

ALBANIA

INTRODUCTION

Since the downfall of communism in 1991 and the establishment of the free media, marked by the founding of *Rilindja Demokratike*, not much has changed except for the proliferation of various news outlets. It has now been 11 years since Sali Berisha became the first democratically elected president of Albania, and the media sector has evolved very slowly.

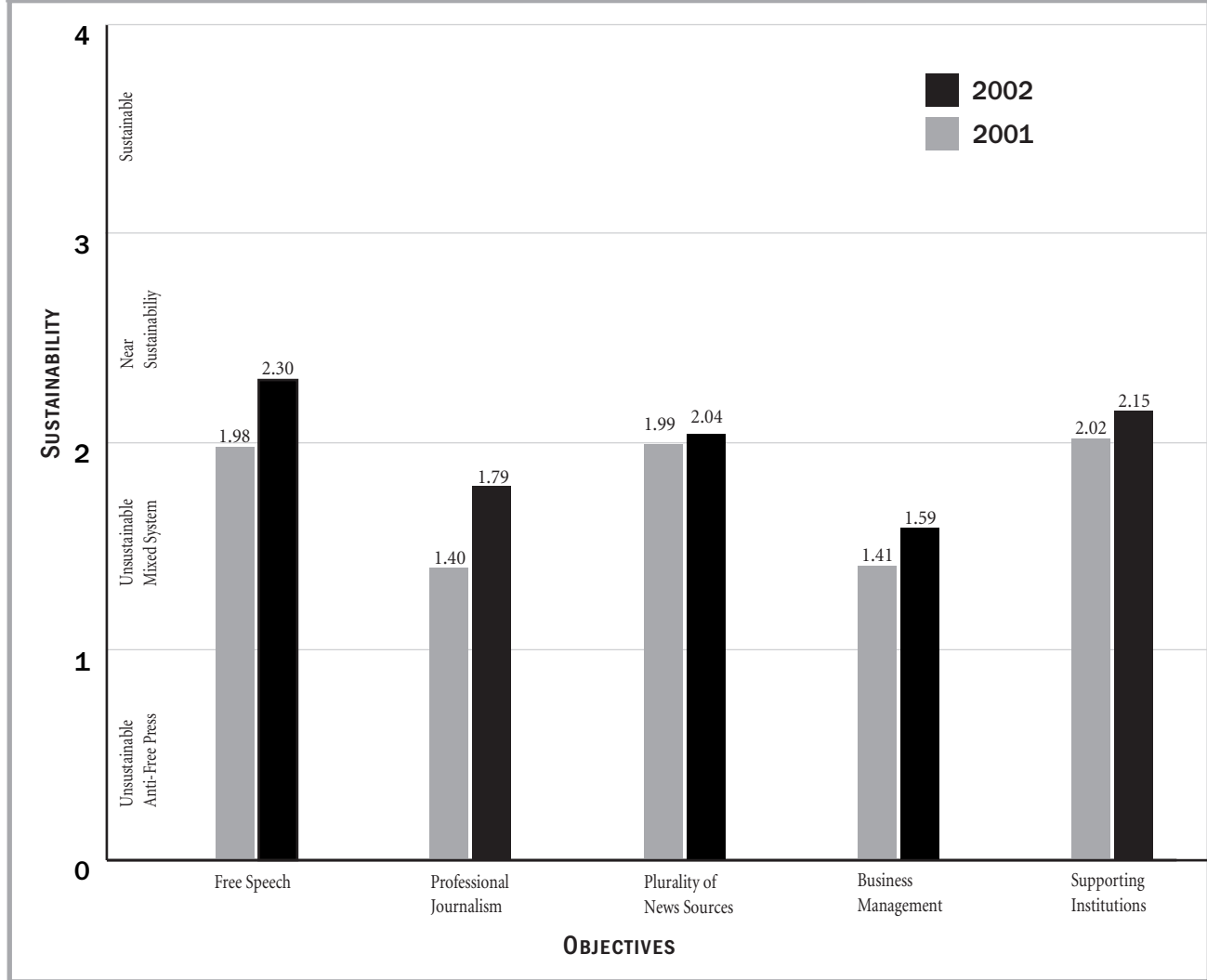
Media development may not be as bleak as some may see it. A myriad of media are available to Albanians. There are 65 television stations, not including foreign channels from Italy and other parts of Europe. There are also 35 radio stations and 19 daily newspapers. The main problem, however, lies with the quality and not the quantity of media coverage. Overall, there are too many outlets for a country of fewer than 3.5 million people. The publishing community is controlled by a few oligarchs, most of whom set their own agendas when it comes to what information is printed, and how it is printed. For the most part, the print media are divided along party lines. As a result, opposing parties are often targeted in the newspapers, but the accusations are rarely supported by facts.

We know that some media are favored, so there is no equality to the access to information.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

Albania Objective Score: 2.30/4.0—Albanian journalists work with a loose interpretation of free speech. If there are no facts, they often make them up. This is especially true in the print industry because most newspapers are divided along party lines. Political parties openly support some of the media outlets. It is not unusual for a high party official to be the primary financier of a newspaper. In the past year, the former minister of finance, who left office following accusations of corruption, has begun to publish his own daily. The party-affiliated papers often print headlines accusing their opposition of corruption and abuse of power. Articles often target party leaders as a means to discredit the leadership of the major parties.

ALBANIA—MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX



OBJECTIVE SCORING

The averages of all the indicators are averaged to obtain a single, overall score for each objective. Objective scores are averaged to provide an overall score for the country. IREX interprets the overall scores as follows:

3 and above: Sustainable and free independent media

2-3: Independent media approaching sustainability

1-2: Significant progress remains to be made; society or government is not fully supportive

0-1: Country meets few indicators; government and society actively oppose change

INDICATOR SCORING

Each indicator is scored using the following system:

0 = Country does not meet indicator; government or social forces may actively oppose its implementation

1 = Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not actively oppose its implementation, but business environment may not support it and government or profession do not fully and actively support change

2 = Country has begun to meet many aspects of the indicator, but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces

3 = Country meets most aspects of the indicator; implementation of the indicator has occurred over several years and/or through changes in government, indicating likely sustainability

4 = Country meets the aspects of the indicator; implementation has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion, and/or changing social conventions

The public's tendency to ignore reported scandals has led to the decline of daily news circulation. The public views the publishers as promoters of their particular party line. Public disinterest, however, has not stopped the supporters of politicians from publishing a vast array of newspapers and propaganda.

Only one libel lawsuit has been brought before the judges in 2002, and the claimant was vindicated. The journalist involved was fined quite heavily but was not given a prison sentence. Jail time for those convicted of libel had occurred in past years.

The broadcast regulatory body, the National Council on Radio and Television (NCRT), is controlled by the party in power and has no members representing the primary opposition parties. The Union for Victory, the coalition of opposition parties, chose not to participate in the NCRT when it was first formed. Now lacking a voice in determining broadcast regulatory issues, the Union is regretting that decision. The NCRT has the power to grant broadcast licenses but seemingly does not have the ability to reject an application. There are currently 65 television operators, three of which have national licenses (including the state broadcaster). There are 35 radio broadcasters, but only three possess national licenses. All of these media outlets exist in a country of fewer than 3.5 million people.

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.	
Free Speech Indicators	Legal/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 the offended party must prove falsity and malice.
	Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
	Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
	Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

In 1999, when the parliament arbitrarily decided not to limit national licenses, nine station operators decided to build out their signal coverage beyond their local licensing areas. This build-out has led to widespread interference among broadcasters. The NCRT has recently completed a frequency mapping project in an effort to develop a nationwide frequency plan and eliminate areas of interference.

The state broadcaster, Radio/Television Shqipëtare (RTSH), is also controlled by the party in power, primarily through the minister of culture. Although the minister herself is hardly seen, her influence can be detected in each newscast. The director general of RTSH was replaced recently due to corruption charges, but the current director was appointed after political pressure was exerted on the selection committee.

There is no enforced code of ethics for Albanian journalists. Self-regulation also has not yet taken hold in the media sector.

The Media Sustainability Index (MSI) panel was largely divided along party and professional (journalists vs. politicians) lines regarding legal rights for journalists. The Socialist panelist stated that the media laws in place were the most liberal in Europe. The Democratic representative argued that these laws were not implemented. The journalists tended to agree with the Democratic party member. Access to information is guaranteed under law, but actually obtaining information is very difficult. The journalists on the panel said that if they were not informed, the public could not be informed. The politicians argued that although the system is not perfect, it does not give journalists the right to invent facts. Another problem is that the government ministries do not efficiently provide information, either by design or ignorance. Access to information is haphazard at best. All of the panelists mentioned that the system in place simply does not work. According to one panel member, it can take a journalist "six months to research the legislation relating to an issue." According to another panelist, "We know that some media are favored, so there is no equality to the access to information."

There was a wide divergence among the panelists when it came to the question of free speech. Two representatives from the Parliamentary Commission on Mass Media—one from the party in power and the other from the opposition—clashed on the issue of protections for journalists. The Socialist representative stated that the press was treated equally, but the opposition member disagreed.

Contention arose when the question of whether to prosecute media infractions according to the penal code or the civil code surfaced. Albania, along with Romania, Montenegro, and Serbia, use the penal code to harness the media, against the statutes of the European Union. To this point, the Albanian parliament has not seen fit to change the situation.

The licensing issue generated intense debate among the participants. According to the original law on electronic media, only two private licenses were to be issued. However, the parliament overturned that edict in 2000 and decided there should be no limitation on the number of national licenses. Therefore, applicants previously denied national coverage extended their signals beyond their licensed areas. The stations did so illegally because the parliament had frozen the issuing of licenses. The former president of Albania once mentioned that the “score was three to zero” when it came to national licenses. This essentially means that the party in power controls the three national licenses and that the opposition has no national voice. This comment rings true because the three national television broadcasters—TV KLAN, TV Arberia, and state-run TVSH—all tend to favor the ruling party. However, each of these stations has proven to be somewhat unbiased in its reporting. Each has criticized the current administration when circumstances warranted it. Of course, the opposition still believes itself to be the victim of state media coverage.

The consensus among the panelists was that entry into the Albanian media industry was no different from any other industry in the country. This is true in that there are too many broadcasters operating in Albania. It is not economically feasible to have 65 television stations and 35 radio stations. It is clear that the broadcast market is unsustainable when one considers that the country’s total advertising revenue is between \$5 million and \$8 million per year. In comparison, broadcast revenues in Bulgaria exceed \$40 million.

According to the panelists, the public broadcaster receives no special privileges, except for exclusive rights to some cultural programs. However, some critics believe that it operates in much the same way as the private broadcasters, except that it receives advertising revenue and supplementary funding from the state budget. The programming that the state channel offers is similar to that of the private broadcasters, and the advertising rates are comparable to the independent stations. The state broadcaster also airs the same amount of pirated programs. During the 2001 election period,

it was officially cited for bias along with several of the private stations.

It was agreed that it was not at all difficult to become a journalist in Albania. One of the panelists commented that it was easier to become a journalist than a police officer.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Albania Objective Score: 1.79/4.0—Albanian journalists follow no particular criteria when it comes to reporting. Many are more concerned with “filling the page” than they are with the actual content of what they write. This trend is most evident in the newspapers. Broadcast reporting has different standards due to time restrictions, but generally fair and objective journalism is not commonplace. The media are controlled by editors and publishers who cater to politicians’ needs. In order to keep their jobs, journalists tend to follow their employers’ orders.

Self-censorship among the media seems to be prevalent throughout the industry. One of the panel participants gave the following example: “I personally know journalists who ask their chief editors whom they have to attack in the press each day. This is self-censorship.”

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).

For the most part, television stations in the capital city are models of modern technology. Private stations, in particular, have made major investments in equipment and software. The public broadcaster, on the other hand, relies on foreign aid to upgrade its facility. The country's most modern station, Top Channel, could easily compete with most mid-market US television broadcasters, both in technology and in quality of self-produced programming. Some of the other stations have ignored staffing requirements, while investing heavily in technical infrastructure. Albanian broadcasters are often more concerned with their outward appearance than with their internal capacities.

Outside Tirana, the state of regional broadcast outlets is very poor. Most regional stations operate from a two-room apartment, use primitive equipment, and air programming stolen from the satellite. Their primary advertising is done by airing personal messages. Local stations suffer from a lack of expertise and a dearth of ethical standards. These regional broadcasters face the same demise suffered by the locally printed newspapers—extinction. As with the print industry, broadcast information is becoming increasingly concentrated in Tirana.

The news industry has yet to discover the importance of niche reporting as a means of sustaining itself. An international donor provided one of the Albanian daily newspapers with funding and expertise in the development of a cultural supplement. Two inserts were published over two weeks, and the resulting increase in circulation indicated that the inserts were popular. However, the publisher decided that the experiment took too much time away from the daily workload of his reporters, and the project was discontinued.

The Tirana broadcasters do produce specialized reporting, but it tends to be mostly talk shows that do not feature live debates. One of the television stations uses this specialized programming in its ongoing campaign against the NCRT, the industry's regulatory body.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Albania Objective Score: 2.04/4.0—The word “plurality” has different meanings among the MSI panel participants. As one panelist said, “We don't have an independent media yet, but we have a pluralist media—18 daily newspapers. These newspapers present opinions ranging from one extreme to another.” Another panelist replied, “There are so many opinions that it is difficult

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.

to find the truth.” These comments represent one of the main problems within the print community. Information is based on opinion rather than fact. Because journalists are required to fill a certain number of pages per day, there is no time for proper background research. Journalists have been known to report news that is based partly on rumor or hearsay. They then fabricate stories to reinforce their editors' or publishers' agendas.

The Albanian Media Institute provides Internet service to journalists so that they may have access to foreign press. However, unless the journalists understand English, Italian, or French, the Internet resources are limited. Aside from the Balkan News Service, there are no foreign news services available in the Albanian language.

Some of the stations in Tirana subscribe to foreign services such as Reuters or Associated Press Television News (APTN), while others resort to pirating material from EuroNews. These stations then incorporate the “lifts” into their own news programs.

Television has become the primary source of information for those living outside Tirana. Poor newspaper distribution is the primary cause of this phenomenon. Dailies are printed overnight in Tirana and then trucked to the regions. The papers often arrive very late in the day and are not available until after the first televised newscasts.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Albania Objective Score: 1.59/4.0—Few media outlets are able to sustain themselves financially through their own business practices. Media owners who are involved in other businesses subsidize some of the larger television stations in Albania. For example, TV KLAN is owned by the ADA group, which publishes the *Corriere* newspaper. ADA also operates

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.

the *Klan* weekly magazine in addition to ADA Air. A businessman who represents the local lottery owns TV Arberia. Top Channel is owned by the distributor of a very popular coffee. The current minister of agriculture recently bought one of the smaller television stations. The smaller stations rely on donations from political sponsors and associated business colleagues. The advertising industry is poorly developed, and few businesspeople turn to ad agencies for help. Indeed, selling advertising in Albania consists of taking an order, but the art of actively selling ads is not common practice. Overall, there are too many media outlets and too few advertising dollars being spent. The advertising pool of \$5 million to \$8 million just does not go far enough to sustain the 65 television stations, 35 radio stations, and 19 dailies.

Media funding comes from varied sources. The government has a tendency to advertise state-operated organizations (state power and telephone companies) in

media outlets that support the government. Some media observers believe that stations have been approached by businesses with funding offers in exchange for positive media coverage of those businesses.

Market research is a relatively new phenomenon in the media. Last year, a local statistical organization adapted a Nielsen template to gauge the Albanian media scene. The Institute of Statistics and Opinions (ISO), the provider of the ratings, used a 28-day viewing diary to measure the viewing habits of more than three thousand people. The same group replicated the ratings system again this year.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Albania Objective Score: 2.15/4.0—There are trade associations for the media, but none of them function for the benefit of their members. The publishers are far from a cohesive group, as competition precludes cooperation. The broadcasters are represented by no fewer than five different associations. However, each association has its own agenda, which is usually politically influenced. Overall, media outlets tend to view their competitors as the enemy rather than as potential collaborators.

Albanian journalists are now struggling to form a labor union. The basic goal is to develop a national contract that will cover everyone in the media industry. Journalists now have no rights at all, as few work with a personal services contract. Journalists' employment

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 private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
	Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

is completely at the will of the employers. The Ministry of Labor does require contracts, but few media outlets insist on them.

There is one nongovernmental organization in Albania that supports the media, but its longevity is currently in jeopardy. The Albanian Media Institute (AMI) provides Internet and professional media training to journalism students in Tirana. The AMI receives limited funding from a number of international organizations, but not enough to maintain its much-needed presence on the media scene.

The University of Tirana has a journalism pro-

gram that theoretically provides a four-year course for an average of 40 students each year. In the past it has been less than sufficient in providing a quality education. The university has attempted to partner with the University of Missouri School of Journalism, but this collaboration has yet to be established. One of the primary problems with the University of Tirana program is that the faculty itself lacks media experience. For the most part, the instructors are theoreticians with little practical experience. In general, the students lack motivation, resources, and the proper environment in which to receive an education.

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