

**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](http://www.irex.org/msi)

Copyright © 2006 by IREX

IREX  
2121 K Street, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20037  
E-mail: [irex@irex.org](mailto:irex@irex.org)  
Phone: (202) 628-8188  
Fax: (202) 628-8189  
[www.irex.org](http://www.irex.org)

**Project managers:** Theo Dolan and Mark Whitehouse

**Editorial support:** IREX/DC staff—Theo Dolan, Drusilla Menaker, and Mark Whitehouse

**Copyeditor:** Kelly Kramer, WORDtoWORD Editorial Services

**Design and layout:** OmniStudio

**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.

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, MEPI, UNESCO, or IREX.

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute the MSI in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment "The Media Sustainability Index (MSI) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID and MEPI, and the Iraq chapter was produced with the support and funding of UNESCO."; (b) the MSI is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of the MSI are made.

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.

MSI PANELISTS EXPRESSED HOPE FOR BROADER MEDIA FREEDOMS IN THE FUTURE. THEY SAID INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS IN OMAN HAVE GRADUALLY INCREASED THEIR RELATIVELY SMALL MARGIN OF FREEDOM TO ASSESS THE PERFORMANCE OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS. BUT THEY ALSO EMPHASIZED THE HIGH DEGREE OF SELF-CENSORSHIP AMONG JOURNALISTS WHO WOULD NOT DARE SPEAK OUT ABOUT CORRUPTION CASES AND POLITICALLY SENSITIVE ISSUES.



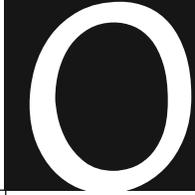
# A

s the desert monarchy of Oman, ruled by Sultan Qaboos Al Bu Sa'id since 1970, moved quietly through a modest series of economic and political reforms in recent years, the media

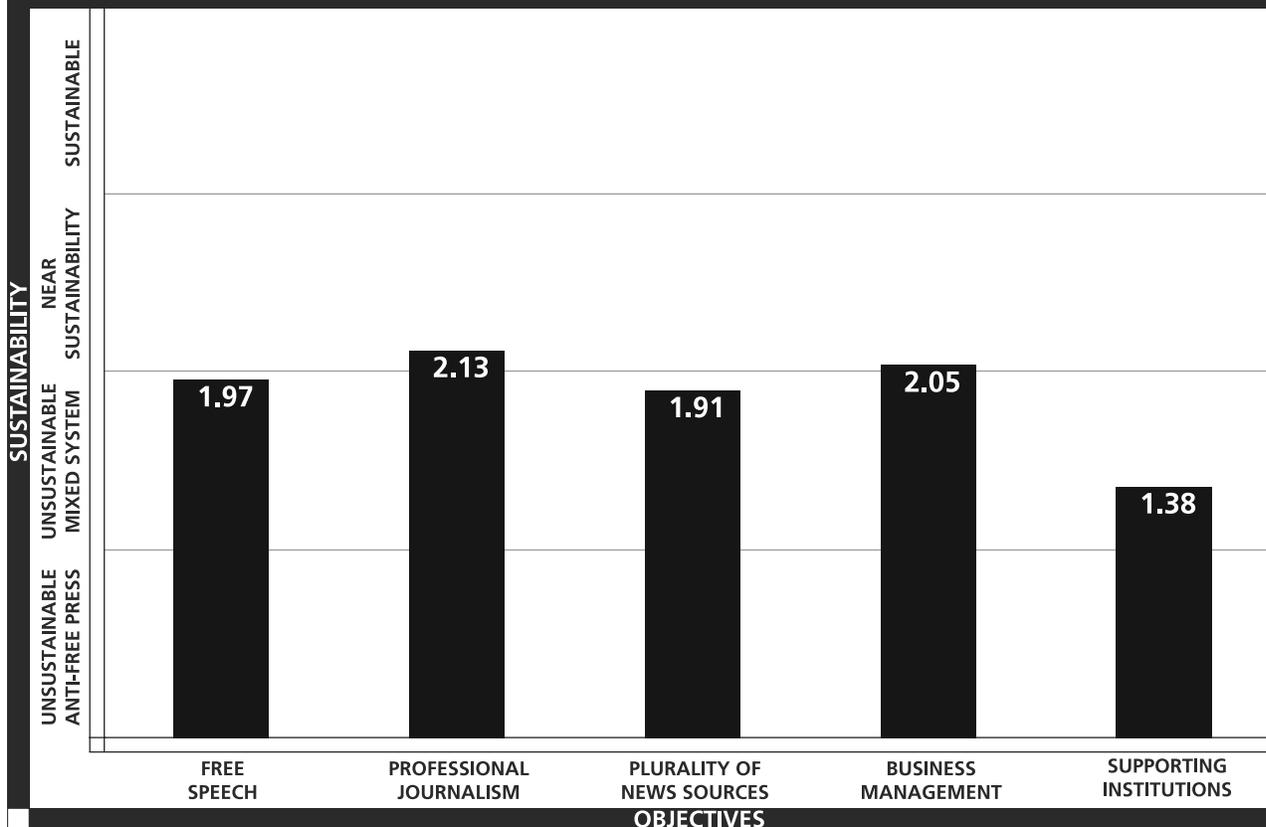
sector remained very much constrained by the government, the society, and sometimes media owners and editors themselves. Oman's 1984 press law, one of the most stringent in the Arab world, was available to suppress anti-government views and criticism of officials. However, this sector began to change, too, during 2004 and 2005, when restrictions on establishing private media were eased.

A few reported cases of press freedom violations surfaced in 2005. In July, poet and journalist Abdallah Al Ryami was detained for alleging human-rights violations in Oman and accused of criticizing the regime in a televised debate. Also in July, former parliamentarian Taybah Al Ma'wali received an 18-month jail sentence for violating the Telecommunication Act and defaming a public official in messages on her cellular phone. In November, the government prevented the media from giving publication space or airtime to Abdallah Al Ryami and the writer Mohammed Al Harthi, who also had publicly expressed negative views of the regime's commitment to democracy. But journalists in Oman said there were other press freedom violations that remain unreported, and such steps by the state foster a high degree of self-censorship in the media community despite the expressed sentiments of Sultan Qaboos for democratic reforms.

The Media Sustainability Index (MSI) panelists noted positive trends as well, however. Among them were the granting of licenses in October 2005 to establish a private television station and three private radio stations. A year earlier, the government had issued the enabling Law on Private Radio and Television Companies. For many journalists, this was considered partial liberation of broadcast from strict state control, but they also noted that the media, and print in particular, remained constrained by the press law. Another positive development was the formation of the Omani Journalists Association, which was launched officially in early 2006.



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: OMAN



**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.

MSI panelists expressed hope for broader media freedoms in the future. They said independent newspapers in Oman have gradually increased their relatively small margin of freedom to assess the performance of government officials. But they also emphasized the high degree of self-censorship among journalists who would not dare speak out about corruption cases and politically sensitive issues.

Oman’s private media continued to flourish as businesses in 2005. The daily newspapers have their own printing plants and publishing houses and use increasingly creative ideas to compete with one another, resulting in a vibrant market with more options offered to readers. International and regional satellite television and radio remained freely accessible by the public, while Internet access was filtered by the state-owned Internet Service Provider, which blocks sites considered to be socially inappropriate or politically sensitive.

The MSI panel’s assessment of Oman’s media sector gave an overall score of 1.89, with weakness in supporting institutions and relative strength in professional journalism.

**OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH**  
**Oman Objective Score: 1.97 / 4.00**

Oman’s Constitution allows freedom of opinion and expression as long as it remains “within the limits of the law”—and the 1984 Press and Publication Law defined many limitations as well as giving authorities the right to censor all domestic and imported publications. This has resulted in self-censorship by journalists and media owners fearful of violating any of the prohibitions.

Radio and television was under government control and used to convey officially approved views only until, under a law adopted in 2004, a private television station and three private radio stations were given licenses in 2005. Establishing a newspaper or magazine in Oman is an extremely difficult task involving bureaucracy and substantial capital, limiting ownership to powerful, wealthy investors. Only six dailies have licenses to operate, of which four are privately owned.

Libel is considered a major criminal offense and is punishable by jail and fines. Few crimes are committed against journalists, and authorities usually deal with them swiftly. Information generally is widely available, but print media publications arriving from abroad remain strictly censored. Internet access is guarded

and filtered through a state-controlled gateway. Journalists are given information more openly if they are affiliated with or in favor of the government. Entry into journalism requires licensing, and the licenses can be revoked for press law violations.

MSI panelists agreed that the Constitution does to a certain degree allow free speech. Direct criticism of the Sultan is strictly prohibited, but, according to the panelists, the press is allowed to print “constructive” criticism of government officials and policies. In practice, however, there is no independent body that judges whether an article has violated the press law, which is vaguely worded and open to differing interpretations. Panelist Abdullah Al Kindi, a journalism instructor at Sultan Qaboos University, said there have been no opportunities to probe the limits of press freedom. “Unfortunately, there is not a single case so far that we can use to measure the level of press freedom in Oman.... For more than 35 years, the media has continued to evolve, and we remain in the learning process,” he said.

The government is not necessarily fully responsible for the absence of probing assessments in the media

**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.

because often it is owners and managers who prevent journalists from pursuing investigative stories that may raise sensitive issues. "Journalists say that they tested their limits on what they can report and decided to pursue sensitive stories, but they are stopped by their direct management," Abdullah Al Kindi said. Rafia Al Talei, editor-in-chief of the privately owned *Al-Mara* magazine, which publishes in Arabic and English, said, "In reality, there is no law in Oman to protect press freedom. On the contrary, the freedom of expression is almost dead, not only absent." Omani society is conservative and accepts change very slowly; therefore, panelists said, there should be a gradual process to raise awareness of the importance of free speech. "It cannot happen overnight," explained Abdullah Al Kindi.

***Panelist Abdullah Al Kindi, a journalism instructor at Sultan Qaboos University, said there have been no opportunities to probe the limits of press freedom. "Unfortunately, there is not a single case so far that we can use to measure the level of press freedom in Oman ... For more than 35 years, the media has continued to evolve, and we remain in the learning process," he said.***

All broadcast media in Oman have been owned by the state, including Oman TV and Radio Oman, which are both operated by the Ministry of Information. However, in October 2005, the government issued one license to an Omani company to establish a private television station and a radio station. It

also issued licenses to another company to establish two radio stations. According to a 2004 law regulating private broadcast media, only corporations owned by nationals are allowed to apply for licenses. Beyond that, there are a number of conditions to be met by the owners, including allowing the authorities to close down the enterprise. All owners of broadcast media must agree to have the stringent Press and Publication Law applied to their staff and the outlet's journalistic work. Rafia Al Talei said these conditions set the stage for making private broadcast media an electronic version of the material published in the heavily self-censored private print media. Panelist Hamoud Al Touqi, editor-in-chief of the *Al-Waha* monthly magazine, said the 2004 law had conditions that are almost impossible to meet. He said the gravest danger could be the sudden unanticipated closure of the whole station. "If and when the government feels

endangered by a private channel, it could easily close it down using the power of this law," Hamoud Al Touqi said. Nevertheless, panelists believe the possibility of private electronic media represents a positive step simply by ending the 35-year government monopoly on broadcasting.

Only wealthy investors or large corporations can afford to start private media outlets. To establish a daily newspaper, for example, the required capital is approximately \$1.25 million, while weekly periodicals require about \$750,000 and monthlies \$390,000. This leaves little opportunity for small or medium-size investors to establish their own stations.

Taxes imposed on media institutions are not as stringent as in other industries. However, based on the 2004 law regulating broadcast media, the government would receive a commission of up to 10 percent from advertising revenues. On the positive side, panelists said there were no specific incidents that they are aware of in which the government declined to evaluate an application to establish a private media outlet merely for political reasons.

Panelists said they are not aware of crimes committed against journalist that were ignored by the authorities. But Rafia Al Talei noted that there are nonviolent offenses committed against journalists, including cases where they were sacked, had their licenses withdrawn, had their rank or salaries lowered, or were threatened by phone. "There are many ways of intimidation, and journalists are aware of possible consequences of their writings," she said. Some harassment cases might be carried out by powerful individuals who may influence law enforcement to escape the consequences, she said.

Panelists did not agree fully on whether there is preferential legal treatment for public officials in media cases. But they did agree that many lawsuits in the past years were triggered by the authorities. Rafia Al Talei said journalists feel helpless when they are confronted with the government on defamation or libel charges because they realize they have little chance to win their case. She said the press law could easily be interpreted to mean any criticism of the government is a violation because it may cause "public discord," which is prohibited. She added that the law is considered outdated and efforts in the Shura Council to introduce fundamental changes "have always fallen on deaf ears."

Libel in the Omani media is considered a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment and fines. The Basic Law of Oman defines the limits of press freedom vaguely by prohibiting the printing or publishing of material that may lead to "public discord," violate the

“security of the State,” or abuse a person’s dignity and rights. Hence, journalists in Oman are constantly worried whether what they write may be interpreted as a violation. In July 2005, poet and journalist Abdallah Al Ryami was detained for criticizing human-rights violations in Oman and accused of criticizing the regime in a televised debate. Also in July, former parliamentarian Taybah Al Ma’wali received an 18-month sentence for allegedly violating the Telecommunication Act through libel against a public official using messages on her cellular phone. Neither person had published or broadcast in conventional media, but the government was able to use the same Press and Publication Law for these cases.

Rafia Al Talei said there are cases of journalists being imprisoned or secretly prosecuted without their cases receiving media coverage. She gave an example of a female journalist, Taiba Al Mawali, who was arrested in June 2005 for comments she made on a foreign satellite TV channel that were critical of the government. She served a six-month prison sentence, reduced from the original 18-month term. “No one ever talked about her in the local media. But when a writer spoke about her briefly, he also was imprisoned for a week and no one ever dared to talk about his case,” she said.

Journalists face difficulties in accessing information. Panelists said this is mainly due to reluctance by sources to give information. Journalists rarely complain about this lack of access, thinking that it is the authorities’ right to deny such access without any justification because journalists are “mere recipients.” Public information is usually made available by official sources via the official Oman News Agency, which in turn distributes it to media outlets.

Panelists agreed that media do have relative freedom to access international sources without restrictions. But imported publications and broadcast material are examined and strictly censored before they reach their target audiences. Furthermore, numerous websites considered to be pornographic, politically sensitive, or competitive with local telecommunications services are restricted by the state-owned Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel), the country’s only Internet Service Provider.

Entry into the field of journalism requires obtaining a license from the Ministry of Information. These are granted with relative ease to Omanis. Panelists said this has resulted in an oversupply of under-qualified journalists. On the other hand, because most media in Oman are state-owned, journalists who may write about sensitive social or political issues have their work closely scrutinized.

Rafia Al Talei said that in 2005 a new procedure was imposed on journalists concerning their journalistic identification cards. In the past, journalists had only to get permission once, and they could work without constraints. But in 2005, the IDs were all cancelled, and each journalist had to apply for a new one, she said. The new ID required renewal by the Ministry of Information every year and had to be carried everywhere by the journalist. Furthermore, the journalist must apply on behalf of a specific media organization and hence cannot work independently. Journalists who leave their jobs must surrender their IDs, she said.

***“Those journalists who try to say something that is different than usual may be sacked,” Rafia Al Talei said. “In Oman, differences in opinion may be viewed as unforgivable crimes.”***

Other panelists said there were cases in which the government cancelled the licenses of journalists viewed by the government to have crossed a red line. At the authorities’ sole discretion, journalists could be prevented from writing either by direct orders or by a court sentence. “Those journalists who try to say something that is different than usual may be sacked,” Rafia Al Talei said. “In Oman, differences in opinion may be viewed as unforgivable crimes.

**OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM**

**Oman Objective Score: 2.13 / 4.00**

Professional journalism in Oman is undermined by self-censorship, coupled with an emphasis on commercial content, according to the MSI assessment. Journalists do not have a professional association working on raising ethical standards, but pay levels are relatively high and journalists do not usually seek gifts or bribes for covering stories. Nonetheless, the conditions in which journalists work are closely controlled by their outlets’ owners and managers, and they are required to cover events to which they are assigned regardless of their newsworthiness. Most material published in the media, whether state-owned or private, is usually in favor of the government, according to the MSI panelists. Entertainment programming is usually in balance with informational programming, although there is a trend toward giving more space to entertainment sections. Like other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, technical capacity is high and most media have advanced equipment, though there may be a lack of

personnel to use it to full effect. There are some efforts to produce quality niche programs in Oman, particularly in the private media, although panelists said legal and social constraints may impinge on the quality.

***“When you grow up and become responsible for a family with a wife and kids, you think twice before pursuing critical stories,” Haider A. Dawood said.***

Panelists complained about the lack of qualified Omani journalists able to do balanced, well-sourced reports. They said many journalists do not have the proper training

or background when they enter the field, reducing Oman’s ability to compete with media in the region and putting its media below the GCC standard. Panelist Haider A. Dawood, editor-in-chief of the *Al-Markazi* business magazine, the publication of the state-owned Central Bank of Oman, said journalists sometimes blame their editors and the media owners for their own shortcomings. “It is a matter of experience—the more you write, the better you get,” Haider A. Dawood said. But he also acknowledged that the risks increase for journalists when they tackle certain issues, adding that the press law and the environment as a whole do not encourage talent and professionalism. “When you

grow up and become responsible for a family with a wife and kids, you think twice before pursuing critical stories,” he said.

Panelist Abdulmoneim Al Hasani, an instructor who specializes in news reporting at Sultan Qaboos University, said he has observed an increasing tendency among current students to practice investigative journalism more aggressively, which could be a major factor in bringing about a turning point in Oman’s media. “I feel that batches that have just graduated in recent years would be able to create better media and bring about phenomenal change in Oman’s media,” Abdulmoneim Al Hasani said.

Panelist Abdullah Al Kindi said Oman’s government realizes that lack of a sufficient margin of press freedom has contributed to lowering the professional standard of journalism. He said the government is now seriously reviewing its press laws and thinking of revitalizing the media by allowing more freedom, adding that journalists need a model to follow to enhance the quality of their work. Haider A. Dawood agreed that journalists are not encouraged to use their talents and potential. “There is the lack of initiative, and sometimes journalists simply don’t try to do something new and hence lose the opportunity of practicing professional journalism as it is supposed to be,” he said.

A code of ethics does not exist in the Omani media because there is no common entity that brings together the journalism community. There are individual efforts by media outlets to promote their own image before their readers, but Abdullah Al Kindi said newspapers should at least start developing their own sets of ethics rules. “If I were an editor-in-chief, I would not accept a ready-made article copied from another source. This is not right! What I must do is have a journalist carry out an exclusive story by contacting sources directly,” Abdullah Al Kindi said. Panelists agreed that the media should not portray coverage as coming from a neutral standpoint when in truth it is merely a copied and pasted press release from an interested party, usually governmental or commercial.

The MSI panelists were unanimous that self-censorship is endemic at all layers of the media from the owner to the editor to the journalist, and sometimes to the source of news. The stringent laws of the country make the print media hesitant to expose any wrongdoings of the authorities or even publish a small article questioning the government’s efficiency in a certain issue. Haider A. Dawood said an example of this self-censorship is the “clear distinction” between Omani Internet news outlets that are not subject to the press

**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).

law and the private daily newspapers. "If you compare news coverage on the Internet of the Muscat Festival, you'd find significant criticism, while when you look at what is published in the press, you'd find pure praise," he said.

Panelists agreed that journalists are not the ones who usually decide what is a key event or issue and what is not. It is mostly editors and owners who determine what will be covered or written about. This has resulted in a routine work style for journalists: arriving at the office, waiting for instructions from editors on what to write about, going to the field or using the phone to collect information on that issue, and writing the article. There are few journalists in Oman who have developed independent judgment on what to cover, panelists said. Nevertheless, panelist Abdullah Al Kindi said that regardless of the issue or event that a journalist is assigned to cover, a story could still be important for the reader if the journalist knows how to tackle it properly. "A journalist can improve his own abilities and produce professional journalism if he wanted to," he said.

Pay for journalists in Oman is rather high, according to panelists, so there is relatively little corruption and journalists usually don't look for bribes or gifts to cover events. However, the higher pay level in itself is a problem because many nationals tend to go into journalism just for the salary. Journalists working for state media may consider themselves to have an ordinary office job simply requiring them to arrive at the office, sign in and wait for duties, do them, and at the end of every month receive salaries. "Journalists consider their post as a governmental duty that requires no creativity, and many journalists lack the spirit of initiative and adventure, which are vital for effective journalism," Abdullah Al Kindi said.

Increasing competition among private dailies has resulted in more focus on entertainment content seen to be appealing to the younger generation. However, so far, entertainment material in the print media is relatively balanced with other sections and hence remains within acceptable standards, panelists agreed.

Technical facilities for gathering news are widely available. Considering the high capital required for a newspaper license, private media have financial resources for equipment. However, human resources may be missing. "Our main problem is the lack of training to use the equipment, which are already available and in sufficient quality and quantity," Raifa Al Talei said.

Increasingly, private media in Oman have tried to develop quality niche reports and publications.

However, these initiatives also are limited by the press law and self-censorship, panel members said.

On the other hand, advertising material has become dominant in Omani private media, resulting in commercial interests being given priority over quality reporting. This is particularly evident in commercial supplements that focus on specific topics such as technology or family life. These usually are sponsored by certain companies that pay heavily to advertise their material, and hence the whole objective of those supplements is to make more money rather than producing quality niche reports.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

**Oman Objective Score: 1.91 / 4.00**

In general, media are affordable and accessible in Oman, the MSI panel reported. However, due to censorship of imported publications, some editions of magazines or newspapers that may contain criticism of the state or what the government views as "offensive material" are prevented from reaching the public. Internet access is mainly available in cities and heavily filtered by the state-owned Internet Service Provider, panelists said. The most widely accessible medium

#### 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.

is broadcast, the local television and radio channels, which are owned and operated by the state, along with regional Arab satellite television and radio channels. The panel said state media only reflect official views, generally distributed by the official news agency, which

**Panelist Haider A. Dawood said he wrote an article for *Oman Daily* in 2005 concerning the problems faced by Omani students in Jordan. "I was told the article could not be published because it could jeopardize relations with another Arab country," he said.**

is the only agency in the country. Ownership of media is transparent and well-known: Omani citizens can easily differentiate between private media outlets and those that are state. However, MSI panelists said that due to the

lack of political parties and opposition leaders, private and governmental media are somewhat similar in their scope of coverage. Some social issues are reflected in the Omani media, but certain sensitive issues are ignored rather than having coverage result in "public discord," which is prohibited by the press laws. No media target minority groups in the country.

Media may be affordable and accessible, but the content is not focused on local issues. Due to the fact that most Omani nationals live in rural areas, the most widely accessible medium is broadcast. The most widely watched channels are Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, MBC, and

**"But if they allow even one newspaper in Hindi to be licensed, it will definitely succeed big time," Haider A. Dawood predicted.**

the local Oman TV. According to panelists, there is an evident lack of sufficient reporting on Oman's internal affairs and issues that

concern citizens, such as corruption, unemployment, the national economy and welfare, plus a host of other problems related to minorities and expatriates. The major source for local news is the print media; panelists said the coverage is gradually expanding, but legal and social constraints preclude tackling sensitive issues. Panelist Abdullah Al Kindi said that the private *Al-Shabiba* daily newspaper has looked at a number of social issues, such as women's rights, marriage, the problems of adolescents, illegal drug use, crime, and unemployment, with a degree of professionalism, setting precedent and raising the bar for other newspapers.

The situation is different for access to international news sources. The prior censorship of imported magazines and newspapers can prevent periodicals from reaching potential readers. This is usually the case for editions containing any content that the government views as a violation of the press and publishing law, MSI panelists said. Another limitation is the Internet, which is heavily guarded and filtered by Omantel, the state-owned and only Internet Service Provider in the country.

Satellite television is the only means that is freely accessible by citizens, although the government has exerted some pressure on correspondents of television news networks that operate in the country when covering certain local issues. Panelist Hamoud Al Touqi recalled that when he was the correspondent of the Kuwait News Agency KUNA in 2000, he sent a news item quoting a senior Omani official expressing discontent over the Saudi government's treatment of Omani citizens crossing the border to Saudi Arabia. The report was quickly circulated throughout the Arab world and reached the Omani public through satellite television. "The next day after the news reached the public, I was summoned by the authorities as my source denied what he said in the interview. But luckily, I had recorded all he said in a tape and was able to prove that he did say all what was quoted in the article," Hamoud Al Touqi said. Panelist Haider A. Dawood said he wrote an article for *Oman Daily* in 2005 concerning the problems faced by Omani students in Jordan. "I was told the article could not be published because it could jeopardize relations with another Arab country," he said.

Panelists noted that the Omani government tries to influence correspondents in the country to ensure that no so-called negative reporting reaches the international networks. The Omani government is particularly sensitive regarding reports on Al Jazeera because of the satellite channel's massive reach throughout the world and its impact within Omani borders. However, panelists said, the extremely cautious reporting by Omani media about local issues results in an increasing number of Omanis seeking news about their own country from Arab and international news networks and sometimes from online sources.

The only news agency is the state-owned Oman News Agency. Panelist Haider A. Dawood said there are what he called "media services companies," which specialize in doing reports and gathering information on a fee basis. Apart from that, any journalist communicating with a foreign news service considers himself "a small news agency," a panelist said.

Panelists also noted that there were some efforts to establish news gathering and distributing mechanisms on the Internet. Online forums on Oman thrived in 2005. Among the most prominent is [www.omanforum.com](http://www.omanforum.com), which reflects various opinions more freely and openly than any other medium. However, the sole Internet Service Provider in the country, Omantel—which also monopolizes wireless and landline telephones—has set up conditions to be met by local Internet cafés available to the public. The company requires that all Internet cafés keep a log of every customer’s name and prevent him or her from accessing “Voice over Internet” websites, which are viewed as competitive to Omantel. Internet cafés need to report any user attempting to browse pornographic or other politically or socially improper websites through a proxy tunnel. However, those measures are seldom actually carried out.

There was little to mention when it came to private broadcasting in Oman until the government issued licenses for a private television station and three radio stations, with their launch expected during 2006. However, panelists predicted that the new stations’ news programming would conform to the strict press law, and so not necessarily be an alternative to the regular state television channels.

Ownership of media in Oman is quite transparent, panelists said. The state-run media are well known and their news reporting policy has remained the same for decades. Private newspapers, on the other hand, have a somewhat more independent line, even though they rarely criticize the authorities. The press and publication law obliges newspaper and other periodicals to print the owner’s name clearly in a visible location in the publication.

A significant portion of the population in Oman constitutes non-Arab minority groups, including Iranians, Baluchis, Indians, Pakistanis, and Africans. The print media do have special sections covering news from the home countries of some minorities, particularly Asians. However, panelists said little coverage is given to the communities within Oman’s borders. When it comes to minority-language information sources, panelists said there were no initiatives to establish such media despite the fact that there is a significant Asian population in Oman. The major obstacle, according to a panelist, may be the fact that the law prohibits non-nationals from owning media in the country. “But if they allow even one newspaper in Hindi to be licensed, it will definitely succeed big time,” Haider A. Dawood predicted.

**OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

**Oman Objective Score: 2.05 / 4.00**

In business terms, private media are thriving in Oman, panelists said. The two largest private dailies are *Al-Watan* and *Al-Shabiba*, which have their own English-language dailies, *Oman Tribune* and *Times of Oman*, respectively. Those media have proven quite profitable and their managements quite creative, panelists said. The four private dailies compete with the two state-owned

newspapers operated by the Ministry of Information—*Oman Daily* in Arabic and *Oman Observer* in English. Panelists

***“If newspapers depended on sales or subscriptions, they wouldn’t survive for a day without outside support,” Abdullah Al Kindi said.***

agreed that for private newspapers, the main source of income is advertising. But the market share of ads brought by advertising agencies is modest compared with other GCC countries. The amount of advertising in the private press is balanced compared with editorial content. Private media received significant subsidies from the government until 1995, after which they became self-sustaining. Market research and innovative promotion were introduced by private newspapers,

**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.

pushing their circulation and revenues higher. But there is no independent entity that verifies the circulation numbers for private media in Oman.

Despite operating in the poorest GCC country, the

***“There were obvious differences between what this study had concluded and what media owners had mentioned,” [Panelist Abdulmoneim Al Hasani] said. “There are even differences between the numbers provided by the editor-in-chief of a newspaper and those given by the very newspaper’s managing editor.”***

private print media in Oman continued its profitability and growth in 2005. Panelist Saif Al Muzayani, a reporter for the *Al-Shabiba* daily, said the publisher holds regular meetings to ensure the management efficiency of the company. He said the newspapers have expanded over the past few years due to

effective business management focused on increasing circulation by enhancing editorial content and introducing new commercial services and promotions. “In the newspaper I work for, there is a monthly meeting for the managers of the different sections to evaluate progress of the newspaper,” Saif Al Muzayani said. “This meeting is carried out to evaluate the successes and failures of the paper and to develop new means to achieve better progress.”

However, Rafia Al Talei noted that some of the private print media outlets that are owned by prominent businessmen or royal family members are in fact run by expatriates, generally Indians. Therefore, these media outlets are operated as investment companies with the sole aim of earning “profit even through deception and lack of transparency.” She said that most media outlet owners, who must be Omani nationals by law, do nothing but sign on the application to establish the outlet and the annual accounting sheets of the company. “Those media outlets were established only to be among a group of commercial companies that would contribute to increasing the annual profits,” she said.

Apart from advertising, private media in Oman do not have any substantial source of revenue, panelists said. “If newspapers depended on sales or subscriptions, they wouldn’t survive for a day without outside support,” Abdullah Al Kindi said. Advertising remains

relatively low compared with other GCC countries, although international advertising agencies do provide substantial advertising contracts to private media on an annual basis. Panelist Haider A. Dawood recalled that the private *Al-Watan* daily had once tried to generate income from printing textbooks, but failed. The volume of ads compared with editorial content is reasonable in private newspapers and magazines, panelists said, adding that private newspaper owners realize that the better the editorial content, the higher the circulation and the more ads they get.

The government used to give substantial subsidies but stopped in 1995. According to panelist Hamoud Al Touqi, the annual subsidy given to private dailies was about \$312,000, with about \$65,000 going to magazines. According to panelist Hamoud Al Touqi, the government initiated those subsidies decades ago in an attempt to develop the infrastructure of the dailies to compete with other prominent GCC publications. “But newspapers and magazines at the time focused on taking advantage of this subsidy without taking bold steps to develop themselves,” he said, adding that Oman remained behind partially because it had depended on those funds for such a long time.

The decision to lift governmental subsidies seems to have contributed to the development of private media, panelists said. Private newspapers started to apply rigorous and aggressive marketing techniques and carry out market research to enhance their reputation and expand their readership base. They were able to raise income by introducing new advertising opportunities through weekly supplements and other innovative promotions. The limited potential readership in Oman, with its population of 3 million, produced fierce competition among daily newspapers, resulting in a vibrant atmosphere where surprises are introduced every year in the form of raffles and nationwide contests with prizes such as cars and appliances.

Panelists said that each daily has its own printing press and keeps circulation figures highly confidential. There is neither an independent nor a governmental body that monitors circulation data. Even for magazines that print at other publications’ presses, there usually is a contract signed between the printing house and the magazine manager that includes a condition to keep the number of copies strictly confidential between the two parties. “If I, for example, find that the press where I print my own magazine has leaked the true number of printed copies, I can easily file and win a lawsuit against it,” said panelist Hamoud Al Touqi. But he also complained about the limited market, noting that circulation figures could be surprisingly

low compared with other countries in the region. However, for magazines in particular, advertisers are more concerned about the subscriber base and make placements based on factors other than the number of printed copies alone, he added.

Panelist Abdulmoneim Al Hasani said a study was carried out by an international organization using various methodologies to estimate the broadcast ratings and circulation. "There were obvious differences between what this study had concluded and what media owners had mentioned," he said. "There are even differences between the numbers provided by the editor-in-chief of a newspaper and those given by the very newspaper's managing editor."

**OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS**  
**Oman Objective Score: 1.38 / 4.00**

Oman has fallen behind other Arab countries in terms of establishing and operating media-support institutions, and the MSI assessment gave the weakest ranking to this objective. There are no independent trade associations that represent the interest of media owners and provide member services. In 2005, formal steps were taken to establish the Omani Journalists Association, the first and only professional association for journalists, but restrictions in its charter mean it falls

**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.

short of meeting the full needs of journalists. There are no nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) supporting media in Oman, and in 2005 an application to set up a human-rights NGO was denied. There are academic degrees offered in media studies in Oman. However, media outlets lack human-resource development departments that could ensure a range of on-the-job training opportunities, and there were few workshops for professionals.

Although materials used for printing are mainly in the hands of the private sector, there are certain governmental regulations on their use. The government also applies various restrictions on the way periodicals and newspapers

are distributed throughout the country and on transmission of news reports to television networks abroad.

Oman overall is relatively out of date when it comes to unions, trade associations, and other civil society establishments, panelists said. There are no trade associations promoting the media industry, and there are rarely joint activities among private outlets, with each usually acting unilaterally when purchasing goods, setting plans, or conducting other activities.

The only professional association in Oman related to the media is the Omani Journalists Association (OJA), which started accepting members in 2005 but was not formally inaugurated. Its operations were limited to providing members with basic services such as reference materials, and the role of defending media freedoms remained out of its charter. Panelist Haider A. Dawood said the government allowed the licensing of the OJA only if an article about defending journalists was scrapped. "If we had waited for this article to be part of the charter, the association would not have been established," he said. He added that the government objected to this article because "it said there are already courts established to defend any citizen, whether a journalist or not." However, the government was embarrassed when OJA approached the Federation of Arab Journalists to apply for membership on behalf of Oman and was rejected for

**Panelist Haider A. Dawood said the government allowed the licensing of the OJA only if an article about defending journalists was scrapped. "If we had waited for this article to be part of the charter, the association would not have been established," he said.**

lack of this article, considered a standard for journalists' associations worldwide, Haider A. Dawood said. "Only then did the government say it would consider allowing this article back in the Constitution, (and) we are hopeful that this could happen," he said, adding that setting up such bodies is relatively new in Oman. "We started with a petition signed by 25 journalists, of whom eight or nine said they would be committed to its work on a voluntary basis." The OJA is a nonprofit NGO with donations from local companies as the main source of income, according to Haider A. Dawood, who did not rule out the possibility to receive assistance from donor organizations or embassies after approval from the government.

Panelists said that there are no human-rights NGOs in Oman, and certainly none focused on the media. In January 2005, a request to establish a local human-rights center was turned down by the authorities. Furthermore, there were reports that some activists who were found to be involved in foreign-registered organizations were threatened with arrest or loss of government scholarships or employment.

A popular course in journalism is taught at the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the state-owned Sultan Qaboos University. The university offers Omani nationals the opportunity to acquire an accredited Bachelor in Arts degree in media studies.

There were a few short-term training courses in 2005, but not enough to cover the professional development needs of Omani journalists, panelists said. The OJA will take part of the responsibility for organizing such activities, according to panelist Haider A. Dawood. "The cost of such activities would be partially paid by international organizations, but of course, after consent is given by the authorities," he said.

Panelist Abdullah Al Kindi said that some governmental institutions do hold short-term training programs related to journalism and provide training to public-relations employees to increase their awareness of how to communicate with the media. Oman's Press Club is a governmental body that holds conventions and arranges workshops and training courses. Sultan Qaboos University offers training for journalists who may not be affiliated with the university. Similarly, the Ministry of Information has a budget that it uses to invite Arab and international media experts to provide training for journalists. There were cases of scholarships and grants given to Omani journalists to participate in workshops and training opportunities and sometimes to enroll in long-term academic programs abroad.

Private media are able to purchase directly their newsprint and other printing equipment without

interference by the government, panelists said. However, there are conditions to be met in accordance to the law, which may include prior licensing and registration of all parts imported and quantities of paper purchased. "The government deals with us as any other private business," said panelist Saif Al-Muzayani, who works for the *Al-Shabiba* daily, which owns its own printing press and prints other newspapers and periodicals. The printing market in Oman is competitive, with relatively low prices and easy access for customers. However, publications must show their licenses to the press before being printed.

For the print media, channels of media distribution are mainly kiosks and shops. Each daily distributes on its own and takes care of delivery of newspapers to the selling points as well as subscribers across the country. *Al-Shabiba* and *Times of Oman* went a step forward by signing with an international company to distribute their editions daily via satellite to selected locations in hotels around the world. Smaller and imported publications are usually distributed through one or two private companies that offer competitive rates for the delivery of periodicals and other material nationwide, though these companies require government approval before they distribute any edition. Omani media have used the Internet effectively, and each publication has its own website through which it reaches a growing local and international readership.

## MSI Participants

**Dr. Abdullah Al Kindi**, journalism instructor, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat

**Hamoud Al Touqi**, editor-in-chief, *Al-Waha* monthly magazine, Muscat

**Haider A. Dawood**, editor-in-chief, *Al-Markazi* business magazine, Muscat

**Saif Al Muzayani**, reporter, *Al-Shabiba* daily, Muscat

**Dr. Abdulmoneim Al Hasani**, journalism instructor, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat

**Rafia Al Talei**, editor-in-chief, *Al-Mara* magazine, Muscat

**Khalfan Fadhil**, freelancer, Muscat

**Bader Khalfan**, freelancer, Muscat

**Faiza Al Haimli**, journalist, *Al-Watan* daily, Muscat

## Moderator

**Walid Al Saqaf**, media consultant, IREX, Yemen

# OMAN AT A GLANCE

## GENERAL

- **Population:** 2.7 million (2004 est., World Bank)
- **Capital city:** Muscat
- **Ethnic groups:** Arab, Baluchi, Iranian, African, Baluchi, Pakistani (www.nationsencyclopedia.com, 2006)
- **Religions:** Ibadhi Muslim 75%, Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, Hindu, very small number of Christians (www.nationsencyclopedia.com, 2006)
- **Languages:** Arabic (official), English, Baluchi, Urdu, Indian dialects, Swahili
- **GDP (ppp):** \$21.7 billion (2003 est., World Bank)
- **GNI per capita (ppp):** \$7,830 (2004 est., UNICEF)
- **Literacy rate:** male 82%, female 65.4% (2004 est., UNICEF)
- **President or top authority:** Sultan and Prime Minister Qaboos bin Said Al Said (sultan since July 23, 1970, and prime minister since July 23, 1972)
- **Next scheduled elections:** Majlis Al-Shura (Lower Chamber) elections to be held in 2007

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** There are six dailies. Three are in Arabic: private *Al-Watan* (34,000), state-owned *Oman Daily* (26,000), and private *Al-Shabiba* (15,000). Four are in English: private *Times of Oman* (34,000), state-owned *Oman Observer* (18,000), and private *Oman Tribune* (N/A). (Arab Press Network arabpressnetwork.org)
- **Broadcast networks:** The only broadcast network is managed by the Ministry of Information and is composed of Oman TV and Oman Radio. (omanet.om)
- **Television stations:** The only terrestrial television broadcaster in the Sultanate of Oman is the state-owned Oman TV, run by the Ministry of Information. Oman TV broadcasts two channels (Arabic and English). Programming from both channels is available via satellite. (arab.net)
- **Radio stations:** Radio Oman, the official state broadcaster, is operated by the Ministry of Information. Radio Oman runs two channels on AM, FM, and short-wave (Arabic and English), and some programs can be heard via the Internet. Broadcasts can be heard in the Sultanate of Oman from UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. (arab.net)

- **Active print outlets:** As of 2004, there were more than 40 registered newspapers and magazines and 13 bulletins. The country has eight media establishments and 70 printing presses.
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- **Number of Internet users:** 180,000 (2002 est.)
- **News agencies:** State-owned Oman News Agency (omannews.com) – Muscat
- **Significant foreign investment in the media:** All owners of media in Oman need to be national citizens by law.

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: OMAN

