

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

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USAID

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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.

WELL-KNOWN AS THE HOST OF WORLDWIDE FAMOUS AL JAZEERA, QATAR HAS EMERGED AS ONE OF THE MOST FORWARD-LOOKING ARAB NATIONS IN TERMS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND PROFESSIONAL MEDIA. SHEIKH HAMAD BIN KHALIFA AL THANI, WHO TOOK POWER FROM HIS FATHER IN 1995, HAS ABOLISHED PRE-CENSORSHIP AND OTHER RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OF EXPRESSION AND HAS INTRODUCED SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL REFORMS.



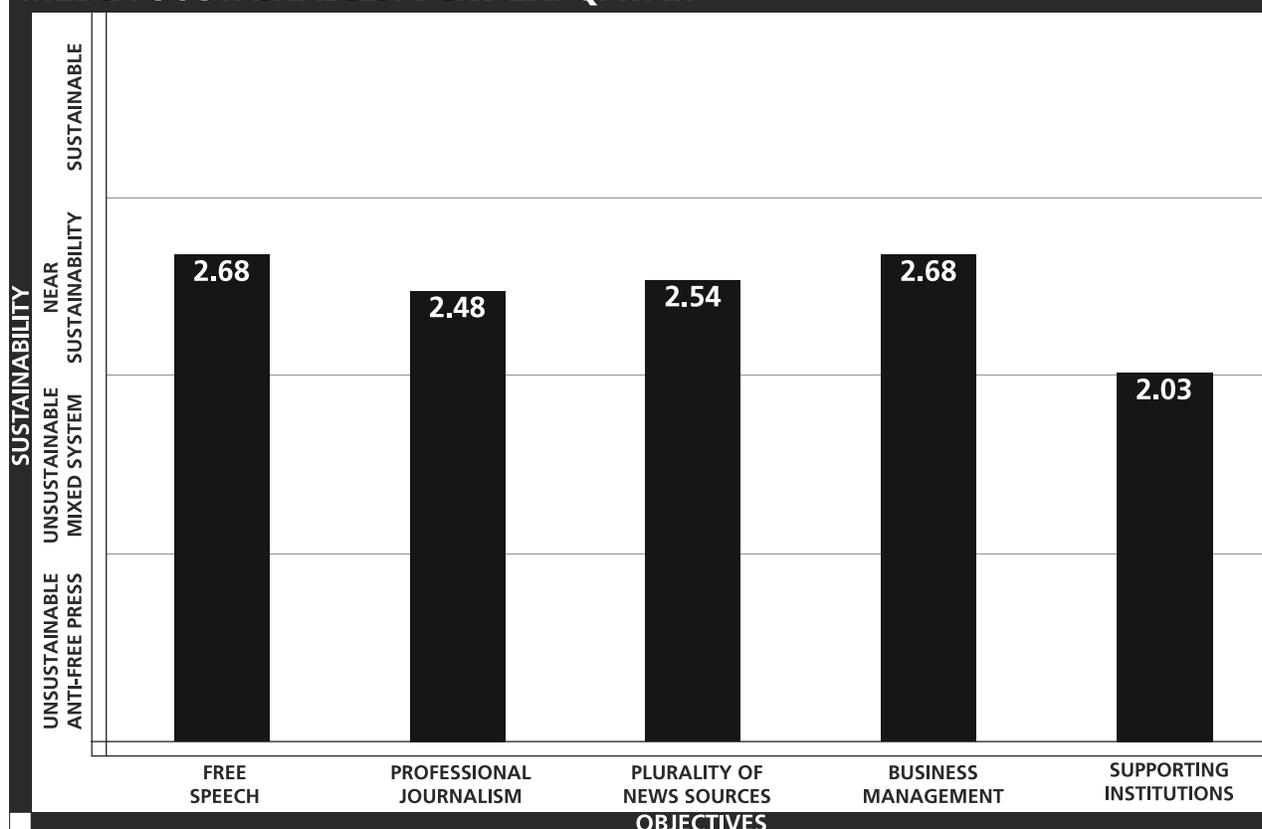
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ell-known as the host of worldwide famous Al Jazeera, Qatar has emerged as one of the most forward-looking Arab nations in terms of freedom of expression and professional media. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who took power from his father in 1995, has abolished pre-censorship and other restrictions on media of expression and has introduced significant political reforms.

The emir has indicated a long-term plan to convert the monarchy to a multiparty democratic system, but arguably the most important achievement of the ambitious emir is the introduction of Al Jazeera, the first pan-Arab independent television station. Initially financed with a \$150 million grant, Al Jazeera debuted in 1996. In 2005, the online magazine *Brandchannel* ranked Al Jazeera as the world's fifth most influential brand, giving tiny Qatar a place on the international stage. The emir is credited with protecting the station's editorial independence despite harsh measures imposed against it by some other Middle Eastern states unhappy with its probing and thought-provoking coverage. In April 2005, for example, the Iranian government ordered the closure of the Al Jazeera bureau in Tehran based on charges of "incitement to disorder" after it reported on clashes in Khuzistan in southwest Iran. The emir also has not yielded to pressure from fellow Arab leaders who have demanded he interfere with the station's editorial policy, as they might with their own state-aligned media. The US government has also criticized Al Jazeera since September 11, 2001, particularly for broadcasting taped statements by Osama bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders as well as footage from hostages. At the same time, however, the United States uses Qatar as its Central Command forward base for its military campaign in Iraq.

At the same time, Qatar's own media face some of the same chronic issues as that of the other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). First on the list for the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) participants is the excessive self-censorship practiced by the expatriate journalist community that makes up more than 90 percent of the staff at Qatar's media outlets. With an annual GDP per capita income of approximately \$27,000, Qatar is

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: QATAR



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.

one of the richest countries in the world, but Qatari nationals make up only approximately 25 percent of the population of about 885,000, with the rest being largely foreign guest workers. This has made it a magnet for professionally qualified journalists from many Arab countries, particularly Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Well-paid but dependent on work permits allowing them to stay in Qatar, these journalists are generally afraid to report critically for fear of risking their positions—despite assurances by the authorities that press freedoms would be respected, the MSI panelists said. Also hindering the progress of Qatari media is the lack of appropriate regulations to specify which political, religious, or social subjects might be off limits. Libel and defamation cases involving the media fall under the jurisdiction of the criminal courts, another reason why journalists practice self-censorship to avoid being deported or jailed because of their writings.

However, although Al Jazeera is an outward-oriented media organization that targets Arabic-speaking viewers globally, its impact on local Qatari media organizations has been significant. The introduction of the channel raised the overall standards of journalists working in Qatar and encouraged local media establishments to report more professionally and critically. Furthermore, the exchange of expertise and staff between the channel and local media has also contributed to building bridges between the two sides. Nonetheless, the level of critical reporting in the local media about Qatari affairs remained lower than that in neighboring Kuwait or Bahrain and behind countries such as Egypt, Algeria, and Yemen. Despite the fact that no journalists have been imprisoned since 1995 for their writings, harsh or critical articles against the regime or royal family are almost nonexistent. However, increasingly there are articles and radio programs implicitly criticizing inefficiencies in governmental circles.

One widely covered event in 2005 was a car bomb blast in March at a theater near a British school in Doha. One Briton was killed, and 12 other people were injured. The press was allowed full access to the scene, and local media reported extensively on the incident.

The emir has mentioned plans to drive the political reform program forward. In 2003, the country's new Constitution was approved in a referendum, making freedom of expression a constitutional right. There is interest now in creating a "media city," which for the first time would allow privately owned and operated broadcast media within the country. On the political level, Qatar has an Advisory Council, an appointed body that assists the emir in formulating policy. The state has no electoral system and imposes a ban on

political parties. However, in April 2003, Qatar held its second nationwide elections for a 29-member Central Municipal Council, which has consultative powers aimed at improving the provision of municipal services.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

Qatar Objective Score: 2.68 / 4.00

Qatar's Constitution assures press freedom within the limits of the law, but there is confusion about what restrictions that implies. The press law is yet to be issued, and journalists and media outlets use their own judgment in assessing what topics can and cannot be covered. The dilemma is particularly acute for non-Arab expatriates working in the media because they are less able to assess the social, religious, and political sensitivities of different issues. The result, according to the MSI participants, is that these editors and journalists avoid using their full potential for probing and wide-ranging reporting. The status of libel as a criminal offense has caused yet more self-censorship. Although Qatar does not allow private broadcast media, there are three major private 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.

MSI interviewees agreed that the environment in Qatar is quite encouraging for private print media. "Judging by the fact that there are three Arabic daily newspapers, I believe the market environment here is competitive and attractive," Chacko K T said. "Employees in Qatari media do not pay taxes, and media corporations that have a profit exceeding a certain amount need to pay a small tax, which is negligible."

corporations that are operating under a flexible tax-friendly environment. News is available from local and international sources, as the regime has opened the country to the flow of information. Publications containing articles critical of the regime are allowed entry to Qatar without restriction, making Qatar the only Gulf Cooperation

The same issue was raised by Abd Al Motalab Seddiq, editorial secretary of the *Al-Sharq* newspaper: "I am mainly concerned about one thing, and that is the law. I worry about the very thin line that separates what is acceptable and what could trigger legal action against the writer." Other than that, he said, "I can peacefully solve any problem that may occur whether it is related to an opinion piece or a story published." MSI interviewees stressed that the regime in Qatar seems committed to allowing press freedom as much as possible and noted that there was no governmental interference in the editorial policies of private print media.

Broadcast media remain under the monopoly of the government. However, Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim said there are plans to establish a media city in Qatar, which would allow private broadcast corporations to emerge. MSI interviewees also said Al Jazeera remains totally independent in its editorial content, even though it is almost fully financed by the state. Some interviewees said the government may not be keen to have too many television and radio stations operating in such a small piece of land and targeting the smallest population in the Arabian Peninsula. On the other hand, Babiker Eisa, managing editor of the *Al-Raya* Arabic daily, said there were no reports of any rejection of an initiative to establish private broadcasting companies. "We need to wait for someone to apply for a license and then see the response from the authorities," Babiker Eisa said. He noted, however, that businessmen may be waiting for the establishment of the media city before applying for licenses.

Meanwhile, Abdulaziz Ibrahim Al Mehmoud, chief editor of Al Jazeera.net, said the society in Qatar remains quite conservative and complaints are received when local events are reported. "We face problems with the community more than those with the government when we report on local events," Abdulaziz Ibrahim Al Mehmoud said, adding that "if you criticize a minister or an official, do you think he would not mind. Of course he would mind, as we are still unaware of the importance of press freedom."

MSI interviewees agreed that the environment in Qatar is quite encouraging for private print media. "Judging by the fact that there are three Arabic daily newspapers, I believe the market environment here is competitive and attractive," Chacko K T said. "Employees in Qatari media do not pay taxes, and media corporations that have a profit exceeding a certain amount need to pay a small tax, which is negligible." The abolishing of the Ministry of Information in 1995 was another turning point, coinciding with the birth of the third Arabic daily, *Al-*

Council country to do so. Internet access is affordable and based on the latest technology, but the monopolized Internet service applies a proxy to filter some religious, political, and pornographic content containing certain key words and phrases.

Article 47 of the new Constitution endorsed in a referendum in 2003 states that "freedom of expression and scientific research is assured according to the conditions and circumstances to be stipulated by the law." But MSI interviewees noted that the article in the Constitution is general and more specific laws are required to define the limits of press freedom. According to Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim, a media expert at the Qatar Radio and Television Corporation, discussions are underway to formulate a special press law that could serve as a source of clear guidelines for media professionals. "There is need for such a law, but I'm glad to say that a committee has already been formed, and it has started to look into the means in which such a law could be formulated," he said. The news editor of English-language daily *Gulf Times*, Chacko K T, complained about the absence of media laws that would allow journalists, particularly those of non-Arab origin, to appreciate the religious, social, and political sensitivities of Qatar. He gave as an example the publishing of the picture of the emir's wife, Sheikha Moza, which he said raised some complaints even though the picture was distributed by the emir's office. "It is an Arab society and a Muslim country, and they have the right to portray the pictures in the right perspective," Chacko K T said.

Watan, which has a reputation for a somewhat more critical and investigative reporting style.

There were no reports of crimes against journalists in 2005. However, MSI participants said this was mainly due to the overall safe environment in the well-policed country. They noted that in the cases in which journalists reported to police that they felt intimidated or threatened, they witnessed prompt action. Some panelists also said that self-censorship prevents the publishing of critical articles in the first place.

The participants agreed that there was no evidence of any preferential legal treatment for state or public officials, and that editorial independence is not hindered or affected by the government.

Libel is considered a crime punishable with fines and possible imprisonment. No journalists have been imprisoned since 1995 based on the libel law, but it has been imposed on people who defamed or verbally attacked officials in public. According to Babiker Eisa, anyone who finds his interests or dignity affected by an article has the right to file a libel lawsuit against the writer. But in reality, there are very few cases of libel because there are very few articles that are found to be beyond the normal level of criticism in the national media.

Information accessibility in Qatar was given high marks by participants. The fact that Al Jazeera is based in Qatar makes the flow of information even more seamless. By Arab standards, Qatar is among the leaders in terms of ability to receive and disseminate international and local news. The same applies to media establishments, which are able to access the Internet with little interference and to receive and send information around the clock without any governmental supervision or permission.

But Khusro Parvez, acting managing editor of *The Peninsula* newspaper, said he believes that the anticipated press law is needed to guarantee the right to access of information. He noted that despite the voluntary cooperation of news sources in giving information, those sources may well withhold information, as there is no law that forces them to do otherwise. "When you are interviewing someone for information, you cannot ... explain why he must give you information. Once we have a press law that guarantees the freedom of access to information, then sources will be obliged to react and cooperate with journalists in providing information," Khusro Parvez said.

There are no restrictions or conditions imposed by the government for those seeking to enter media professions. Panelists said the regime believes in the

need to recruit qualified professionals in all fields, including journalism, which suffers from acute shortages in the number of Qatari nationals applying for positions.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Qatar Objective Score: 2.48 / 4.00

The media community, which is mainly expatriate, censors itself, particularly when it comes to investigative reports concerning critical political, social, or religious issues, the MSI panelists agreed. They said this self-censorship, common throughout the GCC, has hindered journalism professionalism in the Qatari media—except at Al Jazeera, which focuses mainly on non-local issues. However, the panelists said that following the establishment of Al Jazeera and the abolition of official press censorship in 1995, the professionalism of the local media has improved significantly, particularly at the Arabic-language daily newspapers.

Although there is no standard ethics code in Qatar, each media organization has written or unwritten principles that journalists usually abide by, the MSI assessment found. With noticeable encouragement from the regime, journalists have started covering more sensitive issues such as inefficiency in governmental services, criminal activities, and other issues of direct concern to readers. Corruption in the journalism

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).

Yahya Alawad A. Adam said journalists in Qatar have gone through a lot since 1995 and have reached an acceptable level of professionalism in their work. "We are trying to encourage journalists to develop innovative and creative means of journalistic reporting, but that requires time and effort," he said, adding that talented journalists have been given awards and encouraged to write critically and not fear the consequences—although self-censorship remains strong.

field is almost nonexistent, as pay levels for journalists are quite high compared with other GCC countries. However, journalists receive lower salaries compared with other professions in the financial or oil fields, for example, which has discouraged Qatari nationals from selecting careers in the media. Entertainment programming in Qatari

a lot since 1995 and have reached an acceptable level of professionalism in their work. "We are trying to encourage journalists to develop innovative and creative means of journalistic reporting, but that requires time and effort," he said, adding that talented journalists have been given awards and encouraged to write critically and not fear the consequences—although self-censorship remains strong.

There are no written ethics code adopted in Qatar, but individual media corporations and sometimes individual writers abide by their own sets of rules, leaving self-censorship as likely the biggest challenge to media professionalism. There are no journalists in Qatar who do not practice self-censorship, but the level is usually highest among the foreigners who constitute the overwhelming majority of journalists, the MSI panelists agreed. The high salaries and living standards and the various privileges that expatriate journalists get in Qatar makes them think twice before publishing a critical report or opinion piece, they acknowledge. "I cannot deny that I practice self-censorship," said Chacko K T of *Gulf Times*. Abdulaziz Ibrahim Al Mehmoud, who is also the former chief editor of *Al-Sharq* daily, explained that self-censorship is practiced heavily by the newspaper management as well as the journalists. "An editor-in-chief needs to measure the potential backlash a certain story or article may cause in terms of profits, circulation, development of the newspaper, and so on, so he is certainly under lots of pressure," he said.

Amid increasing competition among private daily newspapers over the past few years, journalists in Qatar were encouraged to report on issues that could raise the popularity of their newspapers. This has resulted in a more vibrant newspaper industry, the MSI panelists said. Aiman Abboushi, the correspondent of the Dubai-based *Al-Bayan* newspaper and US-backed Radio Sawa, said: "You can't imagine how thoroughly we were able to report on the assassination of former Chechen leader Yandarbiyev in Doha in February 2004." Aiman Abboushi added that the government had never interfered in his coverage, as the police are aware that journalists need to be allowed to reach the sites where incidents have occurred. He said other issues that might be viewed as critical of the state are being covered, including rent increases, the proposition to charge non-Qataris for electricity services, and rights of immigrant workers.

Although the pay level for journalists in Qatar is much higher compared with other Arab countries, MSI interviewees agreed that it may need to be raised to encourage Qatari nationals to join the field and reduce the self-censorship on the part of the expatriates. But

media does not eclipse news and information programming, and technical facilities and equipment in media establishments are quite advanced, reaching international standards. Quality niche reporting and programming exist but not at a particularly high level, apparently due to the lower demand of the public, which is composed of a majority expatriate community.

Journalists in Qatar were taken by surprise in 1995 when the emir transformed the country from a highly censored, restrictive environment to a situation where freedom of expression is theoretically without bounds. This transformation was a challenge for the journalism community, which had little experience with press freedom and had to adjust to media professionalism. The greatest push to the quality of journalism in Qatar was without doubt the emergence of Al Jazeera. According to Abd Al Motalab Seddiq of the *Al-Sharq* daily, "Al Jazeera resulted in raising the professionalism standards of the broadcast media compared to the print media, which is contrary to all other Arab states where print media was well ahead of broadcast media, which were controlled by the regimes." He noted that Al Jazeera forced journalists in Qatar to rethink their way of reporting: "For example, renowned Al Jazeera anchor Dr. Faisal Al Qassim also writes for *Al-Sharq* newspaper, and he writes in the same style of Al Jazeera."

Yahya Alawad A. Adam, the manager of Dar Al-Sharq Center for Information, Studies and Training (DARINFO), said journalists in Qatar have gone through

overall, the pay level remains well beyond the point that could result in corruption. Babiker Eisa noted that demands from journalists to increase salaries yielded results. "We explained to the management that a journalist needs to be in the proper form, with the most appropriate means of communication, cars, and facilities to be active and fully functional in reporting good stories," he said.

Entertainment material was not found to eclipse news and information in the private newspaper industry. However, Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim expressed hope that the government would impose certain conditions on private broadcast companies willing to establish their own television and radio programming. "The government should not allow private TV and radio to negatively influence our society and hence should avoid replicating the degrading TV channels that we see on Arab satellite networks," he said.

Among the things that MSI participants agreed upon was that Qatar enjoys a very high standard in technical capabilities of its media corporations, whether in broadcast or print. "Media corporations in Qatar are keen to remain up-to-date in their equipment and technology," Yahya Alawad A. Adam said, adding that some publishers demand that journalists ask for the most advanced equipment to be ordered and delivered within days.

Quality niche reporting and programming exist in Qatar but are not yet to the standards that publishers and readers seek, MSI interviewees said. The problem is the low circulation and reach, as Qatari newspapers target a very small local readership, considered the smallest in the GCC. However, advertising material is increasingly being given more attention by publishers, and hence various specialized supplements do get printed occasionally. Babiker Eisa said the local press has no choice but to enhance those quality niche reports because "we cannot compete with Al Jazeera or others on news. So we need to focus on local issues that the public is interested in. We must do investigative stories in culture, politics, society, sports, and other fields." He noted that *Al-Raya* may come with various sections totaling more than 120 pages. "We have also added a special pleasure supplement every Friday to offer a fun side to the newspaper," he said. Al Jazeera, for its part, has started producing specialized sports, as well as children's and business programming, giving it an edge in this type of diversity compared with other pan-Arab news networks.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Qatar Objective Score: 2.54 / 4.00

Being the smallest Arab country in population, Qatar has, according to MSI interviewees, a sufficient number of news sources. It has three Arabic (*Al-Raya*, *Al-Sharq*, and *Al-Watan*) and two English dailies (*Gulf Times* and *The Peninsula*), along with the local television and radio channels plus Al Jazeera, which is a comprehensive source of news mainly focusing on the broader Middle East. The high income level in the country also allows residents to easily access satellite channels, the Internet, and other sources of news. However, just as the case in other GCC countries, the only local broadcast media (Qatar Radio and Television Corporation) remain under the tight control of the government, while the majority of private print media are linked or associated to powerful individuals with connections to the royal family. Media establishments have the right to approach news sources, but there is no way to guarantee a positive interaction from the sources, MSI interviewees noted. There is full transparency, however, in media ownership, and readers are able to learn about the shareholders easily and hence judge the newspapers' objectivity. Since 1995, government-owned media have tried to bring more critical reports and views that contradict the government to its programming.

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 unique thing about Qatar, which may have irritated others, is the fact that the government allows the entry of publications that slander the country or the regime. As far as I can recall, this is a unique case in the Arab world,” said Babiker Eisa of Al-Raya Daily.

However, it remained below the aspirations of the public. Residents in Qatar are able to access domestic or international media, including newspaper and magazine editions that may harshly criticize the Qatari regime.

The Internet service is monopolized and is only filtered for social and religious reasons; pornographic sites, for instance, are blocked by the state-run Internet Service Provider (ISP). There is only one news agency in Qatar, which is controlled by the state and usually offers material that is strictly official in nature. Because at least 75 percent of the population is non-Qatari, there is a decent representation in the local media of their interests and concerns. There are newspapers in foreign languages, such as Nepalese and English, to reach out to the expatriate community. Coverage of community news in English and Arabic newspapers is also widely evident.

Except for the lack of private broadcast networks focusing on domestic news, a plurality of affordable public and private news sources does exist in Qatar. Residents in Qatar are able to access print and broadcast media sources easily. There is no censorship of imported print newspapers and magazines, for instance, based on the political orientation of those publications. However, certain publications may be filtered out in the mail or prevented from entry if they were found to contain content that is not acceptable by the conservative Qatari society (pornography, etc.).

Domestic and international media are easily accessible with few restrictions in Qatar. The Qatar Public Telecommunications Corporation, which is the sole ISP in the country, blocks through a proxy server some websites that may contain unacceptable religious, political, and pornographic content. But Qatar may be the only Arab state that does not block the entry of publications that may be hostile to the State of Qatar. “The unique thing about Qatar, which may have irritated others, is the fact that the government allows the entry of publications that slander the country or the regime. As far as I can recall, this is a unique case in the Arab world,” said Babiker Eisa of *Al-Raya Daily*.

But when it comes to accessibility of news sources by journalists, there are some hurdles, says Chacko K T of *Gulf Times*. “Sometimes you need to access the Public Relations officer at a certain authority or company but you realize he is not there or not answering, so this makes it difficult for a journalist to ensure that the story is ready by the time of print,” Chacko said. He noted that the formation of a press law that obliges the sources to reveal information to the media would help overcome this difficulty.

The only state-run media institution is the Public TV and Radio Corporation, which, according to Babiker Eisa, has not been able to raise its professional standards to those of Al Jazeera. “Those running the corporation maintain their old mentality in running things and were not yet infected by the Al Jazeera drive,” Babiker Eisa said. However, Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim, who works for the corporation, complained of the lack of enough local cadres that are able to innovate and change the look and feel of the public corporation’s programming. He hoped that the establishment of the media city would drive competition and help improve the overall quality of public television and radio programs.

There are no independent news agencies in Qatar. The only news agency in the country is the official Qatar News Agency, which, according to MSI interviewees, remains more of an official media tool that does not have sufficient critical investigative reports that tackle sensitive problems and issues faced in the society and focus on the need for accountability.

There are no private broadcast media establishments in Qatar. But there was an agreement among MSI interviewees that Al Jazeera is considered an editorially independent broadcast corporation with its own news programming but which is financed by the State of Qatar. The fact that the channel rarely covers local news made judging the channel’s editorial independence quite difficult. Ever since its founding, there seems to have been a tendency to focus more on Arab affairs and less on local issues happening in Qatar. Hence, Al Jazeera has not yet been able to fully test the tolerance level of the Qatari regime.

But according to Aiman Abboushi, who has been working in Qatar for more than 10 years, the regime has a genuine desire to secure editorial independence of Qatari media, including Al Jazeera. “In the last 10 or 11 years, Qatar has gone through a major transformation as it broke several taboos and restrictions,” Aiman Abboushi said, adding that part of the blame should be on the journalists themselves, who need to be “more courageous and forthright in their reports and articles.”

When it comes to ownership of media corporations, there is full transparency, MSI interviewees said. "Anyone can know who the shareholders of *Al-Raya* daily are, for example. But this has negative consequences on us, given the fact that the newspaper was founded and is owned by members of the royal family, as some people view us as an official newspaper, which is not true." Babiker Eisa complained. But as one of the conditions to establish a private media corporation is to be a local national and have a large capital base to start the company inevitably results in the concentration of media company ownership in the hands of a few families or business owners, which is quite similar to the case in other GCC countries.

The fact that 75 percent of the resident population in Qatar is foreign makes coverage of community news and activities a priority for the media. There are English, Nepalese, and Malayalam newspapers that cover news from various parts of the world and focus on countries that have a significant expatriate community in Qatar, including India, Nepal, the Philippines, etc. Furthermore, Arab expatriate workers in Qatar also enjoy reasonably wide coverage in the Arabic press through a variety of sections covering community news, particularly that of Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and other Arab countries. Issues concerning immigrant rights, working conditions, and cases of detention and deportation have significant coverage in the local press.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Qatar Objective Score: 2.68 / 4.00

All the major private media corporations are owned mainly by members of the royal family and enjoy a wealth of financial and marketing resources. MSI interviewees strongly agreed that those media establishments enjoy high profit margins and are well-run, with qualified cadres using top-notch technology and equipment. The marketing techniques used in the main three private media enterprises have resulted in an advertising sales boom, with income from advertisements composing the bulk of the private media's income. The fact that purchasing power parity in Qatar is high makes it possible for residents to subscribe to more than one newspaper, helping newspapers to increase circulation amid healthy competition. There are not many streams of income for private media, but the majority of private media apply marketing research to outperform their competitors. However, there are no independently verifiable formal circulation and broadcast ratings systems available.

Being one of the least taxed sovereign states in the world, Qatar has become a haven for media corporations, particularly as the country enjoys a remarkably high GDP per capita income and a purchase power that exceeds most countries of the world. Therefore,

media enterprises were able to gain good profit and run their businesses successfully. The major three private media businesses are Gulf Publishing and Printing Corporation, which issues *Gulf Times* and *Al-Raya* dailies, Dar al Sharq for Printing Publishing and Distribution, which issues *Al-Sharq* and *The Peninsula* dailies, and Dar al Watan for Printing Publishing and Distribution, which publishes *Al-Watan* daily. The high pay in Qatar was enough to attract many highly qualified journalists and media professionals from around the world. Most employees in Arabic-language

To a lesser degree, major media companies generate income from printing for others and commission-driven marketing services. "Qatar is a small country, and therefore, we have small circulation numbers, which is again why advertisements are the main source of income," said Babiker Eisa of Al-Raya.

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.

newspapers come from Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan, while English-language newspapers employ mainly Asian expatriates with competitive salaries. Without doubt, Al Jazeera remains the single biggest employer of media professionals in the GCC. The fact that more foreigners than Arabs reside in Qatar has naturally resulted in higher circulation for English-language newspapers, according to Yahya Alawad A. Adam of DARINFO. "Hence, it is more lucrative to launch and operate an English-language newspaper, as more circulation means more advertisements and more revenue," he said.

Revenues for private media in Qatar are mainly confined to advertising. Circulation numbers are not high, given the small population of Qatar. Readership is estimated at 10 percent of the population. To a lesser degree, major media companies generate income from printing for others and commission-driven marketing services. "Qatar is a small country, and therefore, we have small circulation numbers, which is again why advertisements are the main source of income," said Babiker Eisa of *Al-Raya*.

Advertising agencies are quite active in Qatar, and various international brands seek to have their advertisements published sometimes evenly among the main newspapers. This has been a major boost for the media market and has raised profits considerably. But the same is not necessarily true for the Al Jazeera channel due to the different target group that the global channel focuses on. Nevertheless, governmental bodies and large corporate companies in Qatar remain active in advertising in Al Jazeera. This has been helpful in reducing the cost of operation that the State of Qatar has been incurring since 1995. The main advertisers in Qatar include Qatar Airways, Qatar Petroleum, Qatar Electricity and Water Company, Public Telecommunications Corporation, Qatar Fertilizer Company, and many others. The local media get a smaller share of advertising by public- and private-sector companies, mainly automobile agents and real-estate companies. It is worth noting that advertising in Al Jazeera has been discouraged by neighboring countries that have been annoyed or dismayed by Al Jazeera's open coverage.

The balance between information content and advertising remains respected. "Even if we had to put in 10 more pages of ads for a specific edition, we are also obliged to add another 10 pages of news content," Yahya Alawad A. Adam said.

Among the steps taken by the emir of Qatar after taking over power was the lifting of governmental subsidies to the private media sector, which were

usually given large amounts. This step, according to Aiman Abboushi, broke the state of stagnancy and reliance on government funding and "helped bring more competition to the local media," particularly in more investigative and quality reports and stories that appeal to the readers.

MSI interviewees noted that market research is common among the private media in Qatar. Each corporation has its own advertising and marketing teams that survey the market and explore avenues and potentials for revenue generation from new advertisement campaigns. "In our newspaper, I do know for sure that the advertising department does have regular meetings to explore means to increase advertising revenues and circulation," Chacko K T of *The Peninsula* said. Proper market research has contributed to raising advertising revenues in private media corporations. But it is still an expanding market, Yahya Alawad A. Adam of DARINFO said. "Private newspapers have developed a habit of issuing regular supplements focusing on a specific field, and hence generate a wealth of profit from companies dealing with this field," he said.

There is currently no independent body that could verify circulation or broadcast ratings of Qatari media. The fact that the population and area of Qatar are small makes it less of a concern for newspapers to know about their rivals' circulation, as they can easily monitor distribution points. But the issue is more significant for the local broadcast media, represented in Qatar Radio and Television Corporation, whose expert, Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim, hoped for the revival of a unit that was used to monitor and survey viewers to gain information about the local television channel's appeal. "We used to have a specialized unit that would go to the field and get views and data from viewers about the programming. Such information is useful for us to evaluate whether we are progressing or deteriorating in our outreach," Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim said.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Qatar Objective Score: 2.03 / 4.00

Qatar is lagging behind in its civil-society development in comparison with a flourishing and active business market. With the exception of three professional associations (the Qatari Bar Association, the Gulf Studies Center, and the Japan-Qatar Friendship Association), unions, societies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are nonexistent and the law severely restricts the freedom of association and

assembly. MSI interviewees noted that the country still has a long way to go before this arena is fully exploited and used for the benefit of the private media. There are, however, some discussions and preparations to establish a journalism association or syndicate. While formal associations may not exist, unofficial friendly meetings and gatherings do take place among different expatriate communities to discuss their concerns and plans. There is only one academic program in the field of journalism taught at Qatar University, but there are a few training centers that work in coordination with media companies and the university to help train and qualify journalists (Al Jazeera Media Training and Development Center and Dar Al-Sharq Center for Information, Studies and Training). Entry into the field of journalism is relatively free and flexible. Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are apolitical and do not require prior licensing. However, importing of printing presses and other large-scale printing utilities require prior permission from the Qatar Radio and Television Corporation. Distribution of publications is not monitored by the authorities, and broadcast transmission is unrestricted. Internet access is widely available but is filtered through a proxy set by the only ISP in the country, which the government controls.

Perhaps the main concern for journalists and media professionals in Qatar is the lack of proper representation in civil-society organizations. There are

very rigid laws that regulate the process of establishing or joining any professional society. There are no NGOs or associations in Qatar related to the media. Individuals have the right to

apply for the establishment of professional associations, but among 22 requests submitted so far to the Ministry of Civil Service Affairs and Housing, only three licenses were granted (the Qatari Bar Association, the Gulf Studies Center, and the Japan-Qatar Friendship Association). Some MSI interviewees argued that the lack of enthusiasm among the local Qatari community is the root cause of the lack of NGOs in Qatar. "If Qatari nationals were more into this field, I believe NGOs could flourish in this country, particularly as the emir of Qatar expressed a desire to enhance the level of public participation in various aspects of life," Aiman Abboushi said.

Even though law No. 18 of 2004 provides for and regulates freedom of assembly, a permit is still required for each and every public gathering. This somewhat contradicts the democratic tendency of the regime, and members of the journalism community hope there will be possible amendments to relax those measures.

The fact that the three major private media corporations are owned by members of the ruling family and others associated with them makes communication among them easier. There are times when general managers of those companies meet to share views on the appropriate advertisement prices and means of cooperation. However, there is no official body that represents their interests.

As for professional journalism associations, there are already talks and discussions underway to establish a journalism association. "There has been a request filed to the authorities to establish a professional association for journalists, and we are waiting for the response," Babiker Eisa of *Al-Raya* said. In the meantime, journalists could always meet under the umbrella of their community leaders. As Chacko K T of *Gulf Times* explained, there are gatherings of journalists from different communities, such as the Indian, Sudanese, or other communities, to discuss challenges or plans for

"There has been a request filed to the authorities to establish a professional association for journalists, and we are waiting for the response," Babiker Eisa of Al-Raya said. In the meantime, journalists could always meet under the umbrella of their community leaders.

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.

their common goods. "But those communities are not official entities," he remarked.

Nevertheless, MSI interviewees pointed to the National Human Rights Commission affiliated with the government. Khusro Parvez of *The Peninsula* believes that the commission is "quite independent" and could somewhat compensate for the lack of other associations that could have helped protect journalists' rights.

There is only one academic program in Qatar that offers a BA degree in Mass Communication and Information Science, and it is taught at Qatar University's College of Arts and Sciences. However, Kushru Parvez of *The Peninsula* believes it is still below the required standard and needs "thorough improvement" before graduates could be employed in local newspapers. The academic program is not fully focused on journalism but branches into information science, which is considered a separate field of its own in many academic programs worldwide. However, the university's Mass Communication department had tried to compensate for this by organizing common activities with Qatari newspapers to help students become more acquainted with the newsroom environment.

Yahya Alawad A. Adam of DARINFO, whose center is affiliated with *Al-Sharq* newspaper, said that his center had agreements with Qatar University to train students on the job at *Al-Sharq* newspaper. "We also have short-term training courses to equip trainees with up-to-date and modern editing and news-writing techniques," he said. DARINFO, along with the Al Jazeera Media Training and Development Centre (JMTDC), have contributed positively to enhancing the overall professional standards of journalists in Doha. But the JMTDC has been more involved in training its own cadres and also journalists from other countries, while DARINFO has focused on training journalists in Qatar. "Our programs offer trainees diplomas that are recognized worldwide," Yahya Alawad A. Adam remarked.

Sources of newsprint and printing facilities in Qatar are in private hands and are unrestricted. The business activity in the form of importing newsprint paper, ink, and other material is open and seamless. According to Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim of the Qatar Radio and Television Corporation, importing of printing units and similar machinery require prior approval by the Qatar Radio and Television Corporation, which took this responsibility from the Ministry of Information when it was dissolved in 1995.

Meanwhile, channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are all private, apolitical, and unrestricted. Distribution of daily newspapers is done by the newspapers themselves, which also provide distribution services for smaller magazines. The government does not interfere in the distribution process, and there were no reports of government intervention or withdrawal of any edition already in the market.

MSI Participants

Aiman Abboushi, correspondent, *Al-Bayan* daily and Radio Sawa, Doha

Yahya Alawad A. Adam, manager, Dar Al Sharq Centre for Information, Studies and Training, Doha

Khusro Parvez, acting managing editor, *The Peninsula*, Doha

Abd Al Motalab Seddiq, secretary editor, *Al-Sharq*, Doha

Chacko K T, news editor, *Gulf Times*, Doha

Babiker Eisa, managing editor, *Al-Raya*, Doha

Abdulaziz Ibrahim Al Mehmoud, chief editor, AlJazeera.net, Doha

Yousuf M. Al Ibrahim, media expert, Qatar Radio and Television Corporation, Doha

Moderator

Walid Al Saqaf, media consultant, IREX, Yemen

QATAR AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

- **Population:** 637,200 (2004 est., World Bank)
- **Capital city:** Doha
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Arab 52.5% (of which Palestinian 13.4%, Qatari 13.3%, Lebanese 10.4%, Syrian 9.4%), Indo-Pakistani 15.2%, Iranian 16.5%, black African 9.5%, other 6.3% (<http://www.worldstatesmen.org>, 2000)
- **Religions (% of population):** Muslim (official) 95%, other 5% (www.nationsencyclopedia.com, 2006)
- **Languages (% of population):** Arabic (official), English commonly used as a second language
- **GDP (purchasing power parity):** \$20.4 billion (2003 est., World Bank)
- **GDP per capita (purchasing power parity):** \$21,200 (www.nationsencyclopedia.com, 2006)
- **Literacy rate (% of population):** 82% age 15 and above (2004, World Bank)
- **President or top authority:** Amir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (since June 27, 1995)
- **Next scheduled elections:** The third nationwide elections for the 29-member Central Municipal Council (CMC) are scheduled for 2007.

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** The total circulation of the main five daily newspapers is about 100,000 copies per day. The largest circulating Arabic daily newspaper is privately owned *Al-Raya*, published by Gulf Publishing & Printing Corporation (18,000 daily), followed by privately owned *Al-Sharq* (15,000 daily), published by Dar al Sharq for Printing Publishing & Distribution, and privately owned *Al-Watan*, published by Dar al Watan for Printing Publishing & Distribution (15,000 daily). The largest English newspaper is privately owned *Gulf Times* (18,000 daily), published by Gulf Publishing & Printing Corporation, and privately owned *The Peninsula* (18,000 daily), published by Gulf Publishing & Printing Corporation. (Arab Press Network & Carnegie Endowment)
- **Broadcast networks:** There are two broadcast networks, the public Qatar Radio and Television Corporation (QRTC) and the Pan-Arab Al Jazeera, which is financed by the State of Qatar.
- **Television stations:** The main local television channel is Qatar TV and Al-Kass football channel (official channel for the country's football league). Both channels are run by the state's public broadcast network, QRTC. Al Jazeera broadcasts the main news channel, Al Jazeera Children, Al Jazeera Sports (two open-air channels), and Al Jazeera Live.
- **Radio stations:** The main radio station is Qatar Radio (general program), which is in Arabic. But there are also radio programs broadcast on separate waves during specific hours of the day in English, French, and Urdu. (qatarradio.net)
- **Active print outlets:** There are about nine magazines and periodicals licensed by the government that focus on society and lifestyle.
- **Number of Internet users:** 165,000 (2005) (www.internetworldstats.com)
- **News agencies:** State-owned Qatar News Agency (QNA) – Doha
- **Foreign investment in the media:** Media corporations in Qatar are local businesses with no foreign investment. However, there are plans to establish a media city, which could allow foreign investment in the media.

