

MEDIA

SUSTAINABILITY INDEX—

MIDDLE EAST AND

NORTH AFRICA



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2005

The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in the Middle East and North Africa

www.irex.org/msi

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Printer: Kirby Lithographics Inc.

Acknowledgment: This publication was made possible through support provided by UNESCO, the United States Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under Cooperative Agreement No. #DFD-A-00-05-00243 (MSI-MENA) via a Task Order by the Academy for Educational Development.

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ISSN 1546-0878

USAID

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an independent agency that provides economic, development, and humanitarian assistance around the world in support of the foreign-policy goals of the United States. The agency works to support long-term and sustainable economic growth and advances US foreign-policy objectives by supporting economic growth, agriculture, and trade; global health; and democracy, conflict prevention, and humanitarian assistance.

USAID provides assistance in four regions of the world: Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia and the Near East; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Europe and Eurasia.

With headquarters in Washington, DC, USAID's strength is its field offices around the world. They work in close partnership with private voluntary organizations, indigenous organizations, universities, American businesses, international agencies, other governments, and other US government agencies. USAID has working relationships with more than 3,500 American companies and over 300 US-based private voluntary organizations.

MEPI

The United States Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative provides tangible support to reformers in the Middle East and North Africa so democracy can spread, education can thrive, economies can grow, and women can be empowered. In four years, this presidential initiative has devoted \$293 million to more than 350 programs in 15 countries and the Palestinian territories to support the aspirations of those working to build a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Examples of the initiative's work includes campaign schools, independent media training, civic education, entrepreneurship skill building, youth leadership development, trade transparency promotion, business hubs for women, and judicial and legal reform training.

UNESCO

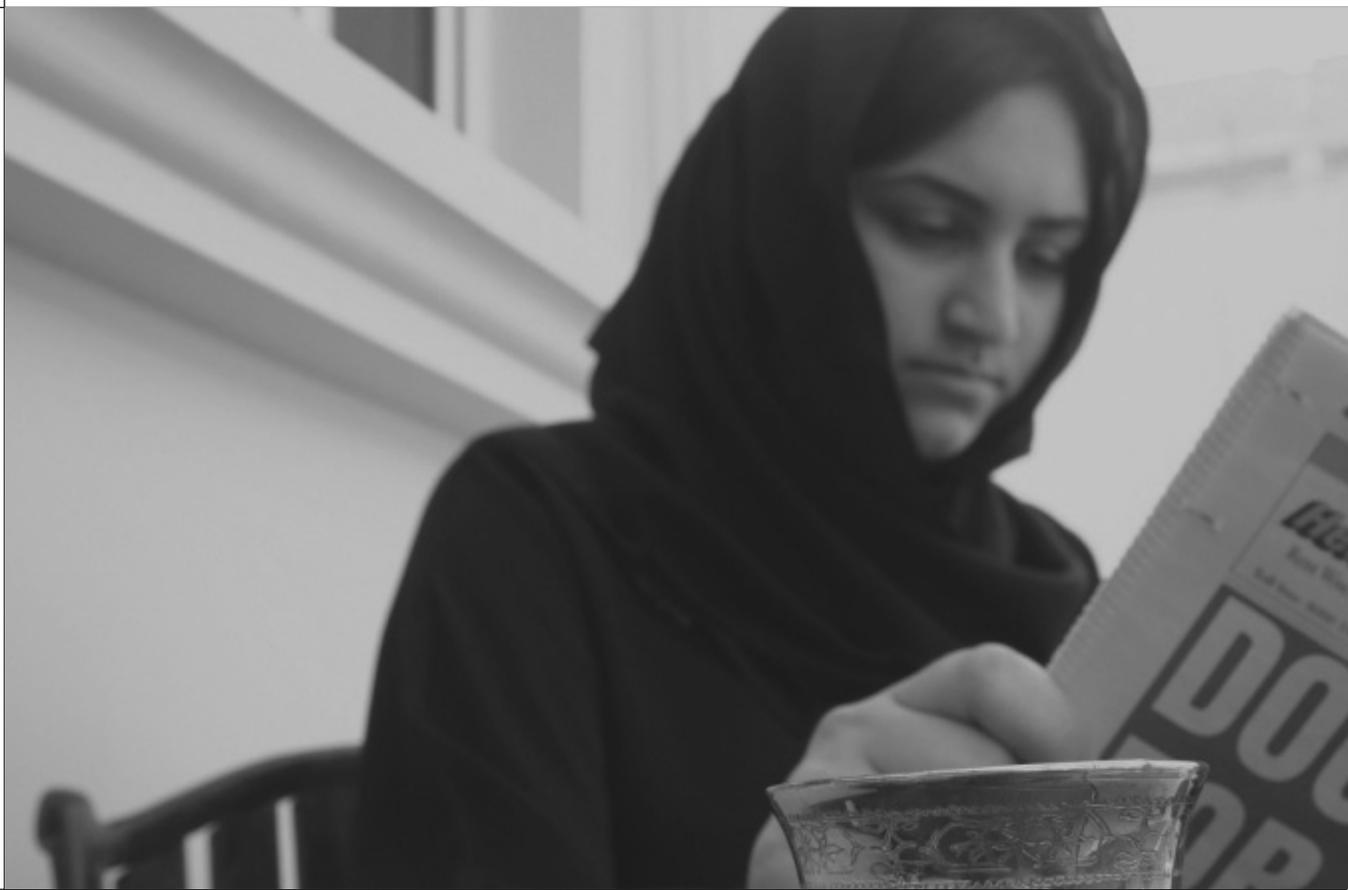
UNESCO, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, maintains a Communication and Information (CI) sector that is guided by the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press as basic human rights. Since 2003, the CI sector has supported the Iraqi people in their transition to democracy. Among other projects, UNESCO facilitated initiatives to develop a national media policy and provided practical guidance for journalists and civil society prior to the elections. Training and networking opportunities were made available to more than 550 media workers and professionals.

IREX

IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.

Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of \$50 million and a staff of over 500 professionals worldwide. IREX and its partner IREX Europe deliver cross-cutting programs and consulting expertise in more than 50 countries.

THE PANEL CONCLUDED THAT BAHRAIN SEEMED TO BE STRIVING TO LEAD REFORM EFFORTS IN THE GULF, BUT WAS LAGGING IN ACHIEVING ASPECTS OF ITS OBJECTIVE.

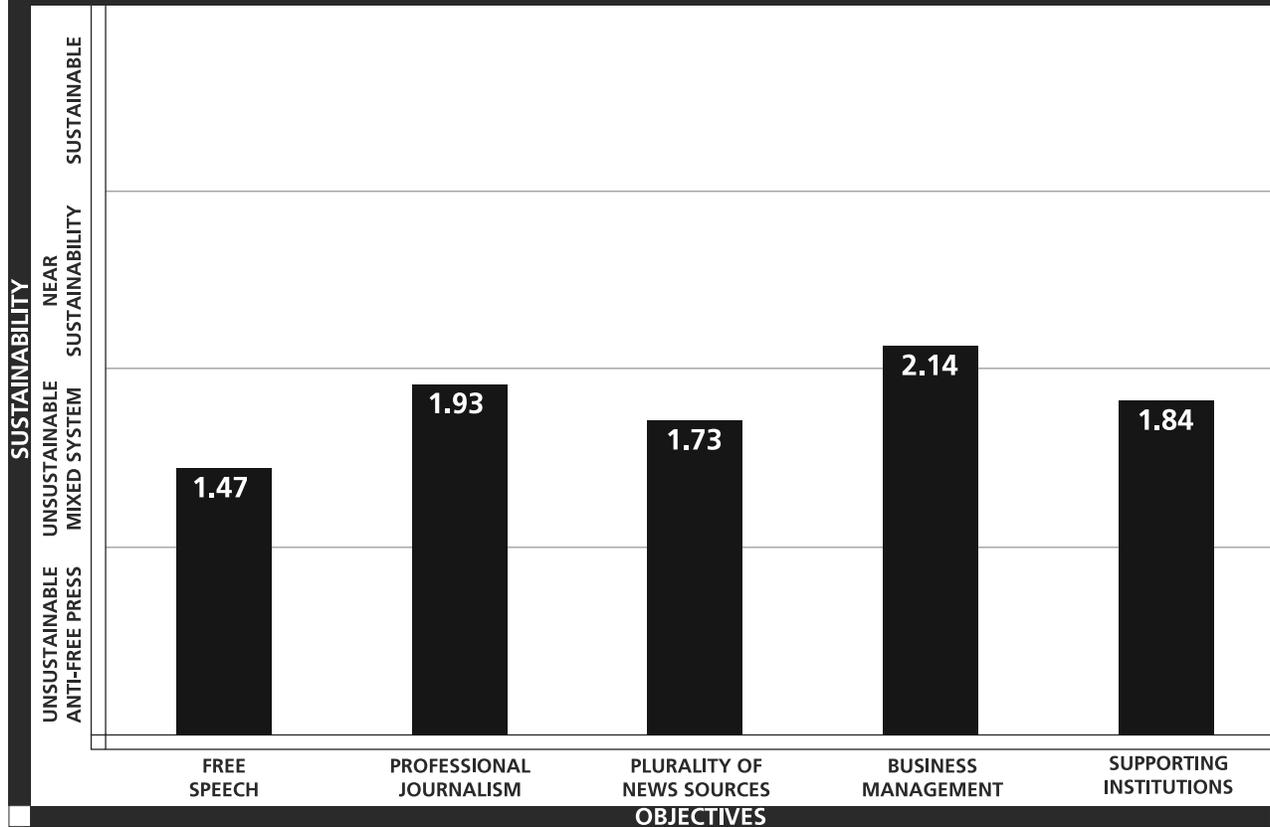


Although Bahrain is the smallest Arab country in size, it is one of the most active in terms of the media. Reform of Bahrain's media laws continued during 2005, part of the democratization efforts that started with the adoption of a new Constitution in 2002 reinstating a legislative body with one elected chamber. There were setbacks to press freedom in 2005 as well, however. Three moderators of online media outlets were detained for two weeks in March, part of a broader crackdown on the online sector. Cases of revoking licenses, pressure on correspondents, and interference with editorial policy were also reported, raising questions among some members of the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) panel about whether the government was seriously committed to progressive reforms in the media sector.

The panel concluded that Bahrain seemed to be striving to lead reform efforts in the Gulf, but was lagging in achieving aspects of its objective. There was consensus about the need to move forward along the path laid out by King Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa but concerns that some conservative elements in the country are holding back these reforms. Panelists noted that Bahrain is unique among its Gulf neighbors in having a diverse community with varied sectarian and religious affiliations, making its reform efforts even more challenging compared with other Arab countries. Some panelists suggested that the conflicting interests of various political groups constituted a serious hurdle because the media increasingly have been manipulated by different parties for political goals.

The MSI panelists gave Bahrain's media sector an overall ranking of 1.82, indicating it was approaching the first stages of sustainability. Its strongest feature, in the view of the panel, is the management of its media businesses, and the professionalism of journalists also was considered relatively strong. The weakest aspect was the country's media law and its overall free-speech environment, according to the assessment.

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BAHRAIN



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: FREE SPEECH

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.47 / 4.00

Although Bahrain's new Constitution, endorsed in a 2002 referendum, mentioned the right to free speech, the MSI panelists said that the infamous press law, No. 47, of 2002 discouraged this freedom and clearly contradicted the Constitution. Cases of prosecution, detention, expelling of journalists from their posts, and interference with editorial policies all have been linked to this law, and combined to dampen the willingness of journalists to put forward dissenting views regarding the government. However, there are now efforts to reform the law so that it enhances freedom of speech. Private print media can be licensed with relative ease, but broadcast continues in government hands. Because libel remained a criminal offense punishable with imprisonment according to the law, self-censorship was high in 2005.

Some panelists noted preferential treatment in favor of media that are seen as loyal to the regime. Even

though satellite and radio transmission is open to the public, information obtained from the Internet remained relatively restricted, and complicated proxy filtering mechanisms have been applied to block many politically oriented websites. Among the hot issues debated by the MSI panel was the licensing of journalists, particularly correspondents of foreign media. Panelists agreed that the government interferes with the appointment of correspondents. One of the panelists was himself exposed to such treatment when he was removed from his post in 2005 as a Bahrain correspondent for a pan-Arab daily. Overall, the panel was dissatisfied with the degree of free speech possible in Bahrain, and this objective received the lowest MSI score for 2005: 1.47.

Panelists unanimously agreed that the 2002 press law was the biggest obstacle to legal protection. When the law was drafted, it was fiercely rejected by journalists and human-rights activists. Reacting to the strong opposition, the government claimed that it had "frozen" the law. But panelists noted that the government continued to apply it quietly to prosecute journalists and constrain press freedom.

Abdullah A. Yateem, assistant undersecretary for press and publications at the Ministry of Information, acknowledged the growing concern over the 2002 press law and said reform efforts initiated by King Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa have set the stage for revisions to remove or change articles that were deemed incompatible with freedom of expression. "After demands were made by the journalism community, a decision was reached to apply changes to the 2002 press law to strengthen press freedom in Bahrain," the official said in an interview. "For example, during his last meeting with journalists, His Majesty the King supported an initiative to abolish the imprisonment sentence against journalists." The official said that consultations on removing some restrictions in the law were held with the Bahrain Journalists Association and newspaper editors-in-chief, and a ministerial committee was formed to discuss the changes before a draft was submitted to the parliament in 2005.

In addition to the government draft law, which remained before the parliament in early 2006, the Shura Council of Bahrain also drafted and presented to the parliament its own version. MSI panelist Ebrahim Bashmi, a Shura Council member who spearheaded the alternative law drafting during 2005, acknowledged that it still did not meet many journalists' aspirations despite extensive consultations and debate. He noted that the Shura Council version replaced prison penalties

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.

for libel with fines, with the exception of offenses against religion or the royal family.

Some panelists were skeptical about the new law. Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, a freedom-of-expression activist and the founder and president of the now-dissolved Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was quite pessimistic about the result from the parliament deliberations. "Because of the overwhelming majority in the parliament, the draft law that is presented by the government will be the one that is passed," Abdulhadi

"However, one needs to understand that there are strong blocs in the parliament that are conservative and demand limiting the freedom of expression," Abdul Nabi Salman said.

Al Khawaja said. Panelist Abdul Nabi Salman, a parliament member, said many members of parliament (MPs) were serious about adopting a law that is better for the journalism community, regardless of

whether it came from the government or the Shura Council. "However, one needs to understand that there are strong blocs in the parliament that are conservative and demand limiting the freedom of expression," Abdul Nabi Salman said. "They do not represent the government but are in fact less tolerant to the free press and are not only insisting on keeping the prison sentence, but some are asking for more severe punishments despite the King's vision in abolishing such penalties."

All broadcast media outlets are owned and strictly controlled by the government. However, a special draft law regulating the licensing of private television and radio channels was endorsed by the Shura Council in 2004 and submitted to the parliament for consideration. No timetable was set for consideration, and there were no guarantees that it would be approved. However, in August the government declared it would eliminate the Information Ministry and replace it with the Bahrain Radio and Television Commission, which would be a new regulatory commission for the media. This measure was expected to take effect in 2006. Some viewed this as a step toward the potential introduction of a law allowing establishment of private broadcast media.

Panelists said no profit taxes were imposed on media institutions in Bahrain. There are some nominal fees that are considered insignificant compared with the media's market productivity.

MSI panelists agreed that there were no significant crimes committed against Bahraini journalists in 2005 and therefore no opportunities to measure the reaction of the authorities. Overall, such crimes are extremely rare, and panelists said authorities usually act swiftly to prosecute perpetrators of any that do occur.

Journalists are accountable to their editors, media owners, and to the government, and the fact that the press law penalizes journalists based on 17 categories of offenses makes securing editorial independence virtually impossible in many cases. Based on the 2002 press law, offenses "against the Islamic faith, the unity of the people, and the person of the king" and "inciting division or sectarianism" are punishable by prison sentences of six months to five years.

Although newspapers and magazines have started publishing moderately critical views of government policy, they are far behind the progressive and rapidly expanding online media community. In fact, panelists noted that many of the legal battles in the media scene in 2005 involved online publishing. "Ironically, the old press law did not include electronic media. But when the term 'electronic media' was inserted into the 2002 press law, this gave the authorities capacity to control electronic media without clear constraints," said activist Abdulhadi Al Khawaja. "I believe this is unprecedented and constitutes one of the serious breaches of freedom of expression in Bahrain."

Panelists said online media's influence is growing in Bahrain, where Internet use is relatively high compared with many other Arab countries. The number of Internet users in 2005 was estimated to be more than 150,000, over 20 percent of the population. Panelist Ali Abdulemam, the moderator of the discussion forum www.bahrainonline.org, was arrested and held by security services in 2005. He was subject to five charges based on the press law of 2002, including defaming the king, inciting hatred against the regime, publishing information to undermine the country's security, and violating the press and communications laws. Based on those charges, Ali Abdulemam was kept in detention for two weeks with his assistants, Mohammed Almosawi and Hussain Yousif. They eventually were released without bail, but the case was not closed. Furthermore, five websites, some of them run by the opposition, were blocked by the government in early 2005 for allegedly publishing "dubious information, rumors, and lies."

Libel is a criminal offense, panelist Abdulhadi Al Khawaja said. "Those who are found in violation of the press law in defamation or libel for a story they wrote or an opinion they reflected may be exposed

to imprisonment based on the current law," he said. However, defaming the royal family in particular is serious to the degree that even the two revised draft press laws keep the prison punishment against offenders intact while removing it for all other offenses, except those against Islam.

A defamation lawsuit filed in February against www.bahrainonline.org, the largest and most controversial Bahraini forum of its kind, was discussed extensively during the MSI assessment. The website's moderator, Ali Abdulemam, said his site did not allow or encourage defamation against anyone, but the nature of the Internet makes it impossible to monitor data sent live from around the world. "I tried to explain to the court that as a moderate, I cannot control what comes on the website until I access and remove any defamation content. I should not be prosecuted for something submitted by a member online simply because I am the website's moderator," Ali Abdulemam said. "We cannot accept the labeling or insulting of any personality regardless of his or her position. But again, in such live online discussions, this is something that we cannot control, and the government needs to understand this." He complained that the government suspended his Internet Service Provider account, and said: "Whenever I would like to help resolve such issues, I find the government standing in my way and preventing me from accessing the Internet."

Abdulhadi Al Khawaja agreed that based on the current press law, "it is a criminal offense" to allow content considered defamatory to be viewed by Bahraini citizens, adding that journalists were prosecuted for alleged defamation of public figures in 2005. Panelist Ebrahim Bashmi said that there were some cases filed against newspapers and journalists for libel. "It is the citizens' right to refer to the judiciary if their interests were harmed by the media," he said.

Panelist Mohamed Fadhel said that generally most lawsuits filed by the government in recent years dealt with news stories because opinion articles are usually heavily self-censored. He added that some news stories that dealt with facts and were accurate nonetheless were viewed by officials as defamation cases because they exposed their names to the public. He mentioned the trial of Radhi Al Mousawi, editor-in-chief of *The Democrat*, a newsletter published by the National Democratic Action Society, and described it as "a classical example of defamation lawsuits that could be filed against journalists in Bahrain." Mohamed Fadhel said Radhi Al Mousawi wrote a news report accusing an unnamed tourism inspector of corruption and providing evidence to support that in his story. The High Criminal

Court charged Radhi Al Mousawi with defamation in September 2003.

Panelists agreed that public information is mostly not readily available and the right to access information is not guaranteed for journalists in Bahrain. Part of the problem is the degree of secrecy that the government maintains and the lack of transparency regarding governmental activities.

There were no clear restrictions in Bahrain on international news networks and other news sources. But there were cases of censorship

of publications arriving from abroad by post and also by freight, partially due, panelists suggested, to the conservative nature of the society. The Internet has made it possible for journalists to gain the required information directly, although there are a number of politically oriented websites that are being filtered by the government for their potential to damage the country's "national interests."

Although journalists can apply for licenses and practice journalism freely in Bahrain, restrictions start to emerge after they produce their work, which is usually monitored by the authorities. Panelists complained of interference by the authorities, particularly for correspondents of international media working in Bahrain. Panelist Mahdi Rabea, who used to work as a correspondent for London-based pan-Arab *Al-Hayat* newspaper, said he was officially summoned by the Ministry of Information in March 2005 and a short while later had his license revoked. "The official at the Ministry told me that the Minister of Information was upset, and that I was not cooperating with the Ministry and did not implement orders given by the Minister," Mahdi Rabea said. He sent a response saying that he and *Al-Hayat* "are not to be given orders." "The Minister told me in February that *Al-Hayat* continues to write about Sunnis and Shiites in Bahrain, and this apparently was not to his liking. So he requested that we remove those labels from any article on Bahrain." Mahdi Rabea said. "The government then exerted tremendous pressure and succeeded in removing me from my post as the correspondent for *Al-Hayat*," he added, noting that the government wanted a "submissive" person to do the Ministry's bidding. "In April, I got a call from my editor-in-chief saying that the Bahraini authorities requested that I be replaced

"The challenge is to maintain balance between your role as a journalist and an activist," Ebrahim Bashmi commented.

and will not give me a working permit. I remain unsure, however, of the real motive.” Mahdi Rabea now works for *Al-Ayam* daily newspaper in Manama.

Panelist and journalist Jawad Abdul Wahab also alleged that he was forcibly removed from his post as correspondent for the pan-Arab *Elaph* news network. He said the authorities directly interfere in the selection process of Bahrain correspondents for foreign media. “In fact, in my case the government invited the publisher of *Elaph* and hosted him in Bahrain, apparently to convince him to replace me with another, more obedient correspondent,” Jawad Abdul Wahab said.

Ebrahim Bashmi said such issues may arise if the journalist in question is affiliated with a political body. “The challenge is to maintain balance between your role as a journalist and an activist,” Ebrahim Bashmi commented. MP Abdul Nabi Salman noted that this may not be a governmental policy but could be an individual decision in the ministry. “The issue with Jawad took place in a time of transition, as a minister left and another came in. Instead of improving on conditions of the press with the new minister, things became worse,” Salman said, noting that this situation should not be generalized.

Activist Abdulhadi Al Khawaja said the government controls the appointment of correspondents of foreign media, adding that the government may go to the level of changing non-Bahraini correspondents. The US Department of State Human Rights report for 2005 mentioned that a correspondent was threatened with the revoking of his license when officials read a draft report about an activity the government deemed illegal. Another foreign correspondent reporting about military service was exposed to similar pressure. Both correspondents had to cancel their stories to remain in their posts, panelists said.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.93 / 4.00

Panelists agreed that journalism in Bahrain does not meet international professional standards. Within the media establishment, there are constraints that prevent journalists from raising their skills, and one panelist went as far as claiming that the tradition of professional journalism in Bahrain is simply “nonexistent.” There are no standard codes of ethics, and self-censorship was described by a panelist as “routine” in Bahraini media. The low pay for journalists also contributed to corruption, as journalists frequently receive gifts to cover stories. Panelists said that private media have been

giving too much coverage to government propaganda and less to other important issues that relate on the needs of the society. But panelists also agreed that technical capabilities of Bahraini media are high and match international standards.

The issue of professional qualifications and training for Bahraini journalists is quite pressing, panelist Ebrahim Bashmi said. “We have an increasing number of journalists in Bahrain but below professional standards due to the lack of training and development in the media sector,” he said. Financial pressure also affects the editorial independence of some newspapers. An example given by panelist Ali Abdulemam concerned an editor-in-chief who stopped covering a certain story about public education because the then–Minister of Education suspended subscriptions to the newspaper at all educational institutions and hence deprived the newspaper of an essential source of income. “The editor-in-chief had to yield to pressure, demonstrating how vulnerable newspapers may be in Bahrain,” Ali Abdulemam said.

Part of the difficulty in establishing ethical standards stems from the lack of consensus on a central body that journalists would agree on to start the process, panelists said. Ebrahim Bashmi said the Bahrain Journalists Association is not as active as journalists would wish it to be and may be transformed into a syndicate. “The profession of journalism in Bahrain is

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).

increasingly viewed as a mere source of income rather than a noble profession to get the truth to the public," he said.

Abdulhadi Al Khawaja noted that journalists usually blame the lack of professional media for the lawsuits filed against newspapers and journalists. "In reality, it is journalists themselves who need to take the initiative and draft their own code of ethics and hence prevent the authorities from using the lack of such a code against them," he argued.

Due to the strict control of the government over media, particularly television and radio, there is a very high level of self-censorship among journalists. The fact that the 2002 press law remains the mechanism to regulate journalism means very few reporters have the courage to cross the red lines. Hence, there are very few lawsuit cases against journalists, especially compared with other Arab countries such as Yemen and Egypt. The case of Radhi Al Mousawi, who found that having documents supporting the validity of his story did not save him from being charged with defamation, served to perpetuate self-censorship by journalists who do not want to find themselves in similar positions, panelists noted.

Bahraini reporters tend to cover issues and events selected based on the policy of their newspapers and have little freedom to report on matters not approved by the top editors. Ali Abdulemam said newspaper publishers or editors-in-chief usually take control of the newspaper's policy and decide for journalists what is news and what is not. "For whatever personal, commercial, or social reasons, editors of newspapers can focus on a narrow story that may not be of interest to the public, and hence turn the whole newspaper to a private tool used to achieve certain goals," he said.

Moreover, the tradition of publishing news relating the formal activities of the government is still widely practiced in all newspapers in Bahrain. Regardless of the worth of such news for the reader, the front page of every Bahraini newspaper needs to have a story sent from the official news agency, panelists said. The reason, according to Ebrahim Bashmi, is to maintain good relations with the authorities. "If you ignore publishing their press releases and photos for some time, they would not cooperate with you and would deprive you from news in the future," he said. "Furthermore, we are a small community, and we do need all the information we could get from the government."

Panelists agreed that corruption was on the rise in the media. "This is a dangerous phenomenon spreading quickly in Bahrain: Never in the past had so many journalists been receiving funds or cash awards

from companies to write about them handsomely in newspapers," a panelist said. There has recently been a rise in salaries due to the emergence of two new dailies, *Al-Watan* and *Al-Waqt*, that offered higher salaries, forcing the rest to raise pay rates to keep staff. However, panelist Mahdi Rabea insisted that corruption of some journalists would continue regardless of the issue of salaries. "One

"The profession of journalism in Bahrain is increasingly viewed as a mere source of income rather than a noble profession to get the truth to the public," [Ebrahim Bashmi] said.

could investigate and find out that there are certain individuals in the media that accept such gifts. There are even foreign journalists who do so. But one needs not to generalize," Mahdi Rabea noted.

Entertainment content has become an essential part of newspapers to promote sales and advertising, although the panel agreed that most newspapers do have a reasonable balance with serious news. However, they noted that tense competition in Bahrain for a limited readership results in more entertainment stories because, as one panelist noted, "a newspaper that is too serious would not sell."

Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news through modern means are widely available in media outlets

"Bahrainis would like to read about local politics and can't care less about specialized programming," [Ali Abdulemam] said.

in Bahrain, panelists said. The very fact that each daily newspaper has to have capital worth more than \$3 million demonstrates that they are financially fit to purchase and provide all the technical facilities and equipment required for gathering information.

Regarding niche reporting, some panelists said Bahrain is too small to sustain a great deal of specialized reporting, although there are journalists who could produce it for regional or international media. "Specialized high-quality media production is demand-driven. So far, the demand for such material is low, but I believe it could succeed if it targets the region as a whole," Ebrahim Bashmi said.

Bahrainis like political reporting, panelist Ali Abdulemam argued. “Bahrainis would like to read about local politics and can’t care less about specialized programming,” he said. “All they want is politics. They may read political material coming from abroad, but only if it talks about Bahrain.”

In broadcast, Bahrain successfully launched the children’s television channel SpaceToon in 2000. It gained popularity and during 2005 broadcast two separate channels, one in English and the other in Arabic. However, the channel, like all other television and radio stations, remained under state control.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES
Bahrain Objective Score: 1.73 / 4.00

Various local and international media outlets are accessible and affordable in Bahrain, including broadcast, print, and the Internet. However, local news is not reflected widely in those media, and the country suffers from something of an information vacuum in that regard, MSI panelists said. They said many important issues of local concern, such as land distribution and the demographic distribution of Sunnis and Shiites in Bahraini society, are untouchable by the

“Nowadays, there are conservative groups inspecting newsstands and stores to ensure that pictures on cover pages of imported magazines do not include partial nudity, and if they find such a thing, they report it to the authorities immediately,” panelist Ebrahim Bashmi said. “It is not the government that is doing this; it is the society.”

media due to government and social restrictions. Even the Internet, thought to be the most open media, is filtered heavily by the authorities. The fact that local media do not reflect the different political and social groups in the country makes access to comprehensive and balanced journalism coverage for regular citizens

difficult. The lack of any private news agencies results in a monopoly for the state-run agency, which usually provides positive coverage approved by the authorities. The sectarian tensions in Bahraini society drive many to seek out articles that consider cultural and religious questions. Panelists said that media are slowly trying to give greater coverage to Shiite festivities and beliefs, something that was rare in the 1990s.

Bahraini citizens are able to find and purchase various types of newspapers and magazines with a variety of political and social affiliations and including a range of opinions and editorial tendencies.

By the end of 2005, there were five Arabic daily newspapers in Bahrain. According to industry estimates, *Al Ayam* had a circulation of 36,000, *Al Meethaq* had 35,000 copies, *Akhbar Al Khaleej* had 32,000 copies, and *Al Wasat* had 9,000 copies. For *Al Watan* daily, which debuted in December, it was too soon to estimate circulation numbers. Two daily newspapers publish in English—*Gulf Daily News*, which prints 11,000 copies, and *Bahrain Tribute*, with a circulation of about 13,000. Another daily, *Al-Waqt*, was expected to enter the market in early 2006.

Bahrain has an Arabic and an English radio station and a television network with five channels, all owned and operated by the Ministry of Information. Spacetoon TV is the largest pan-Arab channel broadcasting from Bahrain, although the private company that owns it, Spacetoon Media Group, is based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It transmits to over 130 million viewers in more than 22 countries throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Indonesia, and Korea.

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.

The Bahrain media's rather constrained coverage has pushed more people to seek information about the country from online outlets and forums where politically controversial opinions are more openly reflected, panelists said. The public, however, is not free to view all online media outlets and websites. The Bahraini government filters at least five political or religious websites using the legal context of the press law, the panel said. Technically, the government prevents citizens from accessing a website because it controls the single Internet Service Provider and a state-mandated Internet exchange point in the country.

The Open Net Initiative, which tracks filtering procedures of governments around the world, said that tests have shown the Bahraini government filtered at least these political websites: www.bahrainonline.org, www.bahraintimes.org, www.bahrain4u.com, www.jehad.net, and www.thekoran.com. The government can easily close down locally produced and hosted websites, and this has happened with several. But panelists noted that there will always be new websites popping up, and citizens find ways to overcome the filtering.

Although international media is accessible, movies imported to the country are usually censored before being approved to be shown. Publications that enter the country are subject to the "society's own censorship," panelists noted. "Nowadays, there are conservative groups inspecting newsstands and stores to ensure that pictures on cover pages of imported magazines do not include partial nudity, and if they find such a thing, they report it to the authorities immediately," panelist Ebrahim Bashmi said. "It is not the government that is doing this; it is the society," he affirmed. The proposed amendments to the 2002 press law include a phrase lifting censorship of such material altogether.

Additionally, although the government lifted its ban on correspondents from the Qatar-based Al Jazeera satellite television channel in 2004, it has maintained control over the selection of its correspondent in Bahrain.

Panelists were firmly agreed that state media do not reflect the views of the entire political spectrum and strictly abide by policies set by the government. When journalists from state media violate those rules, they may be expelled from their post by a governmental order, regardless of their intention. Furthermore, Ali Abdulemam said, the media are unable to serve the public interest fully because they are confined by many restrictions and unable to disclose facts and information that are considered "classified." "An employee at the Ministry of Information was penalized (administratively) because the authorities suspected that he had given

sensitive information to a member of parliament," Ali Abdulemam said.

Other restricted information includes budgets of certain governmental bodies that are not revealed to the public and not included in the yearly fiscal plan. "People want to know about the land ownership in Bahrain and how owners bought and sold to each other. There is a sealed secret chamber at the Supreme Court in Bahrain that contains all the documents concerning this issue," said Ali Abdulemam. "There is a sealed room that includes historic documents related to the heritage of the people that unveil the true origin of the population.... It is even prohibited to know how many Bahraini citizens were naturalized."

Panelist Abdul Nabi Salman suggested that media targeting the interests of each (ethnic or religious) group could be counterproductive for Bahrain because "a certain newspaper would cover a story from a specific angle and neglect all other parts of the story that do not conform to the newspaper's policy or target readership."

However, another panelist argued that Bahrain needs time to move gradually to full openness in the media. "If we rush into this now, there would be chaos, conflict, and lawsuits," he said.

So far, there are no independent news agencies that gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media. There were some efforts in 2005 to start small press offices, but they could not compete with the government Bahrain News Agency. "There are no laws that prohibit the establishment of such agencies, but there is also no law to regulate them," a panelist said, adding that establishing a news agency could be viewed as a serious threat to the delicate balance between the different social and religiously diverse groups in the country.

Although there are no private broadcasters, people have a rough understanding of who owns which print media outlets, panelists said. This has added somewhat to citizens' ability to judge the objectivity of news. However, because newspapers in Bahrain are corporations owned by private investors, it remains the task of a researcher to go to the appropriate authorities at the Ministries of Industry and Information

to retrieve the whole list of shareholders. Those who want to go to this effort can know who the owners are, a panelist said, “but they may never know their intentions in establishing those media.” Most dailies in Bahrain are owned by corporations primarily led by independent businessmen who are closely associated with the regime.

With Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Asian expatriates, and naturalized citizens from other countries, Bahrain has a diversified population with varied cultures and ethnic and religious backgrounds. Panelist Abdul Nabi Salman suggested that media targeting the interests of each group could be counterproductive for Bahrain because “a certain newspaper would cover a story from a specific angle and neglect all other parts of the story that do not conform to the newspaper’s policy or target readership.”

Panelists noted a recent trend for Bahraini newspapers to start developing along social, political, or even sectarian lines, with each focusing more on publishing what aligns well with its editorial policy and group of readers. Panelist Ali Abdulemam gave examples: “*Akhbar Al Khaleej* daily considers itself the mouthpiece of the Prime Minister, while *Al-Ayam* and *Al-Wasat* see themselves aligned with the King. A recently established newspaper, *Al-Watan*, is also supported by another supreme official body,” Ali Abdulemam said.

Ali Abdulemam argued that although the government does not have direct control or ownership of any of these influential dailies, it remains involved somewhat in guiding each outlet toward certain goals. Panelists were concerned that sectarianism in the media may have negative long-term implications if outlets are used to foment sensitivity instead of building bridges between the social groups.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
Bahrain Objective Score: 2.14 / 4.00

The Bahraini media market is relatively rich compared with other Arab countries, but it falls behind the volume of media business activity compared with Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. MSI panelists said that Bahrain’s private media in general are doing well economically, but the market is too small to have giant dailies fight over it. Advertising revenues are the major source of income for private media, and ad agencies usually bring budgets from abroad for international brands to be promoted in the local market. Because the government removed

subsidies for the private media, newspapers are working hard to design and use market research to stay ahead of the competition. In a country with a population of fewer than 700,000, newspapers have low circulation figures—but they never reveal them to the public, and panelists said there are no independent bodies to give credible statistics in this regard. The creativity newspaper managers use to run their businesses has resulted in a steadily growing media market with considerable potential, panelists said, giving this objective a score of 2.14, the highest among the five MSI objectives for Bahrain.

The market share of media in Bahrain had witnessed a steady increase in recent years, according to panelist Ebrahim Bashmi, who owns *Al-Waqt* daily, whose license was being reviewed by the Ministry of Information in 2005. Ebrahim Bashmi estimated that spending on media for last year reached about \$300 million, putting Bahrain in the fourth rank among Gulf countries in the volume of media spending. However, this is far less than what other, more developed countries are spending. “On per capita average, an amount of \$20 is allocated per Arab citizen, while an Israeli citizen is allocated about \$200 when it comes to media spending,” Ebrahim Bashmi said.

Because licensing for the establishment of a newspaper or magazine in Bahrain requires a very high deposit compared with other Arab countries, newspapers are

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.

usually properly managed and generate decent profit. Each daily newspaper needs to establish that it has a capital of about \$3 million to receive a license from the Ministry of Information. This investment needs to be recovered from the operation of the newspaper, which is usually a printing press along with other distribution and advertising services. Understanding their obligation to recover this capital, newspaper managers and owners in Bahrain apply aggressive income-generation techniques. Hence, the industry has grown in Bahrain by leaps and bounds and is considered among the strongest in the Arab world.

Panelist Ebrahim Bashmi, founder of *Al-Waqt* daily, acknowledged that finding multiple revenue sources for his newspaper was a challenge. However, he erected massive street banners and spends handsomely on advertising. “We need to find several other income-generation streams for the survival of the media in Bahrain. This could include revenues from the printing press, from holding conferences and seminars, from organizing book fairs and exhibitions.” Ebrahim Bashmi also said publishers would be well served by investing capital in external operations out of the scope of the media and using revenues from these to support the newspaper.

Ad agencies and related industries grow in the Bahrain media market as more newspapers compete to produce appealing advertising services to an increasing number of companies. “Most of the newspapers in Bahrain have advertising departments working in two levels: locally seeking advertisements directly from clients and externally through advertising agencies,” Ebrahim Bashmi said. Ad agencies usually provide newspapers with clients from other countries, and this is the most significant source of advertising, as newspapers cannot depend on local industries to provide such revenue, panelists said.

In general, newspapers in Bahrain depend heavily on advertising to meet their expenses. However, advertising is supplemented by sales and subscriptions. Panelists agreed that the market is quite competitive and that there is a need to develop more interest in the business community in advertising in the print press rather than having publishers compete for what is already available. “We need to enlarge the cake that we will split,” a panelist said.

In the past, the government paid newspapers sums every December on the occasion of the national anniversary of the country, technically in return for publishing reports on the achievements of the government during the year, panelists said. Now, however, that practice has stopped, and the reports are published for free.

Research and strategic planning are generally done regularly by larger newspapers in Bahrain. It is their policy to market their newspapers’ services aggressively to increase sales and generate revenues. Several newspapers have developed marketing promotions to enhance their income, including producing supplements and sponsoring raffles and other types of contests.

Circulation and distribution numbers in Bahrain are never revealed to the public, panelists said. There is no agency in Bahrain that monitors or reports circulation numbers. Newspaper owners consider such information as business secrets and work hard to maintain confidentiality within the newspaper or between the newspaper and the printing press. “The claims that some newspapers print 30,000 or 40,000 copies per edition, I believe, are not accurate,” Ebrahim Bashmi said. “My estimate of the circulation number of newspapers in Bahrain ranges from 5,000 to 15,000 copies per edition.”

Panelist Ebrahim Bashmi, founder of Al-Waqt daily, acknowledged that finding multiple revenue sources for his newspaper was a challenge. However, he erected massive street banners and spends handsomely on advertising. “We need to find several other income-generation streams for the survival of the media in Bahrain. This could include revenues from the printing press, from holding conferences and seminars, from organizing book fairs and exhibitions.”

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.84 / 4.00

Panelists agreed that institutions to support media in Bahrain are almost nonexistent. No group represents the interests of media owners. The only professional association that defends journalists is the recently established Bahrain Journalists Association (BJA), but panelists said its activities do not yet meet expectations. Academic programs and short-term training activities do exist, but they are below the standards required to develop significantly the media sector’s professionalism. The small geographical area of Bahrain makes newspapers and magazines easy to distribute, reaching the public in the early morning hours. Printing services

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.

and production materials such as paper and ink are widely available in the market at competitive prices.

There are no associations that promote the private media in Bahrain. All newspapers in the country are by default commercial enterprises, as they have to apply for a license at the Ministry of Industry. Each has its individual concerns and policies and takes its own path toward achieving its goals. Newspapers in Bahrain rarely hold joint activities. "Each newspaper is concerned about itself and no one else," panelist Ebrahim Bashmi said.

"Each newspaper is concerned about itself and no one else," panelist Ebrahim Bashmi said.

The only professional association that has anything to do with media is the BJA, which was established in

September 2000. The aim of the association is to ensure journalistic freedom, provide legal protection and consultation to journalists, raise journalistic standards, and supply professional, social, and health services to its members. With about 200 members, the BJA has become a member of the Arab Union of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists. However, panelists played down the association's role in protecting freedom of expression. They said journalists

are unsatisfied with its performance and want it to be a full-fledged union or syndicate and, barring that, the association would remain in an identity crisis with very little influence. Furthermore, panelists agreed that the association has not been active enough in holding specialized journalism training activities.

Panelists said they urgently need a journalists' syndicate. There were preliminary plans to transform or merge the association into the proposed syndicate or union that would be dealing with media issues in the future. Panelist Abdulhadi Al Khawaja noted that the government has been exerting efforts to prevent the establishment of the syndicate. "Continuous attempts by journalists to have their syndicate have been thwarted again and again to the degree that they have now given up hope," he said. An initiative was taken by some Bahraini journalists to apply for a license to establish the syndicate, but the government kept delaying their case due to the lack of some needed regulations in the country's Syndicates Law. The government had pledged in 2001 to speed up the process in allowing the establishment of the syndicate, but has not yet allowed it to emerge as a licensed entity.

Even though there are more than 400 registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), most of them are sports clubs and charitable organizations. There are a few NGOs in Bahrain that deal with human-rights issues. However, there is not a single NGO solely dedicated to the advancement of media and the development and protection of freedom of the press, according to panelists.

In September 2004 and during a symposium on poverty and social rights in Bahrain, the founder of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, was detained for 45 days under the charges of "encouraging hate of the state" and "distributing falseness and rumors" in conformity to Articles 165 and 168 of the Bahraini Penal Code. His NGO was perhaps the strongest defender of press freedom and the human right of freedom of expression, and such actions have discouraged other NGOs from actively promoting free-speech rights.

Bahrain has academic courses related to journalism and media studies at the universities. The strongest and most prestigious specialized program is the state university's Media, Tourism, and Arts Department at the Faculty of Arts, where journalists graduate with a degree in Journalism and Public Relations. The curriculum covers traditional media, new media, and computer-mediated communication, and students have to fulfill a practical training internship in journalism before graduating.

Panelists believe there is a dire need for more short-term professional journalism training programs in Bahrain. They acknowledge that there were a few activities but pressed for more, especially as more newspapers are being established and there may be prospects for allowing the private sector to establish its own broadcast media in the future. A state-of-the-art unit at the University of Bahrain to support practical journalism training for students as well as host activities for mid-career journalists was readied for inauguration in 2006. The unit, built with a contribution from a private local company at a cost approaching \$1 million, is said to be the largest of its kind in the Middle East. Panelists stressed that in order to meet its objectives, training in professional journalism needs to be associated with editorial independence and freedom of expression.

There are no restrictions on newsprint and printing facilities. Three daily newspapers in Bahrain have their own printing presses and face no difficulty in obtaining newsprint and other production materials. Smaller newspapers and magazines are able to print at other commercial presses and have various options to choose from with no regulations or restrictions by the government. There is no censorship in the printing phase of newspapers in Bahrain. However, according to the press law, the Ministry of Information must be notified if a newspaper changes the printing press where it prints its editions.

Kisoks, bookshops, and stores are the main channels of distribution for newspapers in Bahrain. Increasingly, newspapers are also targeting subscribers and delivering newspapers directly to their addresses. The fact that Bahrain is geographically small enables each newspaper to distribute its copies independently in total contrast to a large country such as Saudi Arabia, which has a national distribution company serving many newspapers.

Satellite transmitter services, however, are strictly controlled by the Bahraini authorities, which closely monitor what is being broadcast to the world through correspondents in the country. The

government had revoked licenses of correspondents who sent out material that the government viewed as a violation of its sovereignty or press laws.

Meanwhile, the Internet, which is growing rapidly in Bahrain, remains a guarded media outlet by the government, which practices routine filtering and closure of various websites according to its discretion.

“Continuous attempts by journalists to have their syndicate have been thwarted again and again to the degree that they have now given up hope,” panelist Abdulhadi Al Khawaja said.

MSI Participants

Ebrahim Bashmi, member, Shura Council, Manama

Abdul Nabi Salman, member, Council of Representatives (Parliament), Manama

Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, human-rights activist and former director, Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, Manama

Mohamed Fadhel, correspondent, Agence France-Presse, Manama

Ali Abdulemam, moderator, Bahrain Online (www.bahrainonline.org), Manama

Mahdi Rabea, journalist, *Al-Ayam* daily, Manama

Jawad Abdul Wahab, freelance reporter, Manama

Ali Al Jabal, legal consultant, Manama

Tamam Abu Safi, reporter, Radio Sawa, Manama

Nazeeha Saeed, reporter, Radio Monte Carlo and *Al-Watan* daily, Manama

Moderator

Walid Al Saqaf, media consultant, IREX, Yemen

BAHRAIN AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

- **Population:** 725,400 (2004 est., World Bank)
- **Capital city:** Manama
- **Ethnic groups:** Bahraini 63%, Asian 19%, other Arab groups 10%, Iranian 8%, other Ethnic groups 6% (www.nationencyclopedia.com, 2006)
- **Religions:** Muslim (official) 98%, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, other 2% (www.nationencyclopedia.com, 2006)
- **Languages:** Arabic, English, Farsi, Urdu (www.nationencyclopedia.com, 2006)
- **GDP (ppp):** \$9.6 billion (2003 est., World Bank)
- **GNI per capita (ppp):** \$2,410 (2003 est., World Bank)
- **Literacy rate:** male 92.5%, female 83% (2004 est., UNICEF)
- **President or top authority:** King Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa (since March 6, 1999)
- **Next scheduled elections:** House of Deputies 2006

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Independent *Al-Ayam* (36,000 daily), independent *Al Meethaq* (35,000 daily), independent *Akhbar Al Khaleej* (32,000 daily) (Arab Press Network arabpressnetwork.org), and independent *Al Watan* (no daily circulation figures available)
- **Broadcast networks:** State-owned Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation (BRTC)
- **Television stations:** One television station with five different channels along with the main satellite channel, Bahrain TV, which is viewed throughout the Arab world through Arabsat and Nilesat (BRTC)
- **Radio stations:** One radio station beaming six channels with different programming (BRTC)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- **Number of Internet users:** 150,000 (Bahrain Internet Society)
- **News agencies:** State-owned Bahrain News Agency (BNA)
- **Significant foreign investment in the media:** N/A

[Sources for circulation figures above: Arab Press Network (arabpressnetwork.org), Encyclopedia of the Orient (lexicorient.co)]

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BAHRAIN

