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The year 2010 proved momentous for Mauritania's media. Among the most important breakthroughs, the government moved to liberalize the broadcast media. Prior to this decision, Mauritania's government had maintained a monopoly in the broadcast sector, comprised mainly of the state outlets Télévision de Mauritanie (TVM) and Radio Mauritanie. At the time of the MSI panel no private broadcast outlets had yet launched, but the panelists expressed hope this would soon change.

Additionally, Mauritania previously had only one regional radio station, in Nouadhibou, but the government opened regional stations in the towns of Aïoun, Kiffa, Kaédi, Atar, Tidjikja, Sélibabi, Zouerate, Néma, and Akjoujt, and some of these stations have become operational.

The growth in new media heralded in last year's MSI continued as well, with a new press agency, Sahara Media Agency, offering multimedia content online. Additionally, the daily newspapers (*le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, *Nouakchott Info*) launched a paying subscriber service in French and Arabic to receive information and news alerts on multimedia telephones. SMS news alerts in minority languages are also appearing.

Another positive stride was the creation of a public institution, the National School of Administration, Journalism and Law (known by its French acronym, ENAJM). Before this development, Mauritania's media had no formal journalism school. The media community hopes that the new school will answer the need to elevate professional standards and give journalists who previously had to travel abroad for their training a choice to obtain their training in Mauritania.

These improvements notwithstanding, some within the government have not caught up with the new regulatory changes, as seen in the warning to online media sent with the sentencing of cyber journalist Hanevy Ould Denah to two years in prison for defamation and offending public decency. (He was pardoned by President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and freed after serving eight months.) The move heralded the government's interest in regulating the online media, answered by the year's end by the Council of Ministers' approval of a law governing the electronic media in Mauritania that stipulates, among other things, that Internet service providers (ISPs) operating in Mauritania shall be held accountable before the law.

In addition to such mixed signals from the government, other problems that hurt Mauritania's prospects for media sustainability include the ingrained preferential treatment for state media, censorship and intimidation of journalists, and the lack of lawyers trained to defend media rights in the country. Furthermore, in terms of business management, neither private nor public outlets can be described as well managed.

# MAURITANIA AT A GLANCE

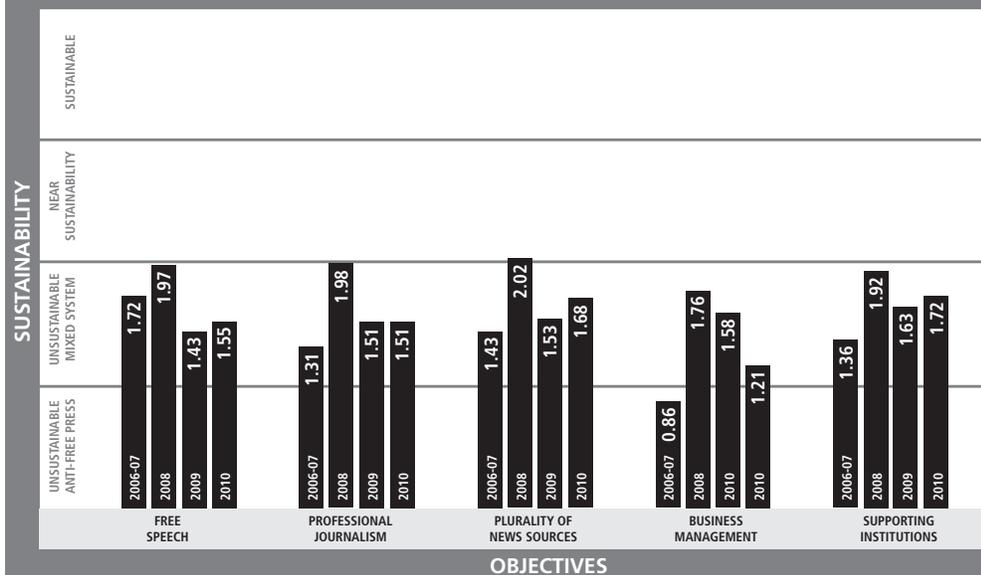
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,281,634 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Nouakchott
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** N/A
- > **Religions (% of population):** 100% Muslim (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** Arabic (official and national), Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof (all national languages), French, Hassaniya (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$3.571 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$2,000 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 51.2% (male 59.5%, female 43.4%) (2000 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (since August 5, 2009)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:**  
Print: 229 (200 in Arabic, 29 in French, 1 in English); Radio Stations: 5 (all state-run); Television Stations: 2 public channels, 1 private Internet station (Ministry of Communication)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top four by circulation: *Le Calame*, *L'Éveil Hebdo*, *La Tribune*, *L'Authentique*; these circulate between 500 and 2,000 copies each
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Mauritanian News Agency, Agence Nouakchott d'Information
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 75,000 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: MAURITANIA



### 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

### Mauritania Objective Score: 1.55

After a dramatic dip in indicator 1 scores between 2008 and 2009, the rating improved significantly over 2009 MSI scores, increasing about 1 point. The change reflects Mauritania's progress during 2010 in terms of legal and regulatory standards promoting the freedom of expression. One area of progress concerns the law liberalizing the sectors of radio and television communications, adopted in July, and a second area concerns the electronic media, modifying certain measures of Ordinance Number 2006-017 of July 12, 2006. According to the panelists, there is no reversing the process that has been initiated. The government and social forces are all engaged in its implementation.

Unlike its predecessor, the constitution created in 1991, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania's new constitution, amended in June 2006, guarantees the freedom of expression. It evokes in its preamble its commitment to Islam and to the democratic principles defined by the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Article 10, for example, guarantees the freedom of opinion and thought: "The state shall guarantee to all its citizens the freedom of opinion and thought; the freedom of expression; the freedom of assembly; the freedom of intellectual, artistic, and scientific creative effort."

#### 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.

*Asked Camara, "When the law forces a media outlet to broadcast up to 90 percent in a language that 90 percent of the inhabitants of the referred geographical area do not understand, is that really respecting cultural diversity?"*

And yet, according to the panelists, certain legal measures are still not in line with international standards of human rights and freedom of expression. Sy Mamoudou, publishing director of *L'Éveil Hebdo* and president of the Mauritanian Press Group (known by its French acronym, RPM), pointed to Articles 35, 44, and 45 of the constitution, which give protection to the president, foreign heads of state, and accredited diplomats in Mauritania, as contrary to international principles on freedom of expression.

The legislative and regulatory framework of the Mauritanian information and communication sectors also guarantees the freedom of expression. A specific law (Ordinance Number 017 of October 2006) on the freedom of the press frames and regulates this freedom of expression, and the panelists admitted that certain standard guarantees regarding the freedom of expression do exist. "There is relative freedom of the press since journalists, at least those in the private media, can freely report on all facts and issues in the news," commented Guèye Birome, an official at the High Authority for the Press, Radio and Television (known by its French acronym, HAPA). Other panelists, however, said that while supportive laws exist, they remain weak.

Moctar Ould Mohamed Jaafar, a correspondent of the weekly *Le Divan*, feels even stronger. "This freedom is often nothing but an illusion," he said, "because the authorities are always there ready to guide and even, at times, manipulate the facts they find damaging." In fact, some panelists maintained, quoting the online news site canalrim.info ([www.canalrim.info](http://www.canalrim.info)), that the publication (in July 2010) by the local press of pictures of terrorists in an Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) camp killed by Mauritanian troops cost a TVM employee suspected of the leak his job.

Moreover, in September 2010, deadly fighting between the Mauritanian army and AQMI forces left five dead on the Mauritanian side and 12 on the terrorist side. The private press made a great deal of this military operation in their papers, with sometimes contradictory and misleading information from various sources—prompting a harsh response by the government, remarked Birome. To restore calm, HAPA publicized a statement acknowledging "errors

*“Between August 6, 2008, and February 2011 no fewer than three general directors of TVM, two directors of Radio Mauritanie, and two directors of AMI were appointed and then removed from their positions by the ruling authorities,” observed Diop Mountaga, a regional correspondent for L’Éveil Hebdo.*

committed by certain media groups during their coverage of the strike by our national army against terrorist positions.” The statement also said that “the majority of these media groups broadcast inaccurate news stories, often unfounded and striking at the Army’s morale.”

Noting that any mistakes by the press always draw consequences, occasionally serious, for the journalist or the publication, the panelists were unanimous that freedom of expression is little appreciated within Mauritanian society. Seydi Moussa Camara, publisher of the independent weekly *La Nouvelle Expression*, was quite definite in his view that “public opinion guaranteeing the right to information still does not exist in Mauritania.” He commented, “Public authorities and other politicians take advantage of the clause defining defamation by the media to drag journalists into the courts. Cyberjournalist Hanevy Ould Dehah was condemned on February 4 to an additional two years of prison following an unprecedented parody of justice; he was freed only when he obtained a presidential pardon on February 6, 2010.”

The panelists noted as well that the legislative and regulatory officials of the information and communications sector in Mauritania proved unable to keep up with the rapid changes in this sector. According to Mamoudou, “The regulatory officials were restrained, because of the authorities’ interest in checking the media in order to better control it. During the past 20 years, numerous media laws or legal regulations concerning the freedom of speech or communication were promulgated, but many of them have now become obsolete and cannot be adapted to the changes that have occurred since then in the information and communications sector.”

After years of the state monopoly, broadcast licensing in Mauritania is still not fully transparent. The panelists are encouraged, though, by the adoption of the law promoting the liberalization of the radio and television communication sector, the suppression of the state monopoly, the end of censorship, and the transformation of the state media (Radio Mauritanie and TVM) into a public-service media.

HAPA will pilot the process of granting licenses to operate broadcast stations.

According to the bill, a fee will be charged whenever a license is issued or renewed. Associated private radios must pay MRO 1 million (\$3,415), commercial private radios MRO 10 million (\$34,150), associated private television stations MRO 15 million (\$51,235), and commercial private television stations 40 million (\$136,630).

However, Bah Ould Kaber, a former TVM journalist, expressed caution, noting that “the reach of this liberalization of broadcasting media is limited by legislation, especially by Article 3, that requires future private operators to safeguard law and order, the unity and integrity of the nation, which in my opinion are contrary to the international standards in radio-television broadcasting and telecommunications.” The law also directs broadcast media outlets to “respect the cultural and linguistic diversity of Mauritanian society in accordance with the national languages as defined in the guidelines of the future operators of broadcast communications,” set by HAPA.

Ould Kaber believes that this measure on language quotas is difficult to apply and nearly incompatible with the full right of peoples to information and to the freedom to communicate, as “community radio stations are directed to an audience often of a limited area and of the same ethnicity.” Asked Camara, “When the law forces a media outlet to broadcast up to 90 percent in a language that 90 percent of the inhabitants of the referred geographical area do not understand, is that really respecting cultural diversity?”

Criminal acts against journalists or media outlets are very rare in Mauritania, the panelists said, but journalists, photographers, bloggers, or media outlets are exposed to some physical and verbal abuse. During 2010, a few isolated cases were registered by the Union of Mauritanian Journalists (known by its French acronym, SJM); they did not draw any media coverage.

In the past, various cases of physical assault, destruction of production equipment, death threats, and arrests have been reported, both in the private as well as the public media. In December 2010, a cameraman from Québec, Stéphane Lapierre, and an American documentary producer who were in Mauritania to film a documentary on clandestine immigration were arrested and held in jail for several days by the Mauritanian authorities. According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), they were accused of spying in addition to filming without proper authorization. They were freed only after posting bail.

In other cases, journalists face disciplinary sanctions. According to the online information site GPS ([www.gps.mr](http://www.gps.mr)),

"The famous sports anchor on TVM, Mohamed Ould Hassen, was suspended for three days for announcing the withdrawal of the Mauritanian national soccer team before the President of Mauritanian Federation of Soccer had a chance to officially announce it during a press conference.

According to the panelists, crimes against journalists are often publicized in the state media, but they are also reported with sympathy in Western media and by international media organizations, such as Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF)—as seen when cyber dissident Ould Dehah was imprisoned in 2010. They are equally unanimous in believing that the legal system does not yet guarantee freedom and equal treatment for all the media in Mauritania, and in their belief that the public or state media benefit considerably from biased treatment. According to Bocar Bâ, a journalist from Radio Mauritanie, "The state media are regulated by a cadre of legal and regulatory officials who are ill equipped for the purpose. This affects the media's independence and turns it into a propaganda tool in the hands of government officials."

The online media organizations that exist in Mauritania work without being subject to any regulations. Before the adoption at the end of 2010 of the law regulating the online media in Mauritania, the Web was a no-man's land filled with professional and ethical blunders of all kinds. Camara commented, "The absence of a regulatory framework, however, did not prevent judges, on February 4, 2010, from imposing a heavy prison sentence on the cyberjournalist Hanevy Ould Dehah, the publishing editor of the Taqadoumy website ([www.taqadoumy.com](http://www.taqadoumy.com)), for undermining decency, incitement to rebellion, and crime in publishing." He continued, "As the stiff sentencing to two years in prison was being read, it also heralded the government's ironclad will to begin regulating the online media and services." Thus, the Council of Ministers approved a specific law governing the electronic media in Mauritania in December. It stipulates, among other things, that Internet service providers operating in Mauritania shall be held accountable before the law.

Barely enacted, this law has already given rise to some caveats because it has, according to Jaafar, some shortcomings: "It does not clearly define either the main purpose of the online media service, or the content to be published by the editor, or let alone the limits of his accountability."

In Mauritania, the organizations that are, according to the law, controlled, managed, or financed in large part by the government are the Mauritanian Information Agency (known by its French acronym, AMI), TVM, Radio Mauritanie, the National Printing Office (IN), and HAPA. But as a prelude to the upcoming opening of the press and broadcast sectors to competition, Hamdi Ould Mahjoub, the minister of communications, was quoted in the government daily,

*According to the panelists, even if all the conditions are met to obtain a renowned "national press card," the waiting time to receive this precious "open sesame" can be very short (less than one month) for some journalists or extremely long and discouraging, up to eight months, for most others.*

*Horizons*, as saying in a speech given in January 2011 before the Senators: "The press organizations belonging to the state will soon be transformed into hybrid companies, allowing them to have a role to play in an open and competitive media environment." In Mauritania, mixed-economy companies, governed under a specific Ordinance, are public companies in which the state holds a stake of capital and the remainder of the shares are held privately.

According to the panelists, the publishers of public media groups are nominated in an impartial manner but are subject to political considerations. They pointed to the Council of Ministers' nomination of Yedali Ould Cheikh, from the main opposition party in Mauritania, the Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques (RDF), as president of the Conseil d'Administration (CA) of IN. Cheikhna Ould Nenni, a former diplomatic consul, close to the government and owner of a private media agency, Agence National d'Information (ANI) and *Nouakchott Info*, was appointed head of AMI.

The panelists said that the method of appointing the head of HAPA adheres to political considerations as well: "HAPA benefits from administrative and financial autonomy and freedom of decision making," according to the 2006 Ordinance. But the reality is different; its president is appointed by presidential decree and is placed under the direct authority of the president of the republic. The method used to appoint its nine members is also perplexing: two other members in addition to HAPA's president are appointed by the president of the republic, three by the president of the National Assembly, and three by the president of the Senate, noted Mamadou Alassane Thiam, local correspondent for *Lumières du Nord*.

The heads of these public information bodies serve at the mercy of the government, frequently paying with their jobs for poor management or for inexplicable reasons. "Between August 6, 2008, and February 2011 no fewer than three general directors of TVM, two directors of Radio Mauritanie, and two directors of AMI were appointed and then removed

from their positions by the ruling authorities,” observed Diop Mountaga, a regional correspondent for *L’Éveil Hebdo*.

The panelists confirmed that there is a law against libel and slander in Mauritania, in the ordinance on the media and media offenses. Defamation is punished by fines and/or disciplinary or professional sanctions administered by HAPA and the courts. Depending on the gravity of the offense, the fine can be accompanied by the withdrawal of the journalist’s press credentials for a period ranging between three to six months and a temporary suspension of the publication. Defamation can also land the journalist in prison.

Some panelists maintained that HAPA is often either bypassed by the Mauritanian Supreme Court, whose judges are often quick to bring the accused journalists before the court well before HAPA can rule on the defamatory act. They further maintain that the impartiality of Mauritanian judges in handling issues concerning freedom of speech is still far from guaranteed. As proof, they point to the Ould Dehah case. RSF denounced the severity of the sentence and the abusive and incomprehensible legal proceedings that led to Ould Dehah’s conviction: “We fail to understand how the judicial authorities could reach such a decision at the end of this farcical trial.”<sup>1</sup> Coordination de l’Opposition Démocratique (COD), an opposition coalition, strongly denounced the verdict: “This untenable verdict reflects a ferocious attack by the judicial apparatus completely in the hands of the Executive power, in flagrant violation of the rule of law and basic freedoms enshrined in the constitution.”

During 2010, no cases of corruption among judges and prosecutors in charge of libel and slander cases were reported by the press or journalist advocacy organizations. Panelists, however, are confident that the executive authority and certain businessmen often exert pressure on judges so that they impose exemplary sentences to journalists deemed “uncooperative.” They also stress that the education of judges leaves something to be desired in light of the number of journalists brought every year before the courts for “procedural errors.” According to them, this is mainly due to the fact that there are still no lawyers in Mauritania trained in and specializing in the defense of the rights of journalists and of the media.

According to the panelists, the laws concerning the media in Mauritania favor the public media over the private media. This often results in better access to information by the journalists from the state media and consequently a near ban on private media to report on certain government activities,

<sup>1</sup> “Court imposes new two year sentence on website editor.” February 5, 2010. Reporters Sans Frontières. (Accessed at <http://en.rsf.org/mauritania-website-editor-freed-under-26-02-2010,36319.html> on November 26, 2011.)

including sessions of parliament, particularly by denying them access. A minister can grant an interview or an infomercial about his particular department to journalists from state media. But he cannot, in any way, do the same for private media, one panelist noted.

Article 2 of the Ordinance on the media and media offenses clearly states that “journalists have a right to access to information sources, the duty and right to protect their sources in every circumstance,” recalled Mamoudou. And yet, he said, “Until now, only a few journalists have had access to elected officials. We encounter enormous difficulties in performing our work properly before the parliament.” He believes, however, that “with more journalists accredited to parliament or the National Assemblies, there will inevitably be more openness and transparency in these institutions.” For now, though, public information is virtually inaccessible to some journalists. The practice of withholding is widespread within the state apparatus and even in private enterprises,” noted Hawa Traoré, a freelance journalist. The panelists pointed out that some Western diplomatic missions based in Mauritania also tend to limit access to sources. In July 2010, during a press conference at the French embassy in Mauritania, only accredited correspondents of the foreign press were invited—leaving private media out.

Complaints from journalists—especially those from the private press, faced with the daily challenge of gaining access to public information sources—led HAPA to sound the alarm on this issue in September by making public a statement insisting on the “need to open the sources of information by all parties involved, official or private, so as to allow the press and public opinion to obtain accurate and true information in a timely manner.”

According to the panelists, journalists have unrestricted access to international news and information sources. The private media can reprint and rebroadcast foreign programs or information from media agencies, both local and those based abroad, but are subject to mentioning the source. However, it seems that some of them do not want to adhere to this basic provision, claim some panelists. In fact, following a copyright dispute between the online information site *cridem* ([www.cridem.org](http://www.cridem.org)) and the state-run AMI, the latter forbade the online site from carrying its dispatches. The site then reacted, “We are sorry for not being able to publish the statement by the Council of Ministers, but AMI now reserves its publications to its subscribers only. We regret that an official news agency that must inform the citizens of Mauritania acts in this way.” An amicable solution was found several days later.

Similarly, access to the Internet is free and does not require prior government approval for journalists or for fellow citizens. The price, however, is relatively high, and the

coverage is still poor. Some media agency owners benefit from Internet subscription packages at very reasonable rates for their newsrooms, though, and there is not a single press newsroom without access to the Web.

Some panelists believe that laws regulating the entry of foreign language publications into the country are incompatible with international standards. Aydaly Ould Hemed, a journalist at the government daily *Horizons*, singled out Article 21, which stipulates that "foreign publications are subject to bans or heavy fees if they are 'liable for undermining Islam or the credibility of the state, harming the public interest, undermining the public order and security.'" Hemed said that this provision raises the specter of censorship in the foreign press.

Entry into the profession of journalism is relatively free. Article 5 of the 2006 press ordinance considers a journalist to be "any person who is compensated for the occupation of the gathering, processing, and dissemination of information." However, the person must hold, in advance, a "graduate degree in journalism/communications" or give proof of another graduate degree with proven professional experience of between 12 months and five years in a public or private print or broadcast media organization. Panelists believe that this definition is too narrow, as it excludes numerous bloggers and other online media professionals.

There is also a law regulating press cards in Mauritania, reserved for journalists with adequate training or proven experience in a private or public media organization (print or broadcast). But until now press cards have been granted rather sporadically. According to the panelists, even if all the conditions are met to obtain a renowned "national press card," the waiting time to receive this precious "open sesame" can be very short (less than one month) for some journalists or extremely long and discouraging, up to eight months, for most others.

As for the state's role in hiring journalists, Ould Kaber commented that the procedure for hiring entry-level journalists is fraught with irregularities, as the state media recruitment procedures are murky. According to them, journalists often need a permit to report on specific events, to cover certain activities by government or parliamentary officials, or even sometimes to simply attend, inside the country, an international conference organized by the Mauritanian government.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Mauritania Objective Score: 1.51

This objective scored identically to 2009. The rating for indicator 4 on the treatment of certain key issues by journalists scored about two-thirds of a point higher than the objective score. Indicator 5, pay levels for journalists, and indicator 7, facilities and equipment for media production and broadcasting, both scored half a point lower.

Members of the panel were unanimous that professional quality standards are still lacking in journalism. According to Hemed, "Most journalists, whether from state or public media, were trained on the job. Journalistic writing techniques have not been mastered. Confusion of grammatical genders is common. Ironically, many of them have nevertheless enjoyed one or two internships or short training sessions."

Generally, the panelists believe, reporting is dominated by subjectivity and commentary, presented from only one angle. Moreover, journalists lack the professional training and general cultural background needed to conduct background research. The public media, when they even bother to consult outside experts, depend on the same people over and over. And, the problems are not limited to public media. "Just as in the programs and news columns in the state media, there exists a real problem in the biased and sometimes irreverent coverage of information in most of the newsrooms of so-called independent newspapers," said Birome.

The panelists feel that journalists show little respect for widely accepted and recognized ethical and good-conduct

### JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

#### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

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*When self-censorship occurs, it generally stems from a need to comply with certain business interests rather than a fear of offending certain influential circles or senior political officials that pushes them to engage in self-censorship.*

standards. On May 3, 2001, the private press of Mauritania adopted a "Charter of ethics and good conduct," comprising rights and duties developed by the Comité pour le Respect de l'Éthique et de Déontologie (CRED), to "make the press more worthy of the trust of its readers."

CRED, an independent organization, aims to ensure ethical and professional conduct rules are adhered to among and between all its members, and between its members and the broader society. The panelists said that some highlights of this charter were inspired by standards developed and recognized by associations of international professional journalists. However, CRED has only the power of moral persuasion, with no power of deterrence.

In December 2010, SJM sponsored an international conference on press ethics, resulting in the adoption of a declaration called "The Nouakchott Declaration on the Journalistic Profession" in which participants, both local as well as those coming from abroad, reaffirmed their commitment to respect the charter on national and international pride and professional conduct. However, according to the panelists, there are serious and recurring violations of these standards—although no cases were brought before a judge over the course of 2010, as the parties in dispute often favor amicable settlements.

According to some panelists, journalists and editors engage very little in self-censorship. This is true in the private media even with regards to subjects touching on religion or sexuality, say the panelists. Reporters and editors are rarely pressured to practice self-censorship due to a real or perceived fear of losing their job or of jeopardizing their safety or well-being, emphasize the panelists.

When self-censorship occurs, it generally stems from a need to comply with certain business interests rather than a fear of offending certain influential circles or senior political officials that pushes them to engage in self-censorship. "Because of the relationship editors or publishers often maintain with certain influential wealthy individuals or politicians, self-censorship is sometimes imposed on journalists. This unwritten rule on reporting limits journalists considerably

in their ability to conduct original reporting or to freely investigate certain matters," maintained one panelist.

Furthermore, some of the panelists agreed, journalists do not report on events and key issues affecting the country in complete freedom. Slavery, which still exists in Mauritania, homosexuality, and prostitution are virtually absent from the pages of government dailies or state television and radio broadcasts. According to a report from the privately owned Agence Nationale d'Information (ANI), in June 2010 the director of Radio Mauritanie censored a weekly broadcast investigating slavery in Mauritania; the star anchor was asked to change the subject matter. "The censoring of this broadcast is a flagrant contradiction of the commitments of the institution to grant full liberty to report on selected issues without bias," suggested a panelist who asked to remain anonymous.

Many other issues are considered sensitive. In August 2010, following floods that assailed the region of Gorgol, the governor forbade reporters of two private media agencies, the ANI and Al-Akhbar Info, from taking pictures of the affected population, according to the information site [www.riminfo.net](http://www.riminfo.net). The governor defended his actions by pointing to the concern not "to expose" the poverty of the affected population to the "outside world," explains the same source. Rokhaya Tall, a lawyer and member of the Mauritanian Association for Women's Rights (known by its French acronym, AMDF), believes that "the journalist, of either the public or private media, cannot avoid the socio-cultural inertia...it increases a feeling of insecurity and forces the journalist too often, for fear of reprisals, to avoid writing about certain issues."

The panelists believe that, generally, the risk undertaken by editors, reporters, bloggers, and photographers reporting on these issues is that of being censored by their employer, being charged, or being brought to court by plaintiffs. Often, editors or employers forbid reporters to report on certain events. This is especially prevalent in the public media.

According to the panelists, the taboo subjects that are not reported on by the public media organizations find a somewhat sympathetic outlet in certain independent press editions, online information sites, blogs, or social media sites (especially YouTube and Facebook). Some unique blogs like Lakhbaar Tebgue Vi Dar (<http://ltvidar.blogspot.com/>), Canal H (<http://canalh.blogspot.com/>), or the once famous blog of X Ould Y made headlines in the city from 2005 to 2007, say the panelists. A famous lawyer, Master Mohameden Ould Ichiddou, said about blogger X Ould Y: "He's phenomenal. He is the mirror of this society. Through his writing, he faithfully describes what people are saying. He puts on the Web what is talked about in lounges. His is a witness, everyone believes, of

someone with intimate knowledge of Mauritanian society.” However, the scope of these media still remains rather limited in Mauritania, particularly due to the high number of people who are illiterate.

When reporting on certain events, journalists are sometimes faced with a scarcity of information or an outright restriction on information. For example, there is no longer enough freedom to report on events relating to military defense or security, which are considered state secrets and liable to charges of undermining the security of the state, say the panelists. Indeed, during a seminar on ethics and approaches to national information reporting held on May 27, 2010, the Mauritanian Minister of National Defense himself stated, “Mauritanian journalists no longer have the right to publish information regarding military secrets,” according to a dispatch from Agence de Presse Africaine (APA).

According to the minister, quoted by the same source, journalists have repeatedly published information on the movement of military units, their positions, or their command without incurring any penalties. This “dangerous (practice) can no longer be tolerated, and the perpetrators will be subject to the law, in all its force,” he warned. Some panelists believe this is a warning by the government of its intentions to limit the scope of the activity of journalists.

Although some state media publishers and some private media editors benefit from wages and favors that reduce their level of insecurity, the panelists maintain that salaries for journalists and other media and communications professionals, both in the private and public sectors, is still not high enough to discourage bribes. To increase their income, journalists and editors, especially those in the private media, often feel forced to “prostitute” themselves, by promoting or defending in their articles politicians or companies. Media professionals are often inclined to accept bribes or kickbacks as gifts in exchange for covering certain types of events, and the practice is widespread in both the private and public media without distinction for age or experience. According to them, corrupt bureaucrats, businessmen, and elected officials often fuel this practice. A panelist who requested anonymity claimed that it is customary, during trips by the president or the prime minister, for journalists to demand or accept money or favors offered them. Birome questioned whether Mauritanian journalists’ professional associations would ever follow Senegal’s lead and forbid the practice of payment for coverage.

In Mauritania, the range of pay in the public-service sector is especially low. The minimum salary is MRO 21,000 (around \$72)—on par with salaries for nurses and teachers. Journalists from the private sector earn on average MRO 50,000–60,000 (around \$170–205); however, unlike public media journalists, they do not benefit from social security or health coverage,

*In Mauritania, the lack of facilities and technical equipment is felt at all stages in the collection, production, or broadcasting of the news.*

and they are often not tied down by contracts. This does not prevent public media association representatives from organizing sit-ins, as they have every year since 2006, to demand the payment of back wages going back four years, given the government’s failure to keep its promises of salary increases for all state officials and employees.

Poor conditions and pay for journalists in both public and private media have driven some to move to other professions (communications chiefs at private companies, editors and designers in communications agencies, etc.) in the past few years.

As for the balance between news and entertainment, the panelists do not feel that entertainment programs overshadow news and information talk shows, although they exceed in number of hours programming devoted to the news. However, say the panelists, during election campaigns, these tend to balance out. Large swathes of morning radio programming are dedicated to entertainment, whereas on TVM the news and political talk shows fill the first part of the evening before giving way to entertainment. With the exception of soaps (two hours per day), mostly in Arabic, and sportscasts, TVM broadcasts on average 11 hours of programming per day (reports, debates, televised news), focusing only on Mauritania. The only French-language program is the daily news broadcast, while the national languages (Pular, Soninké, and Wolof) take up only 45 minutes per day. The rest of the programming is in classical Arabic.

The facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and broadcasting the news are relatively modern, but they are not completely effective and sufficient. TVM broadcasts in very high frequency (VHF) in Nouakchott, as well as in the 12 regional capitals and some smaller cities. It has also broadcast via satellite, ARABSAT, since 1995. During the past 10 years, it has acquired modern facilities, including a mast, an earth station, six new cameras, and 11 staging benches, say some sources. However, the number of new cameras, production units, and facilities for digital transmission via satellite is still inadequate. Problems with microphones and cameras are commonplace at TVM Plus (the second public television channel); broadcasts sometimes air without any footage.

In Mauritania, the lack of facilities and technical equipment is felt at all stages in the collection, production, or broadcasting

of the news. In the public radio and television sector, this often results in the limitation of reports to one single area—more specifically to Nouakchott, the capital of the country. In the private media, the lack of printing equipment and the poor print quality of publications likely discourages advertisers, said the panelists. Also, they said, print editions and selective reporting (surveys, economic / business, local, political) of high quality are rare.

The lack of professionalism is displayed in productions reflecting a total lack of research and originality. Some socio-professional media organizations, apparently recognizing these shortcomings, hold regular training sessions for journalists. In April 2010, SJM organized a training workshop on investigative journalism for the benefit of public- and private-media journalists. Mountaga lamented, “Investigative journalism remains a neglected genre in the newsrooms. Yet our country contains mines of shady affairs yet to be brought out into the open.” Camara, meanwhile, asked, “With newspapers operating without advertising, where can they find the means to send out their journalists to investigate?”

The panelists were unanimous that the print media do not produce more field reports than the televised media. But journalists from the private media use a freer tone in their reporting than those from the state media. The most important constraints on the print media as well as on the public media are the lack of resources, education, and experience by the journalists and reporters to produce specialized news reporting. The same goes for bloggers who do not provide, according to the panelists, quality coverage of issues or field reports.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Mauritania Objective Score: 1.68

Compared with 2009, the rating for this objective shows progress. In particular, the ratings for indicators 1 (plurality of outlets and viewpoints in the media) and 4 (news agencies) improved. Additionally, new sources of information in minority languages are starting to appear via mobile phone. The panelists were unanimous that the government and private operators will continue to sustain this plurality in information sources.

The plurality in private and public news sources (press, radio, and Internet) today is a tangible reality in Mauritania. However, the panelists believe, these sources are not always approachable, objective, or reliable.

The major shortcoming in terms of plurality is in the broadcast sector. At the time of the MSI panel, there was still

no independent broadcast media in Mauritania; the sector remained under a state monopoly comprised mainly of public media, specifically Radio Mauritanie and TVM. However, following the adoption of the law liberalizing private radio and television media at the end of December 2010, the panelists believe that the country will soon see private radio and television stations emerge. For now, aside from the state-run outlets, it is possible for Mauritians to listen to or to watch foreign broadcasts legally. The use of satellite receivers, especially in large cities, is very common. Al Jazeera is very popular and even has an office in Nouakchott. Other international radio stations are available as well, such as Radio France Internationale (RFI), the BBC (British Broadcast Corporation), and Africa Number 1, the Pan-African channel broadcasting from Gabon.

According to the panelists, Mauritians living in large cities like Nouakchott, Rosso, or Nouadhibou depend on the Internet more and more to obtain information. Every year, no less than a dozen general information sites in Arabic or French spring up in Mauritania. Some, like the information site Oum Tounsy ([www.oumtounsy.com](http://www.oumtounsy.com)), which came on the scene in May 2010, only publish information of a local nature and specifically one sole region, Nouadhibou, the economic capital of Mauritania. Others, like canal Rim ([www.canalrim.info](http://www.canalrim.info)) and GPS ([www.gps.mr](http://www.gps.mr)), are broader in scope.

There are Mauritanian blogs on the Web. Similarly, since 2006, phone applications and mobile news services in Mauritania have expanded. Following in the footsteps of the public AMI, a private media agency (Sahara media), the daily newspapers (*le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, *Nouakchott*

### 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.

*Info*), and a job portal (beta.mr) all launched in 2010 a paying subscriber service in French and Arabic to receive information and news alerts on multimedia telephones. Besides Arabic and French, the Mauritanian private media agency Al-Akhbar launched at the end of December 2010 a paying service of short messages over mobile telephone (SMS), entirely given in the country's minority languages, Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof. It is the first service of its kind in Mauritania. Similarly, in 2010, AMI's website was revamped and equipped with RSS (<http://www.ami.mr/fr/rss.xml>), allowing subscribers to receive daily feeds.

Social network sites like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook are still little utilized by the adult population in Mauritania for news. Their use is mostly limited to young city dwellers from large cities, especially Nouakchott or Nouadhibou. Internet usage at home and over other media (3G mobile telephones) tends to be spread throughout mainly urban areas, say the panelists. According to the panelists, even if it is true that today almost all Mauritians in both rural areas and in cities have mobile phones, the use of these new sources of information is still very marginal. Additionally, advertisers are still hesitant to embrace these types of media.

The inhabitants of large cities like Nouakchott and Nouadhibou benefit more from the plurality of news sources than those living in cities in the interior of the country or in rural villages. In Mauritania, private media outlets, especially the print media, essentially cover only certain large cities like Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, or Rosso. The types of media or other information aids available in rural settings remain essentially the radio, followed by mobile telephone, shortwave radio, and satellite television. The panelists also underscored the absence of community media in Mauritania. However, since 2010, the government has moved ahead to open regional stations in the towns of Aïoun, Kiffa, Kaédi, Atar, Tidjikja, Sélibabi, Zouerate, Néma, and Akjoujt, and some of these stations have begun operating. Prior to this development, only the town of Nouadhibou had a regional station. These regional stations cover a radius of 50 km and broadcast eight hours per day. Coverage focuses on local issues and educational programs of interest to the people of the affected regions, mostly ranchers and farmers.

Cost and literacy are additional barriers to media access. Given the very high rate of illiteracy in the country—nearly half of the population—and given that most people live on less than one dollar per day, they cannot afford to buy private press copies, and foreign publications are out of reach. The readership comes mostly (80 percent) from the public administration or private enterprise sectors. Some French and Arabic publications are available, but they are not generally affordable to large segments of the population.

*In Mauritania, private media outlets, especially the print media, essentially cover only certain large cities like Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, or Rosso. The types of media or other information aids available in rural settings remain essentially the radio, followed by mobile telephone, shortwave radio, and satellite television.*

The Pan-African weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique* (*Young Africa*) sells for MRO 1,000 (around \$3.40). However, certain national press editions, such as the general news magazine *Mauritanies1*, printed in color abroad (Tunisia), are sold for the same price as foreign publications.

In contrast with print media, according to the panelists, the low income of the people and the low salaries of civil servants do not affect greatly the access to the Internet, satellite television, or other paying broadcast services, especially in the urban areas.

Aside from barriers posted by cost and geography, there is no way for the government to either directly or indirectly restrict the access of its citizens to national and international media, panelists said. Access to the Internet is free in Mauritania. There is no censorship or restriction on access to Google or to social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.); however, there is some uncertainty of how the legislation adopted by the government in December 2010, which holds ISPs accountable for content, might affect this.

In terms of the state media's record of reflecting the full political spectrum and serving the public interest, according to the panelists, the public media are still far from these goals. Citing *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, the panelists estimated that the annual subsidy to state media approaches MRO 2 billion. But even though these media groups are heavily subsidized by taxpayer money, they continue to be managed archaically and are not truly independent from the state or the political party in power, the Union pour la République (UPR). The public media generally present an editorial line from only one viewpoint, that of the government. In March 2010, even the Mauritanian president, during a surprise visit to the TVM offices, scathingly criticized its journalists and the technical staff, telling them that they appear more interested in the speeches given by the president and the ministers rather than in the concerns of average citizens, and their programs are rebroadcasts with

*Said Ould Kaber, "Only on rare occasions is the state media open to the political opposition," such as a February press conference held by Ahmed Ould Daddah (the leader of the main opposition party in Mauritania).*

never-ending scenes poorly filmed, with poor audio quality. He told them that he expects TVM to give a voice to the concerns of the citizens of Mauritania, not the ministers that he sees every week.

State media coverage leans heavily toward the government at the expense of the opposition. A 2010 HAPA report criticized *Horizons* for its lack of respect for diversity of opinion, noting that in March, only one edition of *Horizons* reported on an opposition event, and the newspaper avoided giving detailed information. Said Ould Kaber, "Only on rare occasions is the state media open to the political opposition," such as a February press conference held by Ahmed Ould Daddah (the leader of the main opposition party in Mauritania). But this openness did not last long. In a statement made public on July 21, 2010, the joint committee of the Mauritanian democratic opposition denounced as biased TVM's coverage of a televised event on President Azziz's assessment of the regime.

In the opinion of the panelists, very few editors and journalists in Mauritania in the public or private media are professionally aware of the dedicated role they have to serve the public interest in an apolitical manner. The state and public media do not yet promote cultural or educational programs. Nevertheless, the HAPA report welcomed the fact that *Horizons*, since April 2010, has published reports on issues of concern to the people, like the report on food safety and clean-water shortages.

In Mauritania, independent media agencies collect and disseminate news only for the print media. Between 2006 and 2010, no fewer than four private media agencies were established. At least two new private online media agencies emerged in 2010, most notably the Sahara Media Agency ([www.sahamedias.net](http://www.sahamedias.net)) and the Agence d'Informations et de Nouvelles (AINRIM, [www.ainrim.com](http://www.ainrim.com)), which publish in French. The Sahara Media Agency is a Mauritanian private media agency with a focus on international news. Besides Mauritania, it has offices in West and North Africa (Rabat, Dakar, Abidjan) with over 70 employees, journalists, and technical staff from various countries. AINRIM offers a nonstop, 24-hour information service covering national political, economic, social, cultural, and sports news.

ANI, an independent electronic information agency that has been in existence for five years, is owned by the Mauritanian Society of Press, Printing, and Communications (known by its French acronym, MAPECI), which publishes the two dailies *Nouakchott Info* and *Akhbar Nouakchott*.

ANI and AINRIM do not provide pictures, videos, or other visuals allowing for connections to social networks (Facebook, Twitter) via their website, or options to receive news alerts on mobile telephones. Sahara Media Agency, in contrast, provides multimedia content (audio and video). In addition to its audio and video, the agency Al Akbar offers a messaging service on mobile telephone (SMS) in the national languages of Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof; it was launched on January 1, 2011.

Media agencies provide their news to the independent print and broadcast media without distinction. The media outlets relay dispatches or other content of these local or international media news agencies, like Reuters, AP, and AFP. But, say the panelists, local newspapers rarely mention the sources.

There is no real transparency in media ownership permitting consumers to judge the objectivity of reporting, the panelists said, and there are no laws or regulations on the disclosure of media ownership. Foreign investments in the media are very small, and this is simultaneously an advantage and a disadvantage, say the panelists.

There are no press conglomerates in Mauritania, however; media ownership is very often concentrated in the hands of a single owner. *Le Quotidien Nouakchott Info*, *Al-Akhbar Info*, the Agence de Presse Nouakchott Info, and MAPECI are held by a former journalist-turned-politician, Cheikhna Ould Nenni, with close ties to the ruling party. In a similar way, a former correspondent of RFI, MBC, and Al Jazeera, Abdallahi Mouhamdy, owns the Sahara Media Agency, the daily *Arabic Al Akhbar*, and a printing press company. It is also very common for these media owners to try to influence the editorial line of their publications.

The panelists do not believe that a broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including sources of information in minority languages. According to them, the public media (Radio Mauritanie, TVM, and *Horizons*) still continue to be tools for the ruling regime or of a sole ethnic group, the Arabs. There is very little time or space given to other politicians, civil-society members, and minorities.

The media, especially private media and bloggers, often address a variety of social issues, such as those concerning gender, ethnicity, social mores, religion, and sexual orientation, with little difficulty. However, the same is not true of the state media. The government and the chief editors in the media, who are not forthcoming with their

reasons, often enforce this resistance. In April 2010, RPM decided to boycott a state television program, "Press Club," after a guest on the show, the chief editor of the weekly *La Tribune*, was censored after bringing up controversial issues (including national unity, toxic waste generated by certain foreign mining companies, and the expansion of electricity to outlying districts) on the show.

While the panelists could cite no proven case of harassment of journalists for writing about issues affecting ethnic minorities, they noted that out of a total of nearly 200 newspaper editions published more or less regularly, only one, *Foyre Bamtaré*, is published in Pulaar (one of the four national spoken languages officially recognized in Mauritania). Furthermore, in September 2010, a famous Mauritanian singer, Ousmane Gangué, lamented in the columns of *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott* the low number of hours devoted by TVM to a cultural program in a minority language, such as Pulaar. "If there is no Pulaar programming at TVM, I will never be able to do a show on television, since a Pulaar performer cannot participate in a program with Moor hosts or journalists. I prefer to do my shows with a guy like Bosco (a famous journalist from this ethnic group), because he will conduct the show in Pulaar. But if we do not give him the necessary time to meet the performers, how can he do his show properly? At TVM, we give three or five minutes of antenna time to black Mauritians; this is not normal. If we were to give them one hour of broadcast time, they would have the time to do a proper television variety show. When Bosco does a show he has to constantly be looking at the time."

Ethmane Ould Bidiel, a political activist from the Alliance Populaire Progressiste (APP), also complained, in a post published in August 2010 on the information website *cridem.org*, about the absence of the Haratine community (descendants of former slaves) from TVM—an absence he equates to a quasi-racism of the state. "Why do all the regimes that succeed each other agree on one thing and one thing only, the principle of excluding and of marginalizing systematically the Haratines from all public media organizations, especially radio and television?"

The private media have a better record than the public media for reporting on issues affecting minorities and providing minority-language programming. In addition to Arabic and French, the Mauritanian private media agency *Al Akhbar* launched at the end of December 2010 a paying service of short messages over mobile telephone (SMS), entirely given in the country's minority languages, Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof. It is the first service of its kind in Mauritania.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Mauritania Objective Score: 1.21

The ratings for nearly every indicator in this objective decreased in comparison with 2009. Indeed, the panelists are unanimous in judging that media companies in Mauritania are all basically just barely staying afloat, with a business environment that is not yet favorable to the establishment of media companies. Only indicator 5, government subsidies for private media, registered some progress, resulting from the recent establishment of an aid fund for the media.

Neither the independent nor public media in Mauritania can be described as well-managed enterprises allowing for independent journalism, say the panelists. Neither the media outlets, nor support companies (distribution, print) are professional or profitable. In 2006, a report by the National Commission for the Reform of the Press and Broadcast Media noted the absence of a text defining what a media company is, its collective responsibilities, as well as its moral character and its commitment to its employees. Five years later, little has changed.

Newspaper companies cannot afford their own ambitious projects. The majority of independent publications do not yet own cars to run errands, let alone to allow journalists to travel. Some newsrooms do not even have a standard telephone line or a connection to the Internet. And even where it exists, its access is tightly controlled, according to Birome. Media outlets and supporting companies do not have business plans. Accounting and financial practices remain dubious and noncompliant with international standards.

### 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 yet, private media professionals have generally not received any basic training in the search for new markets and advertising resources, claimed Thiam, who added that “media editors lament that for many years there was no national advertising agency in the country.”*

In the private media, accounting functions, sales, and human resources are sometimes carried out by the publishing editor or perhaps even by his brother, cousin, or someone else close to him, claimed Djeinaba Bâ, a salesperson for the communications agency 3MC.com. The panelists said that typically there is no personnel policy in place; instead, tasks are assigned haphazardly.

The panelists also believe that the public media do not use taxpayer money responsibly. Indeed, private newspapers regularly feature cases of misappropriation of funds in these enterprises.

The private media have multiple sources of revenue, the most important being sales, subscriptions, and sponsorships. However, this income seems very inadequate for the sustainability and viability of the media companies, considering that newspaper circulation is poor (it varies between 1,500 and 2,000 copies for each publication), and other sales and advertising revenue are also insignificant. The panelists note as well that the purchasing power of the Mauritanian people, who live on less than one dollar per day, makes for a poor readership, given that newspapers, on average, cost MRO 100 to MRO 200 (\$0.35–\$0.68). Certain private newspapers benefit from assistance, namely from some Western governments, said Camara.

Contrary to other neighboring countries (Senegal, Mali, etc.), the Mauritanian private media do not yet benefit from any direct state subsidy. For about 15 years, the only form of aid to which it was entitled was a reduction in the cost of the printing of newspapers. “In 2010, the state took on 70 percent of the cost of the printing of 229 newspapers, which is about MRO 240 million (\$820,000),” confirmed by the communications minister in the local press.

Revenue and funding sources often influence the editorial policies of newspapers, their management, and the content itself of media outlets, say the panelists, who believe, however, that this practice is more deeply anchored in the

private media than in the public media. Some business leaders of the private or public sector, senior government administrators, or elected local officials often subscribe, as a show of support, to private newspapers in return for increased and improved visibility.

Advertising is still very little developed in Mauritania. Outside of Nouakchott, there are no consulting agencies in communications in the other large cities, including Nouadhibou, the economic capital. International agencies (Moroccan, Tunisian, and Senegalese) dominate the advertising world.

The economic and industrial base of Mauritania counts no fewer than one hundred companies, and yet, the companies using advertising are almost nonexistent. For about 10 years, advertising space in the private newspaper columns, as well as space in the public media, was essentially purchased by the three mobile telephone operators in the country (Mattel, Mauritel, and Chinguitel). Their advertisements, on average 15 minutes long, are replayed continually on radio and television. These operators have also entered into contracts with the most widely read private newspapers to carry regular advertisement flyers throughout the year. But advertising revenue, if there is any, still remains insignificant to the survival of the newspapers, say the panelists.

According to the panelists, in Mauritania, it is the media organizations that take responsibility for soliciting and selling advertising space to advertisers. And yet, private media professionals have generally not received any basic training in the search for new markets and advertising resources, claimed Thiam, who added that “media editors lament that for many years there was no national advertising agency in the country. Such an entity would have undoubtedly allowed for a better distribution among various newspapers’ and other media organizations’ advertising and subscription opportunities.”

According to the panelists, the public media have sufficient access to adequate and guaranteed funding sources without risking political interference. The figures released by the private media show that indeed, TVM receives an annual subsidy of around MRO 2 billion (\$6,831,000), Radio Mauritanie around MRO 1 billion (\$3,416,000), MRO 600 million (\$2,049,350) for AMI, publisher of the two government dailies (*Chaab* and *Horizons*), and MRO 300 million (\$1,024,650) for the IN.

The government has also taken a step to support the private media by passing a bill in late December 2010 that establishes, for the first time in the history of independent media in Mauritania, direct public aid to the private media. According to the communications minister, the modalities of managing and setting up the fund will be overseen by a

committee whose mission had not yet been defined at the time of the MSI panel.

In general, the panelists did not feel concerned that direct or indirect subsidies from the government to private media would affect editorial independence. They noted that in the past, *Le Calame*, a private weekly newspaper, had received a reduction in its printing costs with IN, without any signs of ensuing influence on its political editorial line or management. On the contrary, the newspaper adopted a hard editorial line against the policies of the government. And yet, the panelists conceded that because of this critical attitude, the editions of the newspaper were regularly censored.

Panelists also emphasize that public administration and the state-owned companies are an important source of advertising revenue and subscriptions for Mauritanian newspapers. However, “the offers benefit only the two government dailies, *Chaab* and *Horizons*. In general, public administrators are quite reticent in granting advertising or subscriptions to the private print media,” says Sidina Ould Ely, responsible for distribution and customer relations at the national printing company.

The panelists think that market studies in the media sector in Mauritania can certainly provide a mine of information for different targets. But the media or their sponsors rarely use the information obtained. The types of research used by the media are limited at this time to opinion surveys on the popularity of politicians that are prepared by media organizations. “Rarely have the studies specifically concerned market segmentation or the profile of the private newspapers’ readership. These studies have so far concerned above all the audiences of public radio and television, Mamoudou said.

Djeinaba Bâ commented, “Better market research will necessarily lead to improved quality in news and newspaper distribution. But the problem is that no media editor is yet prepared to sponsor at his own expense such a study, let alone to implement its strategic or business findings.”

The panelists believe that audience ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are generally produced by the government or by other related organizations, rendering their reliability questionable. Nevertheless, certain international organizations (UNFPA, UNICEF, World Vision) operating in the country also sometimes carry out media research. The results produced by these appear less focused. The results of the audience ratings or circulation figures from these studies are rarely made public and are still less used by media outlets or other organizations. Figures on the number of copies of the print media or on the consistency of publication of private newspapers in Mauritania have been

produced since 2007 by a research team from HAPA—but the results, compiled purely on the basis of individual interviews, are often viewed as biased.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Mauritania Objective Score: 1.72

The overall average of Objective 5 showed slight improvement compared with 2009. Indicator 3 (the role of media NGOs) recorded the largest increase. The panelists also noted progress with regard to indicator 4 (formal education options for journalists), mainly because of the launching of classes at the trade school for journalism created in 2009 by the government. Indicator 5 (short-term training options) improved as well. The ratings for most other indicators remained virtually unchanged from 2009; the exception to this was indicator 6, access to printing facilities and newsprint, which lost some ground.

Since 2008, the media sector experienced a revitalization of the union labor movement. New associations launched to defend the interests of media professionals, reflecting the aspirations of the Mauritanian media as a whole. Some of these associations include RPM, SJM, the Association of Mauritanian Media Publishers, the Association of Mauritanian Journalists, and the Union of Independent Press and Media in Mauritania. However, according to the panelists, some of these organizations still do very little on behalf of the interests of independent journalists. They do more for the preservation of interests of publishers and of the institutions.

There are still no associations of broadcasters in Mauritania, and there are only a few associations for media publishers.

## 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.

*According to the panelists, professional associations, including unions, generally represent individuals in the media (such as editors, journalists, or other media professionals). Furthermore, the independence of these organizations or their leaders, vis-à-vis the government, is often very strongly criticized, say the panelists.*

The most important are RPM, which represents the traditional print media, and the Association of the Mauritanian Electronic Media, for online media. RPM, created in 2008, numbers at least 23 newspapers and information site members, while close to 25 Mauritanian newspapers and electronic sites have announced the creation of the Association of Mauritanian Electronic Media, with the goal to “defend the moral and material interests” of the electronic media. As noted in last year’s MSI, RPM is the trade association most representative of the profession (while SJM is the most representative in terms of looking after journalists’ professional interests). This year’s panelists singled out trade associations like RPM for most actively defending the media’s interests before the government. For example, following an IN decision to increase costs for independent newspapers by three times, RPM decided to observe a day without newspapers on Sunday, January 3, 2010. By the end of day, IN caved in to RPM’s demands, and the communications minister ordered IN to restore the subsidized prices.

According to the panelists, in Mauritania, union activity is still underdeveloped in media circles. Certainly, associations of media professionals have existed for around 15 years, but they have not encountered problems of legitimacy. Some of these associations, modeled after CRED, which was launched in 2001, are under the control of media owners who do not share the same concerns as the journalists. Others, like the National Association for the Independent Media, created in 1991 and influenced for a long time by the theories of the overthrown dictatorial regime that ravaged the country from 1984 to 2005, were plagued by leadership quarrels, which handicapped their ability to function. A new group that emerged in December 2010, called the Club of Reporter Journalists, is open to all journalists and seeks to defend journalists against all attacks on their material or moral rights.

According to the panelists, professional associations, including unions, generally represent individuals in the media (such as editors, journalists, or other media professionals).

Furthermore, the independence of these organizations or their leaders, vis-à-vis the government, is often very strongly criticized, say the panelists. There are professional associations for the defense of journalists in general, but their number is very small (around one dozen) and their usefulness remains very limited. Services offered by these organizations are limited typically to moral support for journalists or their families in case of arrest, organizing sit-ins to show solidarity, and other efforts to mobilize public opinion.

The conditions necessary for membership in these associations are generally not very restrictive. For example, Article 4 of the CRED’s ethical charter stipulates that, for example, every journalist or publisher having subscribed to the Charter and having confirmed his/her membership by an oath of honor duly signed can be a member of CRED. The number of members in these organizations tends to decrease every year. Since its creation in 2001, CRED has held only two general meetings (in 2001 and 2010) and currently numbers just 59 member journalists.

There are a number of NGOs operating locally that collaborate with the media sector to support freedom of speech and the independence of media groups, including the Forum of Organizations for Human Rights in Mauritania (known by its French acronym, FONADH), the Mauritanian League for Human Rights (known by its French acronym, LMDH), and the National Order of Lawyers. Although their number is still very small and collaboration is sporadic, they collaborate with the international organizations defending the freedom of speech or human rights, and these local organizations, which are mainly located in Nouakchott, often spare no effort when reacting and responding to attacks on the media. The panelists believe, nevertheless, that these NGOs are involved only marginally in the evaluation of legislative changes affecting the media. However, some among them, like LMDH, often provide legal support to journalists or other media outlets.

Ever since Mauritania acquired independence 50 years ago, there had been no public or private journalism schools in the country. However, in March 2010, the Mauritanian government adopted a draft decree supporting the creation of a publicly owned institution, ENAJM, to answer the need for highly qualified administrators to reduce the deficit adversely affecting the administration.

The panelists stressed that before the creation of this establishment, Mauritanian graduates in journalism, communication, and information sciences were trained in foreign countries (Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, France, etc.). “After receiving their diplomas, most return to Mauritania with new expertise but without any promise of employment—except, of course, for those on a

fast track,” said Bocar Bâ, who added that media outlets are generally very satisfied with the quality of the graduates.

The panelists feel that there are short-term training and development programs that allow journalists to improve their skills or to acquire new ones. “Training seminars have benefited the Mauritanian media. Some workshops are funded and organized by embassies and international organizations, but these opportunities are often hard to come by. Generally, training programs are implemented by local organizations in partnership with their international colleagues or local NGOs. The most popular courses generally focus on ethics and good conduct in the journalistic profession, investigative journalism or reporting, the electronic press, etc.

According to the panelists, the media outlets give very little support to the efforts of the personnel wishing to take part in professional development opportunities. There are programs to address all the training needs of professionals of all fields (editing, advertising, etc.), but very often the level of learning in these programs is undifferentiated for all the participants: beginner or advanced journalists all take the same courses. “As for courses held abroad, the participation fees are exorbitant—and neither journalists nor editorial offices are often ready to pay them,” admitted Camara. Some Western embassies (USA, France, Germany) offer to cover expenses for one or two Mauritanian journalists from the private media to take short training courses in journalism in their respective countries.

There are very few printing presses owned by businessmen. By far, the government-run IN is the largest printing company, said Ely, and it prints nearly all the independent newspapers as well.

The state pays up to 70 percent of the costs associated with printing private newspapers. The panelists believe that IN, which benefits from a yearly state subsidy, is managed as a for-profit company. However, the panelists criticized IN's quality of services and ever-rising prices, which, they said, significantly impede the development of print media. Overall, according to Jaafar, “The support from the printing companies and distribution companies for the media is fainthearted and ineffective.”

Ely noted that Mauritania lacks an adequate distribution network, and that is a major reason why newspapers remain nearly inaccessible to the vast majority of the population.

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