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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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Media professionals in the Central African Republic (CAR) continue to subsist despite deteriorating working conditions, meager operating budgets, dilapidated facilities, and technical barriers to disseminating their reporting. They face government tactics of harassment, suspensions, and other deterrents, particularly in relation to the country's persisting problems of corruption and banditry in the southeast. All of these factors complicate the media scene and create a largely unsustainable environment for the press.

In 2012, a donor-funded project sponsored by the EU and French Embassy laid out the areas of concern for media development in coming years. Anticipated legal reforms would vest authority in official regulators, while allowing the High Communications Council (HCC) only the power to exact administrative sanctions in cases of violations of journalistic ethics.

In preparation for these changes, the Central African Media Observatory (CAR's self-regulation body, known by its French acronym, OMCA) underwent genuine restructuring. In April 2012, the OMCA Elective General Assembly permitted the establishment of a new office consisting of five elected members, and a review of OMCA's status. In addition, a new code of ethics for Central African journalists was adopted.

Current CAR law accommodates online media, and in practice, online media outlets are left to operate without interference. This is in contrast to the print and broadcast sectors, which are subject regularly to government interventions that skirt the law. But the significance of this development may lie in the fact that only a tiny proportion of the republic's population—less than 3 percent—uses the Internet.

As the country enters the digital age, its media sector continues to face the struggles it has had for decades. Newspapers are many, but are all published in the capital, Bangui, with little distribution to the interior. Radio stations remain the primary conduit for information.

The MSI panelists assigned equal blame to HCC and the country's private professional institutions for the shortcomings in journalism practice. Outlets friendly to the opposition are allowed to exist and even criticize the government, but their circulation is low, and operational costs deep in the interior of Africa are astronomical. The panelists agreed that freedom of speech protections and rule of law are lacking, but the economic constraints on the development of stronger media enterprises remain the greatest challenge to Central African Republic media.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC AT A GLANCE

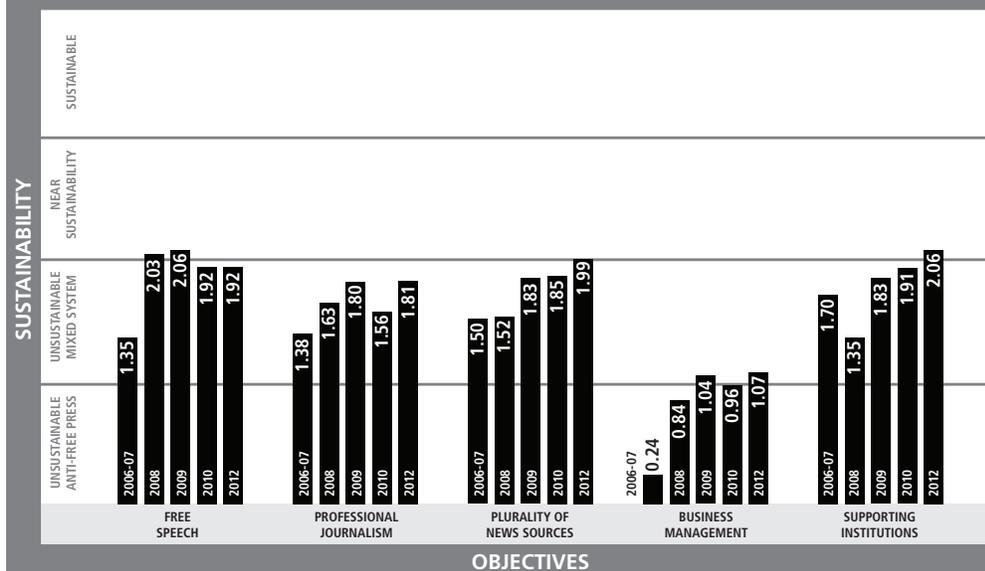
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,057,208 (July 2012 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Bangui
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Baya 33%, Banda 27%, Mandjia 13%, Sara 10%, Mboum 7%, M'Baka 4%, Yakoma 4%, other 2% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** indigenous beliefs 35%, Protestant 25%, Roman Catholic 25%, Muslim 15% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** French (official), Sangho (lingua franca and national language), tribal languages (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2011-Atlas):** \$2.13 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **GNI per capita (2011-PPP):** \$810 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **Literacy rate:** 48.6% (male 64.8%, female 33.5%) (2000 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** Francois Bozize (since March 15, 2003)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 43 newspapers; Radio Stations: 2 main stations: Central African Radio, Ndeke Luka Radio; Television Stations: 1, Central African Television (Source: HCC)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three most popular: *Le Citoyen*, *Le Confident*, *L'Hirondelle*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Agence Centrafrique Presse (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 22,600 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



Unstable, 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.

Unstable 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

CAR Objective Score: 1.92

The MSI panelists discussed free speech issues at length. According to Debato Il Pierre of OMCA, the constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Manengou Jean Ignace, of the Association of Community Radio Stations of the CAR, maintained that “the CAR has all the appropriate laws guaranteeing freedom of speech.” The 2004 constitution and Ordinance 05.002 draw on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on People and Human Rights.

The generally favorable legal environment helps the press to work with less tension. HCC guarantees and ensures the independence, freedom, and protection of the press and the arts, as well as all means of mass communication in compliance with the law. OMCA enforces rules of professional conduct and ethics to avoid inciting tribal, religious, or racial hatred and cites and punishes any journalist when professional misconduct is proven. The Central African Journalists’ Union (known by its French acronym, UJCA), OMCA, HCC, and the Association of Independent Private Press Publishers all function to hold media professionals to account in case of non-compliance with ethical standards. However, given their weak financial resources, these institutions are limited in fulfilling their roles effectively.

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.

In addition, applying the constitutional principles remains problematic, due to the interdependence of the judiciary and executive authorities, panelists said. “Officially, legal norms that protect freedom of speech do exist,” Chérubin Raphaël Magba Totama noted. “In practice, however, the problem has been demonstrated by the recent arrests of media personnel.”

Judges apply the penal code instead of the relevant press law when rendering judgments involving media professionals. The panelists gave the example of the Minister of Communications’ recent arrest of Sylvie Panika, the director of the independent radio station Ndeke Luka, as evidence of the threats to freedom of the press. Panika was arrested for possession of a wireless microphone at an August 2 demonstration by a group of citizens that had applied to the national army but failed an entrance exam.

The panelists had an adversarial and extensive debate on the licensing of media outlets. With radio stations, two steps must occur: the licensing of the frequency and licensing for establishment of the station itself. Journalist Albert Mbaya gave the example of the station Tropic FM, which had to wait three years to receive a license, while some print media, allegedly with politicians’ sponsorship, obtained authorization to publish in less time. Totama added that a waiting period is normal because “it is necessary to first check the equipment and the specifications, and that involves the ministries of communications and defense as well as the agency regulating telecommunications.”

According to the panelists, HCC has helped with establishing newspapers, in order to foster a pluralism of information. The panelists discussed the role of HCC in the sometimes-unregulated issuance of licenses, and said that by design, HCC must encourage establishment of more media outlets and be guided by the principle of media quality.

Media professionals have fought for, and obtained, decriminalization of press infractions. The media sector has also welcomed the creation of HCC. However, decriminalization of libel is not complete, largely because of loose enforcement and interpretation of laws. Indeed, certain particularly serious offenses (such as incitement to public disorder, to tribal hatred, or to genocide) remain criminal acts.

Totama commented on tax matters, saying that the print media situation is mixed. Media outlets that have established themselves as press enterprises must pay taxes, and they have not seen the expected easing of their tax burden. However, VAT is often not applied.

Another issue is the daily violence and threats against media professionals. For example, a camera operator for

the state-run Central African Television station was lynched during the second round of elections in March 2011, and the act went unprosecuted.

Panelists discussed other factors, such as culture and organizational management, which impact the media. According to some observations, the state's Radio Central Africa has not had any official operational procedures since 1967, and Central African Television is run very informally. Public media outlets often have no board of directors for public media outlets and no specific law governing them, other than the general ordinance that provides for a free press under the constitution.

Another problem is the government's withholding of information from the media—a result of the overall culture of fear among public servants, specialists, and other professionals, according to Issa Jean-Magloire of Ndeke Luka. Gakara Virginie Félicité, a civil servant, agreed, saying that the CAR government is making progress but "access to public information is a problem."

Radio and television stations are supported by politicians, but CAR media do not receive government subsidies. According to Geoffroy Hyacinthe Dotte-Babot of UJCA, "The issue of state subsidies or public aid to the private media cannot be overlooked in this debate about satisfying professional quality standards."

The state media's editorial independence is not protected in any specific way, and coverage is at the discretion of the government. Magloire said that the government appoints the Director of Public Media and blocks other political factions from accessing state outlets.

Dotte-Babot called for recognition of the national-level efforts to encourage freedom of speech and access to public information. He contended that these efforts are being made "as much by the public authorities, development partners, and by civil society as by professional media organizations. An illustration of this is Ordinance 05.002, but it must be noted that this legal text does not seem to decriminalize anything, as exemplified by the arrest and imprisonment of journalists from the CAR in the past two years."

Although the degree of such crimes is not the same as in other African nations, intimidation and threats by telephone and court summons are the rule in CAR professional journalism.

Entry into journalism is unrestricted in CAR. Moreover, the law on freedom of communication, in its 7th and 8th iterations, has adopted a broad definition of "journalist."

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

CAR Objective Score: 1.81

The panelist discussion yielded a few key observations regarding media professionalism: professional journalism is on the rise, but the social environment for improved practices and the quality of equipment are far from sufficient. As a result, the country's score for Objective 2 improved modestly over 2010.

CAR media practitioners have a code of ethics and professional conduct that informs their efforts toward fair treatment of news and information. However, the larger challenge remains in print media and the politicization by self-serving elites. Indeed, the CAR media are modernizing, but not yet effectively or with the benefit of state subsidies.

Few journalists are professionally trained in journalism schools. In the 1960s and 1970s, many CAR journalists trained in France and Cameroon. That generation has now retired, and today many journalists are trained on the job, in their respective newsrooms.

Félicité likened journalism to a science, such as sociology, anthropology, or law, with standards that must be met. However, the lack of a clear definition of the profession and the low production levels have led to breaches in ethics and the standards of professional conduct. The most frequent violations that the panelists have observed are corruption, manipulation, misinformation, libel, abuse of power, dissemination of false news, and disregard of the public's right to receive honest and accurate information.

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).

Journalists are subject to very poor working conditions—lacking proper training, resources, and adequate and consistently paid wages. Apart from a few top newspapers, journalists of the print media are not well paid. At some radio stations, hosts are actually volunteers. Event organizers cover transportation costs for reporters, and often this is journalists' only source of income.

In the newsroom, correspondents snap up some of the more salacious reports in order to be able to make ends meet or simply to be able to justify work. These reports are often not fair, objective, or well documented. Many journalists do not play their roles as vehicles of truth, but rather unduly alarm people by publishing rumor and conjecture.

Manengou Jean Ignace had a slightly more positive view of professionalism. He said that journalists have made real progress recently in dealing with news and information, and a number of journalists seek out correct information and are developing specializations, but corruption still exists. "In the CAR, there are professional organizations that provide the profession with a framework. Ethical standards adopted are based on international codes. Despite these efforts, there are journalists, especially in the print media, who distort information in return for accepting payments or gifts from the organizers of the demonstrations they are invited to cover," he said.

Voyemacoa Gervais, for his part, said that it is too early to talk about journalists' regular and serious violations of ethical standards, given that journalism organizations only this year began attempting to establish ethical standards for the country. He echoed and elaborated on the comments of the other panelists. "In general, media professionals have tended to accept payments or gifts in exchange for certain types of event coverage. Journalists have not addressed all the key events and issues of the country that concern the citizenry. They have limited themselves to the political news and engaged in insults and libel. The wages of journalists and other media professionals have not been high enough to discourage all corruption. Consequently, newspapers have recruited very few qualified personnel."

Censorship is more prevalent in the public media. Key events in the country are covered more and more by journalists from the private press. Journalists practice self-censorship for security reasons, especially when the subject is sensitive. Occasionally, a report will be broadcast a single time, then a supervisor will intervene and forbid its rebroadcast. Sometimes the reporter is reprimanded.

Pierre gave a vivid description of the battle between the private media and the government. "As in other African countries, the private press in the Central African Republic has

been 'bothersome' because it has told certain truths, fought impunity, and denounced abuses of power—violations of human rights and scandals that the government would rather have kept quiet. So much so that one minister, in office at the time, felt obliged to make some unfortunate remarks about journalists, and I quote: 'They will be killed like flies, like chickens, because it is they who are destroying this country.'" Despite such threats, many journalists have taken a firm stance as sentinels of democracy and monitors of human rights.

Most media outlets cover events such as street demonstrations, armed attacks, and militia occupations of a part of the country. But in the state-controlled media, these issues are discussed only if the minister agrees to a partial and/or biased treatment of the subject.

The panelists discussed the media's equipment for collection, production, and dissemination of the news. They agreed that facilities have not been modernized. The lack of proper technical equipment is felt most in the radio and television sectors.

Very few journalists specialize in subjects such as health, education, or sports, and CAR has a shortage of investigative journalists. In general, reporters' treatment of information is not fair, but the panelists emphasized that some standout journalists provide citizens with quality information, and deserve to be encouraged and supported. According to Bogoto Samuel, "In the CAR, in almost all media, journalists train themselves on the job. But that does not stop reporters from doing their job with the utmost professionalism. In most cases, the floor is given to the specialists, to the experts in the development of topics such as health, education, etc."

Dotte-Babot touched on several of the Objective 2 indicators when giving his overall assessment of media professionalism. "Forty-five percent of the time, the current situation has been satisfactory. But a thorough analysis has led us, at the same time, to identify shortcomings in certain sectors that constituted obstacles. Professional quality has required, therefore, an ensemble of resources that promote the exercise of the profession and respond adequately to expectations. To this end, the issues of equipment, financial resources, and the political and social environment that have surrounded the journalistic profession have deserved more attention and more effort in the search [of] answers and appropriate solutions."

Dotte-Babot added that public aid to private media might weaken the independence and sense of patriotism of journalists in dealing with news and information. Free speech can only be achieved if all parties understand that the media contribute to the concept of development of a nation, he said.

Albert Mbaya attributed the state of professionalism to two underlying factors: media access to primary sources, and media

outlets' financial conditions—which he said are “at rock bottom in the provinces.” As a result, he said, “standards and quality have not always been respected. The media has neither had access to primary sources nor has it had at its disposal the proven abilities to fully address the issues.”

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

CAR Objective Score: 1.99

The CAR media landscape is characterized by a pluralism of expression and opinion and diversity of media outlets, and has seen singular growth in recent years, panelists said. However, multiple factors affect consumer accessibility, and self-censorship and objectivity remain issues.

Gervais commented on the challenges with dissemination. He said that the media have “evolved in less than 10 years from the monopoly of a handful of state media outlets to abundant, but unevenly distributed, outlets. The media landscape, for the most part, has concentrated in the capital and has faced enormous difficulties. The distribution of periodicals has posed crucial problems, given the lack of a transportation network and the low purchasing power of the potential readership.”

According to the participants, bloggers and citizen reporters are not yet visible in CAR. Internet connectivity issues, lack of electricity, and illiteracy have prevented real development of blogging. However, government interference cannot be counted among the obstacles, according to Gervais. “Online press has not yet been regulated in the CAR,” he said. “The

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.

authorities have not blocked or limited certain functions of the Internet. On the contrary—they have encouraged cultural and educational programming that the private media is not interested in, or for which they do not provide enough space.”

Radio correspondents in CAR's rural areas air more commentaries than fact-based presentations, in part out of fear, according to the panelists. They underlined the case of Abdel Kader, a Ndeke Luka correspondent working from Birao. He reported a partisan story that cost him his life.

Although access to foreign news sources is permitted and not censored by law, it is prohibitively expensive in most cases. Some media houses and foreign news agencies in CAR lack correspondents. Even “stringer” foreign reporters do not have facilities that allow them to broadcast news to their home offices.

ARC-Centrafrrique, a community radio alliance supported by the Hirondelle Foundation, has implemented an advertising agency and a training center that support the activities of Ndeke Luka. Panelists noted an increase in the association's membership; two years ago it had only 14 member stations, but had 24 as of December 2012. Thanks to the actions of the association, stations operate in a network and exchange programs—and even co-produce some programs and disseminate in collaboration. In addition, the association organizes training programs for journalists and managers of its member radio stations.

According to the majority of panel participants, journalists are overly dependent on and trusting of their informants, and many of the difficulties of the profession stem from this. The main sources of information—government administrations—conspire to hide behind the obligation of confidentiality.

The Press Agency of CAR does not provide the services that professional journalism demands. CAR has no other private agencies that can provide citizens with objective or reliable information. However, multiple other sources for informing the public do exist, including community radio stations; rural radio stations; the Internet; foreign radio stations, such as RFI and Voice of America; and foreign television channels, such as France 24 and Africa 24.

The state media do not truly reflect the views of the political spectrum and do not serve the public interest. The private media produce their own news. Overall, the media provide news and information on local, national, and international issues.

Issa Jean-Magloire commented on several of the Objective 3 indicators. “Central African journalists have been doing their best to provide objective and reliable information to

the public. The CAR now has approximately 50 newspapers; only about 10 are published regularly. Private and community radio stations have broadcast in [local languages] to get the message out to the people in rural areas about issues that affect the country's future."

Bogoto Samuel commented on the limits to plurality. "Radio Ndeke Luka, a private station, has been the only one that includes a diversity of views in its editorials. The government, professional associations, opposition political parties, and average citizens have been heard on this radio station. This has not been the case with the national radio station." Despite the positive contributions of Radio Ndeke Luka, its sponsorship by the UN and European NGOs limits its sustainability.

Although radio journalists host debates sporadically, the largest share of domestic air time is given to the government and the ruling party. To fill in information gaps, citizens can tune in to such foreign radio stations such as RFI, BBC, and Africa 1.

Panelists noted the announcement that the Minister of Communications made in decree 92.291 of July 31, 1992, which coincided with the advent of the country's multiparty democratic system. The decree promised equal access to state media for all political parties, the press, and unions. That offer remains unfulfilled, as do two orders that came subsequently. The panelists said that such disappointments erode trust between the public and government authorities.

According to Albert Mbaya, the development of the New Information and Communications Technology Act allows citizens, if their resources permit, to access international news through satellite television, the Internet, or the telephone. Similarly, Ewango Ndouwa Julie noted that RFI and BBC now provide reliable and objective information to greater portions of the public. Although this access is allowed by law, in practice, electricity cuts hamper access to broadcasts and the Internet is unavailable in many areas.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

CAR Objective Score: 1.07

The panelists found more of a consensus on business management than other objectives, though not because they saw many bright points. They all agreed that economic stagnation has hampered the media sector for two decades, and that CAR media sector is not made up of well-managed companies.

"In difficult times like the present in the CAR, except for the public media and Radio Ndeke Luka...media organs have been too poor to do anything," Totama said. "Advertisements have been rare."

CAR does not have a delivery service or an advertising agency. No one conducts in-depth studies of ratings and circulation, thus the government and media owners have no information by which they could correct their coverage policies. The last ratings study by Radio Central Africa was in 1976. Radio Ndeke Luka completed an audience survey in 2010, but it did not cover the entire country.

Price stabilization for advertising and the definition of criteria for granting advertisements are also problems. Because the CAR advertising sector needs to be overhauled, one of the panelists speculated on whether professional media organizations could create an advertising agency. In response, the moderator stated that media practitioners must first revive their professional association, then the Independent Press Publishers' Group in CAR, before they can consider creating an advertising agency.

Pierre described the norm for CAR press businesses: "Newspapers constituted as companies are rare. They have usually been the work of an individual with very little financial and material resources. Without market research beforehand, the owner has embarked on an adventure."

Joseph Kpikolo Tombo noted that the media outlets with advertisers receive revenue. Each media outlet negotiates advertising rates according to its personal relationships, because CAR has no formal regulations for the advertising market. Panelists gave an example of a symptom of the

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.

problem: an agency called Empreinte (Imprint) that advertises in media outlets is accumulating debts with some newspapers.

Bogoto Samuel elaborated on the conditions that have created the current advertising market. "After the military and political crises that the country experienced between 1996 and 2003, the companies were almost destroyed. For the moment, it has been the mobile phone companies that have taken out full-page advertisements in the most widely read newspapers and advertising spots on radio. International organizations have also been doing this. Moreover, given their limited financial capacity, newspapers and some radio stations have only been able to employ poorly trained agents."

The 2005 ordinance on the press mandates that the government include a press subsidy in each annual budget. The subsidy is never allocated, however, except for occasional assistance that the president makes to some leading newspapers—which influences the editorial line of the newspaper. Occasionally, the state makes a gesture to help during the celebration of World Press Freedom Day.

Only a few international organizations advertise in newspapers, and some advertisers prefer to only deal directly with certain media outlets.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

CAR Objective Score: 2.06

Various human rights NGOs support freedom of speech and independent media in CAR. International NGOs conduct practical training opportunities in line with CAR's needs. The Panos Paris Institute has offered training in human rights

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.

sensitivity for the last two years. The Kongo Ti Doli Project trains journalism students in the collection and processing of information related to human rights and sexual health, and to encourage the dissemination of high-quality information to a wider audience. Several "Exchange Days" were organized to promote discourse between journalism students, media professionals, civil society associations, and state institutions on issues that concern citizens.

According to the majority of panelists, media sustainability is linked closely to the professional institutions that are supposed to support the media sector. As stated by one panelist, the professional media bodies' ineffectiveness has caused the deterioration of living and working conditions for its members. In fact, the panelists said that the media sector must overhaul its supporting institutional structure and set up an independent union, whose role and regulations must be clearly defined. The panelists also called for a collective agreement on roles and responsibilities to be made between media support institutions—the publisher's association, UJCA, and OMCA in particular.

According to Pierre, UJCA and OMCA are playing leading roles in defending the professional interests of the independent media. UJCA successfully lobbied for decriminalization of press infractions, the restoration of the Press and Journalists House, and equipment donations from UNESCO. Pierre elaborated on UJCA's mission. "Currently, the UJCA's intention is to reach a consensus with the directors of publication for the development of a collective agreement for the journalists of the private press and a special status for private sector journalists," he said. "Through its questioning of and penalties against journalists, [UJCA] contributes to the promotion of compliance with the rules of professional conduct and thus to the improvement of the quality of media content."

Ignace noted that CAR has one private press publishers association, but said that the "group has been divided from within. This body has not been independent vis-à-vis the government."

Ignace added that most professional associations have been facing various financial difficulties. The groups include the African Media Association for the Fight against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; ARC-Centrafrique; the Association of Professional Women in Communications; and OMCA. Regarding the effectiveness of these organizations, Gervais reported that "professional organizations are very poorly structured in the CAR, while they purport to represent publishers or media outlet owners."

Gervais lamented that the Independent Press Publisher's Group does not play its watchdog role regarding the

government, and that its membership is decreasing while it should be working to protect journalist rights and advance the quality of journalism. He said that NGOs are more effective at supporting free speech and the independent media. NGOs are involved in evaluating the legislature's efforts to modify the media, CAR's basic laws governing freedom of communication, and HCC's organic law.

Magloire added that CAR is gaining a better reputation in media education matters "thanks to a new information and communications department at the University of Bangui." Students follow a curriculum composed of courses on theory and practice. NGOs such as the Panos Paris Institute are providing financial support to the department.

Panelists said that although a good number of young people are being trained, the labor market is weak, and the quality of the training will be revealed once the first class of students finishes the program. Dotte-Babot had another word of caution. "The opening or creation of a department of information and communications at the University of Bangui is a welcomed initiative. However, it is important to note that despite the will and determination of the candidates and nationals of this institution to establish themselves as professionals, their basic training—because it is fundamentally theoretical—leaves them hindered because of the lack of access to up-to-date tools of the trade," he said.

List of Panel Participants

Jean-Magloire Issa, journalist, Radio Ndeke Luka, Bangui

Pierre Debato II, media observer, Central African Media Observatory, Bangui

Jean Ignace Manengou, president, Central African Radio Communications Association, Bangui

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Joseph Kpikolo Tombo, program director, Radio Maria, Bossangoa

Sammuel Bagoto, editor-in-chief, Integrated Community Development International Radio, Boali

Chérubin-Raphaël Magba-Tutama, journalist, Union of Central African Journalists, Bangui

Geoffroy Hyacinthe Dotte-Babot, president, Union of Central African Journalists, Bangui

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