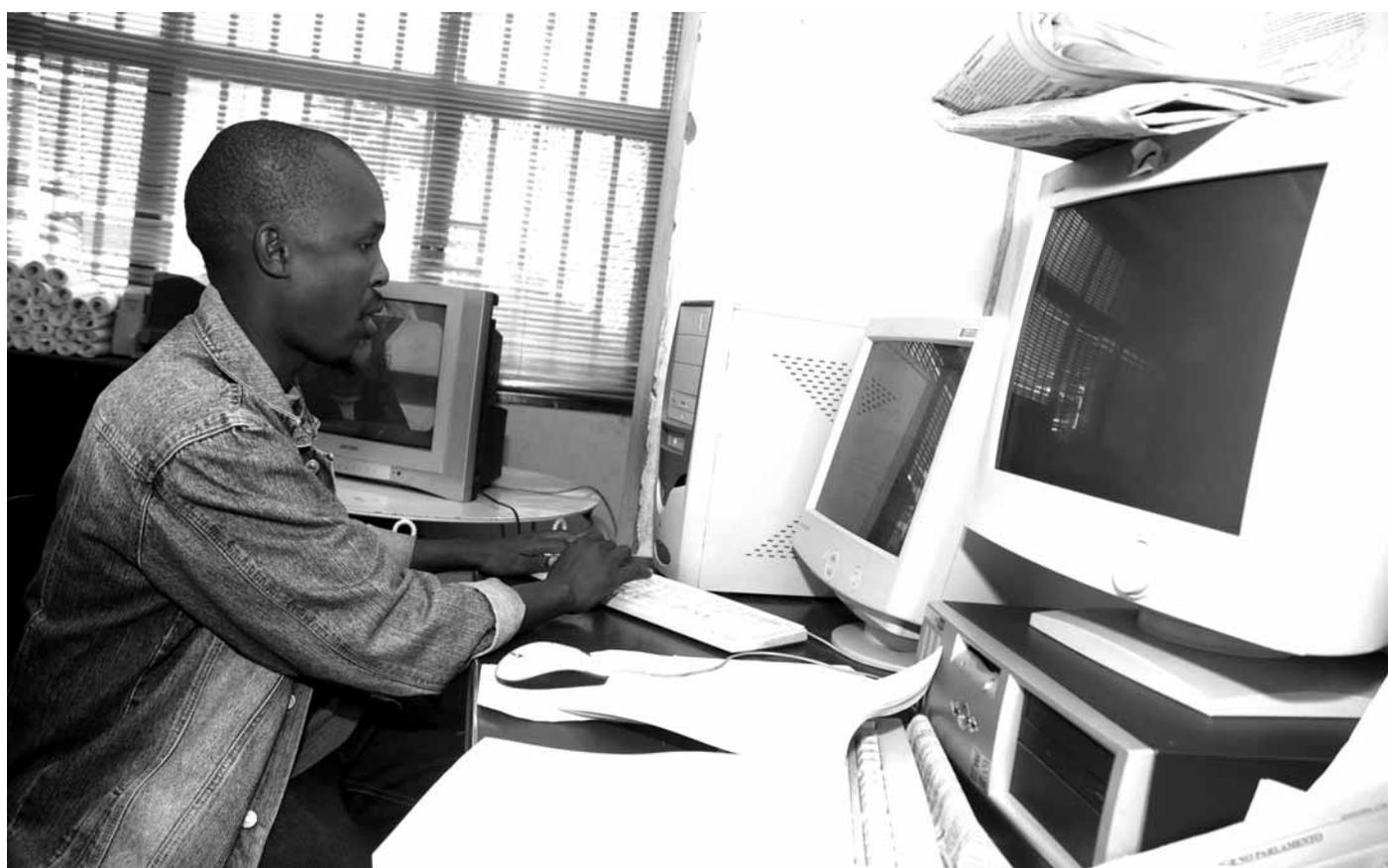


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*The panelists attribute the improvement to important developments that have shaped the sector in the last few months—most notably, the July 2010 passage of the Freedom of Information Act, which has eased skepticism of the government’s commitment to the protection of freedom of speech and of the press.*



LIBERIA

Liberia is heading toward crucial elections in October 2011, following unprecedented stability and economic progress in recent years. The upcoming elections are regarded widely as the country's first truly democratic transition—a phenomenal step for a country that internationally was considered as a pariah and failed state. Following close to 20 years of political instability, Liberia's current president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, has arguably presided over the country's most stable period for decades. During her tenure, Liberia has experienced relatively strong economic growth, with a rapid increase in foreign investment—leading to the creation of jobs in key sectors, such as mining and forestry. These gains have been buoyed by debt cancellation and the rehabilitation of Liberia's reputation on the global political stage.

Despite these milestones, frustration is growing internally and externally over the pace of the government's response to corruption cases. Several government officials lost their jobs in 2010 as a result of corruption allegations. But at the time of the MSI study, not one had been successfully tried and convicted of corruption, lowering some Liberians' confidence in their government. Furthermore, criticism over the president's handling of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report continues to overshadow calls for the swift implementation of the commission's recommendations. In addition, despite gains in meeting Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) around gender equality and HIV/AIDS, the country is unlikely to meet MDG targets related to reducing child mortality and improving access to primary education.

A troubling and potentially destabilizing development is the crisis in neighboring Côte d'Ivoire, which triggered an influx of tens of thousands of refugees. The emerging humanitarian situation is exacerbated further by poor infrastructure in bordering towns and cities. Latent conflict over land and longstanding tribal intolerance in the northern region are breeding grounds for potential unrest. Thus, the sustainability of peace and stability remains in question.

The media are moving through a time of great change, as well. Media scrutiny has increased in the last year, with the Liberia Media Center (LMC) introducing the Media Quality Barometer. Designed to stimulate competition by ranking the performance of news media outlets, the barometer has recorded some encouraging improvements. Also, the United States government has sponsored new investments in media development interventions.

By and large, Liberia has made a strong recovery from the downturn in the last MSI study, with modest progress in all five objective indicators. The panelists attribute the improvement to important developments that have shaped the sector in the last few months—most notably, the July 2010 passage of the Freedom of Information Act, which has eased skepticism of the government's commitment to the protection of freedom of speech and of the press. Nevertheless, some of the world's most repressive legislation surrounding the freedom of expression remains on the books, and challenges remain with adherence to professional standards and the development and sustenance of the business management side of media outlets.

# LIBERIA AT A GLANCE

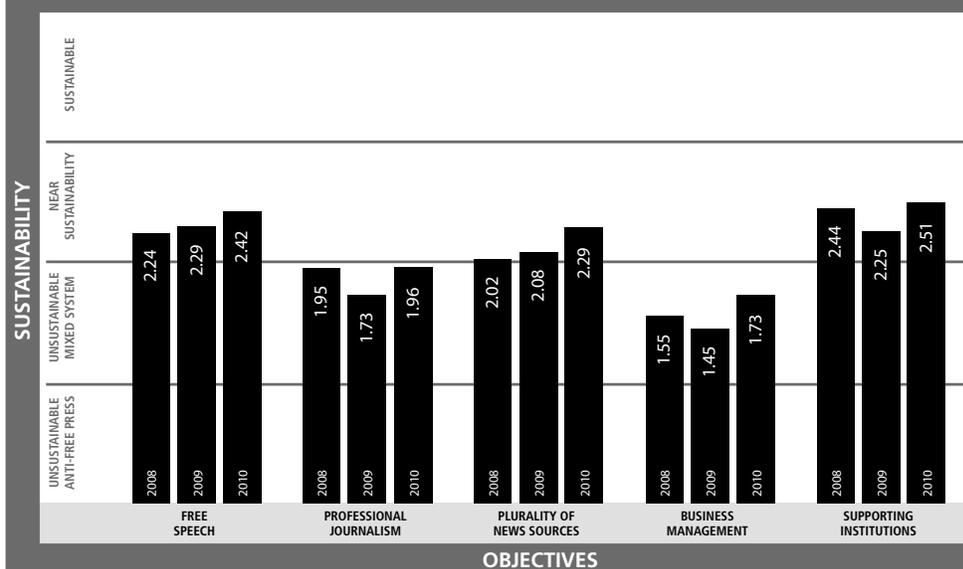
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,786,764 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Monrovia
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Kpelle 20.3%, Bassa 13.4%, Grebo 10%, Gio 8%, Mano 7.9%, Kru 6%, Lorma 5.1%, Kissi 4.8%, Gola 4.4%, other 20.1% indigenous African 95%, other 5% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 85.6%, Muslim 12.2%, traditional 0.6%, other 0.2%, none 1.4% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English 20% (official), some 20 ethnic group languages, few of which can be written or used in correspondence (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$782 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$330 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 57.5% (male 73.3%, female 41.6%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (since January 16, 2006)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 18 newspapers 8 of which are daily; Radio Stations: 16, 2 of which are nationwide; Television Stations: 6
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Daily Observer* (circulation 3,000), *New Democrat* (circulation 3,000), *Inquirer* (circulation 1,000) (*Media Reach and Penetration Study*, Liberia Media Center)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top radio station: United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) Radio Station (*Media Reach and Penetration Study*, Liberia Media Center)
- > **News agencies:** Liberia News Agency (state-owned but largely not functioning)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 20,000 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: LIBERIA



**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

### Liberia Objective Score: 2.42

Liberia's media laws reflect international standards, and media houses enjoy relative freedom in covering a wide range of subjects. Most journalists carry out their work unhampered, and the explosive growth of the use of mobile phones in mass media has drawn unprecedented citizen participation in debates on a wide range of subjects. Generally, people are free to express their opinions in the media, and do so mainly via phone-in radio talk shows.

Yet despite these strengths, the press sector still lacks functional independence. A few isolated but unhealthy incidents in 2010 have reinforced the need for press freedom violations to be scrutinized and monitored continuously—which the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building does currently. Liberia retains some of the most repressive anti-speech and anti-press laws in Africa. The watchdog group Freedom House ranked Liberia “partly free” again in the 2010 “Freedom of the Press” report. However, MSI panelists have recorded improvements in certain areas since the 2008 MSI study.

Most of the panelists agreed that the current political atmosphere provides a haven for tolerance toward the media and free speech, citing the passage of the Freedom of Information Act as a testament to the changing environment. But they expressed the concern that challenges

to freedom of speech and the press will persist as long as anti-speech laws do. Gradijah Walker of the Media Women Center for Democracy (MEWOCEDE) summed up the panel's ambivalence: “Free speech in Liberia has received a considerable boost with the passage of the Freedom of Information Act; nevertheless, until efforts are made to address the need for other pressing legal and regulatory reforms, this gain will be largely ceremonial.”

Isaac Jackson, Jr., assistant minister at the Ministry of Information, also pointed to the Freedom of Information Act as evidence of the government's commitment to free speech, noting that Liberia is the first country in West Africa to pass such a law. Jackson added that the president herself is concerned also about the presence of anti-speech laws, and has welcomed a review process.

However, panelists expressed skepticism of the president. While the use of brutal, repressive techniques against journalists has largely disappeared, the panelists underscored the growing wave of lawsuits brought against the media by public officials, in most cases capitalizing on a judiciary that is perceived widely as corrupt. Unfortunately, panelists said, the president leads the list of public officials bringing these charges, which often result in millions of dollars in damages. In December 2009, authorities questioned and briefly detained the printer and the publisher of the *Plain Truth*, and subsequently charged the two with criminal libel. The charges were over a story linking the Liberian government with an alleged arms supply deal to dissidents in neighboring Guinea.

Hector Mulbah, a community radio manager, shared his view that Liberia has sufficient constitutional provisions and safeguards that guarantee free speech. Citing continuous fractured relations between community radio stations and local authorities, Mulbah said that he fears that political authorities still wield huge power and influence at the local level, significantly holding back free speech. He said that “... successive authorities have allowed free speech to flourish according to their whims and caprices. This history should inspire us to be very circumspect and cautious; nevertheless, I believe the current favorable conditions basically hinge on the presence of the United Nations Mission in Liberia [UNMIL], and its departure will be the true litmus test.”

Jackson disagreed; he said that the current government, under the leadership of President Sirleaf, has given the Liberian people unprecedented rights to the freedom of expression. Jackson also expressed his opinion that the government's desire to uphold press freedoms and other civil rights has nothing to do with the presence of UNMIL in Liberia.

#### 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.

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Emmanuel Reeves, formerly of Sabannah Printing Press, agreed that “the protection of free speech is relatively strong in Liberia under the Sirleaf-led government. Journalists, especially, are free to publish their stories and go about their business.”

Again this year, the panelists agreed that licensing procedures for media organizations have relaxed in the last couple of years, aside from complications with community radio stations. Without an exclusive broadcast regulator, the Liberia Telecommunications Authority (LTA) regulates radio frequencies. Community broadcasters have complained that high licensing costs make license renewals very difficult for most outlets. “The bureaucracy involved with getting broadcasting license from the LTA is extremely cumbersome and unfair for community radio stations,” said Justin Cole, station manager of Radio Bomi.

To address this situation, the Liberia Media Center and the Liberia Coalition for Freedom of Expression have undertaken a series of steps in the last two years toward developing a comprehensive Community Radio Policy. Among many other issues, the policy will address the fee structure for community radio licensing. Community radio managers, boards of directors, and representatives from the government and civil society have all vetted the policy plans.

S. Kpanbayezee Duworko, an instructor at the University of Liberia, described another issue with licensing. “Government ministries and agencies typically cite licensing as an excuse to refuse to pay media outlets for advertising services,” he said. State debts to the media are an age-old problem in Liberia—one that has drawn the president’s attention. The debts owed have contributed to the economic woes of many media houses, as the government and UNMIL are the largest advertisers.

Crimes against journalists have all but ceased, according to the panelists. “Attacks on journalists are rare and practically nonexistent in Liberia over the last several years. No

journalists in Liberia have been killed over the life span of the current government,” said Walker.

Although last year’s MSI noted that the Liberian constitution guarantees fair access to state-owned media, it is widely understood that state-owned radio ELBC forbids the airing of news deemed anti-government—perplexing many observers and journalists. This contradiction is one reason that the media community would like to see ELBC transformed into a public service broadcaster.

Libel remains both a civil and criminal law issue in Liberia, although criminal libel charges have only been filed once under the current government (against the publisher of a local newspaper; the case is still pending in court). However, many media practitioners in Liberia are concerned about the number of civil libel suits filed against media outlets. Regarding this trend, Jackson commented, “The government will not encourage any of its officials to take media institutions to court,” but he added, “...it becomes difficult when media institutions grossly misrepresent facts surrounding people’s reputations.”

The panel agreed largely that journalists should be willing to avail themselves to fair and impartial legal processes. Some panelists conceded that this would help to minimize blatant ethical transgressions. Reeves explained, “Legal protection has improved in Liberia in recent years, and since journalists are part of the larger society, they should be subject to the same legal norms that bind the general population.” Duworko, however, said that libel cases are tactics meant primarily to distract the media from their work.

Regarding access to public information, the newly passed Freedom of Information Act grants journalists and citizens the right to access public information from the government—including information about the government’s use of funds.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the passage of this act, the panelists said that usually reporters find it difficult to cover stories relating to corruption or malpractice. Adams said that often the frustration derives from public officials telling their staff not to comment on specific issues. Previous MSI studies have detailed other problems regarding access to public information, such as the Ministry of Gender and Development’s mandate that articles related to gender cannot be published without ministerial approval or a reference to the ministry. Whether the newly passed act will remove such obstacles remains to be seen.

The panel agreed that Liberian media outlets have unrestricted access to foreign news sources. Othello Garblah, manager of *New Dawn* newspaper, remarked, “Considering

<sup>1</sup> Freedom of Information Act, full text available online at IFEX: [http://www.ifex.org/liberia/2010/10/06/liberia\\_foi.pdf](http://www.ifex.org/liberia/2010/10/06/liberia_foi.pdf)

the current government's strong international ties, there is no reason to place restrictions on Liberians' access to international news sources." However, a panelist in last year's study reported that the high expense restricts local media's access to some international sources.

As reported in last year's study, entry into the journalism profession is relatively free, although in the past, the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) had moved toward crafting entry standards.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Liberia Objective Score: 1.96

Scores for this objective increased slightly over the 2009 MSI score. As in the previous two years of the MSI panel, Indicator 5 (pay levels for journalists) scored more than half a point lower than the overall average of the objective; it did show some improvement this year, however. In contrast, indicators 4 (journalists cover key events and issues) scored about two-thirds of a point above the objective average.

Regarding adherence to professional standards, Mulbah stated bluntly, "Professional standards of quality are a serious problem in the Liberian media. Journalists broadcast and publish poorly sourced news content. Part of the problem is the media's impoverishment. The unavailability of resource materials and funds to carry out proper research at media houses contributes to poor quality." Cummeh agreed; he said that he does not believe that news reports are well sourced or balanced. He attributed the shortcomings to the poor economic conditions confronting Liberian journalists.

#### 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).

Tete Karneh, who manages the Liberia Women Democracy Radio (LWDR), took a more optimistic stance. "The media in Liberia still struggle with professional standards of quality, so the efforts of the Liberia Media Center and its partners in introducing the Media Quality Barometer are especially commendable," she said. "It is difficult for people to accept change, and it will take a while, but professionalism is going to improve. Standards were not set in the past for admission to the field of journalism. This has led people to falsely assume that there are no standards."

Although all Liberian journalists have access to the PUL code of ethics, ethical transgressions persist. The Liberian media, like the rest of industry, are in a state of transformation, but regrettably, some media outlets and journalists continue to accept kickbacks to slant their coverage of certain issues. The PUL Grievance and Ethics Committee hears complaints regularly of ethical transgressions and imposes sanctions against offending media institutions and journalists. Yet the committee is considered widely to lack the teeth to punish media outlets, as it is tied very closely to PUL and all its members are journalists. To address its shortfalls, PUL and the Liberia Coalition on Freedom of Expression are working together to develop a Media Complaint Committee, a self-regulatory structure composed of representatives from the government, civil society, the religious community, the bar association, and journalists.

On the issue of self-censorship, the panelists agreed that it exists—and that it results more from economic considerations than fear of persecution. Duworko agreed: "Some practice self-censorship because they are afraid of losing advertising support from public officials, businesses, and government agencies." Indeed, many media houses say that their advertising revenue is not enough to offset their losses amid falling sales.

The panelists agreed, to an extent, that the quality of Liberian journalism is improving, though significant work remains, as often pay is still connected to performance. The minimum wage for government workers has increased by more than 300 percent, especially for those at the base of the income scale, but a huge disparity remains between lower levels and senior levels, even within the government. Meanwhile, most media outlets pay their employees well below the minimum wage on the government worker pay scale. "Even civil servants now earn higher salaries than journalists," *Inquirer* writer C. Winnie Saywah remarked.

Most of the panelists agreed that low pay levels greatly affect Liberian journalists' adherence to recognized and accepted ethical standards. Saywah emphasized, "High salaries for journalists would not be sufficient in the short run

*“Even civil servants now earn higher salaries than journalists,” Inquirer writer C. Winnie Saywah remarked.*

to discourage corruption, or what is widely known as *kato*, but would provide some incentive.” Sherif Adams agreed, saying that “...pay level is a key component of maintaining professionalism in any career.”

Jackson, though, rejected the notion that low pay should be blamed for ethical transgressions. “The passion for one’s profession should surpass financial considerations,” he said.

Reeves commented that regardless of the reasons, journalism in Liberia has suffered from the very low professional standards, and that PUL should institute a minimum wage level for journalists in the country. PUL is trying but struggling to come up with a collective bargaining proposal that would lead to significant improvements in the pay structure for journalists.

According to Cole, poor professionalism and adherence to ethical standards also stems from the quality of tertiary study. “Many journalists would be more ethical if they had received a better education. Professionalism in journalism has suffered because of the country’s low educational standards,” he said.

Although the panelists gave indicator 6 (measuring the balance of entertainment and news programming) a higher score to than the overall average for the objective, a study by LMC showed that time allotted to entertainment surpasses the time devoted to news and other programming. Duworko said that in some cases, radio stations carry no news at all because of their heavy emphasis on entertainment.

Although often the Liberian media are seen as works in progress, a significant number of mainstream and community media outlets have benefited from state-of-the-art equipment. Organizations including LMC, Trust Africa, Talking Drum Studios, International Alert, Mercy Corps, and recently, USAID have provided or intend to provide modern equipment and technical training. Saywah noted, “Liberian media outlets, over time, have been blessed with modern equipment. Look in newsrooms, and you’ll see modern electronic gadgets everywhere.”

Some panelists noted that there are ongoing initiatives to encourage specialized reporting in the Liberian media, but to date, they have failed to develop any quality niche programs, according to the panelists. Walker noted in particular that the media sector shows very limited movement towards gender-sensitive reporting.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Liberia Objective Score: 2.29

Most of the seven indicators in this objective scored within half a point of the objective average. Indicator 5 (independent media produce their own news) scored more than half a point higher, while indicator 4 (independent news agencies) received the lowest score, falling behind the objective score by about two-thirds of a point.

Following the restoration of peace and the institution of democratic rule in 2005, Liberia’s media industry experienced explosive growth. All shades of opinion can be found, and generally, reliable and objective information is available, given the diversity of news sources. Still, many outlets lack resources for quality content, and some media outlets publish misleading, distorted information. Cole estimated that 80 percent of news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective information, while the other 20 percent accounts for the growing rise in civil libel suits.

Jasper Cummehe concurred partly. “Quite frankly, multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news. But it is worrisome that many of the news outlets fail to provide reliable and objective news, and practice yellow journalism and report biased news,” he said.

In the past, most news covered events in the capital, Monrovia. Today, with investments from donors, media content is diversifying and journalists are venturing into areas not covered previously. The Journalists for Human Rights

#### 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.

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(JHR) initiative, supported by the Human Rights Reporters Network, has contributed significantly to this development. The initiative has provided training and funding for humanitarian-centered investigative journalism outside Monrovia, upping coverage in more remote areas.

Community radio development continues to expand broadcast penetration levels across the country. To date, Liberia has about 50 community radio stations. These stations continue to play a vital role, filling the information gap for rural dwellers. The sector still faces challenges and depends heavily on donor support, according to Cole. However, he said, most community radio stations are quite independent editorially.

The Internet is still an emerging media tool in Liberia, with the potential to transform the way people receive and use information in the country. Since its introduction in the late 1990s, Internet costs have decreased steadily. Still, most Liberians live in poverty, and at \$1.00 per hour charged by most commercial cafes, Internet access is still a luxury for many. As Duworko said, “Multiple news sources exist, but are not necessarily affordable, especially the Internet.”

A number of outlets now present operational websites, although low bandwidth and the lack of reliable public electricity continue to hinder web-based journalism. Just a few of the local radio stations—UNMIL Radio, Star Radio, LWDR, and the state-run Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS)—offer web-based broadcasting services. Of these, only LWDR airs a live web-stream.

Three of Liberia’s four cell phone companies have introduced GPRS EDGE technology, enhancing accessibility throughout the country. Social networking tools have become very popular with certain segments of the population, although there are no accurate records of how many Liberians use them.

With the gradual consolidation of democratic practices, access to various news sources is improving steadily. The country continues to enjoy unfettered access to domestic and international media, as it has since the current government came into power. Nearly all villages with at least 100 people have some form of cable television, watched mainly for its entertainment programming, such as movies and international soccer matches. Viewers rarely use cable television to obtain news and information.

Government control and regulation of telecommunication, including the Internet, is practically non-existent—either because the state lacks the technical capacity to monitor web-based content, or there is a genuine sense of tolerance to dissent. Walker confirmed that the government does not censor or block any satellite or Internet sources. For example,

*Jasper Cummeh concurred partly. “Quite frankly, multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news. But it is worrisome that many of the news outlets fail to provide reliable and objective news, and practice yellow journalism and report biased news,” he said.*

despite a contentious *Vice* television report on Liberia in early 2010, the government did not shut off access to *Vice’s* content on the Internet.

Right now, the state media exist in the form of LBS’s television and radio broadcasts. The state-owned newspaper has been defunct since the start of the country’s civil war.

Although the government has shown a willingness to allow widespread free speech, it has failed to pass legislation to transform the state broadcaster into a public broadcaster, despite attempts by civil society advocates to pass a public service broadcasting act into law. In addition, the government has been accused of undermining the resurgence of Star Radio, a non-profit station set up by Foundation Hironnelle and managed by Liberians. Internal disputes and a management crisis have kept Star Radio off the air for nearly a year now.

On the other hand, LBS has undergone a massive revamping, with substantial assistance from the government of China. As part of this package, the station was given a 10-kilowatt transmitter, to be stationed in Monrovia, along with three one-kilowatt relays located at strategic parts of the country to provide nationwide coverage. However, this plan has not worked very well from a technical perspective, as relays in many parts of the country tend to fail. As Quire put it, “Current LBS operations do not suggest an efficient use of the country’s tax dollars, as the station’s FM relays around the country are more often off than on.”

On the programming front, LBS has failed to fill the void in public interest programming left by commercial media outlets. The situation is even worse with the public television service, which restarted more than a year ago. The television signal barely covers Monrovia and its immediate surroundings, and it has a shortage of quality programming. As with most local television stations, LBS bridges the lack of programming capacity by rebroadcasting shows from cable stations like CNN, Al Jazeera, and BBC.

LBS is still prone to manipulation by the government and ruling party, though less overtly than during previous regimes. Some panelists said that they see signs of things moving in the right direction. Duworko, though, said that LBS is biased in favor of the ruling party and the government. Jackson disagreed. "It is unfair to say that the state media only reflect the views of the ruling party and government, when opposition politicians are heard regularly expressing strong views against the government on the same state radio," he said.

Liberia has no news agencies in operation. The country has never had an independent agency, and the Liberian News Agency (LINA), a subsidiary of the Ministry of Information, has been derelict for many years now. Attempts in recent months to resurrect the agency have amounted to little so far. The preponderance of media outlets across the country has probably made it very difficult for LINA to have any relevance, the panelists posited. Media institutions based in the capital rely increasingly on community radio reporters for news from other parts of the country.

Content generation, especially for commercial media and electronic media outlets, is a serious challenge. With the huge growth in competition for audiences, and consumers' demand for radio and television stations to stay on the air for longer hours, having enough content to fill airtime has become an issue. As a result, radio stations broadcast a lot of music, while television stations air films.

Media institutions in Liberia rarely purchase content. In fact, they normally charge content producers for the privilege of broadcasting their programs. William Quire, president of the Association of Liberian Community Radios (ALICOR) and manager of Radio Gbarnga, explained that the media charge fees to air programs produced by other outlets, as a matter of survival.

Blogging is a very new phenomenon in Liberia; most blogs are hardly ever updated, while others just amalgamate news and information from other sources and the local media. The limited capacity of bloggers might be due to lack of home Internet access for most Liberians. Still, blogging shows a glimmer of potential—Liberian bloggers writing for Ceasefire Liberia address a broad range of relevant topics, including corruption, threats to free press, efforts to fight climate change, the impact of the massacre in Guinea on Liberian neighbors, and the need for better rural hospitals.<sup>2</sup>

As reported in previous MSI studies, usually media ownership is shrouded in secrecy. "Having worked in both the public

<sup>2</sup> Ceasefire Liberia blog: <http://ceasefireliberia.com/>; set up by New York-based reporter Ruthie Ackerman and featuring bloggers in Liberia and from the Liberian Diaspora.

and private media in Liberia, I can say that media ownership is not transparent," Duworko said. "There are no media conglomerates in the country; however, the consumers are not cognizant of the fact that media outlets are not transparent." While the law does not mandate ownership of media entities to be made public, most Liberian media outlets are sole proprietorships and partnerships—leading to speculation about the owners. Some media organizations adopt a corporate structure, but in reality, they do not function as proper corporations.

Liberia is home to at least 16 different tribal groups, none of which dominate the political or social space. Nearly every radio station in the country devotes some broadcast time to the major language group in its location of operations, and gives airtime to all major minority-language groupings existing in its area.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Liberia Objective Score: 1.73

For the third year running, the panelists once again underlined the business management shortcomings of Liberian media, giving Objective 4 the lowest overall average score out of the five MSI objectives. All indicators scored very close to the objective score, and none received a score of 2.00 or more.

The Liberian media are still in a state of transition. Like the rest of the country's institutions, the media sector was not spared the comprehensive destruction visited on Liberia by the civil war, the decade of military rule that preceded it,

#### 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.

and the near half-century of autocracy that preceded the military takeover of 1980. As a result, media institutions lack proper systems and generally are not managed as efficient business entities. Reeves attributes this to the inclination of managers to commingle their personal finances with their institutional assets.

The country's community media sector reflects management problems also. Made up of small radio stations, this sector is owned by the communities theoretically, but most communities are unable to provide financial stability—draining stations' potential to achieve sustainability. Karneh, who manages the only women's radio station in Liberia, explained, "Most media institutions do not enter the market with a solid capital base and business skills. This situation causes them to struggle to stay afloat, and tempts them into ethical transgressions because their workers are not paid properly."

James Wolo, UNMIL representative and journalism professor, expressed the belief that PUL should step in and jump-start the entire reform process. "The media outlets should be compelled to set up standard structures, and possess the kind of capital it takes to gain respect, pay employees properly, and obtain the kind of technology the profession demands in this digital high-definition era," he said.

PUL President Peter Quaqua agreed with Wolo. "The PUL sees the need to reform the Liberian media. That is why the union was transformed into a real union at the organization's convention in 2010." He agreed, though, that much work remains in order to meet the needs of the Liberian media.

Liberia has no established or recognized advertising agencies. On the radio front, only business entities with a presence in the country's capital run advertisements on the bigger stations. The panelists agreed that Liberian law lacks any serious provision mandating that businesses advertise in local media.

Most newspapers, rely totally on advertisers, and usually devote most of their pages to ads. As LMC's Media Quality Barometer project has found, ad space overwhelms news space consistently. However, Adams said that the income from advertising is unreliable. "Although media institutions generally rely on ads for sustenance, ads only come in piecemeal to be published on credit—except during the political season, when business suddenly booms," he said.

The government does not provide subsidies for the media, although media development organizations and media network organizations have called persistently for government assistance in the form of across-the-board tax waivers on basic equipment and newsprint. The panelists noted that the government gave PUL around \$100,000 in

2007 for the construction of its headquarters; however, that project has yet to lift off the ground in any meaningful way.

Market research remains a luxury for the Liberian media. The country has no organization set up expressly for that purpose. The void continues to be filled in a very limited way by organizations such as LMC and, more recently, USAID, through its Civil Society and Media Leadership program.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Liberia Objective Score: 2.51

Adhering to the trend seen in Liberia's other MSI objectives this year, Objective 5 recorded an increase of about a quarter of a point above its 2009 score. Indicator 1 (trade association) was the only indicator to note score within a half-point of the overall objective average, but fell short of doing so only barely.

Several associations and umbrella organizations work within the country to protect the interests of various sectors of the media. They include the Editors' Association, the Broadcasters' Association, the Publishers' Association, PUL, and ALICOR. While nearly every journalist in the country belongs to PUL, ALICOR serves as an umbrella grouping of only community radio stations, especially those located outside the country's capital.

These organizations, especially PUL and ALICOR, work continuously to gain better benefits for their members. For its part, PUL has played a prominent role in the struggle for press freedom in Liberia for more than 40 years. Jackson said that many media associations exist in name only, but

#### 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.

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*Karneh agreed with Cumme; she had the opinion that the focus should move toward more practical and theoretical instruction. Such an approach would prepare reporters better and ease the workload in the newsroom, she said.*

he praised PUL for the strength of its pro-journalist voice throughout Liberia's recent history.

Local and international NGOs in the country continue to support the local media's quest for free speech. These organizations were very instrumental in the passage of the Liberian Freedom of Information Act in the third quarter of 2010. One local NGO is involved in a project that releases legislative report cards, while another carries out an anti-corruption program.

With respect to direct support, several international and local NGOs assist Liberian media with training and other technical support. Trust Africa continued its support to the LMC's media monitoring program through 2010. In addition, USAID launched a five-year civil society and media program in 2010, aimed at providing capacity support to several media outlets in Monrovia as well as rural parts of the country.

Other organizations providing support in 2010 include the European Union, through the Radio Netherlands Training Center; the Irish NGO Trócaire; the Carter Center; the British government's Department for International Development, through JHR; and Search for Common Grounds, through its local office.

Cumme said that although he does not question that assistance organizations provide significant services, most of what they provide is not very practical for all. "Supporting institutions help build the capacity of media institutions, but there are still major gaps in the independent media circle," he commented. Karneh agreed with Cumme; she had the opinion that the focus should move toward more practical and theoretical instruction. Such an approach would prepare reporters better and ease the workload in the newsroom, she said.

Liberia still has three universities that grant journalism degrees—unchanged since the 2008 MSI study. A planned fourth journalism degree granting program, through Cuttington University in central Liberia, has yet to get off the ground. The panelists speculated that the problem with the Cuttington program might be its distance from Monrovia and the inability to attract the necessary instructors from there.

Duworko said that quality journalism degrees do not exist, as journalism programs in the country are still modeled on the 1986 curriculum of the University of Liberia's Mass Communications Department. Media degree programs are not carrying out adaptive and generative learning, he said.

However, Liberia's three universities have embarked upon a joint curriculum review. Wolo explained that the review process is designed to improve standards and synchronize journalism degree programs in the country, and help journalism education adapt to the changing realities of the profession.

Another problem is that most journalism graduates are viewed with suspicion by their colleagues that lack formal education, because of job competition. Most media institutions pluck people straight from high school without any formal training. As Saywah said, many aspiring journalists in Liberia are not eager for a degree; they are comfortable with simply collecting enough skills to get by—ultimately hurting professionalism in the field.

Short-term training opportunities, run mostly by local organizations with international funding, continue to be freely and widely available to the local media. The courses offered vary widely and are tailored to different media sectors. For community radio staff, instruction covers the whole spectrum of skills, while training for staff from Monrovia outlets tends to focus on specific thematic issues. Over the past year, the USAID-funded media leadership project has delivered sustainable management training for select media outlets, as well.

Unlike printing facilities under past governments, such as the Charles Taylor regime of the late 1990s and early 2000s, current printing facilities are private, and serve everyone capable of paying. At least three media outlets in Monrovia, the *Daily Observer*, the *New Democrat*, and *Liberian Express*, own private printing presses. The cost of printing remains high for newspaper publishers, because of the high import duties associated with newsprint. Garblah said that the cost of printing newspapers is high enough to affect profits dramatically.

The distribution network of newspapers is owned privately, apolitical, and subject to no restrictions by the government. The main problem is that they are poorly organized; they continue to use the same unsustainable, informal distribution methods from over the years. As a result, newspaper circulation is restricted largely to Monrovia and its environs and a few provincial capitals.

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## List of Panel Participants

**C. Winnie Saywah**, reporter, *Inquirer*, Monrovia

**James Wolo**, professor of mass communication, University of Liberia, Monrovia

**William Quire**, station manager, Radio Gbarnga, Gbarnga

**Othello Garblah**, managing editor, New Dawn, Monrovia

**Hector Mulbah**, station manager, Radio Gbezohn, Buchanan

**Tetee Karneh**, station manager, Liberia Women Democracy Radio, Monrovia

**Ade Wede Kekuleh**, station manager, Radio Veritas Monrovia

**Justin Cole**, station manager, Radio Bomi, Tubmanburg

**Peter Quaqua**, president, Press Union of Liberia, Monrovia

**Grariah Walker**, executive director, Media Women Center for Democracy, Monrovia

**Jasper Cummeh**, executive director, AGENDA, Monrovia

**Isaac W. Jackson, Jr.**, assistant minister, Liberian Ministry of Information, Monrovia

**Sherif Adams**, news editor, News Newspaper, Monrovia

**Emmanuel Reeves**, news editor, News Newspaper, Monrovia

**Samuel K. Duworko**, journalist, Monrovia

## Moderator and Author

**Lamii Kpargo**, program director, Liberia Media Center, Monrovia

*The Liberia study was coordinated by, and conducted in partnership with, the Liberia Media Center, Monrovia.*