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 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, Esipovia, Ndebi, Osumba); other Africans and Europeans, 154,000; including 10,700 French and 11,000 persons of dual nationality (CIA World Factbook)
- Religion (% of population): Christian 55%-75%, animist, Muslim less than 1% (CIA World Factbook)
- Languages: French (official), Fang, Nyanga, Ndebi, Bapounou/Eshira, Bandalu (CIA World Factbook)
- GNI per capita (2010-PPP): $13,190 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- Literacy rate: 61.3% (male 73.7%, female 53.3%) (1995 est., CIA World Factbook)
- President or top authority: President Ali 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: 90,805 (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 1995, 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 is responsible for ensuring, among other things, respect for the expression of democracy and the freedom of the press. It also contributed to the fair treatment of all recognized political parties and associations in regard to access to the media.

Isaac Macanga, 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 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 Nzizemi Douckaga, a journalist and reporter for Gabonese Radio and Television Channel One (RTG), 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 Mémy Boussingui, 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—hauled 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. Yes, he said that a law was binding and gave a priori control of newspaper content to the minister of information. Then, after the National Conference of March 1995, 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 is responsible for ensuring, among other things, respect for the expression of democracy and the freedom of the press. It also contributed to the fair treatment of all recognized political parties and associations in regard to access to the media.
media outlets 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. Ludovic Koumba, a journalist and program coordinator for Africa No. 1 Pan-African Radio, said that pro-opposition 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.”

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 possession of its owner, André Mbà 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 panelists, however, have noted that laxity in the definition of a journalist, and the inclusion of ranks of untrained journalists, have perhaps lowered professional standards.

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 Nkumu Lebani, former leader of the National Security Council of Gabon, who was accused of attempting a putsch. Bousangui 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 guaranteeing protection, accommodation, and subsistence needs when reporting from crime scenes or companies that have been censured.

Kouma wondered whether the salaries of journalists in Gaboron 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 Gaboron 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 Messager, Norbert Ngoua Mezui, journalist, founder, publisher, and director of publication of the bimonthly Nku’u Le Messager, spoke as a trade unionist, said the living and working conditions of journalists in Gaboron 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
Gaboron Objective Score: 1.85

While Gaboron’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 plurality 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 the cases of La Griffe, La Clé, Le Bûcheron, Le Progrèsiste, 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 Miamu, that dare to offer critical content. In general, however, the press essentially walks on eggshells because of the repression.

Goma said that in Gaboron, there are no restrictions on citizen access to news (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 cafés cost 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, 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 broad 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-Press.

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 VDA.

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 Afrique television station. Gondjput holds Gabowebag, 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 media oftentimes position themselves to gain political and economic advantages.

As Macangui put it, the only freedom the media provide the public with objective and reliable news. This includes foreign radio stations that are broadcast on FM, particularly in the capitao, 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
Gaboron 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 independently produced.
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 bi-monthly 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 rents 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 practitioners saw 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 chronyism 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 professionals, 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 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. Occasionally 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 provide service to pro-government 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.

**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 newsgroup and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.