
Performing in outstanding fashion during the 2011 elections in Liberia, the media sector is considerably stronger and more influential than it was a few years ago.



LIBERIA

In October 2011, Liberians went to the polls in their second consecutive multi-party democratic voting to elect a president and legislators. The House of Representatives and Senate had wide-ranging changes as a result of the vote, with only one of the 15 senators retaining his seat and about 60 percent of house members failing to get re-elected. The presidential vote went to a run-off, which was boycotted by the opposition Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) party on allegations of fraud, although all local and international observers gave the process a clean bill of health. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was returned to power, with about 90 percent of the run-off ballots.

Stability is set to continue with the re-election of President Sirleaf, but new challenges are emerging and the government is being dogged continuously by sustained allegations of systematic and personal corruption in its ranks. The president has been criticized consistently for nepotism in the appointment of her sons and other relatives to influential and financially lucrative positions in the state bureaucracy. The 2012 Liberia Corruption Perception Index by a local NGO, the Action for Genuine Democratic Alternative (Agenda), found that most people in Liberia lack confidence in the police and judiciary because the two institutions are perceived as corrupt. More than six years after coming to power, President Sirleaf has not successfully prosecuted anyone for corruption in the public sector, although numerous audit reports from the government's General Auditing Commission have pointed to a massive level of graft in several government agencies.

Liberia's economic growth prospects are promising, especially in light of the discovery of a significant deposit of offshore crude oil. The national budget has grown incrementally, with the government moving to a Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, an instrument that promotes cooperation across government agencies as well as fiscal planning for longer than the immediate year. However, there has been a huge public outcry that legislators are self-serving with the national wealth. Protestors have accused lawmakers of using the budgeting process to allocate money for personal use.

The media, on the other hand, continue to make progress towards professionalism and sustainability. Performing in outstanding fashion during the 2011 elections in Liberia, the media sector is considerably stronger and more influential than it was a few years ago. This progress notwithstanding, challenges and threats to media independence remain.

Liberia made a strong showing in the 2012 MSI study, consistent with the small but steady annual increases in average from 2008 (2.04 that year) to the present. Each of the five objectives has improved in that time period. The panelists attributed the progress to the successful elections and the government's ascension to the Declaration of Table Mountain, which seeks to decriminalize libel, combat anti-free speech laws, and provide an enabling environment for media prosperity.

LIBERIA AT A GLANCE

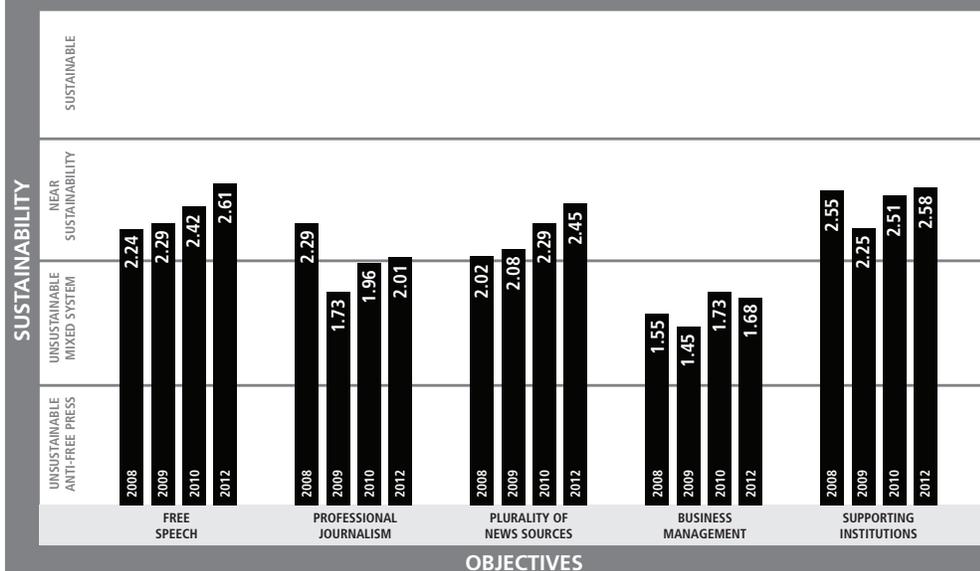
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,887,886 (July 2012 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Monrovia
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Kpelle 20.3%, Bassa 13.4%, Grebo 10%, Gio 8%, Mano 7.9%, Kru 6%, Lorma 5.1%, Kissi 4.8%, Gola 4.4%, other 20.1% indigenous African 95%, other 5% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 85.6%, Muslim 12.2%, traditional 0.6%, other 0.2%, none 1.4% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** English 20% (official), some 20 ethnic group languages, few of which can be written or used in correspondence (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2011-Atlas):** \$996 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **GNI per capita (2011-PPP):** \$520 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **Literacy rate:** 57.5% (male 73.3%, female 41.6%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (since January 16, 2006)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

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

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX LIBERIA



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Liberia Objective Score: 2.61

As with previous MSI studies, Objective 1 experienced an increase in score. This improvement can be credited to the level of free speech that has been maintained since the end of the civil crisis. Laudably, this postwar period is the first continuous time in the past 60 years in which no one was arrested, imprisoned, tried, convicted, or sentenced to a prison term as a result of views they expressed. Deputy Information Minister Norris Tweah said, “The government, true to its democratic tenets, would do nothing to reverse this trend.” He added, “Gone are the days that Liberians will live in fear of their own government because of views that they may hold.”

Estella Nelson of the Liberia Women Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC) noted that this positive trend has to be considered in the context of the impact that culture and tradition have on free speech. She noted that Liberia has legal instruments that support and protect free speech, but these count for little against most Liberian cultural norms. “When it comes to the traditional community, not much is being done to ensure adherence to the tenets laid down in these laws,” she said.

Several other panelists agreed with Nelson. Winston Daryoue of the Liberia Women Democracy Radio noted that Article 15 of the country’s constitution provides ample protection

for free speech, but traditional systems “still have obstacles or perceived obstacles to respect for freedom of expression. In certain settings, media organizations may not be able to speak on certain themes and subjects like FGM [female genital mutilation] and traditional societies.” *New Dawn* newspaper Managing Editor Othello Garblah commented, “The constitution promotes free speech, but the mere existence of the FOI [Freedom of Information] law [does not] guarantee that we have access to information. Some cultural practices prevent free speech, cultural taboo hinders free speech, and bureaucracy and possible lack of documentation prevent access.”

But Tweah said that freedoms are in fact a priority for the general public. “The society values free speech and the necessary enabling environment has been created by the government to protect free speech. The government doesn’t arrest people for free speech; if that [were] to happen, the courts would be used.”

John Gayflor of Radio Kintoma in Lofa County, one of the most traditionally conservative areas in the country, noted that at the local level, free speech is still an issue for women, as they are not allowed to express their views on certain issues in some settings. He said that this usually hampers the process of gathering news, as community elders will not allow women to speak unless the elders are present.

The country’s media laws reflect international best practices, and the media have long enjoyed relatively unhindered freedom in covering a wide range of issues—even those topics that hitherto were considered politically sensitive. Since the inauguration of the new government in January 2012, the media sector has seen an explosion of talk radio programs and newspaper publications that have sought to hold accountable members of the legislative and the executive branches of government.

Though huge strides have been made towards freedom of expression in general, the situation evolving from the 2011 electoral process shows that press freedom and free speech are not yet entrenched irrevocably. During the course of the electoral campaigns, media organizations clearly took the side of the incumbent political party, either voluntarily or through the influence of advertising dollars.

Three ostensibly opposition-leaning media outlets, Love FM/TV, Power FM/TV, and Kings FM, were shut down by the government in November 2011 for broadcasting hate messages following election-related violence between opposition supporters and police. The authorities brought a court case against these outlets, but it was dismissed after a few weeks, following the run-off elections of 2011. The government defended the closures on grounds of national

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.

security, but civil liberties groups and the Press Union of Liberia viewed the closures as an attack on press freedom.

Bonnie Allen, from Journalists for Human Rights and a journalism instructor at the University of Liberia's Mass Communications Department, stated that the government's closure of the Love and Power television stations was "unilateral" and not in keeping with the law, as no state of emergency was declared. "All of us [that] have any sort of legal background recognized that what happened in the courtroom was a sham and was not due process," she said. "The government defended its action by declaring that those media houses were inciting violence. It failed to provide the evidence. So it's difficult to have confidence that that was the case."

Wenie Saywah of *Inquirer* newspaper said that the issues of press freedom and free speech are usually discussed without also considering the responsibility that the constitution places on those exercising such freedoms. She said that journalists should strive at all times to provide factual and reliable information to the public.

As evidenced during the election period, Liberia's current press freedom and free speech situation is relatively fragile. In early 2012, the government registered its intention of acceding to the Declaration of Table Mountain; however, the government has recorded very little actual movement on changing the anti-free speech laws currently in the country's penal code.

Allen agreed that governmental protection of free speech is grounded in law, "...but how they are used can be put aside. [There is] certainly a difference between having legal provisions that protect freedom of expression and for people to feel free to express themselves."

Tiawan Gongloe, the country's former solicitor general and a longtime human rights activist, is on record for calling for the repeal of oppressive laws. While he was solicitor general, he compiled a list of existing laws detrimental to free speech that he recommended be scrapped; six years on, however, the repeal process has not gotten off the ground.

Tweah agreed that the state's efforts have been insufficient. "Some statutes, which inhibit free speech, exist and the government is working to remove them from the books. This government, since coming to power nearly seven years ago, has never used these laws.¹ They are dormant laws. [I] think those laws should be repealed by making plaintiffs have recourse to civil law." He noted, though, "All statutes which

have both free speech and national security implications should be comprehensively studied. As democracy is strengthened it [is] important to remember that the state must at all times be viewed as the essence for the existence of the society."

Given the events subsequent to the closure of the three pro-opposition media outlets, the Liberian judiciary seems perhaps the weakest link in the quest to guarantee free speech and press. In Liberian history, the judiciary has consistently taken the side of the government of the day. This situation is so extensive and pervasive that the government hardly ever loses on politically sensitive issues, regardless of what the judiciary seeks to address.

The U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for 2011 on Liberia critically noted, "The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary; however, judges and magistrates [are] subject to influence and corruption. Uneven application of the law and the unequal distribution of personnel and resources [remain] problems throughout the judicial system." Winston Daryoue, news director of Liberia Women Democracy Radio, reported that the judiciary's credibility is still doubtful in many quarters. He suggested a "serious overhaul" of the judiciary to inspire confidence from members of the public.

Liberia has had no actual court cases in which journalists or citizen reporters were made to reveal their sources. Frances Greeves, who chairs the country's NGO secretariat,² said that "there are times when confidentially is breached, especially [when] a journalist's source divulges information that affects a government official. Such officials individually try to muscle the press to stop such information from being published."

Another issue of concern among the panelists was the government's use of money to drown out the debate. They said that this tactic represents an addition to the use of libel suits, which in previous years were employed by government officials—including the president—to silence critical publications.

Article 17 of the Liberian Constitution guarantees the right of everyone to be informed, and states that there should be no limitation placed on this right. Since September 2010, Liberia has had a Freedom of Information law in place, and in 2012 the government sought to join the Declaration of Table Mountain. While these are all laudable ventures, it is worth noting that there is a serious push back against compliance with the country's Freedom of Information law, primarily by

¹ The MSI chapter author noted that the government used the criminal libel against the president law at least once over its first six-year stint in power.

² The NGO secretariat is the coordinating arm of local NGOs. It is geared towards encouraging collaboration on cross cutting issues and marshalling support on advocacy.

government officials. The president's office has not helped the situation with the January 2012 introduction of Executive Order #38. Part four of this order seems to run contrary to the freedom of information statute, as it exempts classified and confidential information without defining these terms.

On licensing issues, Nelson said that the government charges exorbitant fees for radio frequencies, with stations deemed commercial having to pay as high as \$10,000 for a license. She noted that many of the different licensing fees for the multiple aspects of media work are simply onerous.

License granting appears to be devoid of any political considerations, however. Hector Mulbah, a community radio manager, agreed that frequencies are allocated fairly, but was not sure that it is institutionally grounded, as a different regime might reverse everything. He noted that the former information minister has unilaterally suspended community radio station licensing fees over the last four years, perhaps to curry political favor with station owners. Mulbah also said, however, that the process has become progressively easier, with community radio stations paying a small annual fee of around \$100.

To address this situation, in the last two years the Liberia Media Center and the Liberia Coalition for Freedom of Expression have taken a series of steps toward developing a comprehensive community radio policy. Among many other issues, the policy will address the fee structure for community radio licensing. Community radio managers, boards of directors, and representatives from the government and civil society have all vetted the policy plans. James Dorbor Sao, who manages a community radio station in Gbarnga, agreed that the licensing regime for community radios has been lax and largely easy. He expressed fear that the community radio policy has not come into play for years, and that when the government's access to donor funding dwindles, media licensing fees might be increased to cover the shortfall. He noted that the community newspaper that his radio station publishes pays a minimum annual registration fee of \$100.

Over its lifespan, the current government has granted duty waivers to various NGOs for radio equipment meant for community radio stations. Tweah said that the waivers should be viewed as "tax incentives for the media." Garblah said that the tax structure is fair generally, but his problem is that his paper already pays a 4 percent levy on its income, and the government requires businesses to withhold a further 10 percent for any payment above \$1000 made to newspapers. He viewed this as unfair and a form of double taxation.

However, Garblah also told the panel that the government does not hinder registration of media outlets. "My institution faced no hurdles in registering. But media institutions

themselves fail to register as businesses," he said. He agreed that Liberia should have some minimum requirements for licensing print media, and noted that some improvements are pending: the Ministry of Information has plans to introduce licensing regulations as well as a board dedicated to communications and the licensing process.

Tweah seemed to back up Garblah's information by recommending that the state form a body to address licensing issues. He noted the Ministry of Information is open to passing that role to an independent party. "The ministry is only interested in ensuring that free speech is protected for both the end users and the beneficiaries," he emphasized. Such calls may result in a circumvention of the government's commitments made by signing the Declaration of Table Mountain to guarantee a free press, however.

The panelists agreed that the government has largely ended its policy of committing crimes against journalists as a tool to ensure that the media remain in line. But the electoral period in 2011 saw a spike in attacks on the media, mainly blamed on partisans of the CDC opposition party. The panelists also said that authorities have done little to prosecute people that attack journalists, and noted that even lower-level police officers are on record as threatening to beat up journalists.

Kamara Abdullai Kamara of the Liberia Internet Governance Forum (LIGF) stated that at least two instances of assault against media personnel were reported against the acting mayor of Monrovia, who is a very close confidante of the president. He said that the assaults occurred with impunity. Kamara agreed that non-state actors carry out many of the attacks against the media.

The Liberian constitution guarantees fair access to state-owned media, but during the election of 2011, the director general of the state-owned radio station was suspended indefinitely after the station aired a very critical press conference held by CDC party members. The government denied that the decision was because of the press conference. He was replaced for the duration of the electoral process by a close ally of the president, who had earlier declared his support for the president's second-term bid.

Kamara said that if legislators fail to pass the law transforming the state broadcaster to a public service broadcaster, the state radio station will continue to be hampered in representing all shades of opinion in the country. The law has been in the legislature since April 2008.

Libel remains both a civil and criminal law issue in Liberia, although criminal libel charges have only been filed once under the current government. The panelists expressed hope

that, with the government acceding to the Declaration of Table Mountain, libel will become solely a civil law issue.

Entry into the country's journalism profession remains free with no restrictions, but journalists within the country have started calling for a licensing regime to be instituted. Supporters of this move have argued that people with no formal training should not be allowed to work as journalists, as such people are largely responsible for ethical transgressions. Critics, on the other hand, argue that a profession like journalism should be open for anyone to practice, regardless of previous career choice.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Liberia Objective Score: 2.01

In keeping with previous MSI studies, the average score for Objective 2 increased slightly.

The Liberian media have come a long way since the end of the country's civil war in 2003, but as with most societies that experience prolonged conflicts, huge hurdles still remain. Kamara, who also works with the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building, and serves on the Press Union of Liberia's (PUL) Media Complaints Committee, noted that ethical transgressions are not limited to reporters. He pointed to instances in which the committee found editors wanting ethical transgressions.

The PUL's Media Complaints Committee is a self-regulatory body designed to mitigate lawsuits against the media. Kamara expressed that the committee's work is crucial to

ensure that members of the public that feel aggrieved as a result of media reports can seek redress from the committee rather than the courts. He stated that even government functionaries have taken advantage of the process.

Peter Quaqua, PUL's president, told the panel that it is imperative for journalists to produce reports that are warranted fair and objective and deemed professional. "Editors must ensure proper fact-checking of stories that end up in their papers [or] on radio or television," he said. He lamented the ethical challenges that the media sector faces, but pointed out that the low pay levels are a serious disincentive to fighting graft.

Other panelists, like Nelson, were a little skeptical of the "pay level" argument—insisting that journalists take inducements not because of low pay, but because many journalists choose the profession specifically because its culture is accepting of such practices. Thomas Nah of the anti-corruption watchdog Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia (CENTAL) agreed that low salaries should not be the benchmark for whether journalists carry out their reportorial duties ethically. He also noted that the onus is on media owners and editors to provide better incentives for their reporters commensurate with the revenue of the outlet. At the same time, Nah said that the quality of reporting has improved steadily since the end of the civil war.

Allen agreed that ethical issues have also led to under-reporting of issues surrounding vulnerable groups and marginalized populations, often with reporters preferring to cover stories that earn them side money.

Though PUL's code of ethics is available widely to journalists, ethical violations are still common. This situation is greatly furthered by people (mainly state actors) that provide kickbacks to media practitioners, even at the editorial level, to slant coverage of issues—and in some instances, engage in tarnishing an opponent's reputation. These proxy wars have largely become the order of the day.

As with previous MSI studies, the panelists agreed that self-censorship exists in Liberia. They attributed it to economic muscling—from government mainly, as well as some influential businesses—as opposed to fear of legal reprisal. During the 2011 elections, some political actors (chiefly from the opposition) attempted to intimidate the media into silence because of a perception of negativity in coverage. For example, *Front Page Africa* was among local media outlets that reported contacts from the CDC party threatening physical attacks on its reporters and arson of its offices.

There are no consistent, organized attempts to stop journalists from covering key events, except during the

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).

electoral process. Some opposition political parties have the perception that certain media outlets are pro-government and thus disallow the outlets from covering their activities. In spite of this, it is widely accepted that the Liberian media can cover most issues.

Generally, media workers' pay levels remain below the minimum wage that the government pays, though some media outlets pay their reporters significantly more than the government's minimum wage.

While the panelists viewed the balance of entertainment and news programming as appropriate generally, no data exists to contradict a previous study by LMC, which showed that time allotted to entertainment surpasses the time devoted to news and other programming.

The panelists agreed that equipment and facilities available to the media have improved steadily over the years. They noted interventions by USAID, Liberia Media Center's Initiative for Mobile Training of Community Radios (INFORMOTRAC) project, and other NGOs that have provided more modern equipment and technical training programs to ensure upkeep.

Hector Mulbah, who manages a community radio station in Liberia's second city, Buchanan, noted that his station has begun using experts for programs on health, environment, law, etc. He noted that this has helped the station to have a wide variety of expert sources to tap.

The panelists agreed that niche reporting is still not properly grounded, but groups of journalists are forming around thematic issues, usually with the help of NGOs working in the country. The panelists noted the contributions of the Human Rights Reporters Network. Quaqua of PUL said media excellence awards given for thematic reporting help to encourage specialization.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Liberia Objective Score: 2.45

Since the 2005 establishment of democratic rule in Liberia, the country's media industry has continued to experience growth in the number of new media outlets. As a result, all shades of opinion can be found—with the associated pros and cons. As *New Dawn's* Garblah observed, "Multiplicity in the media is good, but it has worked to negatively impact credibility."

Media outlets cover a broad spectrum of political views, from unabashedly pro-government to extreme opposition and in between. Rural community stations cover the cultural and

tribal viewpoints of their areas in local languages. Liberia has no newspapers in local languages; however, few Liberians are literate in these languages. Only one language has its own script; most use the Roman alphabet.

By law, the airwaves in Liberia remain largely free of censorship of foreign or domestic content. Cable television is available widely, but it is cost prohibitive for the vast majority of Liberians. There are no confirmed reports of the government blocking access to Internet sites, although reportedly a YouTube video called "The Ambassador" (a film by Danish journalist Mads Cortzen that accuses some Liberian government officials of taking bribes) is impossible to access within the country. This is in sharp contrast to the wide YouTube accessibility of the "Vice Guide to Liberia" a few years ago, which, despite an outcry from government officials, remains viewable within Liberia.

The state-owned broadcaster, Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS), continues to be viewed with suspicion, as it has a perceived bias in favor of the executive branch of government. In early 2012, the speaker of the House of Representatives appeared on a LBS talk radio show and accused the station of only airing information partisan to the president. Another senior member of the House of Representatives is on record as stating that the House, where the president's Unity party only holds a small plurality of seats, is in the process of starting its own radio station. According to Tweah, "Lots of the issues said about the LBS are largely driven by concerns over what is on its news. LBS allows public [viewpoints] just like other radio stations.

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.

I [have] not seen any attempt on the parts of the management to censor reporters.”

Regarding the speaker’s specific criticism, Tweah said, “[The] legislature has complained to the Ministry of Information about the perception of the state media being only for the executive, but the separation of powers doctrine as outlined in the constitution presents a dilemma—though the ministry would like to be of service to all branches of government.” Garblah disagreed, stating, “State media [do not] reflect the political spectrum.” He noted that whether it is the Ministry of Information’s newspaper or LBS, the focus of coverage is “...only centered on the presidency and executive branch.”

In August 2011, in the run-up to the general and presidential elections, the president summarily and indefinitely suspended the director general of LBS. The suspension followed the airing of a press conference of an opposition political party, and most observers thought that the timing was linked. The government denied that the conference airing was the reason for the president’s action.

Further compounding the public broadcasting problem is the authorities’ failure to adopt new codes that would grant greater autonomy to the state broadcaster. A draft bill seeking to transform the state-owned broadcaster into a public service broadcaster has languished in the legislature since 2008.

The Carter Center’s Aphonsus Zeon, who is also a Liberian lawyer, said the Liberian Constitution Article 15 (especially section “d”) guarantees the right of everyone, regardless of variation of opinion, to have access to the state-owned media.

Liberia has no independent news agencies. The Government of Liberia runs the Liberia News Agency, which the Ministry of Information has been revitalizing slowly over the last few years. However, the entity is still very derelict and weak, perhaps because information dissemination has changed considerably from the time when only the government could distribute its information across the country.

With dozens of community radio stations located across the country, and mobile phone access nearly nationwide, independent media organizations produce their own stories by relying on field correspondents. Commercial media outlets also produce their own news and also rely on community radio reporters to access information from the countryside.

While Liberia has no media conglomerates, usually media ownership is shrouded in secrecy. Often a few journalists are the face of the operation and the actual financiers stay in the background. In most cases, such people have political agendas

and thus do not care whether or not the outlets operate as properly functioning businesses.

Blogging has not caught on much among Liberian journalists. Some people maintain blogs, but they are not regularly updated. Discussions groups on Facebook, however, have taken off explosively over the past year. Dozens of Liberian Facebook discussion groups now exist, with thousands of Liberians, mainly from the diaspora, making up the membership.

Organizations such as Journalists for Human Rights continue to play a pivotal role in helping media organizations spread their coverage across the country. With DFID funding, the organization mentors Liberian journalists by taking them on assignment to cover stories on human rights.

Liberia has a few Internet-based radio stations, and at least one of these stations partners with a local radio station to broadcast programs to the Liberian diaspora. LBS and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) Radio are the only two media organizations inside Liberia that broadcast full time online.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Liberia Objective Score: 1.68

As in previous MSI studies, Objective 4 recorded the lowest average score. Though Liberia has enjoyed an absence of war since 2003, the country and most of its institutions still seem to be transitioning lethargically from the problems of the civil crisis. Organizational systems are extremely difficult to come

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.

by in many national institutions—the country’s media sector being no exception.

Most panelists agreed that most of the country’s media firms are unfocused and in need of efficient business structures. “Nearly all media institutions in Liberia lack policy frameworks, strategies, and plans,” Nelson said, adding that these firms have no vision for the future of their businesses.

Gayflor said the media in the country’s capital operate more efficiently than in rural areas like his. He is of the view that community radio stations have management issues because of their sustainability problems in the short term. Richmond Anderson, a member of the House of Representatives and professor of journalism at the University of Liberia, attributed the problem of inefficiency to the country’s civil war. He noted that prior to the conflict, most media outlets operated much more effectively.

Media vibrancy, as shown in the number of newspapers in Monrovia and radio stations across the country, continues to be evident. Dozens of newspapers are operational and five television stations broadcast in Monrovia, while at least one television station is in operation at Cuttington University in central Liberia. Dozens of radio stations operate from the capital and around 40 community radio stations are on the airwaves across the country.

Although the panelists said that the future looks extremely promising for the Liberian media with respect to plurality, they returned to the problems with business practices. “It is the business management side that has continued to be a major challenge,” said Zeon. And as Kamara critically noted, “Good management is quite limited in the Liberian space.” He attributed the situation to “political or commercial interests influencing adverts” and the government’s inability to provide clear, “across the spectrum” support for the business environment. Such situations have led to self-censorship or soft censorship.

While Garblah of *New Dawn* agreed, he said that his newspaper operates as a fully functioning business. He gave the example of how the paper has “fully succeeded in paying off a loan it took from a local bank to purchase a printing press.”

Media outlets have some additional sources of revenue beyond advertisements, but they are hardly diverse enough or sufficient to sustain the media outlets at a healthy level. As Allen said, “Newspapers and radio stations are highly dependent on a few major private corporate advertisers, government advertisement, and United Nations advertising.”

Among the major private advertisers are the three operating mobile phone service providers, which are powerful enough

in the market to dictate rates to media outlets. Publishers’ and broadcasters’ associations have attempted repeatedly to present a united front on this issue, but efforts have proven futile. With UNMIL concluding in a few years, that major source of advertising revenue will be lost.

The panelists also described biases that they perceive in how the government allocates advertising—it shies away from placing advertisements in more skeptical outlets. This form of soft censorship has greatly impacted the quality of journalism in many outlets, with many staying well clear of issues that advertisers might view as controversial.

Ratios of content to advertising have shifted toward the latter, as media outlets struggle to stay afloat. As Kamara noted, “Advertising revenue is the prime source of income for the media, and to an extent, adverts are prioritized above news.” On most days, the average newspaper in the country will have far more space devoted to advertisement than news. In its 2010-2011 study, LMC’s Media Quality Barometer highlighted this as a consistent problem.

Community radio stations are the only Liberian media receiving significant government support. They are granted favorable registration terms from the Liberia Telecommunications Authority and a reduction on customs duties for equipment and spare parts. The government, in consultation with local and international NGOs, has agreed to adopt a community radio policy aimed at regulating the sector and formally providing incentives.

Sao, who manages Super Bongese radio in Bong County, said the overtures from the government go a long way in “ensuring that a station like [his] remains above water and now has the prospect of remaining on the airwaves.” However, Nelson of LIWOMAC, which runs the Liberia Women Democracy Radio, said such favorable treatment is not available to her station. Liberia Women Democracy Radio is required to pay the same high registration tariff as commercial broadcasters in the country.

Increasingly over the last few years, community radio stations have been able to identify funding to purchase transmitters and spare parts. Such funds have come largely from local government coffers in the areas of operation, but the situation is an improvement nonetheless, and means that gradually, these stations will run as sustainable enterprises.

Advertising agencies have not yet taken root in the Liberian media landscape, though there have been some attempts to create this market. The same can be said for broadcasting ratings. Audience share and advertising decisions are a matter of individual perceptions, rather than data. To date, the only research on the media market is a radio survey that LMC conducted for the Ministry of Information in 2010. That

research found that most people's first preference for media is their local community radio station.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Liberia Objective Score: 2.58

Supporting institutions have strengthened consistently through the history of the MSI study in Liberia.

Nelson summed up the panel's viewpoint on media trade associations by saying, "There are associations and unions existing, but their roles still need to be strengthened to adequately service the interests of members. While there may be leadership structures, there are many challenges, including skills and resources."

Several associations and umbrella organizations work within the country to protect the interests of various sectors of the media. PUL is the overall umbrella organization. The Association of Liberian Community Radios represents the interests of the community radio sector. The Editors' Association, Broadcasters' Association, and Publishers' Association are the main media-related trade groups.

Doe-Nah of CENTAL said that media network organizations concentrate more on advocacy and do very little to enforce penalties imposed on journalists and media outlets for breaches of ethics.

Liberia has several higher institutions offering journalism study. University of Liberia, AME University, and United Methodist Zion University grant degrees in mass communications. While these programs continue to improve, there are still challenges. Allen, who teaches in the University

of Liberia's Mass Communication Department, said that the challenges at the school are huge, as training is "entirely theoretical." She noted that it is possible for a student studying journalism to go through an entire four-year program without touching a camera, recorder, or computer. Massive investment has to be directed to higher education in Liberia, as the problem is not only limited to journalism schools, panelists said. Garblah was quite emphatic on this issue, agreeing that "journalism degree programs are not quality" and underscoring Allen's point that the schools do not have good training facilities.

The Liberia Media Center and Journalists for Human Rights have worked with the University of Liberia's Mass Communications Department to improve its curriculum. This project has led to the inclusion of the school's the first-ever media rights course. The effort has also seen the assignment of highly skilled professionals to the school's faculty on a short-term basis.

Training opportunities for journalists have continued to be available, especially in the years following the end of the civil war in 2003. Most training programs are now moving away from classroom-style training sessions with journalists to a more hands-on, field mentoring approach, where journalists learn by covering actual stories in the field. However, Garblah expressed skepticism and questioned their effectiveness, saying, "Short-term training programs are poor. Reporters [do not] bring back actual skills. The way the trainings are structured is the problem. It should be intensive and practical."

A wide range of local and international NGOs continues to provide training for the country's media. USAID has sponsored capacity support for the Liberian media over the last two and a half years. With funding from the British Government's Department for International Development, Journalists for Human Rights has operated alongside the Liberia Media Center since 2008, providing rights media training and mentoring. The Radio Netherlands Training Center, with funding from the European Union, has also worked with the Liberia Media Center to provide technical support and workforce personnel to Liberian community radio stations since 2007. Other organizations providing support to the Liberian media include the Irish NGO Trócaire, The Carter Center, Trust Africa, UNMIL, and Search for Common Ground.

Print facilities for newspapers have perhaps experienced the single most significant change since the dark days of the government of former President Charles Taylor, when government minders and printing press owners censored newspaper headlines and stories. At the time, only two newspaper printing presses existed. Both were privately owned, and although one had a virtual monopoly, they still

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.

allowed the government to carry out censorship through the presses. As of 2012, every major newspaper and a few minor ones owned their own printing facilities, making the days of regime intrusion at the press a thing of the past.

The newspaper distribution network is owned privately, apolitical, and subject to no government restrictions. USAID is funding a pilot subscription program for taking the country's newspapers to a wider audience.

Digital broadcasting equipment is available, but no local television or radio station is on track to meet the International Telecommunication Union's 2015 deadline to transition to all-digital broadcasting. Every television station in the country relies only on terrestrial broadcasting. The state broadcaster and UNMIL Radio are the only two stations in the country that broadcast fully online. A commercial radio station, Fabric, offers some of its programs online in partnership with a U.S.-based Liberian Internet radio station.

Since the end of the civil war in 2003, the information and communications technology infrastructure has improved continually. Work was completed in 2011 to bring fiber optic cabling to Liberia. The so-called ACE cable is expected to greatly improve the speed of connectivity and reduce the cost of Internet access in the country. The Ministry of Information's Tweah said that the cable would become operational in December 2012.

At least one telecommunications company claimed in 2012 that it had introduced fourth generation (4G) Internet connectivity on its network. Another such company said it was rolling out 3.9G connectivity. Kamara acknowledged the improvements but noted that the country's current Internet infrastructure is still a far cry from the standards of a properly functioning new media sector.

Zeon said that the literacy level of the average Liberian has not kept pace with the advances that technology has seen in recent years, and that this could impact long-term development.

Liberians have continued to access Internet technology in increasing numbers. The growth was quite apparent from the huge number of Liberian Internet forums that sprang up during the 2011 elections. Those groups saw very vibrant discussions on different political and social issues from thousands of Liberians across the world.

List of Panel Participants

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

John Gayflor, station manager, Radio Kintoma, Voinjama

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

Hector Mulbah, station manager, Radio Gbezohn, Buchanan

Estella Nelson, president, Liberia Women Media Action Committee, Monrovia

Kamara Abdullahi Kamara, ICT expert and chair, Liberia Internet Governance Forum, Monrovia

Bonnie Allen, instructor, Mass Communication Department, University of Liberia, Monrovia

Estelle Liberty, journalist, Power TV, Monrovia

James Dorbor Sao, station manager, Radio Super Bongese, Gbarnga

Peter Quaqua, president, Press Union of Liberia, Monrovia

Winston Daryoue, news director, Liberia Women Democracy Radio, Monrovia

Richmond Anderson, professor of mass communication and Member of Parliament, University of Liberia, Monrovia

Thomas Doe Nah, executive director, Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia, Monrovia

Norris Tweah, deputy minister, Liberian Ministry of Information, Monrovia

Aphonsus Zeon, coordinator, Access to Information Program, The Carter Center, Monrovia

Moderator and Author

Lamii Kpargo, program director, Liberia Media Center, Monrovia

The Liberia study was coordinated by, and conducted in partnership with, the Liberia Media Center, Monrovia. The panel discussion was convened on August 3, 2012.