

# MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

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2017

**The Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
in Nicaragua**



*The government continues to fund its own private media to prevent “contamination” of the political discourse. This allows the government to bypass independent media and communicate directly with its constituents, while independent reporters struggle on a daily basis to access public information.*



# NICARAGUA

In 2016, President Daniel Ortega was able to secure a third consecutive presidential term after the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) won November's national election with no opposition—although its main opponents weren't allowed to compete. Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, was elected vice president. In power since 2007, Ortega has not held a single press conference with independent reporters in more than three thousand days, according to local news reports.

Ortega's government has benefited from years of positive economic growth, economic cooperation with the Venezuelan government, and a political alliance with the international and national business sectors. These factors have allowed the government to fund social programs that benefit its popularity, particularly among the low-income citizens targeted by such endeavors.

The government continues to fund its own private media to prevent "contamination" of the political discourse. This allows the government to bypass independent media and communicate directly with its constituents, while independent reporters struggle on a daily basis to access public information. To complete the scheme, the government doesn't provide advertising to independent media but instead funds private media related to its interests.

Institutions, including the National Police, the National Electoral Council (CSE), and the national government, don't provide access to public information to reporters unless it benefits the state. Independent reporters are barred from many public events, including press conferences, because authorities don't invite them or grant them access. In particular, the National Police has centralized access to information in its national headquarters, to the detriment of local reporters around the country.

The National Institute of Telecommunications (Telcor) continues to favor licensing to business enterprises associated with the national government, while at the same time failing to renew licenses for independent and community radio and television stations.

Attacks against reporters took the form of espionage, physical aggression, and harassment in 2016. Both *Confidencial* and the *Wall Street Journal* claimed to have suffered espionage from the military and governmental agents, respectively. Some journalists were also arrested throughout the year, including national reporters covering protests against gender-based violence in Managua. Local reporters and an international correspondent were also arrested while covering protests against the Interoceanic Canal last December. In 2016, the government expelled international free-press advocates and confiscated the equipment of international correspondents when they tried to enter the country to cover the news.

This year, the panelists underscored the economic impact the government has had on independent media, jeopardizing their sustainability. In 2016, international organizations, such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, pointed out that the operating environment for independent reporters in Nicaragua remains challenging.

# NICARAGUA at a glance

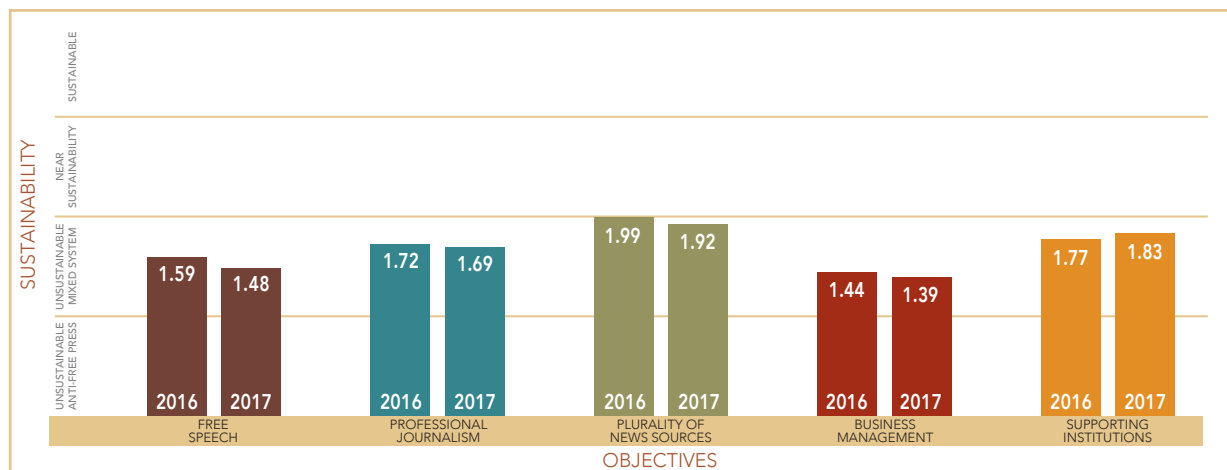
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 6,025,951 (July 2017 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Capital:** Managua
- > **Religions:** Roman Catholic 51.3%, Evangelical 33.9%, other 1.5%, unspecified 12.9%, none 0.2% (CIA World Factbook)
- > **Languages:** Spanish official 95.3%, Miskito 2.2%, Mestizo of the Caribbean coast 2%, other 0.5% (CIA World Factbook)
- > **GNI (2012-Atlas):** \$12.599 billion
- > **GNI per capita:** \$5,390
- > **Literacy rate:** Overall 82.8%, male 82.4%, female 83.2% (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **President:** Jose Daniel Ortega

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** Print Outlets: 2 dailies, 3 weeklies, 2 monthlies; Radio Stations: 50 AM, 235 FM (2012, TELCOR); Television Stations: 21 (2012, TELCOR); Internet News Portals: 11
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** AP (private), AFP (private), Reuters (private), ACAN-EFE (private), Prensa Latina (public)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: NICARAGUA



**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.

Scores for all years may be found online at <https://www.irex.org/msi>

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### Nicaragua Objective Score: 1.48

As in the previous year, overall access to public information and freedom of speech persist under stress in Nicaragua. A slight decrease of 0.11 was observed, in comparison with 2016.

There are legal and social protections of free speech and access to information in Nicaragua. However, the panelists agreed that the implementation of these legal norms is weak and doesn't favor independent media. Mauro Ampié, a lawyer and human-rights defender, explained that the Nicaraguan constitution recognizes freedom of speech as a constitutional right but said that in practice, freedom of speech is restricted for the purpose of obtaining the primacy of the official discourse.

Ampié noted that implementation of the Access to Information Law has been weakened in order to restrict access to public information. He said, "The offices of Access to Public Information have been substituted, in reality, by the Offices of Public Relations."

During 2016, multiple news reports denounced how the National Police, the National Electoral Council, and the national government systematically denied access to public information (even press conferences) to independent reporters. "The police don't even want to receive my requests for information," Elizabeth Romero, a reporter at *La Prensa*, recounted during the panel. A new measure by the police states that all information is now centralized in Managua, the capital city; therefore, local

reporters around the country don't have access to information in their local police station, as in the past. In July 2016, reporters organized a public protest against this measure in the northern city of Matagalpa, to no avail. The panelists ultimately saw these restrictions as inhibiting freedom of speech.

According to María Cristina Medal, a reporter from Chinandega, "If you work for a media outlet controlled by the government, you are granted interviews and some access to information, but if you are not from the ruling political party, they don't give you an interview."

Romero also warned that based on the Nicaraguan criminal code, a judge can force a reporter to disclose her source of information. Though this has not happened recently, according to Romero, "the danger" is there, written in the law.

The Nicaraguan government uses media licensing to further consolidate a duopoly in the television market, controlled by the associates of President Ortega and Mexican media mogul Angel Gonzalez. This is to the detriment of local media. According to Ampié, "Telcor, the national entity that is in charge of licensing, doesn't act independently, favoring the business interests of the presidential family and the consolidation of the Ortega-Gonzalez duopoly, to the detriment of the plurality recognized by the Nicaraguan constitution."

According to critical news reports, Ortega's associates and family members control television stations 2 (in alliance with Gonzalez), 4, 6 (public station), 8, and 13; meanwhile, Gonzalez owns stations 2, 9, 10, and 11. In 2016, Telcor granted yet another license in favor of Ortega's interests.<sup>1</sup> One independent television news station, Nicavision (Canal 12), remains on air.

Adrián Uriarte, a media analyst, says the Law of Telecommunications needs to be modernized to comply with the new reality of the digital age. He criticized the lack of organization among independent media owners who don't push for new regulation. "This is a shared responsibility," he said.

But the most troubling aspect of licensing is the political role of Telcor at the local level. According to Ileana Lacayo, a reporter at the countrywide newspaper *La Prensa* and located in the southeast city of Bluefields, local television and radio stations suffer political pressure from representatives of Telcor and the FSLN, who requested that media owners not criticize the government during the electoral campaign of 2016. Outlets that didn't comply were threatened with the revocation of operating licenses, and independent reporters were told their programs would be canceled. According to Lacayo, some radio directors requested that local reporters present their news content in advance to ensure that it followed the guideline of

<sup>1</sup> Vélchez, Analgimara. "Otro Canal TV para la familia Ortega," *Confidencial*, January 5, 2016: <http://confidencial.com.ni/otro-canal-tv-para-la-familia-ortega/>.

## 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.



not “attacking the government.” In one extreme case, reporter Yolidia Navas’s show on Radio Zinica was canceled after 15 years on the air, a decision pushed by Arturo Valdez, an FSLN legislator who manages the station. Reporters from the region protested in support of Navas, but her program was not restored. FSLN representatives accused her of attacking them during the election.<sup>2</sup>

In previous years, Telcor had closed several stations, arguing technical issues, as was the case for *Voz de Mujer*, *Radio La Ley*, *La Poderosa*, and local television stations from León and Chinandega. In 2016, Telcor closed the radio station *El Emperador* in Carazo, using technicalities to confiscate the equipment; this was confirmed during the panel by Patricia Zúñiga, a journalist at *Stereo Romance*, a station that was associated with *El Emperador*. Afterward, the owner of *El Emperador* was able to recover the equipment previously retained by the government.

The panelists say the market-entry and tax structure for media in Nicaragua are minimally fair and comparable to other industries. The constitution grants some financial benefits for media, such as tax credits for the import of equipment, but a legislative reform that was passed several years ago, known as Ley Arce, threatened to end this benefit and is pending before the Supreme Court. In addition, the implementation of the law is discretionary.

Gilberto Artola, a journalist at a community radio station in the northwestern part of the country, explained that under the law, in order to access tax breaks, a media outlet must have a license of operation granted by Telcor. Unfortunately, dozens of media outlets are unsure of the legality of their licensing statuses and as such are unable to get a tax break. The panelists agree that small media outlets have a clear disadvantage in obtaining tax benefits because of a lack of leverage to negotiate with the government. Oscar García, a news anchor at Nicavision, criticized some media owners for using tax breaks to import luxury goods unrelated to news coverage.

Crimes against the media, including citizen reporters or bloggers, are not prosecuted vigorously, although occurrences of such crimes are lower in comparison with other countries in the region, such as Mexico and Honduras. Ampié said, “Crimes against journalists, citizen reporters, photographers, and cartoonists consist of threats and physical aggression when they report on opposition protests. They also suffer the damage and theft of their equipment and the confiscation of their cell phones to delete incriminating evidence against the police.”

Sergio Simpson, a blogger from Matagalpa, noted that citizens are afraid to express themselves for fear of political repression.

<sup>2</sup> Lacayo, Ileana. “FSLN ordena cierre del noticiario en Bluefields,” *La Prensa*, October 10, 2016: <http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2016/10/10/politica/2114751-diputado-orteguista-cierra-noticiario-de-periodista-en-bluefields>.

Because of this fear, citizens do not often stand in solidarity with reporters who have faced government aggression. Simpson added that authorities speak in very negative terms about journalists with some frequency, which he feels increases their risk of becoming victims of pro-governmental or violent forces.

Ampié highlighted that investigative reporters have suffered threats, intimidation, and espionage from the Nicaraguan Army, which was denounced by Carlos Fernando Chamorro, director of *Confidencial*, in front of the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights. The *Wall Street Journal* also said a team of its reporters was interrogated by authorities and suffered espionage while covering news in Nicaragua in 2016.<sup>3</sup> “Journalists are also defamed in the government-controlled media,” Ampié said. “These crimes are left in impunity.”

Reporters also suffer harassment while covering the news. Romero recounted how she was filmed by the police and the military while covering episodes of violence against the indigenous population in Waspam.

The panel highlighted the case of Julio Lopez Miranda, a reporter at *Onda Local* who was arrested while covering protests against the construction of the Inter-oceanic Canal in the southeast region of the country. The police not only arrested him while he was doing his job, but also confiscated his equipment and deleted the content of his reporting.<sup>4</sup> Gilberto Artola, a news correspondent at *El Nuevo Diario*, also has suffered this kind of harassment from the police and military.

There was broad consensus among the panelists that state-owned media are a vehicle of propaganda in favor of President Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo, Ortega’s wife. In addition, there is no law that protects public media independence from state media. This indicator scored 0.90 this year.

Libel is a criminal law issue, and the burden of proof is on the journalist accused of defamation, against recommendations from the Universal Periodical Review (UPR). “This approach contributes to the persistence of self-censorship in terms of denouncing authorities for actions against the law,” Ampié said.

Nicaragua has a Free Access to Information Law that, in reality, doesn’t help independent reporters to obtain records, data, or any other information. In fact, independent reporters are systematically denied access to public information and events and interviews with public servants. Romero said, “There is no access to documents, and there are zero interviews with public officers for partisan reasons. Therefore, in order to get the

<sup>3</sup> Montes, Juan and de Córdoba, José. “Nicaragua’s Leftist Ortega Embraces Business and Authoritarianism,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2016: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/nicaraguas-leftist-ortega-embraces-business-and-authoritarianism-1478251804>.

<sup>4</sup> Orozco, Patricia. “¡Basta ya! Tenemos derecho a informar,” *Onda Local*, November 29, 2016: <http://ondalocal.com.ni/noticias/248-basta-ya-tenemos-derecho-de-informar/>.

news, we need to listen to Vice President Rosario Murillo's daily speeches through official media."

However, some institutions, such as the Central Bank and the National Assembly, provide free online and fee access to economic data and legislative documents. Budget information from both the national government and municipalities is also available online.

Uriarte said reporters need to foster their digital investigative skills in order to gain greater access to information that is accessible through research. Lacayo pointed out, however, that her request for official information for one of her investigations was denied. Simpson said that even if data are available online, reporters need access to public officers who can provide a better sense of the information and access to additional documents. "Reporters are not invited to public events; the door is closed for them. They even are thrown out," Simpson emphasized. Romero also added, "By law, there are no restrictions on sources, but the silence imposed against independent media makes it difficult to balance stories with the official point of view."

In general, media access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law. But as Uriarte pointed out, poor Internet connectivity around the country limits news access, especially in rural areas. In terms of access to international news, some videos produced in the United States have copyright restrictions, so they cannot be watched in Nicaragua.

Entry into the journalism profession is not an issue in general; it is free, and the government doesn't impose licensing for individual journalists. By law, there is a Colegio de Periodistas (journalism college), but a plea for unconstitutionality against the Colegio is pending in the Supreme Court. Still, the indicator regarding entry into the profession is near sustainable, with no legal mechanisms limiting entry.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Nicaragua Objective Score: 1.69

There was consensus among the panelists that providing quality news is still a challenge in Nicaragua. They said constraining factors include a lack of economic resources to sponsor news coverage, difficulties in accessing public information, and inadequate training for reporters.

Still, the panelists feel that reporting in Nicaragua is fair, objective, and well-sourced, considering the circumstances (the indicator is still near sustainability, though the score regressed from 2.44 to 2.03). In fact, there was some criticism about the quality of reporting during the panel discussion. García criticized some independent media outlets for showing only political points

of view that meet their partisan interests. Alba Nubia Vargas, a news producer at *Radio Vos* in Matagalpa, added that local newsrooms don't have enough resources to invest in reporting quality stories and accused editors of practicing censorship. Simpson emphasized, "I'm not satisfied with what I see, read, and hear." Uriarte said reporters in Nicaragua need to diversify both their sources and agendas. However, Juan Carlos Duarte, director at Radio Camoapa in Boaco, noted that there is some effort at community radio stations to produce quality journalism.

Ampié attributed some of the news quality, especially as it relates to the diversity of news sources, to the country's political polarization. In particular, he indicated, independent reporters struggle to access official sources and points of views, while reporters from pro-government media present only the official view. That lack of balance, Romero acknowledged, is one consequence of the lack of access to official sources.

Reporters follow some ethical standards, the panelists said. But they also noted that not all media outlets have stated ethical guidelines. García was very harsh in his criticism. "It is disgusting what is going on," he said. "There are reporters that are asking for payment from politicians, businessmen, and NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] in order to cover the news." As far as he knows, Simpson said, the only media outlet with a published ethical code is *La Prensa*, but he was skeptical about the rigor of its enforcement. Romero argued that the newspaper follows the guidelines as best it can. Still, the indicators that journalists follow recognized and acceptable ethical standards remain near sustainability.

Self-censorship, however, is an issue. The panelists discussed a noteworthy example: In 2016, *La Prensa* didn't publish a piece about FSLN congressman and majority chief leader Edwin Castro after the legislator threatened to accuse the newspaper of defamation if it continued its investigation of him. "*La Prensa* censored itself. Readers are still waiting to read the report," García said.

Duarte said, "Self-censorship is a silent epidemic that nobody wants to talk about, but one that invades media and citizens who fear repression." Meda added, "There is fear that the government will come to close your media or will not renew your license of operation." Simpson and Maryórit Guevara, both bloggers, said they, too, experience pressure from their readers or sources to self-censor; Simpson, however, insists on the importance of not being silenced.

Independent journalists have some difficulties in covering key events and issues because they are often barred from press conferences or are frequently denied access to public information.

Romero said there is a degree of risk in covering social protests, paramilitary groups opposed to the government, and territorial

## 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).

conflicts affecting indigenous populations. In these cases, she pointed out, the risk for independent reporters is high because they are not protected by the police or military. In some cases, reporters trying to cover stories are arrested by the police, as in the case of López, mentioned above. Hospitals, police stations, and the National Electoral Council are among the institutions that frequently close their doors to independent reporters while allowing official media to take part in press briefings. In Matagalpa, one reporter and two cameramen suffered aggression while working on a story at the regional hospital, Vargas recounted during the panel.

Journalists' salaries are worsening. According to the panelists, salaries ranged from \$51 to \$255 a month, while the monthly cost of a "basket of goods" reached nearly \$450 in 2016. Though reporters from national media outlets are better paid, they are a minority. Many journalists don't have access to social-security protection and are asked to perform multiple tasks in the newsroom without receiving extra payment, Medal said. Some reporters need to obtain an advertisement for their outlet in order to receive a salary, which generates ethical conflicts. There are even journalists who own small businesses to complement their salaries, Ampié noted, though he added that others simply leave the journalism profession entirely. Lacayo pointed out that in her region, according to a recent university survey, the majority of reporters don't have a steady salary, health insurance, or life insurance. She added that in her region, reporters from media associated with the government receive salaries from municipal and regional public institutions.

The panelists agreed that entertainment programming somehow eclipses news and information in Nicaragua. Ampié said, "In the government-controlled media, there is plenty of international entertainment programming and commercial promotions mixed with 'nota roja.'" *Nota roja* is sensationalist

journalism that focuses on crime and accidents. Uriarte added that media outlets have an 80/20 formula for programming, with 80 percent of time devoted to entertainment and 20 percent to news. Natividad Rosales, a publicist, said effective media outlets tend to devote 85 percent of programming to entertainment and just 15 percent to news.

Generally speaking, the country minimally meets indicator 7, which refers to the modernity and efficiency of the technical facilities and equipment used to gather, produce, and distribute news. García said many news media outlets have good equipment but sometimes don't use it because of the risk that it could be damaged during news coverage; they can't buy insurance to prevent losses. Maintenance and high electricity costs can also be prohibitive. Gilberto Artola, news director of URACCAN-Radio in the Caribbean side of the country, said it is costly to get a technician to fix any problem at his local radio station in Siuna. Some technicians charge as much as \$300 just to check an antenna, Duarte added. Romero said that more investment is needed to improve physical installations of news media, noting that at her outlet, "these are not optimal."

There is some quality investigative reporting in Nicaragua, but more investment is needed to achieve sustainability. The increasing costs of news production are a crucial element to consider, and few media outlets can afford to sponsor this kind of work. Wilfredo Miranda, an award-winning investigative reporter at *Confidencial*, recognizes that more resources are needed to sponsor investigations. He said a partnership with *Connectas*, a regional digital platform, has allowed him to pursue many of his leads. Although there are examples of watchdog journalism in Nicaragua, much of it is undermined by a lack of resources and a fear of retribution.

## OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

### Nicaragua Objective Score: 1.92

A duopoly dominates the local television media market, according to some panelists. Other factors, including a lack of multiple points of views in state-owned media and a lack of transparency regarding media ownership, mean this objective is still far away from sustainability.

Ampié said, "The possibilities for citizens to compare information have diminished in recent years because of the growing duopoly and the government strategy of having a greater presence on television, radio, and social media." He added that the quality of government information has also diminished because of a propagandistic approach. In his view, the news program "Nicaragua Hoy" by Yolidia Navas in Bluefields and the television station Voz de Mujer in Jalapa were closed to guarantee the primacy of the official discourse.



In addition, news outlets like Canal 10, which specializes in the aforementioned *nota roja*, are part of the menu of channels on local cable stations around the country. However, that is not the case for Nicavision (Canal 12), which, according to García, a news anchor at the station, has been excluded from appearing on different local cable stations because of its independence.

In general, though, citizens' access to domestic and international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means. However, there are still some constraints on access to diverse media options. There is a digital divide in Nicaragua, especially in rural areas. For many, consistent Internet access is still too costly. Even in areas with Internet access, the connection quality is poor or slow. Some municipalities have installed Wi-Fi in public parks, but the signal is mainly used as a source of entertainment rather than to read or watch news.

The panelists agree that the ruling FSLN uses state or public media as vehicles of propaganda. The opposition isn't given the opportunity to voice its point of view on any of the national public stations. "Nothing that negatively affects the ruling party or the government has a space in their programming," Ampié said.

Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets without major problems, but cost of access is still an issue for small media outlets. The cost of these services can be prohibitive for small media outlets, Romero noted. But, according to Ampié, "News agencies such as AFP [Agence France-Presse], AP [Associated Press], and Reuters distribute news among local media."

The panelists agreed that poor salaries, a lack of sustainable streams of revenue, and the uncertainty around licensing are hindering the capacity of independent media outlets to hire

and retain talented reporters and invest in news production. Nevertheless, private media are still able to produce their own news.

But many challenges remain. According to Vargas, local reporters do not have the proper equipment to do their work or the economic resources to invest in transportation and digital training. Some news programs simply struggle to survive. *Café Con Voz*, a news program that emphasizes interviews and roundtables, was off the air for a few weeks after struggling with economic resources.

As previously mentioned, the panelists consider the Nicaraguan television and radio news market to be dominated by a duopoly linked to Ortega's government, and there is not enough transparency about media ownership for the average news consumer to gauge the objectivity of news. Uriarte said the lack of transparency in media ownership applies to all kinds of media in Nicaragua. When reporter Navas lost her news program on Radio Zinica, she was unsure who truly owned the station; many believe it is owned by FSLN and/or associates.

Unfortunately, minorities, such as the indigenous population and the LGBTI community, are not properly represented in the national media landscape. Nicaragua barely meets this indicator in 2017 (1.75), with the score actually decreasing by 0.25 from 2016.

Artola said there is hostility against reporters who cover transgressions against indigenous communities in the north Caribbean of Nicaragua. He, in particular, has suffered harassment by the police and military for covering indigenous issues. He added that there is resistance among editors to cover these topics with a proper understanding of the cultural implications. Romero said there is a tendency to see aggressions against indigenous territories as simple crime stories. Lacayo criticized public media for not covering these communities in their own languages, like Creole, Misquito, Ulwa, Mayagna, and others. Indigenous populations from the Caribbean, which account for a large percentage of Nicaragua's population, are left out of the media agenda; indigenous peoples from Subtiava (León), Monimbó (Masaya), and Rivas are also ignored by the media. Uriarte places some of the blame for the lack of multiculturalism on advertisers, who often control media agendas.

"There is not enough representation of social interests, other than business and governmental interests," Ampié said. "Issues about indigenous populations, the LGBTI community, and people with disabilities don't always have space in the media." If they are noticed, Ampié pointed out, the approach can be disrespectful and reproduce patterns of discrimination and violence against these communities. This problem also persists in terms of topics related to gender equality.

In general, media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues. Partnerships between

#### 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.

national and local media are helping to expand news coverage. Still, there is a tendency to focus the coverage on Managua ("Managuacentrismo"), so expanding local news coverage remains a challenge.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Nicaragua Objective Score: 1.39

Media outlets still struggle to both find sustainable streams of revenue and improve management capabilities in order to achieve sustainability. The government's strategy of favoring its own media has undermined the economic sustainability of independent media.

Wilfredo Miranda, a journalist for *Confidencial*, offered that "economic suffocation has been the most effective silencing tool" used by the government against independent media.

Not all media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises. Duarte identified the need to boost management capacities among independent media owners. Patricia Zúñiga, producer at Stereo Romance, said that in many cases, radio stations do not have a proper assessment of their costs, so media owners charge for advertising and publicity based on their gut. Some stations don't have general accounting practices. Natividad Rosales, a publicist, indicated that most media outlets do not have business plans or strategic development plans. Only the most established media are able to develop market research to formulate strategic plans and boost advertising revenue. The broad consensus among the panelists was that only small independent media have the resources to use market research to tailor their content to the interests of their audiences. The commercial plans that are written tend to be primitive.

However, there are media with robust management practices, particularly *La Prensa*. Romero, a reporter at *La Prensa*, said the newspaper has been able to promote alternative sources of revenue, such as printing services and sales of smartphones and tablets, to achieve efficacy and sustainability. The newspaper has its own marketing department and has diversified its business by providing printing services. However, García criticized some of the newspaper's commercial promotions, such as the sale of mobile phones, tablets, and computers, because these promotions far exceed the journalistic enterprise.

Independent media do not have access to government advertising, a revenue stream that has historically been crucial for the survival of media in the country. According to Ampié, the government punishes independent media by not providing them advertisements. Moreover, he added, private businesses are afraid to advertise via independent media because it risks their relationship with the government.

Vargas said his station, Radio Vos, has rejected advertisements that go against its values and public advertisements to prevent being politically compromised. The station promotes gender equality and human rights for women, teenagers, and children. To find more sources of revenue, it rents office space in a building it owns.

There is a robust advertising market but not enough transparency about how it works and how supportive it is to the development of independent media. In fact, representatives from community radio stations feel that advertising agencies offer to pay much less to them than what they offer to pay to national media outlets. Artola said URACCAN Radio even has to pay a commission to an intermediary, plus another 20 percent to the advertisement agency in order to get an ad. He added that government-controlled media are able to drop the price for advertisements because they have other revenue sources, including public advertisements and subsidies. Community radio stations and small stations rarely visit advertising agencies in Managua, so those agencies usually ignore the potential of local media and focus their efforts on Managua-based national media. The most important advertisers are telecommunications companies, the different branches of power, pharmaceutical companies, retailers, and hygiene/beauty product companies.

Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is barely in line with accepted standards. Duarte explained that his station covers nearly 70 percent of its operational budget with advertisements and 30 percent by selling air space for programming that includes entertainment, religion, and the arts. The panelists said other radio stations rely heavily on the sale of programming space.

As previously stated, government subsidies and advertising are not distributed fairly, and there is no law to regulate it. This

## 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.

allows the government to punish independent media, subvert editorial independence, and distort the market. Duarte said representatives from the municipality of Camoapa, where his station is located, have told him they would pay to advertise with any other media outlet except his station, even though it is the most important station in the municipality.

Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are minimally reliable or independently produced. Ampié said, "Ratings are accepted and published for the media that obtain better results and are ignored or criticized for those with less audience." Media owners need to buy audience research studies because they are not freely available, but small media can't afford the cost most of the time. The methodology of these studies is not discussed publicly.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Nicaragua Objective score: 1.83

Overall, there was a slight improvement compared with the previous year, a change driven by the increasing quality of academic courses and better access to communications infrastructure. However, challenges remain. The panelists were dissatisfied with the performance of trade associations, feeling they do not sufficiently represent media interests.

Some organizations that work for the interests of media owners are the Cámara Nicaragüense de Radios (CANIRA) and the Asociación de Radios Comunitarias (AMARC). The consensus among the panelists is that more work is needed. "Their efforts are still insufficient to defend media and provide services," Duarte said.

According to Ampié, "COSEP (Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada) is an ally of the government and, in practice, has not been an active advocate of freedom of expression." But, he added, "COSEP voiced its opposition against a new directive from the National Electoral Council (CSE), which was designed to cut freedom of expression in social media in 2016, something that was denounced by CENIDH and other organizations. The directive was withdrawn by CSE."

The panelists were also dissatisfied with the work of professional associations. Romero said there are many journalism associations, but most do not produce meaningful results that promote good journalism. But Medal argued that the Colegio de Periodistas supports journalists, helps reporters in need of health services, and provides pensions to retired journalists. Five panelists are registered with the Colegio de Periodistas, but they also acknowledged division and poor leadership in the organization. Simpson said the division among members of the Colegio is so profound that there are two different directives in Matagalpa. "Both directives are illegal," said Vargas.

## 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.

The government has sponsored and helped create its own organizations, such as the Foro de Periodistas Sandinistas and Red de Comunicadores. Organizations of reporters include the independent Asociación de Periodistas de Nicaragua (APN), the Unión de Periodistas de Nicaragua (UPN), the Sindicato de Periodistas de Nicaragua, the Asociación de Periodistas Parlamentarios (APP), and the Asociación de Cronistas Deportivos de Nicaragua (ACDN).

Journalists lack legal support from groups as well. Miranda said, "There are not professional associations that defend journalists; like many things in Nicaragua, they are co-opted by the ruling party." Lacayo agreed, adding that many professional associations are not credible.

The panelists showed some optimism regarding the role of NGOs as institutions supportive of independent media. There is a constellation of NGOs that support the work of journalists in Nicaragua, including CENIDH, the Chamorro Foundation, El Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación (CINCO), and La Fundación para la Autonomía y Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (FADCANIC). In particular, the panel appreciated CENIDH's work in denouncing human-rights violations against reporters. Other organizations offer training to reporters on specific topics and tools.

Most panelists say the improved quality of journalism education in universities, along with substantive practical experience, is another positive development. Uriarte, a communications professor, identified a few areas of improvement, like the development of specialized courses on media management, sustainable development, and human rights. But access to graduate courses is costly and was identified as a constraint for most reporters. Zúñiga said scholarships are needed to fund these kinds of courses. Universities also provide short-term training courses, but these are often too expensive. Perhaps

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most significantly, Romero said media don't have the capacity to provide employment to all graduates.

In general, there are no restrictions nor monopolies that control media equipment and printing facilities. In fact, this indicator is near sustainability in Nicaragua in 2017, showing a slight increase from 2016 (2.00 to 2.11).

The situation is less optimistic in terms of the autonomy of media distribution. According to Artola, the cost of transmitters is very high, and community radio stations struggle to import equipment using tax benefits because of the uncertainty surrounding licensing. In addition, independent media outlets, such as Nicavision, are banned from appearing among channels of local cable companies for political reasons. Also, both Vargas and Romero expressed concern that communications via mobile phone could easily be compromised by governmental surveillance efforts.

Finally, though Nicaragua still suffers from a digital divide, new public investment is expanding access to the Internet. The government is also planning to invest \$20 million in broadband capability, with support from the South Korean government. But challenges remain. Lacayo said there is no Internet access in many municipalities in the South Caribbean part of the country. Duarte offered that in Boaco, Internet service is "deplorable" and that connectivity is not seen as a human right. According to international studies, it is more expensive to connect to the Internet in Nicaragua than in any other country in Central America, and Nicaraguan citizens pay a higher percentage of their monthly income to get connected.

## List of Panel Participants

**Mauro Ampié**, human-rights defender and executive director at CENIDH

**Gilberto Artola**, news correspondent at *El Nuevo Diario* and news director at URACCAN-Radio, Siuna

**Juan Carlos Duarte**, director at Radio Camoapa, Boaco

**Oscar García**, news anchor at Nicavision (Canal 12)

**Maryórit Guevara**, blogger

**Ileana Lacayo**, news correspondent at *La Prensa*, Bluefields

**María Cristina Medal**, independent journalist, Chinandega

**Wilfredo Miranda**, journalist at *Confidencial*

**Elizbeth Romero**, journalist at *La Prensa*

**Natividad Rosales**, publicist

**Sergio Simpson**, blogger

**Alba Nubia Vargas**, news producer at Radio Vos, Matagalpa

**Patricia Zúñiga**, news producer at Stereo Romance, Carazo

The following participant attended the panel discussion but did not submit a questionnaire.

**Adrián Uriarte**, communications professor

The following participant submitted a questionnaire but did not attend the panel discussion.

**Hjalmar Ruiz**, telecommunications expert

One panelist requested anonymity.

## Moderator & Author

**Eduardo Marengo**, consultant

The panel discussion was convened on January 20, 2017.