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# BENIN

Compared to previous years, in 2012 the Beninese media landscape did not see major upheavals. The major concern was that the High Authority for Radio, Television, and the Media (HAAC) seemed to enter a more repressive phase in its approach to “sanitizing” the media. The public media regulatory authority raised the sanctions it imposes against certain newspapers by several notches, ranging from banning publication for a minimum of five days to permanent bans.

From late 2011 to early 2012, some daily newspapers were handed publication bans of limited duration; *The Independent* was banned for five days and *The New Gallery* for 10 days. Three others were permanently banned: *Le Béninois Libéré*, *L’Actu Express*, and *Aujourd’hui au Bénin*.

At the same time, HAAC issued individual sanctions against five media professionals, who were forbidden for life from practicing journalism in Benin. The first three sanctions came after HAAC received complaints of violations of the code of ethics, and the other two after the courts had found two press owners guilty of attempted fraud and sentenced them to six months in prison. The HAAC Advisory Council, which also took up the case, stated that it considered the prison sentence extremely excessive.

In the print media, half a dozen titles debuted, adding to the existing plethora of newspapers. As for radio and television, the government’s status quo policy is to deny HAAC the leave to assign new frequencies. Some observers link this reticence to the authorities’ fear of losing control over the media.

The national radio and public print media are trying to provide quality service to the population. By contrast, the public television channel, described by some as “government television,” is completely and without reservation in the hands of the current government. Its top managers are not embarrassed to show their support for the head of state. The time allotted for on-air coverage of any criticism of authorities is reduced to the bare minimum. This state of affairs has not failed to alarm the public. The opposition political parties have already complained more than once to HAAC without success, though the regulatory authority has made much-appreciated attempts to call the national television management to order.

Despite these problems, freedom of expression remains vibrant in Benin, thanks especially to the private-sector media, which provide a plurality of news sources. Some occasional incidents of intimidation have not succeeded in silencing journalism professionals. In an interview with the private television station Channel 3 on August 1 (National Day), President Thomas Yayi Boni suggested that he could “do harm” to the “little” journalists from the station that insult him, but his comments resulted only in boosting tenfold the enthusiasm for criticizing the actions of Benin’s rulers. The fact is that in 2012, no journalist doing his or her job ethically was convicted of any crime.

# BENIN AT A GLANCE

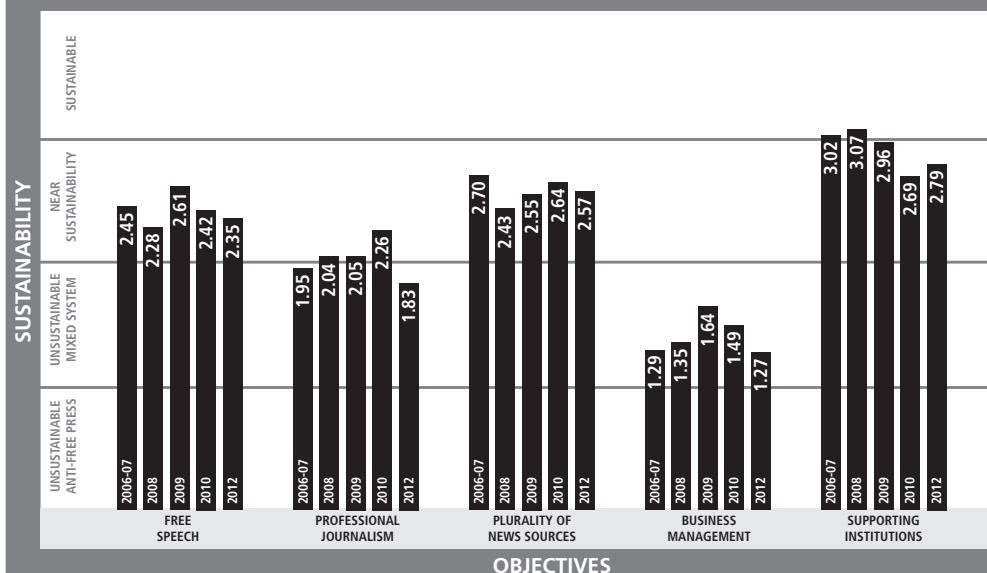
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 9,598,787 (July 2012 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Porto-Novo
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Fon and related 39.2%, Adja 15.2%, Yoruba 12.3%, Bariba 9.2%, Peulh 7%, Ottamari 6.1%, Yoa-Lokpa 4%, Dendi 2.5%, other 1.6%, unspecified 2.9% (2002 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 42.8%, Muslim 24.4%, Vodoun 17.3%, other 15.5% (2002 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** French (official), Fon and Yoruba (most common vernaculars in south), tribal languages (at least six major ones in north (*CIA World Factbook*))
- > **GNI (2011-Atlas):** \$7.12 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **GNI per capita (2011-PPP):** \$1,630 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **Literacy rate:** 34.7% (male 47.9%, female 23.3%) (2002 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Thomas Yayi Boni (since April 6, 2006.)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 53 total (28 daily newspapers, 25 periodicals); Radio Stations: 73; Television Stations: 5, including 1 public channel
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top newspapers by circulation: *La Nation* (state-owned), *Gazette du Golfe* (privately-owned)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top three radio stations: National Radio (state-owned), Golfe FM (privately-owned), Capp FM; Top three television stations: National Television (public channel), Canal3 (privately-owned), Golfe TV (privately-owned)
- > **News agencies:** Agence Bénin Presse (state-owned), Agence de Presse Médiane Afrique (privately-owned), Agence Proximités (privately-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 200,100 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BENIN



### 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

### Benin Objective Score: 2.35

Articles 23 and 24 of the 1990 Benin constitution and certain provisions of HAAC's organic law state expressly that the right to free speech is inalienable. Since 1990, Benin has been one of the countries that protects freedom of speech. Access to public information is also guaranteed in principle, although the government has not yet enacted specific laws protecting this right.

Regarding indicator 1, the participants on IREX's panel unanimously said that the legal environment in Benin is conducive to freedom of speech. "Legal standards exist and promote the exercise of the profession. Access is free," noted Brice Houssou, president of the Union of Media Professionals of Benin (UPMB) and director of publication of the *Brotherhood* daily. "However, there are still some difficulties in the laws that could use correcting in order to support the freedom of the press," he added.

Gilbert Ulrich Togbonon, a judge at the Court of Cotonou, agreed that the legal system works but has some flaws. "Legal and social norms protect journalists and promote freedom of speech and access to public information. In Benin, laws governing the press exist and are being applied. The difficulties are due to the practices of the players," he said.

Indicator 2 sparked a lively discussion. Agapit Napoleon Maforikan, who is the former director of publication for *Le Matinal*, past president of UPMB, and HAAC advisor, told

#### 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.

the panel of a new provision that requires anyone wanting a newspaper license to pay the Interior Ministry a deposit of XOF 50,000 (\$100). "A lot of things remain to be done, particularly with regard to the granting of licenses," he noted, an opinion that the panelists held unanimously.

Indicator 3 challenged the panel's press owners particularly. They all recognized the existence, albeit embryonic, of media enterprises in the market. However, they noted a difference between the written press and radio/television companies, which are compelled to pay annual fees to the treasury. The press owners let it be known that their current struggle is to obtain a reduction in certain taxes levied against press companies that are still struggling to become truly profitable.

Benin has almost no problems with crimes against journalists. There are a few chance attacks by vandals, who are quickly apprehended. Police brutality during official demonstrations has become extremely rare, and if it does happen, it prompts fervent protests from Benin's professional associations.

In discussing indicator 5, most of the panelists noted that since the current regime took power, the public media have received favorable treatment, effectively muting any criticism of the government. Discrimination is blatant, and government opponents are increasingly denouncing the unbalanced coverage. The Beninese Radio and Television (known by its French acronym, ORTB) national television network in particular devotes less air time to opposition demonstrations than those organized by regime supporters.

The panelists were taken aback somewhat by indicator 6, regarding whether defamation is considered a civil matter in which the complainant must prove fault. In Benin, quite the opposite is observed. Defamation is a criminal offense that may even lead to the imprisonment of the journalist, and the burden of proof in a case is on the journalist, not the complainant. In addition, defendants have only seven days to prepare their cases, and the risk of having to pay heavy fines after criminal conviction is often high. The participants noted that the new press code about to be adopted does not include any measures to reverse this trend.

On indicator 7, the panelists agreed that Beninese journalists encounter difficulties in accessing public information. As noted above, Benin has no law to regulate and ensure such access. This led the panelists to believe that authorities only release information that represents no threat to them.

"Access to public information is not easy because of administrative restrictions and restrictions by the public authorities, which 'protect' public information out of fear of what use the journalists will make of it," noted Berthe Angèle Bokossa, director of Canal 3 Television.

In discussing indicator 8, the panelists said that Beninese media have several sources that supply news, especially

international news. Thanks to the Internet, journalists in Benin can connect to the websites of international press agencies whenever they wish. However, some panelists recognized that budget issues affect plurality of sourcing, as not all journalists can afford such access, especially in the interior of the country.

Regarding indicator 9, the panelists unanimously said that no laws limit access to the journalism profession. But criteria do exist to establish who actually is a journalist in Benin. HAAC, for example, has handed down an exhaustive list of requirements for issuing press cards to media professionals.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Benin Objective Score: 1.83

Public authorities, media-focused professional associations, and development partners are working to promote standards of quality using capacity-building techniques and implementing suitable technical means. In the long run, such efforts should reduce the high number of complaints made against journalists.

Regarding indicator 1, in general journalists are motivated by the desire to please somebody. This sometimes prompts them to broadcast or publish only partial information. Many reporters do not go to the trouble of gathering all the evidence or consulting sources with conflicting information—often making for stories that are neither objective nor well documented.

As for indicator 2, the Observatory for Professional Ethics in the Media (known by its French acronym, ODEM) handles

#### 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).

issues related to ethical standards. ODEM is working to better regulate the profession in Benin, but journalist misconduct still occurs sometimes. The panelists said they believe the working conditions and economic difficulties of press outlets have a negative impact on the professional objectivity of journalists and are disincentives to comply with the ethical standards in force. For instance, some journalists put their names on articles that politicians hand to them in return for cash.

Self-censorship remains an entrenched practice in the print and other media; in fact several panelists who participated in both the 2010 MSI panel and this year's panel significantly downgraded their scores from 2010. Usually self-censorship happens in order for journalists to comply with the standards laid down by press organs. In other cases, a journalist might avoid irritating a supervisor and not write certain articles that could affect the supervisor's relationships with political or business figures.

Some topics related to national defense or public safety, as well as cases pending before a judge, are subject to legal restrictions. To cover them, reporters must show professional discretion. Otherwise, major events and issues in the news of all kinds are covered thoroughly.

In the private-sector media, the very low wages and irregular schedule of payment prompt corruption. To help their causes, demonstration organizers will assume the transportation costs and the per diems for journalists reporting on their events.

Regarding Indicator 6, radio and television outlets have fairly specific schedules for news programming. However, the total airtime for news slots is much lower than the time devoted to entertainment programming. In terms of proportion, of every 24 hours of airtime, only about one-third is taken up by news programs and bulletins; the rest is entertainment.

The quality of the print media's equipment has improved, but radio and television have serious problems with equipment. Many radio stations still use analog recorders of very poor quality, which affects the sound of reports and broadcasts made outside the studio. Television stations are going all-digital progressively. The four major television stations now broadcast by satellite.

Regarding Indicator 8, all media outlets are making significant efforts to produce high quality niche stories. But such reporting depends upon the availability of material and human resources.

## OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

### Benin Objective Score: 2.57

The panelists' comments on Objective 3 reflected Benin's inconsistent situation with plurality of news.

Private press outlets saturate urban areas, but strain to reach the rural population because of the low development of delivery and distribution services. This gap is filled by the local radio stations, which relay newspapers' printed information through news bulletins and press reviews. For people in rural areas, these relays remain the primary means of receiving information.

The government places no restrictions on citizen access to domestic or international radio, television, or the printed press. Access to the Internet is free, but financial and technical limitations result in very few people using or having access to the Internet to get their news.

In discussing indicator 3, the panelists all lamented that the state media suffer from the influence of the executive branch of government, which appoints those who run public media outlets. As for the public-service media outlets, they are assimilated to the government media because they operate under the strong influence of the executive branch of the government on their operations and their productions. Government officials' activities and points of view are given more airtime than those of opposition parties and non-political organizations. However, outside the hierarchy that seeks to please the government through questionable stories and commentary, some journalists do strive to fulfill their public service obligations in the media.

#### 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.

Regarding indicator 4, Benin has three private news agencies (Médiane Afrique, Proximités, and Sud Presse). Because their traditional services are not profitable, they invest in secondary activities such as training, studies, and research. Some newspapers also make extensive use of the information available on the Internet, as they are unable to purchase news agency services because of low sales volume.

Regarding indicator 5, private radio stations operate in a very competitive environment for local listeners. In terms of quality, their productions are not comparable to the national radio station programs that are aired to a wider audience.

Sources of media funding are hard to identify in Benin. Much of the private-sector media use figurehead owners, so much so that it is difficult to know their real owners—preventing the public from assessing the degrees of news objectivity.

Politicians and businesspeople will make use of the media to safeguard their interests, influencing and shaping editorial content—and flouting the rules that govern the journalism profession.

Regarding indicator 7, apart from a few restrictions unique to certain communities, most social interests are represented in the media. Local radio stations offer cultural, religious, and other programming; and specialized print outlets (company newspapers, the student press, the cultural and sports press, religious media) target different interest groups.

Beninese media cover the news as much at the local level as at the national. International news coverage consists of summaries of dispatches from international news agencies and newspaper articles. However, the means through which journalists procure news are concentrated in the large urban centers.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Benin Objective Score: 1.27

Most of Benin's media outlets are unprofitable and are structured and managed poorly. The advertising market is disorganized, and advertising revenue is distributed unevenly and only benefits a minority.

Discussing indicator 1, the panelists unanimously found the revenues of press companies insignificant compared to those of companies in other sectors. Without business plans, accounting services are maintained by an inadequate staff and these duties are often lumped in with commercial and administrative responsibilities. As for community media outlets, the situation is so precarious that sometimes mayors' offices will support them financially in return for coverage of mayoral activities.

## 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.

Media revenue comes from sales of newspapers, advertising, and communications campaigns. HAAC, in a highly selective manner, allocates state aid to private press organizations that fulfill its criteria.

On the topic of indicator 3, the panelists explained that, faced with the disarray in the advertising market, each media company negotiates directly with advertisers. Benin still has no agency capable of mobilizing or managing advertising opportunities. A select few media outlets get most of the advertisements, and the excess of advertising is seen clearly on the pages of those publications.

Regarding indicator 4, outside of three or four daily newspapers that rely on the sale of newspapers and subscriptions, the major source of media revenue is advertising. One noteworthy exception is *The Nation*, the state-owned daily. It has high sales figures (because government agencies all subscribe) and it serves as the newspaper for legal announcements to compensate for the irregular publication of the official journal.

In discussing indicator 5, the panelists all noted that independent media receive annual subsidies from the Beninese government. However, the outlets do not benefit from subsidizing as much as they could because the government allocates the funds in such a way that many media are left out or receive insignificant sums.

As measured by indicator 6, few in the media recognize the value of prospective studies to better segment the advertising market. Positioning is done empirically. Print media owners prefer to manage on a day-to-day basis without innovation or differentiation in the presentation of content. Though Benin's newspapers have different names, many look similar in terms of design and graphics.

In radio and television, program schedules barely differ: news bulletins come on at the same time, interactive programs resemble each other, and broadcasts of major debates have nearly the same format. Only the tone and picture quality differ because of the grades of technical equipment used.

There are no reliable statistics for the media sector (indicator 7). Each press company skews circulation and sales figures according to how the party requesting them wants to use them.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Benin Objective Score: 2.79

In spite of shortcomings, journalists have improved the organization of their professional associations. Media members are supported by civil society groups in the struggle to preserve the freedom of the press. Press distribution services still need to be reorganized in order to ensure real-time dissemination of newspapers in Benin's interior. Several institutions provide training in journalism: a school at the University of Benin, an offshoot of the National School of Administration, and a few private schools. State and donor financing are ensuring continued professional training for journalists.

As an anecdote for indicator 1, the general assembly meeting of the Beninese press in 2002 resulted in editor and press owner associations merging into a single association. Its agendas have included organizing training to benefit its members, fighting to clean up the media industry's economic environment by lowering taxes and levies, creating a central procurement service for print media inputs, setting up an advertising brokering agency, and lobbying for passage of a law on advertising. Many current efforts aim to put an end to economic dependence on the state and others who unduly affect editorial policy and to improve the performance of press enterprises.

## 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.

Related to Indicator 2, the 2002 general assembly reorganization also united journalists into a single umbrella group that acts like a trade union, totally independent of management and the government. New members can join based on the criteria adopted by the general assembly. The union has departments specializing in areas such as economics, parliament, politics, and environmental issues. It has also placed regional representatives in all areas of the country.

After signing a collective agreement with management representatives, the union is working towards its effective implementation. Over the past few years, it has mobilized to support journalists in prison, facing trial, or in individual conflicts.

With regard to indicator 3, civil society groups provide visible support to professional associations. Although civil groups are very active in the major urban centers, their credibility and image have taken something of a blow, since some civil society representatives were made ministers in President Boni's government. However, other groups still have the confidence of the media sector, according to the panelists.

On the topic of indicator 4, panelists said that Benin has schools that provide training in the various skills for radio and television. One offers a master's degree in media management. Last year, a government scholarship program was launched that has allowed approximately 120 professionals from all types of media to receive mid-career training at the National School of Administration. As for the written press since last year, the private school Ecole Supérieure has been offering training in journalism, culminating in diplomas co-signed by the government. Most journalism colleges are not seeing large student participation, however, as these schools are only just starting up and enrollment costs are high.

Media members can participate in several types of professional training (indicator 5). International institutions and the government offer training sessions, most often on editorial techniques and specialization modules. In recent years, HAAC has offered more structured and methodical training opportunities. One biennial program was set up on the basis of a study. After starting this program, HAAC instituted a journalism diploma track, and offers some scholarships as part of the project.

Newspapers use printing facilities with management systems that are independent of the government and free of any official restrictions. About 10 Beninese newspapers have had their own print shops for some time now, further bolstering their independence.

With regard to indicator 7, the existing distribution networks and broadcasting stations are not politicized and belong to the private sector. Print press distribution is still in an embryonic state; major urban centers are well serviced by

newspapers but rural areas are not. The disparity is the same with the Internet—use is not very widespread outside of cities because many Beninese lack access to electricity, a computer, or a phone. Internet access is also provided by private operators.

Benin suffers from a huge digital divide. Even though information and communications technology infrastructures exist, they do not yet meet the needs of the media or the citizenry.

## List of Panel Participants

**Armand Coovi**, director, Benin Culture Community Radio, Porto Novo

**Agapit Napoléon Maforikan**, member, Anti-Corruption Organization, Porto Novo

**Georgette Akuesson**, president, Life and Development Association of Benin, Lokssa

**Gilbert Togbonon**, judge, Court of First Instance, Cotonou

**Célestin Akpovo**, counselor, High Authority for Radio, Television, and the Media, Cotonou

**Séïbou Malick Gomina**, president, National Council for Press and Broadcasting in Benin, Parakou

**Berthe Angèle Bokossa**, director, Canal 3 Television, Cotonou

**Brice Houssou**, chairman, Benin Union of Media Professionals; director of publication, *Brotherhood*, Cotonou

**Henriette Doussou**, sales manager, KCG publicity agency, Bohicon

**Kimba Ba Seguere**, reporter, High Authority for Radio, Television, and the Media, Cotonou

**Clémentine Lokonon**, president, Women's Media Association, Cotonou

**Edouard Loko**, vice president, High Authority for Radio, Television, and the Media, Cotonou

**Marie Richard Magnide**, president, Observatory for Professional Ethics in the Media, Porto Novo

**Annick Balley**, member, Women's Media Association, Cotonou

**Kassim Zato**, director, Nonsina Community Radio, Bembèrèkè

## Moderator and Author

**Clément Adechien**, journalist and manager, *L'Informateur*; vice-president, Beninese Media Management Council, Cotonou

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