

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

2006/2007

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



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

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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.

Amid the political controversies that shook the country, the media were visibly affected. According to the MSI panel, Bahrain's overall score declined to 1.63 from the previous year's score of 1.84. Arguably, the main cause of this decline was the volatility the country went through because of the Bandargate report, particularly as press freedom suffered when the Supreme Court banned the press from mentioning the scandal altogether.



BAHRAIN

Despite being the smallest Arab country in terms of geographical area, Bahrain is one of the most politically active countries in the Middle East. In 2006, the country reached its political climax when competitive elections took place to elect members of the 40-seat Lower House of Parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, and municipalities.

The elections were marred, however, by “Bandargate,” which arose with documents depicting a secret organization of government officials allegedly planning to manipulate the voting process in an attempt to marginalize the Shia opposition. Despite the scandal, the opposition won 18 seats in the parliament, signaling a remarkable turning point after an absence of four years since its boycott of the 2002 elections. The 2006 ballot vote was also historic in electing Bahrain’s first woman to parliament.

Amid the political controversies that shook the country, the media were visibly affected. According to the MSI panel, Bahrain’s overall score declined to 1.63 from the previous year’s score of 1.84. Arguably, the main cause of this decline was the volatility the country went through because of the Bandargate report, particularly as press freedom suffered when the Supreme Court banned the press from mentioning the scandal altogether.

Regional newspapers and magazines that dealt with the Bandargate report were also prevented from entering the country, allowing rumors and speculations to spread frantically. Reporters sans Frontières reported that some journalists who covered the event were blackmailed, and another source revealed that two others were summoned for questioning. The government also filtered some websites that investigated or exposed Bandargate. The inability to access information about the report accounted partly for the decline in the plurality of news objective from 1.73 in 2005 to 1.35, which was the sharpest fall among all objectives.

Another factor behind the decline may have been emergence of cases of corruption in the media during the election campaign. An independent report comprised of hundreds of pages of material that included canceled checks, hotel bills, accounting, financial, and other types of documents sparked a massive controversy in the country. Written by Salah Al-Bandar, 52, a Briton, who used to work as a consultant to the Cabinet Affairs Ministry, the report pointed to unusual business deals among government officials to potentially put the country on the course of ethnic clashes. The report detailed media’s use during the election campaign of reported concerns over payments to journalists and newspapers for the promotion of specific candidates through interviews and news reports. The report also said the regime directly and indirectly used state-owned media to promote pro-government candidates.

Some panelists were more optimistic, hoping that things would be better off if and when a more relaxed press law, which is currently with the new parliament, is passed.

BAHRAIN AT A GLANCE

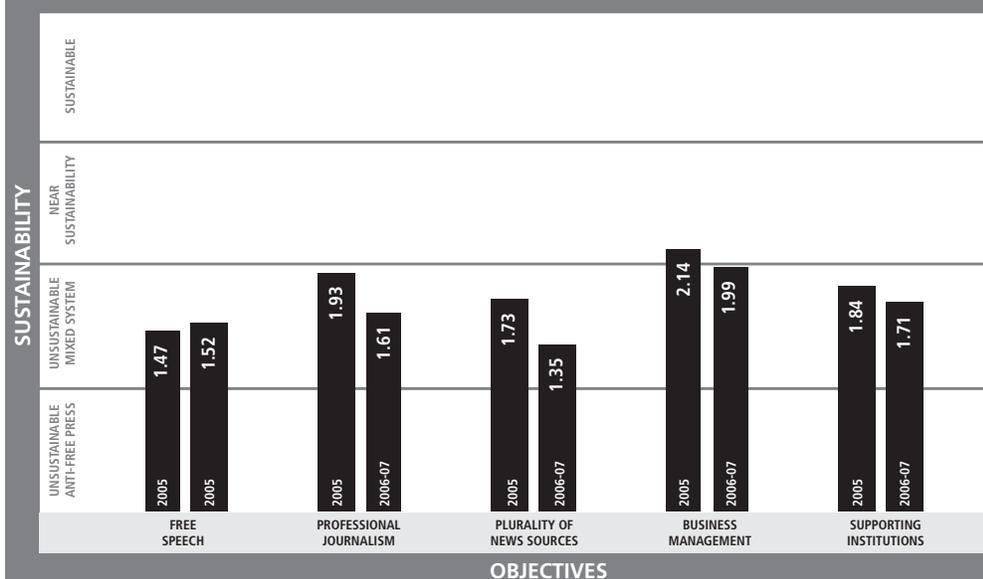
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 708,573 (includes 235,108 non-nationals) (July 2007 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Manama
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Bahraini 62.4%, non-Bahraini 37.6% (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim (Shi'a and Sunni) 81.2%, Christian 9%, other 9.8% (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Arabic, English, Farsi, Urdu
- > **GNI (2006-Atlas):** \$18.77 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$10,288 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **Literacy rate:** 86.5% (male 88.6%, female 83.6%) (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa (since March 6, 1999)
- > **Next scheduled elections:** Council of Representatives in 2010

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** 6 major independent newspapers, 1 radio station beaming six channels with different programming, one TV station with five different channels along with the main satellite channel Bahrain TV (Sources: Arab Press Network arabpressnetwork.org, BRTC)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** top three by circulation: *Al-Ayam* daily 36,000 (independent), *Al-Meethaq* 35,000 daily (independent), *Akhbar Al-Khaleej* daily 32,000 (independent)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Bahrain News Agency (BNA) (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Significant foreign investment in the media:** None
- > **Internet usage:** 157,300 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BAHRAIN



Unustainable, 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.

Unustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.52

Along with Kuwait, Bahrain is a country that allows a wide spectrum of political entities and viewpoints. Panelists therefore acknowledged that it was natural for this political spectrum to reflect itself to some extent on the level of freedom of expression, which is relatively high compared with some other countries in the region. Bahrain scored a 1.52 for this objective, little changed from the previous MSI.

The constitution acknowledges the right of freedom of expression, but the laws regulating the press are old and restrictive and require reforms to meet generally accepted international standards. The society also places its own limitations on press freedom because of the population's sectarian and ethnic diversity. Independent broadcast media are nonexistent, but permits have been provided to six independent dailies that must meet stringent requirements, including upfront capital of 1 million Bahraini dinars (US\$3.6 million) for a daily newspaper. Panelists agreed that crimes against journalists are rare but that when reported, authorities do take action.

The legal system equally deals with different media regardless of affiliation, but libel is a criminal offense that could result in a journalist's facing huge fines and imprisonment. Public information is widely available, though a few political websites are censored. Panelists agreed that access to international and local news is easy and entry into the profession of journalism is open to all except for correspondents who work for non-Bahraini media, who require a license that is renewed annually.

Article 23 of Bahrain's constitution clearly affirms the right to information; hence, legal protection does exist, panelists agreed. Furthermore, given that it enjoys a vibrant and politically active opposition, panelists said that Bahrain is comparable to Kuwait, which is far ahead of other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in terms of democratic practices. Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa has on several occasions pledged to apply reforms that could bring more democracy and freedom to the country. In a speech he made on May 6, 2005, the king presented his vision to allow greater levels of press freedom. Nancy Jamal of Foreign Media Affairs at Bahrain's Ministry of Information said the king meets periodically with editors-in-chief of privately owned newspapers, demonstrating a political will to allow a greater level of liberty. "His Majesty the King said that no journalist, from now on, will be held for his political opinions," Jamal said.

Despite the apparent political will in allowing freedoms, MSI panelists noted that the conditions set by the country's relevant laws confine press freedoms. Law 47 of 2002, which concerns the press, printing, and publishing, contained articles that severely limit freedom of expression. According to this law, journalists can be criminally prosecuted and jailed. They may also be forced to pay huge fines that may be impossible given their limited incomes. Article 68 is one of the most restrictive articles of the press law and states clearly that journalists can be imprisoned or fined for the following: criticizing the religion of the state; inciting crimes in general and crimes that may destabilize the country's security in particular; and inciting attempts to thwart or change the regime. Moreover, the law is associated with Penal Code 15 of 1976, which may bring even more severe punishment to journalists because of their reporting.

The vague phrases in the press law are a source of concern, according to some panelists, who said the country's press law may be interpreted differently and hence used subjectively against journalists. Panelist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, a freedom-of-expression activist and former president of the dissolved Bahrain Center for Human Rights, said journalists cannot depend on the law for protection because the judiciary is "not independent." Furthermore, he noted that even when journalists are acquitted in a long, grueling trial, they are not compensated for the mental and financial losses that they are exposed to, creating fear in journalists of being prosecuted regardless of the outcome of the trial. In a specific example, he noted that a journalist was reporting about

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

Panelist Kamal noted a significant rise in officials' awareness of the need to cooperate with journalists. "There could still be some who may be reluctant in giving information, but from my own experience, I can say this group has become a minority," Kamal said.

corruption in the Ministry of Electricity but after the ministry attempted to file a lawsuit against him, he had to personally go to the ministry and apologize just to avoid going through painful trial procedures. "Is the judiciary a means of protection or a means of pressure?" Al-Khawaja asked, suggesting that the latter was probably the case.

Citing the press law, the Supreme Court banned reporting or writing about Bandargate, which refers to a conspiracy plot uncovered in September 2006 alleging a plan by senior officials to suppress the Shia majority and manipulate the 2006 parliamentary elections. The 240-page report was issued by the London-based Gulf Centre for Democratic Development, whose general secretary was Sudanese-born British national Dr. Salah Al-Bandar, who used to work as an adviser to Bahrain's Cabinet Affairs Ministry before being deported for operating on behalf of a foreign entity and revealing classified government documents.

When the Supreme Court banned reporting about Bandargate, it cited Article 40 of the 2002 press law, which prohibits the publishing of any information that may affect any trial proceedings. It also cited Article 70, which prohibits the publishing of fabricated news that may disrupt peace or damage the public interest. However, the court interpreted the press law in such a way that makes mentioning "Bandargate" a violation of Articles 40 or 70, which consequently imposes a blanket restriction on all Bahraini media, who could have tackled this issue objectively.

However, panelist Mohamed Fadhel, a writer for *Al-Waqt* and secretary of the Bahraini Journalists Syndicate, said the press law may occasionally protect the journalist. He gave the example of journalist Radhi Al-Musawi, who was acquitted by the judiciary based on the articles of the press law despite the fact that it was the government that filed the lawsuit against him. But Fadhel noted that one of the biggest challenges is the public's awareness of the need to have freedom of expression as a fact of life. As proof of the severity of the problem, Fadhel said, "In the past one and a half years, there were 70 cases filed against journalists... this shows that there

is prior antipathy in the people [against the press]," adding that the majority of those cases were filed by regular citizens.

Panelist Ebrahim Bashmi, Shura Council member and editor-in-chief of *Al-Waqt* independent daily newspaper, agreed to the notion that it is the society that needs to raise its awareness and acceptance of freedom of expression. "Seventy-five percent of the lawsuits were not filed by the executive branch, but by the society against existing journalists," he said. Noting that the state had intentionally given more leeway to practice journalism, panelist Mohamed Al-Ghasra, a journalist for *Al-Watan* daily newspaper, said, "Today, it is the society that does not tolerate the other point of view." Unlike many other panelists, Al-Khawaja defended society's role, noting that when the public rises up to defend its rights through protests or other activities, "a person feels more secure whether he is a journalist or a writer on the Internet."

But panelist Ali Abdulemam, an online journalist and moderator of the *BahrainOnline.org* website, noted the government's role. He pointed out that the 2002 press law approved by the government created in its third article a reference to "electronic newspapers" so as to expand restrictions to the Internet.

Overall, there was consensus among panelists of the need to have a more relaxed press law. In this respect, some reformists in the Shura Council drafted and passed a more tolerant and modern press law, which they hoped the parliament would pass by the end of 2007. Panelist Bashmi, one of the architects of this draft law, said the council's passing of the law was the first step but that it remains to be seen if the parliament will give full and final approval.

From his own experience, Bashmi said some parliamentarians may occasionally prevent necessary reforms in the press. "Parliamentarians, who are supposed to grant the press its freedom, were the ones who buried it in the parliament," he said, adding that there were parliamentarians who called for flogging journalists.

Panelist Essa Ghayeb, a lawyer and representative of the Human Rights Society, said another version of a modern press law was drafted during a number of meetings of concerned stakeholders. Panelist Bashmi wondered whether the law Ghayeb noted would be accepted by legislators and parliamentarians and therefore would remain an ambitious piece of work that may not succeed.

The government does not restrict the right to apply for a print media license, but broadcast media remain under strict state monopoly. Given the tight control of the national television and radio networks, some panelists said the public had somewhat lost confidence in their reporting and that

citizens have shifted to regional and pan-Arab news channels, such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya.

While the right to apply for a print media license is not restricted, the conditions set forth in the third chapter of the 2002 press law regarding obtaining a license are quite tough. Panelists indicated that the conditions mean that only rich elites, who are mostly close to the government, would qualify to receive the license. Among the conditions is the required capital of 1 million Bahraini dinars (US\$3.6 million) for a daily newspaper. According to panelist Al-Khawaja, this makes it impossible for people of average income to even dream of establishing their own newspaper. Furthermore, only a company of at least five Bahraini investors could apply for a license, making foreign investment in this respect impossible. Apart from all this, Article 44 of the law requires the approval of the cabinet and prime minister, which triggered a dispute among panelists on whether providing licenses represents a form of political influence.

But panelist Bashmi rejected the notion, noting that the law gives the applicant the right to file a lawsuit against the government if the license is not granted. "There were no cases of a rejected applicant who went to the court," Bashmi said.

Some panelists said that the local market is already saturated with the six daily newspapers targeting a population of less than one million. But others rejected this claim, defending the right to have as many newspapers as desired and letting the public choose which ones to read.

When it comes to licensing of electronic media, the government had attempted an unprecedented move a couple of years ago when it issued orders demanding that all news websites and forums operated from Bahrain be licensed by getting a specific registration number from the Ministry of Information. But according to panelist Abdulemam, his website (*BahrainOnline.org*) was among only 80 websites that registered with the Ministry of Information out of about 10,000 websites run from the country. He was of the opinion that the government is trying to control the electronic media but that its ineffective methods mean it cannot currently do so effectively.

Panelists agreed that once a newspaper is granted a license, market entry from that point onward depends on the newspaper's ability to compete for the limited advertising income for such a small country. Some panelists said the required capital is needed to ensure that the media establishment would become strong and competitive and hence afford to pay reasonable salaries, purchase modern, high-quality equipment, and carry out massive advertising campaigns. But because Bahrain is a tax-free country with the most liberal economy in the Middle East, newspapers

find no tax-related challenges. There are, however, some modest import taxes of 5 percent for newsprint and other printing-related products. But panelist Isa Al-Shaiji, editor-in-chief of *Al-Ayam* newspaper and director of the Bahrain Journalists Association, said efforts are being exerted to secure an exemption from those taxes.

When it comes to crimes committed against journalists, all panelists agreed that such crimes are extremely rare and that the authorities act swiftly if such crimes are reported. They noted, however, that it is the obligation of the journalists attacked to contact the authorities and file complaints to the police when they are subjected to attacks, which usually do not go beyond blackmail or threats.

A particular case of blackmail was reported by Paris-based Reporters sans Frontières, which mentioned in its 2006 report that journalists Hussein Mansour of *Al-Mithak* and Mohamed Al-Othman of *Al-Wasat* received anonymous phone threats in October 2006 for mentioning the sensitive Bandargate scandal in their reports.

However, many panelists stressed the rarity of physical or verbal attacks or other conventional crimes. Instead, they indicated that these are substituted by other means of punishment, such as prosecutions, firing from work, and salary cuts. An example was set forth by panelist Batool Al-Sayed, who said that trial proceedings have started against Ahmed Al-Arabi and Mohamed Al-Sawad of *Al-Waqt* for referring to the Bandargate scandal.

But panelists agreed that there was no obvious differential treatment in the court of law because all journalists would be treated equally regardless of their affiliation. Furthermore, the fact that all newspapers are in private hands makes it difficult to judge such preferential treatment, as no comparable cases were reported. According to panelist Bashmi, there were no well-known cases of lawsuits that targeted journalists working for state-owned media, which includes the state-run television and radio and the national Bahrain News Agency. Bashmi added that he did not notice any special treatment against the private media. As an example, he stated that the Ministry of Housing filed a lawsuit against his newspaper but that the attorney general refused to proceed with the case because of its weak foundation.

Libel cases in Bahrain are both a criminal and civil offense and are subject to a fine and potentially other forms of penalties, including imprisonment, although no jail sentences were issued against any journalists. Chapters six and seven of the 2002 press law are concerned with criminal offenses by journalists resulting from libel and other similar offenses. Panelists indicated that actual criminal cases are not needed

to deter journalists from aggressive reporting—the existence of the law itself serves as a deterrent.

Furthermore, according to panelist Bashmi, the Bahraini society is not yet ready to remove the criminal jail penalty from the press law. He argued that if legislators are to suggest canceling the jail penalty for journalists, regular citizens would object to such preferential legal treatment. “Isn’t he who is jailed based on the penal code also a citizen?” he said people would ask. He added that the draft press law he presented to the parliament maintained the status of libel as a criminal offense and kept the prison penalty intact because otherwise the law is not likely to be passed.

On some occasions, however, fines could be even more devastating than short jail terms, according to some panelists. Sometimes a single fine can be as high as 5,000 Bahraini dinars (US\$18,000) based on a single article of the press law. But the fine could easily be multiplied many times if more than one law is used for prosecution. Panelist Mohamed Sami Kamal, the correspondent for *Al-Ahram* Egyptian daily, said he was subjected to a libel lawsuit and had to pay the fine in installments for five successive years.

Journalists in Bahrain generally suffer from the lack of cooperative sources willing to provide crucial information for certain journalistic reports, some panelists noted. But other panelists underlined a significant positive transformation in terms of respecting journalists in official circles and cooperating willingly with journalists to find proper sources for sought-after information. They said this transformation was partly due to Article 31 of the 2002 press law, which granted journalists the right to access information from its sources. But all panelists agreed that laws that grant the right to access information are vague and need to be improved. Panelist Al-Khawaja had even revealed that there is a ministerial decree prohibiting ministry officials from providing information. “Hence, there is a decree that does the total opposite,” he said.

Because there is no way to compel officials to provide information, newspapers started to develop ways to persuade sources to cooperate. Panelist Bashmi said private newspapers need to occasionally appeal to ministers by publishing their illustrated positive news just to ensure that they would be responsive when approached for future interviews. Bashmi noted that this applies to any other source because when a person “finds his photograph and statement published in a newspaper, whenever he finds news, he would directly call the newspaper,” he said.

Panelist Kamal noted a significant rise in officials’ awareness of the need to cooperate with journalists. “There could still

be some who may be reluctant in giving information, but from my own experience, I can say this group has become a minority,” Kamal said.

Panelists agreed that journalists can easily access international news sources. On certain occasions, however, some publications may be banned from distribution in the country if they were assessed by the authorities to have violated the country’s laws. Similarly, the Internet is accessible, except for a few cases in which the government bans some political websites, such as *BahrainOnline.org*. The website’s moderator and MSI panelist, Abdulemam, was arrested and jailed in early 2005 and was subjected to charges that included defaming the king, inciting hatred against the regime, publishing information to undermine the country’s security, and violating the press and communications laws.

Abdulemam said his website is blocked based on the press law, which he said is supposed to be inapplicable to websites. Furthermore and according to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, whose website itself is banned, at least 22 political or religious websites have been blocked by the Ministry of Information. However, many Bahrainis learned alternative methods to access filtered websites (e.g., using proxy websites).

Entering the journalism profession, however, is granted to all except foreign correspondents, panelists said. Though the majority of panelists viewed this positively, Kamal, the correspondent for *Al-Ahram* Egyptian daily, said that not having any restrictions or conditions for entry into the profession had resulted in a mix-up where journalists without any credentials may work alongside professional journalists with tens of years of experience. As for the restrictions on foreign correspondents, panelist Al-Shaiji said the Bahraini Journalists Association requested the removal of the condition of prior licenses for correspondents.

Panelist Zainab Abdulnabi, who is the correspondent for the Tehran-based *Al-Alam* television channel, complained of the restrictions imposed in licensing for foreign correspondents. She said the government applies double standards in dealing with licenses for correspondents. “A license could be given to the Abu Dhabi channel but not to the *Al-Alam* channel. There could be a license for the *Al-Jazeera* channel on the condition that the Ministry of Information appoints the correspondent,” she said.

Restrictive licensing and pressure on foreign correspondents have significantly affected the neutrality of foreign correspondents, according to Al-Sayed, who works as a reporter for *Al-Ayam* daily. “Most, if not all, correspondents are close to the governmental line, not the opposition,” she said. Panelist Fadhel added that the press law failed

to mention any right to file a petition to the court if an application for a license was rejected.

Furthermore, some panelists complained about restrictions imposed on journalists in the form of compulsory licenses to cover specific events or take photographs of certain buildings and areas. "There are reports for which you can't even apply for a license because their coverage is forbidden," panelist Abdulnabi said.

Direct interference from the authorities in appointing correspondents has also been a major concern, according to Abbas Busafwan, a Manama-based freelance journalist. "The Al-Jazeera channel called me once asking for an interview, and then they said, 'OK.' Upon my return, Al-Jazeera called me, saying, 'Our apologies—there was a veto from the government.'"

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.61

Panelists strongly agreed that journalistic standards in the country have deteriorated and have not kept up with the country's development needs. The objective scored a 1.61, noticeably lower than 2005's score of 1.93. Journalists do not adequately cover issues from various perspectives and lack the knowledge and skills to gather information from different sources. Though there is no standard code of ethics in Bahrain, journalists usually abide by their own standards and individual perceptions. However, there are efforts to create a common code of ethics. Panelists agreed that the strict press law contributed to raising the level of self-censorship in journalists and publishers alike, preventing the media from reporting critically on some sensitive issues. Furthermore, journalists still need guidance in identifying the most important issues and events to cover and need training in how to cover them.

Panelists noted that journalists' wages were relatively low, compared with other posts, but were still high enough to prevent corruption. Panelists agreed that entertainment programming is within acceptable limits, compared with news and other reports. They also agreed that Bahrain enjoys a wealth of technical facilities and equipment that allows the media to operate smoothly. Even though Bahrain's media do occasionally establish various niche programming in the form of supplements and magazines, journalists covering such specific fields and topics need to be trained.

Bahraini journalists are generally active and engaged in political and social reports covering various local issues.

However, many journalists who are politically engaged occasionally allow their personal convictions and affiliations to affect their professionalism, some panelists said. It is often the case that journalists cover a specific issue from a limited perspective either due to their affiliation, self-censorship, restrictions, or just due to negligence or lack of the necessary skills.

Panelist Al-Sayed acknowledged that most journalists may report in favor of a specific editorial line based on political, ideological, or sectarian factors. However, other panelists emphasized the need not to generalize, noting that there is a minority composed of qualified journalists who aspire to achieve the maximum levels of professionalism. Panelist Mahdi Rabea, a journalist for *Al-Ayam* daily, said some journalists working for *Al-Waqt* seem to be following professional guidelines and resisting pressure to be biased in favor of any side.

In terms of journalistic ethical standards, a substantial number of journalists do follow broad ethical guidelines but do not have a formal code of ethics. According to panelist Al-Shaiji, the Bahrain Journalists Association is striving to issue a standard Code of Ethics by the end of 2007. But some panelists noted that establishing a common code of ethics is not the highest priority for journalists, who are more concerned about changing the press law. Sometimes, however, external pressure or temptations cause journalists to abandon their principles and drift away from their ethical convictions, some panelists said. During the 2006 parliamentary elections, for example, there were reports of clear violations of journalistic ethics when journalists received "gifts" and reported in favor of some candidates or political

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).

groups. Other journalists abandoned their professional obligations in presenting all points of view in the hope of promoting the newspaper's political line.

Panelists agreed that the country's strict press law has played a significant role in maintaining a high level of self-censorship in the media community. For example, journalists do not believe the law protects them from harsh penalties resulting from writing critically about issues of concern to the public. Meanwhile, publishers fear the backlash on their businesses if they tackle specific sensitive issues. The 2002 press law specifically lists taboo issues that could lead to prosecution, such as criticism of the royal family. This has caused many journalists to think twice before writing about an issue related to the prime minister, king, or crown prince. Panelist Jalal Fairouz, a member of parliament, recalled a case when a journalist asked a question in a conference regarding real-estate properties owned by Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa. "A couple of days later, this journalist was sacked from his post," Fairouz said.

Panelist Busafwan noted that the situation after the 2006 elections had worsened for journalists in terms of self-censorship because of the emergence of a strong opposition bloc that is hostile to critical reporting against it. He argued that before the elections, journalists didn't dare to criticize the regime, but since the opposition won about half of the seats in the parliamentary elections, journalists are refraining from critically reporting about this opposition bloc (Al-Wefaq), the largest single parliamentary bloc. "If I criticize Al-Wefaq, it will not give me any future statements," Busafwan said.

On the other hand, Jamal of the Ministry of Information noted that the degree of self-censorship in journalists remains within acceptable limits, which consequently does not prevent writers from writing freely.

When it comes to self-censorship among publishers, the picture does not get any brighter. Panelist Bashmi, who publishes *Al-Waqt*, said there are times when publishers are forced to practice self-censorship for the good of their establishment. Bashmi said he would not publish an unedited critical opinion piece, for example, targeting Sheikh Isa Qassim, who is a senior leader of the Shia sect in Bahrain. He noted that if not properly edited to remove inflammatory language and sensitive words, the article may result in direct confrontation with the whole Shia sect in Bahrain. "You could publish one article that could result in closure of the newspaper," Bashmi said, stressing the importance of self-censorship in securing the continuity of the newspaper.

Apart from the damage that may be caused to the establishment and its operations, Article 72 of the 2002 press

law states that libel crimes should also lead to the prosecution of the editor-in-chief as well as the writer of the story.

Panelist Ghayeb added that the conservative and religious nature of large segments of the Bahraini society only confirms the inevitability of self-censorship. "A religious leader may call for the boycott of a specific newspaper or even call for staging a sit-in or protest in front of a particular paper," he said. Confirming the religious and sectarian sensitivity in Bahrain, panelist Fadhel noted that he had been reviewing an interview the other day and said that if he had published the interview as it was, "there would be a sectarian war in Bahrain tomorrow."

Panelist Abdulemam emphasized the commercial factors behind self-censorship when recalling a prominent newspaper editor's warning to his journalists not to write critically about three major Bahraini companies because "I'm deriving your salaries from those companies."

Journalists in Bahrain do strive to cover local news adequately. But they often fail to mark what is most significant for the public and are usually driven by directions from their editors and immediate supervisors when covering various issues. Part of the problem, panelist Bashmi noted, is the lack of a supervisor and trainer who should acquaint fresh journalists with the work environment and inform them of the needs of the readers and public at large. Panelist Fadhel, who also trains journalism students, noted that most nationals who worked in the press remain in the field of journalism for an average of just four years. He argued that such a period is not enough to develop the professional skills necessary to be highly qualified journalists. "The lack of professionalism is the weakest point of Bahrain's media," he said.

Panelist Bashmi added that most young journalists view their work as a temporary and insecure arrangement and immediately leave for posts with higher salaries when the opportunity arrives. Well-known and longtime columnists and veteran journalists are an exception when it comes to wages, as they receive high salaries for limited working hours compared with young journalists.

Panelists agreed that one of the factors behind the poor proficiency level of most journalists is the low monthly wages they are offered, which are about 350 Bahraini dinars (US\$1,250) on average. Newspaper management often gives a high priority to profit and a low priority to journalists' well-being in terms of salaries, health insurance, qualifications, training, etc. Despite a relative increase in wages in the past few years due to competition among newspapers, wages remain unattractive in comparison with many other fields. This encourages journalists to seek other jobs to generate extra income.

In some cases, journalists may end up receiving bribes in return for publishing or not publishing specific stories. The 2006 parliamentary elections stood as evidence of an alarming level of corruption among journalists. This prompted the Bahraini Journalism Association to issue a press release in October 2006 expressing its concern about cases in which journalists and newspapers received funds to carry out and publish interviews and news articles promoting specific candidates without referring to such material as “advertisements.” But panelist Kamal believes that low levels of personal integrity and ethics in some journalists—not the level of pay—is the crucial factor behind corruption among journalists.

Most panelists agreed that low wages and the neglect of training for journalists by their papers may have had negative, long-reaching consequences on the level of journalism in the past three decades. “Newspaper administrations throughout the past 25 years are responsible for the decline of the standard of journalism in Bahrain,” panelist Fadhel contended.

Panelists agreed that news and informative reporting is more dominant than entertainment content in the Bahraini media, particularly in newspapers. However, they also noted a growing desire by the public for more entertainment sections, possibly as a break from the many politically charged news items and columns that they often find in the local press.

Bahrain is a relatively rich country, so it is natural to conclude that the media generally enjoy high-standard, professional equipment, such as digital cameras, computers, and other technological equipment. *Al-Ayam* daily was often criticized for the slow pace of modernization in its equipment. But its editor-in-chief, Al-Shaiji, said the newspaper will be moving in 2007 to a new state-of-the-art building where all the technical facilities will be provided to raise the overall standards of the newspaper and to allow it to compete more vigorously for a bigger share in the country’s limited market.

Panelists acknowledged an increase in the number of specialized publications with niche reporting in specialties such as fashion, vehicles, etc. Furthermore, most daily newspapers regularly publish supplements dealing with various subjects such as sports, family, kids, health, etc. However, panelists Al-Sayed and Ghayeb noted that despite the high technical features of such supplements, cadres that work on them are still not specialized in their theme topics. “The editor of the economic supplement today may become the editor of the sports section the next day,” Ghayeb said. Other panelists noted that because the main objective of those supplements is making a profit, newspapers seem to focus more on money rather than on the editorial quality of the product.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.35

The Bandargate scandal and the aftermath, which witnessed a ban by the Supreme Court on dealing with this issue, resulted in a decline in reliable news available to the public. This resulted in a serious blow to the rating of this objective, which received a modest score of 1.35—a serious decline from last year’s score of 1.76. Being a geographically small country with a population of about 700,000, Bahrain enjoys a wealth of news sources that cover local news extensively. In fact, some panelists believe that the country is too small to have as many as six local newspapers. With an average income exceeding US\$18,000, Bahrain’s citizens can easily afford all sorts of media. The high income levels and the granted freedom to access local and international news made it possible for the public to access a vast amount of information, particularly through the Internet, which has a very high penetration ratio. Though programs on state-owned media have witnessed a steady rise in representing the various political views, such coverage remains well below aspired levels, panelists said.

However, the lack of independent news agencies and broadcast media has been strongly emphasized by some panelists, who said that such a monopoly resulted in leaving out voices of opposition movements that should be heard. Panelists acknowledged a minimum level of transparency in the country in terms of the ability to learn about the shareholders of the various media organs, which would allow

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.

“Bahrain allows for relatively unfettered access to the Internet, especially compared with its neighbors.” Even in cases of filtered websites, many citizens found ways to overcome the blockade.

the public to better judge the objectivity of those media. The fact that Bahraini society comprises various sectarian and ethnic groups with affiliations to different political blocs makes reporting on the different groups a major challenge to the media. Some panelists believe there is sufficient coverage of minorities.

The limited geographical area of 665 square kilometers and a population of about 709,000, of whom only two-thirds are nationals, makes access to news and information in Bahrain relatively easy. Local news is widely reported in the local press. Journalists, who are mostly based in the capital Manama and Muharraq, have easy access to various sources.

A per-capita gross national income of \$18,770 (purchasing power parity) and a literacy level approaching 90 percent make it possible for the public to access the six Arabic (*Al-Ayam*, *Al-Meethaq*, *Al-Wasat*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Waqt*, *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*) and two English (*Gulf News Daily* and *Bahrain Tribune*) daily newspapers plus many locally produced periodicals. In terms of Internet penetration, more than 20 percent of residents in Bahrain have access to the Internet, placing it third to the United Arab Emirates and Qatar among all Arab countries. This explains the increasingly dominant position of the Internet as a primary source of information, particularly for the young population. The broadcast media, represented by one television and one radio station, remain monopolized by the state. But most residents have access to Arab satellite television channels, some of which have correspondents operating in Bahrain. However, these are pan-Arab channels, and coverage of Bahraini issues is minimal and focused on major events.

Panelists said the country's main Internet Service Provider, Batelco, blocked access to several political websites that may include criticism of the regime or royal family members. Nevertheless, the Open Net Initiative, which monitors Internet filtering in a number of countries, acknowledged that “Bahrain allows for relatively unfettered access to the Internet, especially compared with its neighbors.” Even in cases of filtered websites, many citizens found ways to overcome the blockade. According to panelist Abdulemam, whose website *BahrainOnline.org* is itself filtered, Batelco

purchased expensive software solutions to prevent users from using alternative methods to access blocked websites.

Panelists noted, however, that the press law has been applied to censor imported publications, which are reviewed for any objectionable content and banned from entry to the country if they contain what is deemed to be in violation of the law.

State-owned media in Bahrain do not adequately provide a voice to all politically and socially active representatives of the community, some panelists suggested. Panelist Abdulnabi said “neutrality [in the state-media] is almost nonexistent.” Meanwhile, some panelists acknowledged a trend in which those media are gradually allowing more diverse political views to be present. Panelist Kamal noted that increasingly, there are television talk-show programs that discuss sensitive and politically controversial issues. “Today, when a protest erupts and security attacks, talk shows do cover those events openly,” he said.

But even though television, radio, and the country's only news agency, Bahrain News Agency, are officially the only state-owned media in the country, panelists agreed that there certainly is governmental influence on most, if not all, private newspapers. Private newspapers do rely on the agency frequently, particularly for news related to government activities. Although the agency does cover nonpolitical news, panelists agreed that all coverage—whether political or not—is bound to not shed bad light on the government in any way. Panelists have not indicated, however, that the agency provides any substantial coverage about nonpolitical news or reports. Some panelists noted that newspapers rely more heavily themselves on investigative stories and coverage of nonpolitical events.

Dr. Abdulaziz Abul, an independent parliamentarian, noted that there is a crisis in the media in general, including the private media, in terms of independent reporting. “Therefore, we see that newspapers don't usually cover crucial matters, particularly the issue of corruption,” he said. Even though panelists did not fully agree on which daily newspapers are closest to the regime, there was consensus that some newspapers are more neutral than others. Panelist Al-Khawaja said that among private newspapers, the dailies *Akhbar Al-Khaleej* and *Al-Watan* represent one political and sectarian segment, while other newspapers represent other groups. “This is clear evidence of lack of professionalism,” Al-Khawaja said.

The press law in the country needs to be changed to regulate broadcast media and news agency services. However, most panelists agreed that such a move would

require a political will from the highest level as well as from the parliament.

Article 54 of the 2002 press law compels each newspaper to print the name of the owner and editor-in-chief in a visible location. However, because newspapers are usually owned by companies, only the name of the company is printed and not the names of the shareholders. Panelists agreed that information about owners of private media is accessible for those who seek it. Panelist Fadhel said a few years ago that the government enhanced transparency by implementing a system in which details of shareholders of each registered company are stored digitally. Access to this information through the website of the Ministry of Trade is open to the public.

But some panelists found it necessary to point out that it may prove a challenge for regular citizens to learn about the owners without guidance. On the other hand, not all those who know the owners may be able to predict the political inclination of the relevant media. Panelist Al-Khawaja said daily newspapers' political and ideological affiliations are often subject to rumors and speculations.

In terms of social, ethnic, and religious diversity, Bahrain is one of the richest GCC countries in this respect because it is home to a community of complex and mixed roots, cultures, sects, and ethnicities. Some panelists even suggested that Bahrain is a melting pot that contains immigrants from various parts of the region and the world. Citizens of non-Arabic origin along with first- or second-generation nationalized immigrants constitute a significant portion of the population and have their own customs and traditions.

Panelist Al-Khawaja noted, however, that media coverage of issues related to ethnicity, sect, or religion is rare due to the sensitivity of this issue. Some panelists noted that provocative reporting about a specific segment of the community may result in deadly confrontations on the ground. Therefore, media tend to avoid dealing with such issues unless they are thought to have no potential negative impact on the country's stability.

Panelist Abdulemam said the media tend to avoid dealing with serious ethnic and sectarian injustices in Bahrain. He specifically noted Bahrainis of Iranian origin and said they do not enjoy the same level of publicity in the press compared with other Bahrainis. Maintaining this delicate balance is what makes journalists and publishers practice extreme caution and self-censorship. No agreement was reached among panelists on how to deal with the ethnic and sectarian dimension of Bahrain's media scene.

The press law in the country needs to be changed to regulate broadcast media and news agency services. However, most panelists agreed that such a move would require a political will from the highest level as well as from the parliament.

But panelists did agree that expatriates, who form a third of the population, are an integral part of Bahraini demography and hence deserve more adequate coverage of their communities. There are non-Muslim minorities who belong to various faiths and ethnicities. Minorities in the country are represented by the Shura Council. According to Jamal of Foreign Media Affairs at Bahrain's Ministry of Information, the current council composition includes 10 women, some of whom were appointed to represent minority religious and ethnic groups in the country, including one representing Jews and another representing Christians. Jamal also noted that Nancy Elly Khedouri, a prominent Bahraini Jew, recently wrote a book about the origins and traditions of Bahraini Jews. Her book received significant press coverage in the local media.

Panelists noted that expatriates from the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia can find news about their communities and countries in the two English-language daily newspapers *Bahraini Tribune* and *Gulf Daily News*. Those groups can also access satellite television through a number of regional and international networks, which provide news and entertainment programming.

However, panelist Kamal noted that the government had allowed foreign newspapers, such as Cairo-based *Al-Ahram* daily, to print, sell, and distribute in the country without any censorship. "We aren't the only newspaper... There are Filipino, Hindi, Sudanese..." and other newspapers that are allowed to be printed and distributed locally, Kamal said.

It should be noted that Objective 3 (plurality of news sources) must have been affected by the Bandargate scandal. It was a case that shook the whole Bahraini community and particularly the press, which at one time was eager to cover the implications of the issue but was stopped short by Supreme Court orders that considered talking about it in public a crime. Although panelists have not raised the case in the discussion for understandable reasons, the authorities' suppression of journalists inclined to report about such a vital issue is subjectively viewed as a negative factor that decreased the plurality of available news sources.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.99

As is the case with other GCC countries, Bahrain enjoys an economically viable and strong media scene, with most newspapers generating decent income from advertising and those who have printing presses generating income from printing for others. Though the economy has prospered in recent years, this did not reflect positively on the income of newspapers due to an increase in competition after the emergence of the new publications. MSI panelists reflected this concern by giving this objective a score of 1.99, a slight drop from last year's rating of 2.14.

Because of low circulation figures due to the country's small population, sales and subscriptions fall way behind advertisement revenues, making competition among dailies even tenser. On the other hand, advertising agencies do rely heavily on advertising for their clients in the national media, particularly in daily newspapers.

Fierce competition among newspapers has resulted in higher overall quality in design and printing but does not necessarily reflect on editorial quality, which may in part explain the low circulation figures for most dailies. Because no governmental subsidy is given to the private media, newspapers have developed aggressive income-generating methods and occasionally have relied on external market-research bodies that could help them rise above the competitors. But Bahrain lacks verifiable circulation and printing figures for newspapers. The lack of such numbers occasionally results in parallel statements of some dailies that claim to be the most widely read, confusing both advertisers and readers.

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.

Most panelists argued that most of those who establish newspapers did so with the main objective of generating profit. They acknowledged that in general terms, some private newspapers are able to sustain themselves and generate extra profit. Even though Bahrain was ranked as the fastest-growing economy in the Arab world in 2006 and the freest economy in the Middle East, this economic activity has yet to fully develop the advertising market to serve the needs of a growing newspaper industry. As more newspapers emerged in recent years, competition over the limited income from advertising created more challenges for their management. Panelist Kamal said two newspapers may be on their way to declaring bankruptcy because of excessive competition for limited advertising income.

Although most panelists agreed that general management practices in the official media are not well established in the governmental press, they could not generalize the contrary to the private press. Panelists noted that some newspapers seem to be managed better than others. But in general, human resources are not wisely used when it comes to the journalism profession. Some panelists noted that sales and management personnel seem to be getting more attention than journalists. MSI panelists did not come up with a conclusive statement on whether newspapers have effective business plans. Some panelists argued that although newspapers with a higher circulation seem to be managed better commercially and sales-wise, they are not necessarily the best in terms of journalistic standards.

Panelist Rabea added that already there are signs of newspapers that are losing. "Some failed establishments in Bahrain were on the verge of bankruptcy and were supported by the government with loans and contributions," he said. Other panelists agreed that some well-established newspapers are successfully run and are generating profit. But some panelists suggested that it could take substantial time before a newly established newspaper could recover its initial investment and start generating profit. Furthermore, there was also a consensus that the market may be too small to accommodate any more daily Arabic newspapers, particularly as some older newspapers have been affected when they had to share the advertisement income with newcomers.

Furthermore, given that the country's population is quite small, panelists expected daily newspapers to have small circulation figures, which makes income from sales and subscriptions relatively low. For daily newspapers that have their own printing units, extra income is generated from printing external publications. But even then, panelists identified advertising revenues as the main source of income that outmatches all others. Panelist Ghayeb noted that the government is a major advertiser, allocating an annual sum of

about 5 million Bahraini dinars (US\$18 million) in the form of advertisements in the printed media.

Advertising agencies in Bahrain are active and represent a wide variety of local and international brands and companies. International companies allocate significant budgets for advertising their brands in the local market through the agencies, which distribute advertising material to the different media outlets. Newspapers do carry the bulk of the advertising campaigns, though agencies are also active in outdoor advertising.

However, all panelists agreed that newspapers depend solely on advertising income for survival. Panelist Fadhel went further to assert that advertisement revenues constitute almost 100 percent of the income, hinting that income from other streams is less than 0.5 percent. Hence, newspapers are able to form strong links with advertising agencies and companies to maintain a steady flow of advertisements all year round. Panelists agreed that advertising content falls within the reasonable limits that do not usually exceed 40 percent, allowing 60 percent or more for editorial and news content.

Panelists agreed that no subsidies are provided to the private media in Bahrain. However, some newspapers may receive indirect support from the government. Panelist Fadhel gave the example of *Al-Ayam* newspaper, whose old building was bought with a loan from a commercial bank based on a governmental guarantee. He also added that the state may occasionally use advertisements as a means of pressure and persuasion.

Due to growing competition in the past few years, market research has become increasingly common in the local media industry. With daily private newspapers struggling to increase their sales and expand their outreach, private companies are hired to carry out specific market studies that have generally succeeded in increasing sales and popularity. Panelists expect that in order to survive, dailies will probably be forced to do more scientific field research and studies to beat the fierce competition.

Information about circulation figures for printed media and audience statistics for broadcast media are virtually nonexistent. Daily-newspaper owners occasionally give statements claiming that they are the highest in readership and/or outreach. But as there are no independent or even governmental institutions to verify those figures, those numbers are taken at face value. And occasionally, it is the advertising companies that do their own research before deciding on where and for how much they would advertise in the different newspapers. Panelist Fadhel expected that the highest-circulating newspaper would be printing about 10,000 copies per edition.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.71

As expected in a politically vibrant country, the role of supporting institutions in Bahrain is quite significant. Though there are no formal trade associations dealing with media owners and publishers, coordination and alliances among some media owners are not uncommon. The failure to merge the Bahrain Journalism Association with the Bahrain Journalism Syndicate has somewhat frustrated the journalism community. Stagnancy in this objective led to a nominal decline in score from 1.84 last year to 1.71 in 2006. On the other hand, nongovernmental and grassroots organizations have somewhat compensated by actively promoting freedom of expression regularly.

In terms of academic education for journalists, panelists gave poor ratings to the academic programs currently provided in Bahrain's universities. They did, however, reflect a brighter image of some short-term training programs that targeted journalists in the country. Such programs are usually carried out by NGOs with funding from abroad. But panelists also partly blamed the restrictive working environment and faulted journalists for not fully using such opportunities to improve their skills. But there was consensus that printing units and companies importing newsprint and printing material were in private hands and out of governmental control. They also agreed that sale and distribution points are not controlled, as each media institution is free to sell and distribute its product throughout the country without prior permission.

Despite the fact that there are only six private media institutions printing eight daily newspapers (two in English

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

and six in Arabic), no trade association or formal body has formed to represent media owners or publishers. Part of the reason behind that is the excessive competition between rival newspaper owners and the limited scope to operate. Panelist Fadhel noted, however, that in the past couple of years, alliances were formed to standardize the rate of advertisements. Publicly, there have been no efforts to establish such an association. But panelist Al-Shaiji said that when urgent matters that concern newspapers come up, newspaper owners contact each other and coordinate a meeting to take important decisions. "We sometimes coordinate by phone," he said.

But panelist Al-Khawaja said that printing-press owners, some of whom print newspapers, coordinated under the umbrella of the Chamber of Trade and were able to force the Ministry of Labor to abandon a measure that it had been planning to implement concerning printing presses.

Meanwhile, the Bahrain Journalists Association, according to its director and panelist Al-Shaiji, is an institution that had helped journalists defend themselves in courts by appointing lawyers to all who needed one and providing free legal consultation. But panelist Al-Khawaja explained that the association is not professional in the real sense but is rather a "private association, whose legal frame is basically weak and was established with the interference of the state." He argued that the proper alternative to the association should have been a syndicate.

Efforts to formally establish the Bahraini Journalists Syndicate have been going on for many years. However, as an agreement to merge the syndicate with the association has yet to be reached, the long delay may have hampered the activities of the syndicate.

Panelist Fadhel, who is also the syndicate's general secretary, admitted that both the association and the syndicate still have a long way to go before being effective advocacy organizations that journalists could rely on. He indicated that an initiative was proposed to sign agreements, with all newspapers to refrain from firing journalists before consulting the syndicate to reach mutual agreements that could protect the rights of both parties. But among all newspapers, only *Al-Wasat* signed the agreement.

Fadhel said the challenge is to move from the artificial measures in the form of press releases and so on to practical approaches that involve mediation and solving problems that journalists may face in their work environment or in the court of law.

Panelist Al-Sayed said the Bahraini Journalists Association also suffers from a deficiency in providing training to

journalists and keeping them updated about the latest technical and practical means that would help them improve in their profession. Another complaint came from panelist Abdulemam, who said that the association did not react when he was detained in 2005. He said the association did not even consider him a journalist and hence ignored his case altogether while support for him had ironically come from an advocacy group across the Atlantic. "What helped release me from detention was a statement coming from the Committee to Protect Journalists in the USA," he said.

Meanwhile, panelist Kamal said he worked on establishing an entity for another purpose. Two years ago, he and other correspondents launched the Correspondents Club, a body that brought about 40 correspondents together to share experiences in a social and friendly environment. However, he stressed that the club is not a professional entity and hence does not substitute for the Bahrain Journalists Association.

Panelists highly praised the role of NGOs in defending press freedom in Bahrain. They noted that local NGOs remain active in coordinating with regional and international NGOs and advocacy groups to promote press freedom in the country. Among the NGOs that have been engaged with the press was the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, which the government dissolved in 2004, and the Bahrain Human Rights Society. Panelist Ghayeb of the Bahrain Human Rights Society said the society trained journalists and lawyers on means to protect journalists' rights based on the current laws. He also mentioned a recent workshop that discussed potential amendments to the 2002 press law to make it more compatible with international standards. Panelist Al-Khawaja, founder of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, said the center had organized peaceful protest activities in 2003 and 2005 for cases regarding the closure of electronic websites and detention of online moderators and contributors.

Academic education in the field of journalism in Bahrain could be improved, MSI panelists noted. The country's sole bachelor degree in journalism and public relations is provided by the state-owned university in Bahrain's Media, Tourism, and Arts Department at the Faculty of Arts. Panelist Abdulnabi, who graduated from Bahrain University's journalism department, defended the journalism program at the university and said that the student is to blame if he or she fails to develop the necessary skills to excel in the working environment. Abdulnabi added that the university has constantly provided students with practical training sessions to help them become acquainted with their future jobs and to complement the theoretical studies that they learn in class.

Panelist Al-Khawaja said many of the fresh graduates demonstrate poor skills in their work, pointing to a deficiency

in the academic system. Panelist Fadhel said the educational system as a whole was flawed when it did not ensure that journalism students learn proper English. "Any journalist must at least know two languages," he said. Furthermore, although the curriculum is composed of courses involving traditional media, new media, and computer-mediated communication, some panelists criticized the program's deficiency in practical training.

To compensate for any deficiencies in the academic education, panelists agreed that short-term training is needed. Frequent training workshops are held by various institutions, including some by daily newspapers that provide short-term training to their staffers. NGOs may also carry out specialized training sessions in specific themes related to the media. Some panelists, however, were critical of journalists in general for not actively seizing frequent training opportunities. Panelist Al-Khawaja, who himself is a trainer, said he could not figure out why journalists, among all other professionals, were constantly irregular in their attendance of classes and sessions.

Because the Bahraini government had applied a liberal market approach, printing units along with printing material and newsprint are in private hands without any direct control or restrictions imposed by the authorities. Similarly, the distribution and sale of newspapers are unrestricted, as publishers have the right to sell and distribute their editions freely. However, panelist Al-Shaiji of *Al-Ayam* daily said the government issued orders forbidding the sale of newspapers at street crossroads for safety reasons.

On the other hand, broadcast technology and Internet service both remain under the monopoly and control of the state.

List of Panel Participants

Abbas Busafwan, freelance journalist, Manama

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, director, Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Manama

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

Batool Al-Sayed, journalist, *Al-Ayam*, Manama

Dr. Abdulaziz Abul, member, Council of Representatives (Parliament), Manama

Ebrahim Bashmi, Editor-in-Chief, *Al-Waqt*, Manama

Essa Ghayeb, lawyer and activist, Human Rights Society, Manama

Isa Al-Shaiji, editor-in-chief, *Al-Ayam*, Manama [also the director of the Bahrain Journalists Association]

Jalal Fairooz, member, Council of Representatives (Parliament), Manama

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

Mohamed Al-Ghasra, journalist, *Al-Watan*, Manama

Mohamed Fadhel, writer and consultant, *Al-Waqt*, Al-Manama

Mohamed Sami Kamal, correspondent, *Al-Ahram*, Manama

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