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EQUATORIAL GUINEA

Near the end of 2009, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema secured a new term in an election Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) quickly proclaimed rigged. The fact that Nguema won re-election, with 95 percent of the vote, surprised no one and drew little protest from the country's long-suffering media. In his 30 years in power, he confiscated the state-owned media, turned them against the opposition, and ensured that the independent media in Guinea are virtually nonexistent.

According to RSF, the state-owned radio-television station, RTVGE, covered Nguema's activities tirelessly, while the four opposition candidates received minimal media coverage. RTVGE did not organize any debates and essentially ignored the opposition. As for the print media, the official biweekly newspaper, *Ebano*, housed in the Ministry of Information, dedicated two issues to the presidential elections. In one, the newspaper published the electoral program of the opposition but did not give the candidates the opportunity to express themselves as freely as the ruling party.

In Equatorial Guinea the privately owned press consists of just three publications, and the government expends considerable energy obstructing their efforts, making it nearly impossible, for example, for one independent paper, *La Opinion*, to print. The government's efforts to control the media have caused it to lose credibility with the public, however. Self-censorship is widespread, and according to some journalists, the only reliable news source is the Internet. But due to instability in the telecommunications sector, Internet access is not available to the entire population, and costs can be exorbitant.

Over the past few years that the MSI has studied the media in Equatorial Guinea, the opinions and comments of the participants describe the collapse of the media in a corrupt dictatorship, where the journalists feel a sense of gloom that a strong and independent media could ever emerge. Journalists are not even allowed to convene as a group to discuss issues affecting the media. The Ministry of Information, exclusively consisting of members of the ruling party, the Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (known by its French acronym, PDGE), acts as a media regulation agency and keeps a close eye on any and all activities or meetings involving the media.

This is the reason why, for the fourth consecutive year, it has been impossible to convene an expert panel of journalists to discuss Equatorial Guinea's media situation and conduct the MSI study. Not just because a request for such a panel is subject to the express authorization of the Ministry of Information, but also because no journalist or media professional is willing to risk being seen at such a meeting. As a result, journalists have agreed to answer the MSI questionnaire only with the protection of anonymity.

Due to the oppressive political environment, panelists for Equatorial Guinea agreed to participate only on condition of anonymity.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA AT A GLANCE

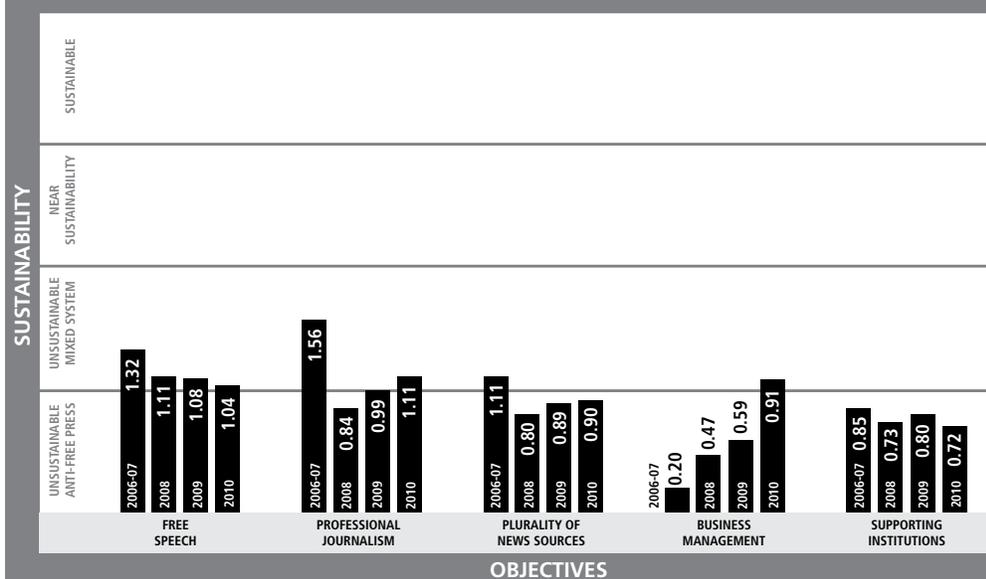
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 668,225 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Malabo
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Fang 85.7%, Bubi 6.5%, Mdowne 3.6%, Annobon 1.6%, Bujeba 1.1%, other 1.4% (1994 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions:** nominally Christian and predominantly Roman Catholic, pagan practices (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Spanish 67.6% (official), other 32.4% (includes French (official), Fang, Bubi) (1994 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$10.182 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$23,810 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 87% (male 93.4%, female 80.5%) (2000 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (since August 3, 1979)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:**
Print: 4 daily newspapers; Radio Stations: 2 national stations; Television Stations: 1 state-run station
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Ebano* (state-owned) *La Opinion* (private) *La Nacion* (private)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top two radio stations: Radio Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial (state-run), Radio Asonga (private, owned by the president's son)
- > **News agencies:** N/A
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 14,400 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: EQUATORIAL GUINEA



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

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 1.04

Many human-rights defense organizations consider Equatorial Guinea among the worst countries in the world in terms of freedom of speech and human rights; the violation of human rights, the torture of political prisoners, and corrupt courts of law are common. Accordingly, Equatorial Guinea placed 167th of 178 countries on the 2010 freedom-of-the-press list compiled by RSF.¹ Moreover, for years, Nguema has been on the list of “freedom-of-the-press predators” compiled by the same organization.

One anonymous panelist stated bitterly, “Despite the purported democratization that is going on in our country, the freedom of speech does not exist yet. Journalists working with international news agencies are often monitored or forbidden to practice their profession freely.”

And yet, there are laws that proclaim the right to the freedom of speech. The 1992 constitution guarantees “the freedom of speech, thought, ideas, and opinions.” However, these words carry little meaning in reality, as the very same authorities supposedly tasked with enforcing the rules ignore them. Instead, the authorities are often behind harassment of journalists. They view the press as a governmental tool. Law

¹ *Press Freedom Index 2010*. Reporters sans Frontières, 2011. Available at: http://www.rsf.org/IMG/CLASSEMENT_2011/GB/C_GENERAL_GB.pdf (Accessed October 18, 2011.)

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.

Number 13/1992 concerning the press and printing regulates all aspects of the media.

In terms of broadcast licensing, all broadcast outlets are tied to the government. As the Ministry of Information is the media regulator, there is little hope that a truly independent outlet could break into the market.

Journalists live in fear of government reprisal. Last year’s MSI documented the arrest of the sole foreign press correspondent in Equatorial Guinea, Rodrigo Angüe Nguema, on June 17, 2009, to illustrate the government’s oppression of journalists. Nguema was jailed for a piece he released on Agence France-Presse that alleged the director of the national airline embezzled funds. The news proved false, and although Nguema acknowledged his mistake, he was sent to Equatorial Guinea’s notorious Black Beach prison.

The authorities wasted little time in finding an excuse to arrest and detain Nguema’s replacement, Samuel Obiang Mbana. On April 14 at the airport in Malabo, police arrested Obiang Mbana, Agence France-Presse and Africa One radio correspondent, as he covered the arrival of heads of state for the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC). RSF condemned the five-hour detention, commenting, “Is Obiang Mbana, Equatorial Guinea’s sole correspondent for the foreign press, going to end up like his predecessor who was demonized and attacked because of the authorities’ mistrust of the foreign press?”²

The panelists agreed that there is no editorial independence in the public media; the government pulls all the strings financially and editorially. Radio station managers are appointed on political criteria, the panelists confirmed, and they exercise significant influence over the way the news is reported.

Libel is very much a criminal offense, and the government has not hesitated to accuse journalists of such offenses and send them to prison.

All participants recognize that the access to official information sources is an everyday battle—and a tough one. One panelist said, “Equatorial Guinean journalists love their work, but they face a serious problem with information sources.” Journalists are confronted with institutions or companies that hate to provide even the tiniest bit of information. Another panelist commented, “Access to public information is difficult. First, the political and social elite are not open to interviews, for fear they might let slip a piece of information that could get them into trouble. In that case, journalists are forced to use doublespeak for the sake of

² “AFP Correspondent held for five hours by police in Malabo.” Reporters sans Frontières, April 16, 2010. <http://en.rsf.org/equatorial-guinea-afp-correspondent-held-for-five-16-04-2010,37051.html> (Accessed October 18, 2011.)

safety. Journalists put themselves at risk whenever they tackle political issues.”

Accessing information is difficult because officials are afraid to speak to journalists or give them information, for fear that the regime will dismiss them for disloyalty. Furthermore, the government finds it politically beneficial to keep the nation in ignorance. However, one panelist who works for the public media *Gaceta* and RTVGE noted that access to information is easier for the journalists from the state-owned media. Another panelist said, “Accessing information sources and reporting news impartially are significant challenges that must be addressed through staff training and retraining.”

As noted in last year’s MSI, the media do not relay news about Equatorial Guinea appearing in the international press because they would be held responsible for this content. The government immediately refutes all critical international reports.

Journalists must obtain licenses to practice their trade, and, as the U.S. Department of State reported, “accreditation is cumbersome for both local and foreign journalists, who had to register with the Ministry of Information.”³

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 1.11

The Guinean journalists’ opinion of their own profession is far from complimentary. They all recognize that in many cases professional quality leaves a lot to be desired, due to several core problems undermining the profession: heavy politicization and bias; lack of training; poor access to news sources; corruption, censorship, and self-censorship. One panelist noted that the journalism profession does not carry the same weight in Equatorial Guinea as in many African countries, which have already started to make significant progress in the area—leaving Equatorial Guinea behind some of its neighbors.

According to one journalist, many of those who call themselves journalists do not have the required training to be journalists. “Meeting professional quality standards can be required only from a professional who has attended some training in journalism. In Guinea, anyone can become a journalist overnight; you only need to know how to read and write. Of the 150 Guinean journalists, only about 20 possess some grasp of professional standards of journalism.” Another panelist agreed, noting, “The lack of journalistic training explains why journalists fail to meet professional standards. In other words,

those who call themselves reporters sometimes miss the point of a story. For instance, when covering a fatal accident, a reporter prefers to make a list of authorities that assisted with picking up the body and neglects to address the actual causes of the accident and the identities of the victims.”

Furthermore, as noted in last year’s MSI, all journalists in Equatorial Guinea are public servants, governed by state laws. Professional standards are broken because journalists, most of them employees of the state, are resigned to focusing on pleasing their bosses, driven by the fear of being laid off by the media owners and the Minister of Information, who controls the media. Noted one panelist, “It is difficult for journalists to comply with professional standards of quality because of the pressure to say only what the politicians want to hear.”

Law Number 13/1992 concerning the press and printing includes an ethical and moral code to guide journalists, publishers, managing editors, and general managers. And yet, there is no way for journalists to uphold the core ethical principles of the profession: they cannot report the truth, given the oppressive climate they work in. With such intense political pressure, journalists resort to heavy self-censorship. Their jobs and safety are in the balance.

As a result, the media avoid covering many significant issues, including corruption. They ignore the country’s ranking of 12th on the Transparency International list of the world’s most corrupt countries and accusations that the authorities have embezzled funds. Although the country, sometimes called Africa’s Kuwait, is rich in oil, rumors percolate about shady transactions involving staggering amounts of oil money in the president’s personal foreign accounts. President Nguema is one of the richest men in the world, panelists said,

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).

³ 2010 Human Rights Report: Equatorial Guinea. U.S. Department of State: April 8, 2011. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/af/154344.htm> (Accessed October 18, 2011.)

spending a fortune on luxury real estate while the majority of the population lives in deep poverty and lacks access to basic social services. Human Rights Watch has been making detailed corruption accusations in successive reports, but the press in Equatorial Guinea ignore the topic. They ignore President Nguema's prosecution, along with his Gabonese and Congolese counterparts—Omar Bongo and Denis Sassou Nguesso, respectively—by the French for “ill-gotten gains,” singing the praises of the president instead.

Regarding salaries, one panelist said, “Journalists have trouble making ends meet, as salaries are ridiculous.” Thus, they frequently turn to politicians to make ends meet, a clear conflict with editorial independence. Public-media journalists are paid according to the civil-servant scale; a manager might earn XAF 100,000 to 250,000 (\$225 to \$560) a month. Panelists highlighted the connection they see in the lack of adequate remuneration and the constant temptation to corruption journalists face. One panelist concluded, “Actual facts are not, for the most part, reflected in the content of news. In Equatorial Guinea, journalists are the mouthpieces of the political elite. The positive news content is proportional to the staggering amount of money that goes into the journalist's pocket.”

Entertainment programs abound, while news is lacking—and objective, balanced news produced in the country is rarely seen. Although the state provides its journalists with adequate equipment and facilities, there are technical gaps.

In this repressive environment, investigative reporting is nonexistent, said last year's MSI panelists, and there is very little specialized reporting on topics such as health, economics, etc.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.90

Media plurality is not possible under the current regime, which either creates or controls public media and stifles all other media. Equatorial Guinea's print media consist of the state-owned *Ebano*, along with three privately owned papers: the weekly *La Opinion*, *La Nacion*, and *La Gazeta* (a monthly). In terms of radio, the choices are limited to the state-run Radio Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial and Radio Asonga, which is private but owned by president's son.

Radio Télévision de Guinea Ecuatoriale (RTVGE) serves a government that does not tolerate even the faintest whiff of criticism. The national radio and television stations, in Malabo and Bata, are the tools of the politicians, who use them as springboards. Concluded one panelist, “Most of the media in

Equatorial Guinea follow in the footsteps of the state-owned media in letting politicians manipulate information.” Another panelist noted, “The so-called independent media play the game of the state-owned television channel. Some media act as showcases for politicians, from the first to the last page. All in all, the journalists' independence in this country is still hard—if not impossible—to find, though there are a few correspondents from international independent media here.”

It is not surprising, then, that the population turns away from media that only flatter the president. One panelist said the only reliable news source is the Internet and the international press. But due to instability in the telecommunications sector, Internet access is not available to the entire population. In some places the connection is slow, and costs can be exorbitant.

The government also attempts to control and monitor foreign and domestic news sources. Vendors must secure permission from the government to sell international publications.⁴ However, satellite television provides another alternative, along with the Internet, to those who can afford it. Despite the government's overt efforts to restrict citizens' access to foreign and domestic media, the U.S. Department of State reported, “Satellite broadcasts were widely available, including the French-language Africa24 television channel that carried opposition criticism,” and, furthermore, “Foreign channels were not censored, were broadcast throughout the country,

⁴ Vines, Alex. *Well-oiled: Oil and Human Rights in Equatorial Guinea*. Human Rights Watch, 2009: p. 58.

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.

and included Radio France International, the BBC, and Radio Exterior, the international shortwave service from Spain.”⁵

And yet, there are no news sources that reach the whole country in an objective and reliable way. Only the international press tries to provide reliable information. The fact that the state-owned media always pamper the political regime costs them greatly in the credibility of the citizens.

The panelists agreed that the public media have no independence from the government and fail utterly to follow a public-service model. As noted in last year’s MSI, it cannot be said that a broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media. The public media are not open to airing views other than the government’s. As a Human Rights Watch book on Equatorial Guinea reported, “The government generally withholds access to domestic broadcasting from opposition parties, and broadcasters refer to the opposition negatively in news programs.”⁶

There are no quality domestic news agencies in Equatorial Guinea, and the government allows no independent broadcast media to exist, let alone produce original content.

As noted in last year’s MSI, media ownership is more or less transparent, given the government’s heavy involvement. The government, by nearly monopolizing ownership, severely restricts the plurality of content and opinion.

As for coverage for minorities, there are time slots reserved especially for the news in local languages. However, the only stories aired are those that cover the governmental and presidential meetings.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.91

Asked if the media are well-managed businesses and able to ensure the independence that journalists need, all the participants expressed unanimous disappointment. While some may be economically independent, political independence is not possible. Explained one panelist, “There are no independent media. The country’s political reality does not allow for the freedom of the press and media independence.”

As noted in last year’s MSI, any truly independent media outlet would likely not be able to survive, amid all of the regulatory burdens and economic hardships imposed by the government. One panelist commented, “Every existing media is dependent

⁵ Ibid, 2010 Human Rights Report: Equatorial Guinea.

⁶ Ibid, Vines: p. 58.

upon financial support from at least two or three members of the ruling party or people close to the government.” Furthermore, most of the managers are active members of the ruling party and control the operation of the media outlets.

Forced to play the game, the owners of the few news agencies and media outlets must obey and transform their outlets generating revenue from paid advertisements for political activities, and that makes them dependent on the political powers. If a media outlet does not play the game, it finds itself in hot water. In his book on Equatorial Guinea, Vines reported, “Moreover, only the political opposition, the Convergencia para la Democracia Social, dares advertise in *La Opinion*, meaning it is not commercially viable to print and now only appears on the Internet.”⁷

As reported in last year’s MSI, the national television channel is completely subsidized by the government and receives supplemental advertising from private telecommunication and oil companies. On the print media side, *La Gaceta and Ceiba* (with a heavy entertainment focus) monopolize advertising, with the blessing of the Ministry of Information.

Although the government does not provide subsidies to the independent media, this does not impede its efforts to censor and influence content of privately owned publications.

As reported in previous MSI studies, market research is not used, broadcast ratings are not prepared, and circulation figures are not verified independently.

⁷ Ibid, Vines: p. 58.

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.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.72

Equatorial Guinea has no trade associations, and the very few press associations are fleeting. Their work revolves around activities unworthy of journalism—if the term even fits, according to the panelists. There is a journalists' association, called the Press Association of Equatorial Guinea (known by its French acronym, ASoPGE). But, heavily politicized, it does nothing to help journalists or enhance the sector's professionalism, as previous MSI studies have detailed.

In fact, as last year's MSI reported, ASoPGE is essentially tasked with controlling the press and ensuring that journalists who become members of another association lose their membership, and consequently their jobs. For that reason, journalists can participate only in activities concerning the press that are organized or approved by the Ministry of Information.

The opinions and comments of the participants faithfully convey the sense of collapse of the media system in a country where the journalists feel that the media sector has been abandoned to a dreary fate. Logically, one participant says, a corrupt and dictatorial regime cannot favor the development of strong and independent media. On the contrary, that sector is being shut out entirely.

"Everything is politicized in Equatorial Guinea. Everyone working in the media sector has been appointed by politicians and is indebted to them," said one panelist. According to another panelist, no one defends the interests of the profession; instead, the focus is on defending the regime.

The existing associations or NGOs do nothing to support the interests of the profession, either. They cannot really be called NGOs because, like most media, they lack independence and follow the same line as the governmental authorities, one that does not encourage the professionalism of the media.

Some panelists also said that even the international NGOs that address the human-rights violations in Guinea do not seem to do enough to denounce the human-rights violations in Guinea, or defend the freedom of expression and support the Guinean media. With burdensome regulations, the government maintains an inhospitable environment for international NGOs.

Concerning training and efforts to improve professionalism among journalists, as noted in last year's MSI, there is no retraining program, school, or training center for journalists. As reported in last year's MSI, the National University of Equatorial Guinea teaches communications in its School for Social Sciences, but the curriculum generally does not cover what would be considered journalism. One panelist said it is obvious that the regime has little interest in encouraging such growth. Professionalism has no support, and, conversely, everything is being done to uphold political interests. The freedom of the press and media sustainability are the least of the regime's concerns.

The government continues to control all arms of printing and distribution.

List of Panel Participants

Due to the oppressive political environment, panelists for Equatorial Guinea agreed to participate only on condition of anonymity.

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.