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As part of the celebration of World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2010, Laure Olga Gondjout, Gabonese minister of communication, postal services, and the digital economy, visited a number of broadcast and print media outlets to learn about the working conditions of media professionals in Gabon. In her statements on World Press Freedom Day, Gondjout expressed her satisfaction that the president, Ali Bongo, continued to support a press that is not only free, but is above all professional in the construction and consolidation of the young democracy of Gabon.

However, despite that official optimism, many media professionals in Gabon maintain that the freedom of the press is violated constantly in their country. According to one observer of the political and media scene, under Ali Bongo the new authorities are afraid of the conscientious work that could make the Gabonese press one that truly reflects public opinion. An independent credible free press also poses a threat to many others across Gabon society: the industrialist who spread radiation and endangered the health of the population with complete impunity; the manufacturers of consumer goods that dumped harmful products on the market; the racketeers of every stripe who benefited from the state of corruption in government departments.

Faced with that picture, many MSI panelists believe that in a country with a very long tradition of bullying supporters of civil liberties, the press must play a leading role by facing up to reprisals from the political authorities, and by showing a willingness to challenge the longstanding tradition of silence. That is the only way, they feel, to expose the principal problems that bring harm to the country's development and militate against the modernization of its political habits.

Despite the sense of pessimism, the panelists did highlight some signs of improvement. In 2010, after a long period without a formal journalism school, the University of Libreville opened a Department of Communication and Journalism. And, on the heels of the 2009 election, new media technology is becoming more familiar—although there are significant geographic and economic barriers to broader use of the Internet. Still, with heavy political and economic pressure, the overall environment does not encourage growth and progress in the sector, keeping sustainability out of reach.



GABON

GABON

GABON AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

- > **Population:** 1,576,665 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Libreville
- > **Ethnic groups:** Bantu tribes, including four major tribal groupings (Fang, Bapounou, Nzebi, Obamba); other Africans and Europeans, 154,000, including 10,700 French and 11,000 persons of dual nationality (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 55%-75%, animist, Muslim less than 1% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** French (official), Fang, Myene, Nzebi, Bapounou/Eschira, Bandjabi (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$11,65 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$13,190 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 63.2% (male 73.7%, female 53.3%) (1995 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba (since October 16, 2009)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations: Print: 7 regularly published newspapers; Radio stations: 13; Television stations: 4
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Gabonews (private), Internet Gabon (private) (BBC Country Profile)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 98,800 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Gabon Objective Score: 2.05

For many years the Law of January 5, 1960, governed the press. The law was binding and gave a priori control of newspaper content to the minister of information. Then, after the National Conference of March 1990, press freedom was set forth in clear terms. Radio and television broadcasting liberalized and opened up to the private sector, and a National Communication Council (known by its French acronym, CNC) was created under the constitution. The CNC was responsible for ensuring, among other things, respect for the expression of democracy and the freedom of the press, and the fair treatment of all recognized political parties and associations in regard to access to the media.

Isaac Mackanga, a journalist with the Gabonese Press Agency (AGP), clarified that in terms of press law, Gabon was governed by two legal platforms: the penal code and the media code. In both platforms, the freedom of the press was strictly regulated. The two legal codes protected citizens much more than journalists, with the indirect consequence of restricting press freedom. Access to public information was recognized, and even encouraged, in the media code in Gabon, but in practice it was not so. To obtain information from a government department, for example, journalists had to obtain authorization from that department's minister.

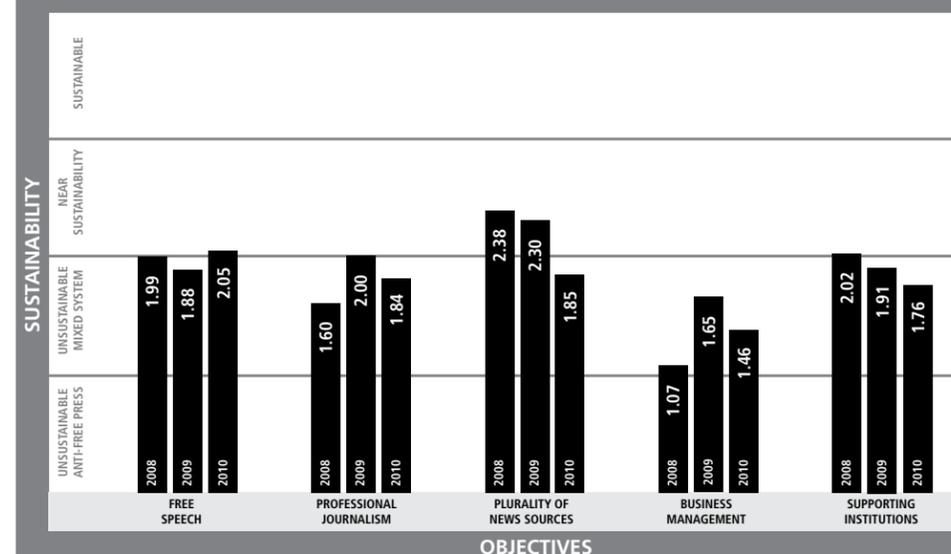
According to several journalists on the panel, in Gabon, as a general rule, listening to other people's opinions is not yet part of the country's political fabric. They generally feel that the authorities are afraid of people's opinions as citizens. That fear first emerged in the very fact of the authorities' refusal to allow the right to vote to be exercised to the full, to allow the expression of that vote to be fully realized. Because the vast majority of Gabonese citizens are not allowed to draw their own conclusions in complete autonomy and because the authoritarian government feeds them their opinions, very few people use their free will to speak about matters of public interest. However, one panelist noted that the role of journalists is especially critical in a climate marred by such intimidation and muzzling of opinion; the press has a strong duty to serve as the voice of the people.

Edgard Omar Nziembi Douckaga, a journalist and reporter for Gabonese Radio and Television Channel One (RTG1), speaking on World Press Freedom Day, had said: "The subject that we are discussing ought to lead us to reflect on the occasion for this day. For, in the context of Gabon, in fact, when we are given a tour of the prison, we see that there are no journalists behind bars. Even if we go round the courts, if you find journalists there, it will certainly be for some other reason, but not for press offenses. So the reflex reaction is to say right away that there is press freedom in Gabon. Except that what the public does not know about is what sometimes leads reporters to lose their jobs. It is not often talked about. There are journalists who are unemployed quite simply because the director who used to employ them received orders from some authority because of a piece of information that was published, however true it was."

Timothée Mémey Boussiengui, a journalist with Africa No. 1 pan-African radio, shared that in his view, Gabon protects the freedom of expression in its basic law, but its reflection on the ground is another story. In Gabon, he said, journalists have been prosecuted—hailed into court and put on trial as common thieves—for what they wrote. And those laws, dating back to the 1960s, have never been revamped. Yves Laurent Goma, journalist and correspondent for Radio France Internationale (RFI), Libreville, observed that in its preamble the Gabonese constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and speech. The media code does as well, but there are violations in its application. In sum, the legislation may appear favorable to the freedom of the press, but the political environment is not.

As for broadcast licensing, some panelists pointed to political restrictions on granting licenses to the broadcast press. As noted in last year's MSI, most broadcast media outlets belong to business and political groups, making it difficult for true media professionals to attain leadership positions at radio

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: GABON



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.

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.

Ludovic Koumba, a journalist and program coordinator for Africa No. 1 Pan-African Radio, said that pro-opposition journalists regularly experience trouble accessing certain types of information; those in a position to provide the information fear losing their privileges or positions in the administration.

stations and television channels. Yet, according to Goma, the allocation of licenses is relatively fair. Many media houses, however, fail to pay their annual license fees.

Concerning the ease of entry into the media market, Goma also noted that the law requires media outlets to pay a value-added tax (VAT), but the government tended not to look too hard in that direction. There are some economic restrictions on authorizations to set up printed newspapers.

For the most recent MSI, the panelists did not report many crimes against journalists. Only Séraphin Ndao's private television station, TV+, which had been pro-government and then switched to the opposition in 2009 after the death of President Omar Bongo Ondimba, suffered intimidation. In 2009 TV+ was shut down and then machine-gunned before having its satellite coverage taken away on the grounds that it broadcast an interview with former President Ondimba, in which he said Gabon is not a monarchy.

While physical assaults against journalists were few, the panelists nonetheless pointed to a number of cases of infringement of journalists' rights since the drama of the 2009 elections. One case featured the dismissal of the former director of AGP, François Essono Obiang, who was removed from office by the Council of Ministers on the grounds that he had refused to carry out a verbal order to dismiss the journalist Mackanga. Mackanga's only "crime" was forwarding e-mail messages criticizing the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), the party in power, to acquaintances. In addition, opposition political figure Ndao's television station in Port Gentil, the country's second-largest city, economic capital, and principal seaport, was closed.

Journalists from the French weekly *L'Express* who wanted to cover the presidential election campaign were banned from entering Gabon. Threats against an Africa 24 team forced them to shorten their stay in Gabon, and later they were forcibly booted out of the country. Most of all, panelists recalled the total blackout on the events in Port Gentil, about

which only a journalist from *L'Union* daily newspaper had the courage to tell a few truths—which were immediately suppressed by political and judicial intimidation. Convictions, astronomical fines against newspapers, seizures of magazines, closures of newspapers, and other arbitrary judgments all reflected a climate that is hostile to the freedom of the press and of expression. The panelists added that handling of crimes against journalists depends on whether the journalist was independent or against the powers that be.

The panelists said the public media benefit from great favors from the authorities. Journalists in the state media are considered pro-government militants—and appointments reflect the degree of militancy. The state media, and pro-government private media, also receive privileges in terms of access to information.

Libel can be treated as either a civil or a criminal offense, as noted in Freedom House's "Freedom of the Press Report" in 2010, which also noted that "the government is permitted to criminalize civil suits and initiate criminal cases in response to the alleged libel of government officials. Publications can be legally suspended for libel and other press offenses."¹

Access to information is guaranteed to all journalists in the media code, but in practice it is not granted. In general, a lack of transparency surrounds sources of access to information, particularly when the information in question is complex. Ludovic Koumba, a journalist and program coordinator for Africa No. 1 Pan-African Radio, said that pro-opposition journalists regularly experience trouble accessing certain types of information; those in a position to provide the information fear losing their privileges or positions in the administration. The case of TV+, which was suspended because of the position of its owner, André Mba Obame, the runner-up in the presidential elections, supports this notion.

All the panelists were of the view that entry into the profession is free. Past MSI panels, however, have noted that laxity in the definition of a journalist, and the inclusion of ranks of untrained journalists, have perhaps lowered professional standards.

¹ Freedom of the Press: Gabon (2010); Freedom House. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2010> (Accessed October 11, 2011.)

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Gabon Objective Score: 1.84

While journalists complain about the increasing numbers of attacks and obstacles put in the way of their work, the Gabonese authorities for their part seem to be more concerned about the contribution of the freedom of information to democratic governance in Gabon and to the emergence of a prosperous country.

Indeed, according to the minister of communication, men and women in the media must be more demanding than ever concerning the news they consume. In a recent speech on press freedom in Gabon, the minister said it would be regrettable if media professionals did not call on their sense of professionalism to combat subjectivity and the pollution of the intellectual debate. She added that very particular attention would be paid to the investigative press, which was, she said, the press for truth and objectivity.

The minister also urged journalists and all who work in the media to pay serious heed to the moral dimension, urging them to respect the conflict between two fundamental rights: the right to inform and, as she put it, everyone's right to respect for their private life.

And yet, several panelists concluded, as observers of the media scene, that the practice of journalism in Gabon suffers from several ills, including a lack of impartiality, particularly in public broadcasting. One panelist, a journalist from Channel One State television (RTG1), admitted that he and his colleagues are government officials working in broadcasting and are therefore at the service of the state.

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).

As a result, panelists said, it is not uncommon to see the CNC leaping to suspend private media while turning a blind eye to the same kind of misdemeanors on the part of state media or the pro-government private press.

Furthermore, panelists noted, the CNC, which bears responsibility for regulating and monitoring both the public and private media, conspicuously lacks neutrality, being particularly heavily skewed in favor of the state media. As a result, panelists said, it is not uncommon to see the CNC leaping to suspend private media while turning a blind eye to the same kind of misdemeanors on the part of state media or the pro-government private press.

For example, the CNC ordered the suspension of two private newspapers, *Le Nganga* (a satirical and investigative weekly) and *Ezombolo* (a satirical monthly), accusing them of sowing confusion in the minds of the Gabonese by raising the question of the succession of President Ondimba. *Ezombolo* was suspended for six months, and *Nganga* was hit with a one-month suspension. The CNC argued that the two newspapers threw public opinion into confusion by announcing that well-known people were intending to stand as candidates to succeed the president while he was at a hospital in Barcelona, Spain. The CNC reminded the national and international press that the freedom of the press must be exercised subject to public order, freedom, and the dignity of citizens, as stipulated in article 94 of the constitution.

Despite the existence in Gabon of a national charter of rights and duties for journalists, signed by all newspaper editorial directors, the press remains highly politicized. Malekou Ma Malekou, a correspondent for Africa No. 1 pan-African radio, said that although high-quality reporting does exist, issues of ethics and professional practice are sometimes a problem because of weak training, coupled with the financial poverty and insecurity faced by many in the profession. The panelists noted that in Gabon, there is no journalism training college in the strict sense of the term.

The panelists concluded that in the case of Gabon, the answer to the question of journalistic quality would have to be a qualified one because of the disparity between the levels of training within the profession. While journalists working in the public media receive the requisite training and attain the required level of competence, their working environment is often not suited to attaining a professional standard of quality. The political authorities control the public media.

In both the private and public media, self-censorship is practiced often, out of fear of reprisals. Goma feels that self-censorship is widely practiced to avoid courting trouble from authorities such as the CNC. The airwaves are silent on a number of subjects, by the public press in particular. As an example, he mentioned the arrest of General Jean-Philippe Ntumpa Léboni, former leader of the National Security Council of Gabon, who was accused of attempting a putsch.

Boussiengui said the low salaries paid to journalists are at least partly to blame for the failure of many journalists to produce high-quality work. For their part, many of the panelists working for the private press acknowledged that they are “in the service of the politics of the belly.” That is also the justification for the current stampede away from the newsrooms to hunt for jobs as press advisers or attachés in ministries or public enterprises. Low salaries also open the door to corruption and to news that is slanted deliberately. In addition, reporters are often “looked after” in terms of their transportation, accommodation, and subsistence needs when reporting from crime scenes or companies that have been censored.

Koumba wondered whether the salaries of journalists in Gabon should be compared to those of journalists in neighboring countries because, comparatively speaking, one would be tempted to say that journalists’ salaries in Gabon are acceptable. Relative to the cost of living, however, they are derisory, sometimes tempting journalists working in Gabon to exact a price for their articles or reports. The situation also affects the quality of journalists’ work; some journalists care more about the thickness of the envelopes they receive than their obligation to provide high-quality work to the public.

Norbert Ngoua Mezui, journalist, founder, publisher, and director of publication of the bimonthly *Nku’u Le Messenger*, was also critical vis-à-vis the political authorities’ monopoly of the public-service news. As a result, the impartiality of journalists in that public service is questionable. Some even equated the treatment, publication, and broadcasting of news in the public media to an idealized form of art in the style of Giotto. Fear, self-censorship, and sycophancy are legion. In his view, only the private media attempt some balance of tone.

Théophile Ndong Edda, a journalist for Africa No. 1 pan-African Radio, Libreville, said that unfortunately everybody seems to believe they could do the job—that all you have to do to call yourself a journalist is pick up a microphone, sit at a desk in a newsroom, or show your face on television. Professionals deserving of being called journalists exist, but they are increasingly being crowded out by corrupt and ill-qualified people not worthy of the title.

As for the balance of news and entertainment, some panelists feel that there is a good balance between entertainment

and news in programming; others believe there is a strong preponderance of entertainment programming—and that the problem is equally acute with public outlets.

François Nzengue, deputy secretary-general of the Union for Channel One (SPC), speaking as a trade unionist, said the living and working conditions of journalists in Gabon leave much to be desired. Trade unions have issued demands for improvements in that area. With the exception of Gabonese Radio and Television (RTG), which boasts fairly modern working facilities, press enterprises, especially private ones, are housed in unsuitable premises.

Panelists also said there are not enough programs or independent specialized reports on certain topics, nor are there enough programs designed to stir real discussion on major issues.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Gabon Objective Score: 1.85

While Gabon’s media have made great strides in plurality since the launch of multiparty democracy in the 1990s, Gabon also has one of the highest rates of mortality among media outlets of any African country. This poses a great danger, not only for the news, but also for the public’s right to pluralism in news sources.

The panelists underlined the gradual disappearance of several private press titles, which join a long list of newspapers that could not survive in the Gabonese market. They mentioned

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.

the cases of *La Griffie*, *La Clé*, *Le Bûcheron*, *Le Progressiste*, and *La Cigale*, among others.

As last year’s MSI noted, new media have been somewhat slow to take off in Gabon, although the 2009 election season marked some progress, with campaigning branching out into social media such as Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube, and SMS messaging.

Faced with political and police repression, coupled with a gloomy economic outlook, the press is always looking over its shoulder. Currently, it is hard to find any press outlet on Gabonese soil that produces any news that challenges the government. There are a few exceptions, such as independent weekly *Misamu*, that dare to offer critical content. In general, however, the press essentially walks on eggshells because of the repression.

Goma said that in Gabon, there are no restrictions on citizens’ access to media (although last year’s MSI noted that mobile-telephone companies suspended SMS service during the elections). The cost of access, however, presents a significant obstacle. The national minimum wage is about CFA 86,000 (about \$180). The largest daily costs CFA 400 (\$0.80). Internet café time costs CFA 500 (\$1.00) an hour. Given their very low purchasing power, some segments of the population cannot afford those costs. Mezui added that the geographic barriers are also significant, given the lack of equipment and infrastructure, particularly in the rural areas, that leaves many Gabonese with little access to news.

The public media reflect only the views of the government, some panelists said, and often fail to give each side a platform. By way of illustration, when the opposition candidate André Mba Obame proclaimed himself president, the state media reported all the steps the government took in retaliation. However, there was no debate about the reasons for those reprisals.

While some panelists said there are independent news agencies and news websites in Gabon, including Gabonews.ga, Gaboneco.com, Gabonactu.com, and others, Mezui countered that the government controls all news agencies to some degree. At any rate, they are largely unused by the broadcast media. The fact that a number of editorial offices still lack Internet connections is one hindrance to broader use. Gabonese journalists also rely on Agence France-Presse.

The Gabonese broadcast media produce almost all their own programs. On the rural side, however, they often rebroadcast programs from a number of stations, such as RFI, the BBC, and sometimes VOA.

There is little to no transparency in media ownership. While government employees officially are not permitted to own

media outlets, that restriction is not heeded. For example, the presidential family owns the Télé Africa television station. Gondjout holds Gabonews.ga, while the mayor of Libreville holds *L’Observateur Africain*.

To circumvent the control by state officials over many media outlets, and also to get around censorship and even self-censorship, those who can afford to are turning to satellite television subscriptions and Internet access. Furthermore, even owners of non-state domestic media often position themselves to gain political and economic advantages.

As Mackanga put it, only the foreign media provide the public with objective and reliable news. This includes foreign radio stations that are broadcast on FM, particularly in the capital, and also foreign television channels on satellite and social networks on the Internet. However, in general only the elite, with substantial financial incomes, can afford access to such media.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Gabon Objective Score: 1.46

According to several panelists, the private media, with the exception of the daily *L’Union*, were not well managed. *L’Union* is owned by a wealthy foreign businessman who installed rigor into the newspaper’s management and managed to diversify its sources of financing, including an advertising agency, a printing house, and the distribution of newspapers throughout the country. Since 2009, the journalists at that newspaper have been aware that they are

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.

Boussiengui expressed the view that the well-managed independent media are in the pocket of special-interest groups comprising the hardliners among the government in power. Those media control the whole of the advertising pie.

doing their job properly—and it is understood that they pull the highest pay of any Gabonese print media.

Aside from the exception of *L'Union*, newspapers announced amid great fanfares of publicity tend to wilt and die just as quickly. They might appear for one, two, or three issues, often after the state subsidy had been paid according to criteria that not everyone agreed with or met. As a result, the weekly and bimonthly papers are becoming bimonthly and monthly papers, for lack of means. Without sustainable sources of support, many less stable media outlets are vulnerable to manipulation, and editorial independence is a fragile commodity.

Boussiengui expressed the view that the well-managed independent media are in the pocket of special-interest groups comprising the hardliners among the government in power. Those media control the whole of the advertising pie. The rest live on their wits and survive mainly because of the annual subsidy paid by Gabonese taxpayers. Printing costs and the 40-percent levy on sales revenue imposed by the distributor are the main sources of the financial rot eating away at the private printed press, he said.

Mezui agreed that the Gabonese market provides the media with very slim sustenance. Sources of financing are extremely limited. The private print media, in particular, have virtually no access to the advertising market, from either private or institutional advertisers. For this reason, he considers it fortunate that there is a state subsidy. Although the state certainly does provide an annual subsidy to the private and the public press, it scarcely guarantees that press enterprises can become self-financing. Furthermore, the panelists said the criteria for allocating it remained unclear. The state provides a subsidy to the independent print media to the tune of 500 million FCFA (\$1 million) a year, the only condition being that a publication is issued regularly. However, the politicians in charge of that portfolio redistribute the funds according to their own interests, panelists said. Goma agreed that cronyism is also the rule in obtaining advertising.

For his part, Koumba believes the subsidy needs to be extended to other types of media, because with such a thin

advertising market, no media organization would be able to hold out very long otherwise. The panelists did not debate whether a state subsidy hurts editorial independence.

There is no audience research, or statistics on the use of the online media, to help media agencies tailor their content.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Gabon Objective Score: 1.76

Since the advent of multiparty politics in 1990, Gabon has experienced the meteoric rise of several professional organizations among both private and public radio and television companies. They include SPC (the Union for Channel One in RTG) and the Gabonese Association of Journalists and Agency Journalists in the Printed and Broadcast Press (AJAPE). They focus primarily on the defense of the moral and physical interests of their employees. Gabon still lacks media owners' associations, such as a group for publishers or distributors.

Mezui noted that while there are associations of media professions, they are dormant. According to him, they lack motivation and fail to act effectively to defend the interests of the profession. They lack a sense of solidarity. This echoes the views articulated in last year's MSI, where panelists claimed that Gabon's professional associations fail to uphold their members' interest or influence the government, failing to lift a finger even in cases where journalists were physically assaulted. Generally, only foreign groups rush to defend journalists accused of press offenses.

Mackanga said that almost no institutions or organizations in Gabon, except for the state, are officially tasked with

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.

coming to the aid of the press. Furthermore, as last year's MSI noted, frequent strikes among public-media journalists reveal problems in the public sector, as well. However, some international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have tried, unsuccessfully so far, to support the independent press, but they complain that the private media lack structure.

In Boussiengui's view, only a few NGOs focus on defending the interests of media professionals, but they do not really live up to that role. They exist more to be seen at intra-professional meetings held in the subregion than to be involved in concrete activities. Their contribution to defending the interests of journalists was nil. Many times, newspapers had been banned or suspended, fellow journalists had been arrested or received death threats, and those NGOs had never lifted a finger.

Gabon has long been handicapped by the lack of a journalism school. In 2010 the University of Libreville opened a Department of Communication and Journalism, and the panelists expect to see a degree track open up in other academic institutions under the Ministry of Communication. However, as Koumba noted, Gabon has no dedicated training institute for journalists. Instead, many Gabonese journalists have been trained abroad, which is very costly.

Supplemental training for media professionals is still quite problematic. The media do not have enough resources to ensure adequate training. The few journalism training seminars offered are often organized for journalists by development partners for specific, targeted needs, such as information on AIDS, covering elections, and so on. Only journalists posted in the public media receive training and refresher courses, as part of a comprehensive training program for state employees.

Given this shortage of opportunities, there is a growing number of young, unqualified journalists, operating mostly in private media outlets. Occasional single-topic training opportunities that could benefit these people, passionate though they are about the job, are thin on the ground.

As noted in last year's MSI, steep printing and distribution costs suffocate media businesses. Private investors control printing houses, and they sometimes fall under government pressure to refuse service to pro-opposition publications. Furthermore, with only one distribution service—which takes 40 percent of the sales return, a figure the panelists deemed outrageous—media enterprises are not left with a lot of choices in getting their newspapers printed and in newsstands.

List of Panel Participants

Timothée Méme Boussiengui, journalist, Africa No. 1 Radio, Libreville

Théophile Ndong Edda, journalist, Africa No. 1 Radio, Libreville

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