain a license. Though a few licenses have been issued to radio stations recently, a closer look at the proprietors of these radio station reveals that they are all sons of the regime, compelled to show unquestioned loyalty. Licensing procedures cannot be considered fair and competitive, and the whole process is highly politicized. Rejected applicants can appeal to the Minister of Information; however, there are no transparent or independent bodies to hear appeals.

Market entry for the media is particularly stricter than for the rest of private business. It is neither fair nor transparent, both for the print and broadcast media. For instance, the Newspaper Act, which has been amended to include broadcast media, requires all private media to enter into a bond of GMD 500,000 (approximately \$2,000) to register a media house. Taxes are levied on media houses, including income tax, sales tax, licenses for editors, broadcasting houses, and Internet service providers. The heavy taxes on newsprint are particularly debilitating for the print media.

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The constitution requires the state media to afford fair opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent

Obtaining information from the state, even simple statistics, is like mining for gold, noted Sarr.

views and dissenting opinion. In practice, however, there is no editorial independence within the state media. The country's only television station is state-owned, and the panelists said that it resembles a ruling-party propaganda tool more than anything else.

State media enjoy a number of advantages. The law does not require state media outlets to register, unlike the private media. Sarata Jabbi, vice president of the GPU, said, "State media enjoy preferential legal treatment to access information, while it is difficult for the independent media; private media face discrimination." Journalists working for the independent media are also barred from the state house and high-profile state functions, such as visits by foreign heads of state and other dignitaries.

Libel is treated as both a civil and criminal offense, punishable by a heavy fine or imprisonment. This year, six journalists were each jailed for two years and fined heavily for libel and sedition after publishing material that criticized the president. Under Gambian law, the defendant should prove the truthfulness of the publication, that he/she had no intention to defame, or that the publication is privileged. Once one of these requirements is met, the defendant will not be liable. The panelists believe that the burden of proof is higher to prove libel against a public figure, but this has yet to be tested in a court of law. There is no law on the operation of the Internet, and the courts have not yet heard any cases regarding Internet offenses.

The Gambian judiciary can only be described, as one anonymous panelist put it, as "a conspiracy against the media and the masses in general." The judiciary has no independence, and above all it has lost its integrity, as the majority of Gambians have lost faith in the judiciary's ability to administer justice. Presidentially appointed Nigerian judges in very key positions dominate the composition of the judiciary. These judges, labeled "mercenaries" by the Gambian media fraternity, have thrown the scale of justice to the wilderness. They dance to tunes dictated by the president and will imprison any individual that the president considers a threat to his regime.

The constitution requires the media to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the executive to the people. But this has not worked in practice, as there is no freedom-of-information law, and the government is not

legally bound to give public information to the public. Obtaining information from the state, even simple statistics, is like mining for gold, noted Sarr. Public officials are usually reluctant to divulge information to the independent media. Journalists who commit an offense can face severe penalties if they publish information that is purported to be confidential. Furthermore, they will be required to reveal their source. Journalists have complained to the authorities concerned, but they have not pursued the matter in a consistent, organized manner.

The government does not restrict international news and news sources, and journalists are able to access the Internet for news. But the cost of maintaining a fairly good Internet service at a media house is high. Media houses do reprint/rebroadcast foreign news programming or news agency information.

Journalists do not need a license to do their work, although state institutions sometimes require special press cards for coverage of particular events. The executive's perspective of journalists is that they are opponents of the government, and those in the private media who wish to be in good graces with the government shy away from the press union. As for those in the state media, they disassociate themselves from the press union for fear of losing their jobs.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

The Gambia Objective Score: 2.00

The topic of professional standards in journalism drew mixed reactions from the panelists. Some said that reporters do check their information, but more work has to be done in consulting a variety of sources. They claim that more often than not, reporters try to get all sides to a story, and that sometimes they do include background information in their stories and consult technical experts. However, they agreed that overall more work needs to be done in obtaining background information before conducting interviews. They added that while many Gambian journalists are doing their level best to meet their professional obligations, the absence of journalism training facilities and the fact that many journalists have never had any professional training pulls down the standards. Some journalists barely verify their facts before publication and rarely conduct the necessary background research before they go to press.

Gambian newspaper reports are generally fair, objective, and dictated by the public interest, according to the panelists. However, they were quick to point out that such objectivity is not found in the state media and the *Daily Observer*. As

propaganda outfits for the regime, their news content is tailored to promote the ideals of the authorities, even to the detriment of the public interest, the panelists said.

The press union has published a code of ethics, which is not fully developed, but meets the basic standards set by international professional organizations. Though press union members have received training on the ethics of the profession, they are not well aware of the substance of the press union's code of ethics. This code reflects the ideals of the International Federation of Journalists code of ethics (of which the GPU is an affiliate). Given their level of training and circumstances, journalists observe these standards fairly well. Panelists said they have heard of fewer reports of journalists accepting money or gifts for certain types of coverage than previously (noting that this practice is more prevalent in some media houses than in others). According to the panelists, private media house editors are consistently on their guard against bribery and corruption in their media houses.

Reporters and editors engage in self-censorship for fear of losing their jobs or being persecuted. This is particularly true for state media employees. Some journalists also resort to self-censorship to avoid conflict with business interests or pressure from their editors. Very few newspapers, *Foroyaa* among them, have the confidence to write and analyze most issues objectively. Self-censorship has increased along with the frequent intimidation and harassment brought by the current regime against journalists.

Journalists do what they can to cover key events and issues, but most media houses dare not address some very important events and issues. Fear still rules the country. Quite often,

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).

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rather than prevent reporters from covering certain events, editors simply refuse to publish their reports. Covering events related to security issues of local and international concern is especially sticky territory—many journalists who try wind up ensnared in the net of the executive branch. Private media in The Gambia are still barred from covering major governmental events, especially those held at the state house. Despite this, the private media do cover some government functions, such as ministry meetings.

In the state media, broadcast television pay levels are considered sufficiently high to discourage corruption. Journalists working for the state media are paid according to a civil-service scale, which is more or less very poor, but they benefit from some allowances that the private media do not receive.

This is not true for private-sector journalists, who earn far less than their counterparts in some other professions. Gambian journalists, like the majority of journalists in West Africa, are very poorly paid; the luckiest earn about \$200 per month, but some make as little as \$50 per month. Journalists make about the same amount as teachers, but within journalism, there is not much difference among the various sectors. Many hang on because of love for the profession, but the low pay drives some highly qualified journalists to leave journalism for jobs with banks, insurance companies, NGOs, and others. Virtually none of these journalists are insured, though the journalists working for the state media do benefit from some form of social security. Selling articles does occur, according to the panelists, though they said it is difficult to determine the extent.

According to the panelists, the broadcast media (both radio and television) devote a lot of air time to entertainment and sports and very little time, if any, to news, which the panelists link to the intimidation and harassment of journalists and the culture of fear that pervades the country. Some private stations even synchronize with the Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS) and others like RFI and BBC to broadcast the news. The print media, on the other hand, give limited space to entertainment. *Foroyaa*, for example, devotes 60 percent to news and reviews. Some panelists feel that introducing more news will surely attract more audience and readership for both broadcast and print media.

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Media houses are benefiting from a UN-funded project to improve their facilities and equipment. Overall, the facilities are still inadequate, and this affects the quality of work. In the print media, the lack of facilities is felt most in the production phase.

While they see the quality of reports continuing to improve, the panelists said that what Gambian journalism is missing the most is investigative journalism. This is partly due to the fact that most journalists lack the competence and training, but the few who take up the task are afraid their reporting will land them in jail. In this regard, the newspapers are often inundated with soft news from political activities and court reports. According to the panelists, only one media house, *Foroyaa*, engages in investigative journalism.

Quality niche reporting is the exception rather than the rule, but a few newspapers do occasionally succeed in this respect. News broadcast by the state-owned media focuses on official engagements or empty propaganda, and it is heavily censored. As Amie Sillah, executive director of Women for Democracy and Development, describes it: "Gambia television practices trial-by-media, as seen in the case of some women detained by security agents and paraded on national television on the pretext that they were sex workers. The issue of gender is given more space in private print media than electronic media. The public media are regime-controlled by law and practice. Ninety percent of news is on the executive, with nothing on the opposition or cultural programs. There is resistance to coverage of gender issues coming from government."

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

The Gambia Objective Score: 1.50

Most of the panelists said that it would not be true to say that a plurality of private and public news sources exist and are affordable in The Gambia. However, within the print media, there are several sources that can enable people to check one against another. Still, due to the low literacy rate—and the fact that very few people can read and understand English, in which all the newspapers are written—very few people actually have access to the newspapers. There is only

one television channel, which is government-controlled and carries only officially sanctioned news and programs.

As far as community radios are concerned, the panelists said that community radio stations exist in name only and do not produce news; rather, they sound more like state propaganda tools. Their coverage on health, agriculture, education, gender, and sports is limited, as they tend to follow the style of the commercial radio stations, and none of them produce their own local news. Some of them link up with the national radio to broadcast mainly official news.

The Internet can still be considered a novelty in The Gambia. Employees of NGOs and public servants use the Internet to access news and information; Internet café users typically visit to send and receive e-mails. The emergence of new service providers, notably QCell, which now provides mobile-phone Internet services, has made access much easier and readily available. There are also newspapers, radios, and blogs established and run by Gambians outside of the country. SMS news alerts are a new phenomenon, recently introduced, which have attracted the attention of many young people.

News coverage is national, and newspapers circulate mainly in the urban area, where all the print media houses are based. When newspapers occasionally make their way to the countryside, the educated youth read them to their parents. Nonetheless, peasant farmers rely primarily on state-owned broadcasting house for their news, both local and international.

Despite the facts that newspapers are sold at approximately 50 cents, very few Gambians can still afford to buy newspapers every day—considering that most Gambians live

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.

on less than one dollar a day. Income levels do affect access to Internet, satellite, or other pay broadcast services. While most people cannot afford to buy newspapers, accessing the Internet for an hour is even more expensive. While there are satellite televisions available, very few people can afford them due to cost, as well. Otherwise, there are few restrictions on access to the media, national or international, with the exception that a website very critical of the government is often blocked. Only a tiny minority can afford to subscribe to cable or satellite television.

The panelists agreed that the state media do not reflect the views of the political spectrum; they support the ruling party and do not serve the public interest. Sarr commented, "The state media are not truly public. They are not open to alternative views and comments. They are partial; most of the broadcast time is devoted to reports on the head of state and achievements of government. Political opponents and other critics of the government are denied access. There are educational, cultural, and other programs, but they are hardly free from political influence."

There is a clearly felt absence of news sources and news agencies in the country. While the state media boast a dormant news agency, GAMNA, the private media cannot claim any functional local news agency. An attempt to launch one a few years ago failed, but this is apparently because media houses cannot afford the services of a news agency, opting instead to lean on international news agencies such as PANA, AP, AFP, and Reuters. However, the panelists said it is difficult to state with any accuracy whether any media houses hold paid subscriptions.

Apart from the state media, broadcasting stations do not produce their own news; some only relay international news from international stations like BBC, RFI, and VOA. Some of the independent media broadcast stations also relay the news of the state media. However, because private radio stations do not carry their own news, people have no choice but to rely on the public media for information.

Considering whether the independent media carry divergent views, panelist Demba Jawo, editor of the African Press Agency in Dakar, Senegal, said, "While independent media have the freedom to carry divergent views, because of the prevailing self-censorship, hardly any other newspaper apart from *Foroyaa* carries stories critical of the government, or that even differ very much from what appears in the public media."

Ownership of media houses is generally transparent; the owners are often known. It is required to disclose ownership at the time of registration, but it is not required that that information be published—although the public is entitled

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to conduct a search at the office of the registrar general for the information. There is no monopoly or oligarchy of media owners. There is no conglomerate of media owners. Apart from *Football Digest* and *Business Digest*, owned by some Lebanese business companies, and the *Daily Observer*, which is widely believed to be owned by President Jammeh himself, the rest are owned by media professionals. Reporters in these media houses complain of interference by the proprietors. In addition, one panelist stated anonymously, "What is most interesting is the trend of young Nigerian immigrants becoming newspaper owners. The only logical explanation is that some of these young men are being used by fronts that are close to government circles."

There is foreign media investment in Internet and cell phone services, but not in the print or broadcast media, the panelists said.

In terms of the spectrum of social interests reflected in the media, the panelists pointed to signs that media houses are becoming increasingly inclusive. More and more social issues are being given greater attention, such as people living with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, gender issues, minority groups, minority languages, etc. However, the panelists expressed concern at evidence of unprofessionalism in the state media, with journalists and managers, in an apparent bid to please the president, displaying ethnic bias.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

The Gambia Objective Score: 1.45

MSI panelists believe that media outlets in The Gambia cannot be characterized as serious, profit-making ventures. MSI panelists revealed that most media houses in The Gambia are generally small in size, and a majority of managers are not well-equipped with management skills. The private media try to operate as commercial ventures, but they hardly turn any profit, due to their poor capital base and

Advertising revenue can be said to be very dry in the Gambia. This is partly due to the fact that most business enterprises in the Gambia still consider advertising in newspapers as a favor to the papers, rather than a promotion for their businesses.

inadequate management and business skills. However, some better-established media houses are now working to improve the management side of their businesses. A number of management courses were conducted for media personnel this year. The state media, on the other hand, are managed by qualified personnel, but they are run more like civil-service operations than well-managed businesses. The government subsidizes them. It is especially hard for community radio stations to operate as efficient, sustainable organizations; they are mostly sponsored by donors. Also, added the panelists, they have become highly politicized.

Private media generate revenue from sales, advertising, and project funding. Public media revenue derives from sales, advertising, project funding, and government subsidies. Advertising revenue can be said to be very dry in the Gambia. This is partly due to the fact that most business enterprises in the Gambia still consider advertising in newspapers as a favor to the papers, rather than a promotion for their businesses. To make matters worse, the government has developed a strategy of not advertising in private newspapers, especially those perceived to be critical of the regime. Gripped by the

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.

fear of reprisal from the regime, most government parastatal enterprises have also adopted this approach. This affects the revenue of the private newspapers, thus limiting their capacity to expand and to pay better salaries to the staff. Retaining professional staff in the private media is very difficult, because most of these professionals search for work elsewhere in order to earn a more decent income.

Although advertising is not yet well-developed in The Gambia, advertising agencies are growing fast, with services offered mainly to Internet service providers, broadcast media, and cell phone companies. In the rural areas, advertising is virtually nonexistent, and where it exists it is dominated by local agencies. For the state radio and television stations, the ratio of advertising to program time is minimal; for the private media, advertising consumes a more substantial amount of time.

Advertising in private newspapers provides a substantial portion of revenue, due to limited sales resulting from the low income of readers. Even there, an increasing number of advertisements are needed to meet revenue goals. For the private radio stations, advertising constitutes the principal source of revenue.

The independent media do not receive any government subsidy. According to Sarr, "What the private media need are not government subsidies, which can lead to editorial influence. What the private media need is the removal of the sales tax on newsprint and other printing materials, and reduced licensing fees."

The panelists said that market research is not used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, or tailor the products to the needs and interest of the audience.

There are no surveys on broadcast ratings, circulation figures, or Internet statistics to speak of. Presently, The Gambia does not have any organizations conducting media ratings for media houses. Furthermore, media houses lack the requisite skills and experience to conduct audience surveys on their own. As one anonymous panelist said, "In fact, it would be very difficult for any Gambian to give an accurate figure of the percentage of Gambians in the rural areas that read a particular newspaper, such as *The Point*. Circulation figures for newspapers are still below the 5,000 range. As there are only two dailies in The Gambia, *The Point* and the *Daily Observer*, it is still difficult to say if these papers can sell up to 35,000 copies a week." Most likely, this is quite impossible, the panelists felt; however, perhaps on special occasions, some of these papers might sell up to 5,000 copies a day. The newspaper industry in The Gambia is still held back by various factors—such as low rural readership and poor roads, which lead to late deliveries—to have a commanding hold in the rural areas.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

The Gambia Objective Score: 1.72

There are no publishing or broadcast owners associations in The Gambia; an earlier attempt to form a publishers association failed. Presently, an editors' forum is in the making. The constitution has been finalized, and Sarr explained that one area of focus will be to find a way to import newsprint as a body and make it available to the media at a much lower price.

The GPU is the leading independent organization defending the rights and interests of most of the country's journalists. Most of its members come from the private media; the panelists said that the majority of journalists from the state media distance themselves from the union, for fear of reprisals from the government. The GPU represents individual media practitioners, such as editors, journalists, or related media professionals, and the panelists believe it is very supportive of its members. It fought tooth and nail to secure the release of members who were jailed this year. However, as a young association, consisting of no more than 300 members, half of whom are not active, the union lacks the financial resources and public support to face the challenges it confronts everyday. For example, in June, three members of the executive were arrested in relation to a response that the union made concerning a presidential statement. In addition, three senior editors were also arrested and jailed. The GPU had to defend its members in court on its own; it had to appeal for funds from regional and international organizations to be able to pay for the legal service.

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.

There is still no school of journalism in The Gambia. For years now, preparations have been underway, but it has yet to get off the ground. There is speculation that the University of The Gambia is currently working on the curriculum for a mass communication degree program.

One panelist commented on the legal proceedings against the GPU: "I am glad that events that occurred (the trial/ conviction of six journalists) have proven that one cannot suppress freedom of expression. There were attempts made to liquidate the Gambia Press Union, but the union is growing stronger. The government went after every soul within the GPU, which is a thorn in its flesh... The GPU and the private media are the only surviving voice of the nation, and we have to ensure that democracy in The Gambia will also survive."

During the past twelve months, the GPU has organized four training courses for journalists. It is also gearing up for more advocacy and lobbying initiatives. It has restructured its administration to become more professional and effective, it is revising its constitution, and it is planning to update its code of ethics and to establish a complaints body. The GPU's growing membership is open to all journalists and other media workers, and members are becoming more active. The concern and sympathy for the cause of journalism has grown significantly this year, but more work needs to be done in promoting journalism to the public in a positive way.

During the past two years, similar associations grouped according to reporting specializations have emerged as well. These include the Sports Journalists Association, the Health Journalists Association, the Human Rights Journalist Association, an association for photojournalists, and the Young Journalists Association of The Gambia. The members of these associations are also all members of the GPU.

NGOs give verbal and moral support to the GPU, but they are not very active in their support for free speech and independent media, although some do work with international free-speech organizations. They do not provide legal support to journalists or media outlets, but they will be involved in advocacy and lobbying for changes in media laws that the press union is now working on. They are also involved in the training of journalists. Some panelists feel strongly that human-rights NGOs in The Gambia have not lived up to expectations, especially the Gambia Bar Association, the Africa Center for Democracy and Human-Rights Studies, the Institute for Human Rights

Even privately held printing facilities are influenced by politics, the panelists said, and usually refuse to print for the private media.

and Development in Africa, and the Foundation for Legal Aid Research and Empowerment, just to name a few. The panelists said also that Action Aid The Gambia, though it has not issued statements in relation to the suppression of the freedom of the press, has been very supportive in terms of funding programs for the GPU. On the other hand, organizations such as the International Federation of Journalists, the Media Foundation for West Africa, the Media Defense Program of the Open Society Initiative, and the Doha Centre have helped to pay legal fees for some court cases concerning journalists.

There is still no school of journalism in The Gambia. For years now, preparations have been underway, but it has yet to get off the ground. There is speculation that the University of The Gambia is currently working on the curriculum for a mass communication degree program. NGOs and the press union are helping to fill the void in the meantime; the GPU, through a Danish NGO, Gambia Media Support, is running a two-year diploma program for Gambian journalists. In the case of the public media, the government does send its media staff for training abroad. Overall, the number of graduates from mass communications or journalism in the media houses is still very low, especially in the private media. Media houses are not in a financial position to absorb graduate journalists, except perhaps for the post of editor.

Short-term training courses have absorbed much of the responsibility for training journalists in The Gambia all these years. The training courses include basic journalism skills, as

well as reporting on social issues such as HIV/AIDS, human rights, etc. Some of the training courses are set up locally, while others are held internationally. The training courses in the past year have all been free, and according to the panelists, they cover the needs of most departments and professional levels.

Sources of newsprint are in private hands, apolitical, and not restricted. However, because of high government taxation, the cost of newsprint is exorbitant and beyond the means of the private media. This invariably has a political dimension, one anonymous panelist stated. On the other hand, the state media, especially GRTS, do enjoy tax holidays in relation to the importation of their materials.

Even privately held printing facilities are influenced by politics, the panelists said, and usually refuse to print for the private media. State-funded printing facilities deny access to the private print media. Thus, the four leading newspapers have their own printing machines; they print their own newspapers and provide services to the newspapers with lesser circulation.

Channels of media distribution are in private hands, apolitical, and not restricted. Due to the fact that all the newspapers are centralized in the urban areas, coupled with poor transportation networks, limited readership, and the financial constraints of the private media, newspaper distribution is quite limited. There are no distribution firms; rather, the distribution network for newspapers is composed of individual newspaper vendors who purchase the paper directly from the media houses at a discount. Newspapers are sold in supermarkets, bookshops, hotels, and other shops. Transmitters can be obtained only when licenses have been issued (which, the panelists described earlier, is a politically biased process). The government controls the Internet.

List of Panel Participants

Due to the repressive environment in The Gambia, most panelists agreed to participate in the MSI panel on condition of anonymity. A partial list of participants is included below.

Amie Sillah, executive director, Women for Democracy and Development; Gender Action Team, The Gambia, Serrekunda

Samuel Sarr, editor, *Foroyaa* newspaper, Serrekunda

Sarata Jabbi, journalist and vice president, Gambia Press Union

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

Fatou Fye, gender, youth, and human-rights activist, accountant, Francis Small Printers, Serrekunda

Moderator

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

Assistants

Momodou Lamin Jaiteh and **Buya Jammeh**, producers/reporters, Radio Alternative Voice for Gambians, Dakar, Senegal

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