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## BENIN

# B

Benin is a country where crimes against journalists are rare, no journalists were jailed in 2010, and the laws generally support a free press, Benin's media enjoy some securities that have eluded many of its West African neighbors. Yet stubborn challenges persist, revealing a government fearful of losing control over the media, and a disconnect between the laws and reality for journalists on the ground. In radio and television, the status quo remains: the government continues to block the Audio-Visual and Communication High Authority (known by its French acronym HAAC) from allocating any new frequencies. Widespread self-censorship, corruption, poor professionalism, and a lack of attention to media management also hold back the media.

In perhaps its most brazen attempt to control the media, in August 2010 the government shut down Radio France Internationale (RFI) for 14 hours and interrogated its correspondent following a news report covering parliament's request to charge President Boni Yayi with abuse of authority and perjury amid corruption allegations. Although the sudden shutdown of RFI was a setback, it also elicited a sharp response from the media community, and the authorities realized fairly quickly that there is a line in the sand that they must not cross.

Complaints against the public media sector underscored by last year's MSI continue. Many public sector journalists try to provide high-quality service, but the MSI panelists said that national television has "sold out," content to let the executive branch of government appoint its leaders and steer its editorial direction. Complaints from opposition political parties to HAAC have failed, although the HAAC has attempted to bring those in charge of national television into line.

Despite this rather gloomy picture, freedom of speech is broadly guaranteed in Benin, particularly thanks to the private media, which ensure the availability of a steady stream of news sources and viewpoints—at least in the major urban centers. Benin's supporting institutions, especially professional associations, continue to gain strength as well, increasing their capacity to improve prospects for a more sustainable media.

# BENIN

# BENIN AT A GLANCE

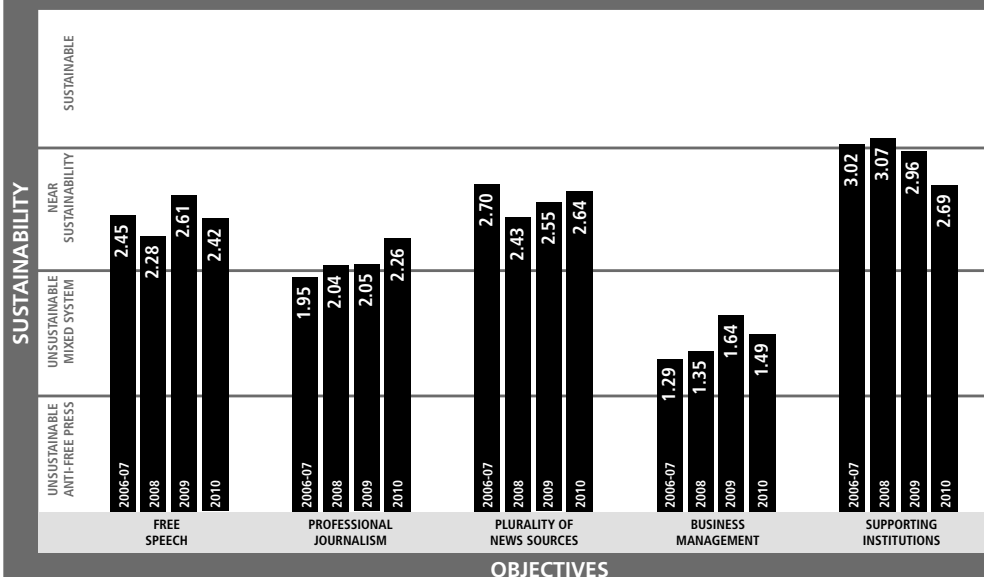
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 9,325,032 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Porto-Novo
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Fon and related 39.2%, Adja 15.2%, Yoruba 12.3%, Bariba 9.2%, Peulh 7%, Ottamari 6.1%, Yoa-Lokpa 4%, Dendi 2.5%, other 1.6%, unspecified 2.9% (2002 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 42.8%, Muslim 24.4%, Vodoun 17.3%, other 15.5% (2002 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** French (official), Fon and Yoruba (most common vernaculars in south), tribal languages (at least six major ones in north) (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$6.945 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$1,510 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 34.7% (male 47.9%, female 23.3%) (2002 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Thomas Yayi Boni (since April 6, 2006.)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:**  
Print: 53 total (28 daily newspapers, 25 periodicals); Radio Stations: 73; Television Stations: 5, including 1 public channel
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top newspapers by circulation: *La Nation* (state-owned), *Gazette du Golfe* (privately-owned)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top three radio stations: National Radio (state-owned), Golfe FM (privately-owned), Capp FM; Top three television stations: National Television (public channel), Canal3 (privately-owned), Golfe TV (privately-owned)
- > **News agencies:** Agence Bénin Presse (state-owned), Agence de Presse Médiane Afrique (privately-owned), Agence Proximités (privately-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 200,100 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BENIN



**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

### Benin Objective Score: 2.42

Articles 23 and 24 of the Constitution of Benin, along with certain provisions of the organic law of the Audio-Visual and Communication High Authority (known by its French acronym, HAAC<sup>1</sup>), expressly guarantee and protect the inalienable right to freedom of speech.

The panelists were unanimous that the legal environment in Benin is favorable to freedom of speech. Célestin Akpovo, a journalist, law professor, HAAC councilor, and former chair of the Beninese Union of Independent Journalists (UJIB), stressed that legal and social norms protect and favor the freedom of the press, but still ought to be strengthened to ensure more effective protection. Bruno Houessou, communications manager for Social Watch Benin, noted that although there are provisions in the constitution that protect the freedom of speech, the government fails to respect the laws.

The issue of licensing fueled much discussion: some panelists followed Armand Covi, director of Radio Benin Culture, in considering the granting of licenses to the broadcast media to be fair, competitive, and apolitical, but others expressed the view that it was not at all so in reality. Houessou commented that the government appears set against allocating radio frequencies, despite the existence of HAAC, the regulatory body.

<sup>1</sup> Haute Autorité de l'Audio Visuel et de la Communication

#### 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.

The question of ease of market entry particularly stirred the press owners on the panel. They pointed to differences in the treatment of print media and broadcast media; the latter are required to pay annual license fees to the government. The owners also described their efforts to reduce taxes paid by press businesses struggling to stay afloat.

Beninese journalists practice with little fear of violence; there continue to be virtually no reports of crimes against journalists. The few chance attacks by vandals are controlled quickly, and police brutality at official events has grown rare. In the past, such instances, generally associated with street demonstrations, always provoked an automatic protest from the professional associations.

The panelists noted that since the current regime came to power, the public media have continued to enjoy certain privileges; the price is editorial influence by the government. The panelists pointed to flagrant discrimination, particularly with favoritism of the Beninese Radio and Television (ORTB), and national television in particular. For example, as noted in last year's MSI, the public television channel received huge subsidies (in one year, amounting to CFA 8 billion (\$16 million) whereas the rest receive only CFA 350 million (\$700,000). Additionally, opposition politicians complain that ORTB covers their activities far less than the ruling party.

Although, as noted earlier, no Beninese journalists were arrested and thrown into jail in 2010, Benin's libel laws keep the possibility open. Libel is still a criminal law matter punishable by prison or heavy fines. Worse, in a complicated evidentiary procedure, the burden of proof rests on accused journalists who must collect evidence for their defense in seven days. These facets make libel a difficult and complex issue in Benin. First, the period of seven days is too short for defendants to collect their evidence. Furthermore, after a criminal conviction, journalists face the likelihood of heavy fines. The panelists noted that the new press code, pending adoption, made no counter-proposal to reverse the trend: that aspect of procedure is to remain exactly the same after the new code is adopted. However, although legal complaints against media personnel continue, the courts exhibit greater reluctance to send journalists to prison.

Access to public information is notoriously challenging for journalists; the panelists feel that the authorities are determined to screen information to prevent the release of anything unflattering. Unfortunately, Benin still lacks a law to regulate and ensure better access.

Beninese journalists do have access to a variety of news sources, particularly international news. With the Internet, they can tap international press agency websites with ease. However, some panelists commented that not all media outlets have room in their budgets for Internet access, particularly up country.

Although there is no law restricting access to the journalism profession, there are criteria to establish whether people are considered true journalists. HAAC, for example, handed down an exhaustive list of criteria that media professionals must meet to receive a press card.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Benin Objective Score: 2.26

In Benin, the authorities, associations of media professionals, and development partners work to promote standards of professional quality within the press, deploying capacity-building measures and technical training aimed at reducing complaints levied against journalists.

Journalists tend to be motivated by the desire to please someone, panelists observed. This sometimes leads them to stoop to broadcasting or publishing one-sided stories, without taking the trouble to gather all the relevant evidence or to seek sources to round out the other side of the story. The result is frequent reporting that is neither fair, objective, nor well documented. Furthermore, all too often, journalists are just out to collect their per diems, giving their best only when they are full-time, regularly paid employees.

In Benin, the Observatory for Professional Ethics in the Media (ODEM) regulates media ethics. Nevertheless, ethical lapses continue. For many of the panelists, working conditions and the economic strain on press businesses negatively impact

journalists' professional objectivity, and create the conditions for ethical standards to slide.

Self-censorship continues to be an entrenched practice among journalists. Journalists who want to avoid provoking their superiors often try to avoid publishing articles that could damage their employer's relations with certain political or business circles. As Covi put it, self-censorship is regularly practiced in Benin because a majority of press outlets are controlled by the financially and politically powerful.

Some issues, such as those that relate to national defense, public safety, or pending court cases, are subject to legal restrictions. Journalists must exercise professional prudence and discretion to cover these sensitive topics. Otherwise, journalists generally cover major events and issues in the news.

In the private sector media, the very low wages, coupled with the lack of proper contracts, are seen as incitements to corruption. To get the coverage they hope for, event organizers pay transport costs and per diems to journalists from local media, which then broadcast the information or publish it in their newspapers. To make ends meet, some journalists accept money to lend their byline to articles handed to them by politicians.

Although the broadcast media adhere to fairly specific schedules for news programming, the total time allotted on air for news is far lower than airtime devoted to entertainment programming. Proportionally, out of every 24 hours of airtime, news programs and bulletins fill less than a third; entertainment shows flood the rest of the schedule, not unlike the print sector, where tabloids crowd out serious newspapers.

For the print media, the quality of equipment has improved. However, serious problems continue in radio and television, painfully apparent by the picture quality displayed on televisions. Additionally, many radio stations still use dreadfully outdated analog recording equipment, which diminishes the sound quality of broadcasts. While media outlets make notable efforts to offer quality productions, production quality is inextricably linked to the availability of the necessary material and human resources.

As noted in previous MSI studies, the state broadcast media acknowledge all of the country's ethnic groups in their programming. Private and community radio stations focus on producing material of interest to ethnic groups living within their coverage area.

#### 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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### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Benin Objective Score: 2.64

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Radio continues to be the principal source for news, especially in rural areas. News media are concentrated in the major urban centers. Although in the cities you do not have to look far for private newspapers, private print media rarely reach rural residents, given the underdeveloped press distribution services. Local radio stations fill this vacuum, passing on the news published by the newspapers.

No official restrictions hamper citizens' access to domestic or international radio, television, or print media. Access to the Internet is free from restrictions as well, but given the costs associated with Internet access and computer equipment, very few people can tap this source of news.

The public service media are tantamount to government media, given the powerful influence of the executive branch on their operations and content. The panelists all maintained that the public or state media suffer from this influence, especially as the government names officials overseeing the media. Additionally, more airtime is devoted to the activities and points of view of the government than those of the opposition parties or non-political organizations. Nevertheless, apart from state media officials who seek to please the government with biased reportage and comment, there are a few journalists who try to make the state-sponsored media live up to their public service obligations.

#### 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.

Currently, there are three private news agencies: Médiante Afrique, Proximités, and Sud Presse, which, failing to make their traditional services profitable, are investing in secondary activities such as training, studies, and research. Newspapers, with sluggish sales, cannot afford the services of press agencies, but make abundant use of the information available on the Internet.

To compete in the sharply competitive radio environment, private radio stations do create original productions for their audiences, but such productions cannot compete with national radio programming in terms of quality.

In Benin, the sources of finance behind the media are difficult to pinpoint. Figureheads front media outlets while the real owners are shielded from the public, preventing the public from judging the objectivity of the news put out by those media. Sometimes, politicians or businessmen use the media to protect their interests, leading them to undue influence on the editorial content, flouting the rules that govern the journalism profession.

Apart from a few local restrictions, most social interests are represented in the media. Alongside the local radio stations (cultural radio, faith-based radio, etc.), there are specialized print media (company newspapers, student press, sports and cultural press, religious media and so on) that cater to various interests.

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### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

#### Benin Objective Score: 1.49

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Business management continues to be a weakness for Beninese press outlets. Most press enterprises are structured poorly and managed badly, and are largely unprofitable. In the absence of business plans, accounting services are often lumped in with sales and administrative services, handled by inadequately trained personnel.

Media revenues come from sales (for the newspapers), advertising, and media campaigns. The panelists were unanimous that revenue made by press enterprises pales in comparison to sales figures of other businesses. Among the community media, the situation is so strained that at times local governments have stepped in to provide infusions of financial support. Panelists noted that this might also be intended to guard against unwelcome coverage of the mayor's activities.

Apart from three or four dailies that rely on sales and subscriptions of their newspapers to boost their income, advertising remains the major source of revenue for most media. There is one noteworthy exception: *La Nation* boasted

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**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.

better sales figures (thanks to all government services holding at least one subscription), and it served as the newspaper for legal announcements to compensate for the irregularity of the state-run *Official Journal*.

As for advertising, the sector is badly organized, only benefiting a small number of press outlets. Yet, as noted in last year's MSI, the pages of the handful of newspapers that receive disproportionate shares of advertising are overflowing with advertisements, crowding out news. The panelists explained that given the disorderliness of the advertising market, each press business negotiates directly with businesses interested in placing advertisements. The panelists repeated calls for a regulatory agency capable of mobilizing and managing advertising opportunities.

The panelists noted that independent media receive an annual subsidy from the government, but they are more concerned with the unfairness of the allocation process rather than the possibility that the funds could undermine media objectivity. The panelists criticized the selective allocation of the funds by the HAAC.

Few of the media recognize the value of prospective market research. Instead, program planning and positioning is done instinctually. Press owners seemingly prefer to manage on a day-to-day basis without innovation or differentiation in the presentation of products. Little except the titles set apart many newspapers, which are strikingly similar graphically.

In radio and television, program listings differ hardly at all: news bulletins air at the same time, interactive programs resemble each other, and broadcasts of major debates present nearly the same format. Only the tone changes, and picture

quality differs simply because of the different technical equipment used.

There are no reliable statistics to guide the media sector, either. The circulation and sales figures provided by each press enterprise appear to shift to fit the purpose of the person requesting the data.

**OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS**

**Benin Objective Score: 2.69**

The structure and organization of professional associations related to the press continues to improve, and these associations also enjoy advocacy support from civil society organizations.

Back in 2002, after a plenary meeting of the Beninese press, the publishers and press magnates merged into a single association. It organized training opportunities for its members, and also went to bat to help level the economic playing field for the press, lowering taxes and levies, creating a central procurement service, setting up an advertising brokering agency, and getting a law on advertising passed. All of these moves aimed to put an end to economic dependency and improve the performance of press enterprises.

Journalists and other media professionals were also organized, after the plenary meeting, into a single umbrella union that acted independently of management and government. The union has specialized departments, each responsible for a certain area of the media: economics, parliament, politics, environment, and so on. Regional representatives of the union serve professionals in all regions

**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.

of the country. Over the past few years, it has mobilized to support journalists in difficulty, whether in prison, facing trial or other battles.

Civil society organizations provide visible support to the defense of press freedom, but they remain focused primarily on the major urban centers. For example, back in 2008, Human Rights, Peace, and Development reported on the negative effects of government contracts with the media. La Maison des Médias du Bénin has also worked to promote press freedom and solidarity among media professionals, and offers training opportunities for media professionals.

A few private colleges provide journalism training, such as the Centre Africain de Formation et de Perfectionnement des Journalistes, and the University of Benin is set to open a school of journalism in October 2011. One program even offers a master's degree in media management, and since 2009, a government scholarship program has supported training for 40 working journalists, from all types of media, at a local institution. Yet, as they are still relatively new to the scene, the journalism colleges are not drawing large numbers of students, because of high tuition.

Several supplementary professional training opportunities are available for the media, as well. Sessions on editorial techniques and specialized reporting are the most commonly offered programs, typically funded by international institutions and the Beninese government. Training opportunities offered by HAAC tend to be more structured and methodical; they are generally offered every other year.

The printing and distribution aspect of media enterprises remains free and independent. The newspapers use printing facilities that are independently managed, and are under no government restrictions. In Benin, around 10 newspapers have had their own print shops for some time now, further bolstering their independence.

The existing distribution and broadcasting channels are apolitical, and are run by the private sector. Distribution of the print press is still in the embryonic stage, though; a press distribution company still needs to be organized to provide timelier distribution of newspapers up country. Although the major urban centers are well served, rural areas have very limited access to newspapers. The same limitations apply for the Internet, which is not used very widely yet because the accompanying infrastructure—electrical power, computer, telephone lines—remain underdeveloped outside of the major cities. Private operators provide Internet access.

## List of Panel Participants

**Emérico Adjovi**, journalist; former secretary general, Beninese Media Management Council, Cotonou

**Alain Zanou Adoun**, editor, *Le Choix*, Cotonou

**Célestin Akpovo**, counselor, High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication, Cotonou

**Georgette Akuesson**, member, Supporters of Cotonou Radio Stations, Cotonou

**Akuété Assevi**, general director, National Office of Press Editors; editor of *La Nation*, Cotonou

**Filbert Toïdé Béhanzin**, lawyer, Beninese Civil Society Platform, Cotonou

**Armand Covi**, director, Radio Bénin Culture, Porto Novo

**Wilfrid Gbegan**, station manager, Sèdohoun Alodalomè of Agbotagon, Toffo

**Bruno Houessou**, communications manager, Social Watch Benin, Cotonou

**Edouard Loko**, president, Beninese Media Management and director, *Le Progrès*, Cotonou

**Marie Richard Magnidet**, journalist and manager, *La Presse du Jour*; president, Observatory for Deontology and Ethics in the Media, Cotonou

## Moderator and Author

**Clément Adechien**, journalist and manager, *L'Informateur*; vice-president, Beninese Media Management Council, Cotonou

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