

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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IREX

2121 K Street, NW, Suite 700

Washington, DC 20037

E-mail: msi@irex.org

Phone: (202) 628-8188

Fax: (202) 628-8189

www.irex.org

Project manager: Leon Morse

IREX Project and Editorial Support: Blake Saville, Mark Whitehouse, Christine Prince

Copyeditors: Carolyn Feola de Rugamas, Carolyn.Ink; Kelly Kramer, WORDtoWORD Editorial Services

Design and layout: OmniStudio

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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.

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OMAN

Despite some progress in Oman's media sector, many Omanis still complain about the limits on freedom of expression. An Omani journalist said that freedom of expression did not advance in the past year, though the number of writers and journalists willing to stand up for it has increased.

Until 2006, the government was the only provider of radio and television services. Since then, two privately owned broadcast outlets have hit the airwaves, one radio station and one television channel. Hala ("Hello"), Oman's first private radio station, was given permission to begin operations in 2005, but was unable to go on air until May 2007 because of government delays and restrictions. Al-Haqiqa TV ("Truth TV") was launched in 2006. These two outlets are the only ones to see the light of day among seven other hopefuls that received official permission pursuant to a 2004 law allowing the establishment of private sector radio and television stations.

In 2006, two individuals were charged with insulting two government officials on the Internet forum Al-Sabla Al-Omaniya. One, journalist Mohammed Al-Harthy, was banned from writing or appearing in any Omani media outlet after writing about the lack of water in eastern Oman. Al-Harthy and six others, including Saeed Al-Rashidy, the manager of the online forum, were put on trial in September 2006. Al-Harthy and another writer were sentenced to pay a fine, while a third was sentenced to a month in prison in addition to a fine of \$15,000. Al-Rashidy eventually shut down his web site, saying he was tired of the problems it brought him since establishing it in 1999.

The MSI panelists said the number of private media organizations is increasing, resulting in slightly different points of view on public issues and improving the image of journalists. They noted the importance of having a variety of media outlets, but felt it imperative to maintain an environment supportive of the profession. However, panelists expressed their worries at the fact that the Ministry of Information still controls all media in Oman, both private and state-run. Panelists agreed that creating an independent media has not been of the highest priority for the government of Oman.

The Oman is the Journalists' Association, the only professional media organization in Oman, was lunched in 2006 and operates under the supervision of the Ministries of Social Development and Information. However, most panelists considered the association powerless, lacking influence with the government or among journalists themselves.

Oman's overall score is 1.65, down somewhat from last year's score of 1.89. All objective scores this year are lower than those from last year, although Objectives 2 and 4, Professional Journalism and Business Management, suffered the largest losses. Other objectives suffered only minor decreases.

OMAN AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

Population: 3,311,640 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

Capital city: Muscat

Ethnic groups (% of population): Arab, Baluchi, South Asian, African (*CIA World Factbook*)

Religions (% of population): Ibadhi Muslim 75%, other (includes Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, Hindu) 25% (*CIA World Factbook*)

Languages (% of population): Arabic (official), English, Baluchi, Urdu, Indian dialects (*CIA World Factbook*)

GNI (2006-Atlas): \$28.89 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)

GNI per capita (2006-PPP): \$19,740 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)

Literacy rate: 81.4% (male 86.8%, female 73.5%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

President or top authority: Sultan and Prime Minister Qaboos bin Said al-Said (sultan since July 23, 1970 and prime minister since July 23, 1972)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations: Print: 7 dailies (4 in Arabic, 3 in English), 40 other newspapers and magazines; Radio: 2; Television Stations: 2

Newspaper circulation statistics: Top 3 by circulation: *Al-Watan* (circulation 34,000), *Times of Oman* (circulation 34,000), *Oman Daily* (circulation 26,000)

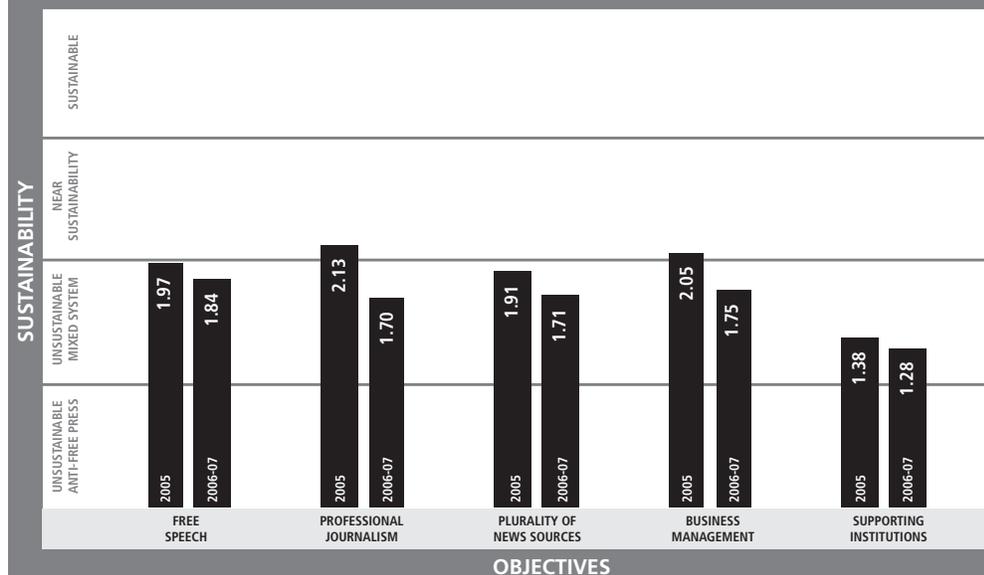
Broadcast ratings: N/A

News agencies: Oman News Agency (state-owned)

Annual advertising revenue in media sector: N/A

Internet usage: 319,200 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: OMAN



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

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

Near Sustainability (2-3):

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

Sustainable (3-4):

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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Oman Objective Score: 1.84

Panelists scored most indicators close to the final objective average of 1.84, and all except Indicators 8 and 9 were scored below a 2. Indicator 4, crimes against journalists, scored slightly more than a half point behind the average, the lowest of all indicators. On the other hand, Indicator 8, media access to and use of foreign information sources scored more than a point higher than the average.

Oman's constitution, called the Basic Law, allows freedom of expression. The country's Publication Law, however, remains silent on the issue. In late 1998 there were demands from the Majlis ash-Shura (Oman's "consultative council") to change the law, but these demands were not addressed by the government. Panelists agreed that the Publication Law as it stands is not conducive to freedom of expression in the media.

Hamoud Al-Touqi, editor-in-chief of *Al-Waha* monthly magazine, said, "According to the [Publication] Law, journalists should not write negatively about the Sultan or religion, or spread hate speech... I have lots of ideas to write about but because I run my own private media company, I am afraid of having my magazine closed or causing trouble for my business."

As panelist Zaher Al-Mahrooqi of Oman Radio explained, the problems with freedom of speech stem from the Basic Law not providing journalists with specific legal protections or the right to information, even though the Law itself grants freedom of expression. He added that there are unwritten laws, orders, and instructions that journalists cannot challenge or ignore.

Taiba Al-Maawali, a former member of the consultative council and former Oman Radio anchor, said there is a contradiction between the law and reality, and between Omani law and the international treaties Oman has signed. The media in Oman can not discuss what is considered to be sensitive political, economic, or military issues. She said that finding information related to citizens' real concerns is nearly impossible, and even when found, it cannot be published or broadcast.

Panelists complained that media discourse has not changed in years because of the Ministry of Information's strict control of news reporting. Basima Al-Rajih of the newly launched Hala Radio said that the media in Oman has been reporting the same stories since 1970. Official points of view are dominating, she said, and although the Basic Law grants freedom of expression, violations against journalists

by the government persist. Al-Rajih said that during Cyclone Guno in June 2007, two weeks after the station's launch, the government pressured staff to change its coverage of the storm's devastation, which differed from the official Oman Radio's approach. "We got calls and threats from the Ministry of Information telling us that we should not be different, we should not cross the line," she said. Al-Rajih added that government officials should respect the law.

Censorship and self-censorship continue to haunt Omani journalists. Abdulmoneim Al-Hasani, a teacher at Sultan Qaboos University, explained that each official creates his own law and orders his subordinates to follow, each having his own interpretation and ambitions for advancement. Al-Hasani said that numerous studies show that the Publication Law is not beneficial; it is old and its principles are mostly imported from other societies with environments different from Oman's. All panelists agreed that there is a need for a new publication law that includes rights and protections for journalists.

Journalists in Oman should raise questions about their profession such as, "What is my role?" "What are my rights?" and "What kind of protection do I have?" Al-Hasani added.

Private media licensing is riddled with obstacles such as government bureaucracy and a requirement to raise enough capital—over \$1 million for a daily paper—to serve as a deposit. Panelists thought the licensing process is unfair because the government favors certain people and groups. Panelist Saeed Al-Hashimi, a writer and analyst, said, "Licenses are given to people loyal to the government, powerful people who are already close to government, or royal family members. Professional journalists don't have the same opportunity. The Ministry of Information can deny licenses to independent journalists or other outspoken people."

Al-Hashimi went on to say, "I know that a well-known non-local Arab TV station has asked for a license but was rejected."

Al-Rajih confirmed that Hala Radio faced many difficulties before it was launched and is still encountering problems in getting its frequency to cover all of Oman. The station can be heard only in Muscat and other nearby cities. "The Ministry of Information refused to give us short-wave frequencies so we can reach all areas in Oman. Now our broadcast is limited to Muscat and cities nearby," she said. The Ministry of Information is holding several applications for other broadcast stations, but has only granted three licenses since private media ownership was legalized in 2004; only two—both radio stations—have begun broadcasting. The license for television only included satellite and cable, not terrestrial broadcasting.

Hamoud Al-Touqi, editor-in-chief of Al-Waha monthly magazine, said, "According to the [Publication] Law, journalists should not write negatively about the Sultan or religion, or spread hate speech... I have lots of ideas to write about but because I run my own private media company, I am afraid of having my magazine closed or causing trouble for my business."

Freelancer Kalfan Al-Abri said that, "Journalists are not encouraged to establish their own media outlets because of the capital required and the limits on freedom of expression."

Khalifa Al-Hijiri, a newspaper correspondent, said, "Currently the country does not have the necessary legal framework, the transparent environment, or the required guarantees for a healthy media industry to function and flourish like other kinds of investment possibilities." He noted that running other types of businesses in Oman is easier, faster, and more transparent.

Al-Hasani added that, except for some relief on taxes applicable to paper and printing, there are no special tax breaks for media outlets. However, media are eligible for interest-free government loans.

Crimes against journalists are neither reported nor does the public know about them. However, they take the form of official pressure and extralegal procedures rather than physical attacks. Usually journalists are threatened and punished without trial. They do not have a forum where they can complain about such measures taken against them. If the government fails to intimidate journalists by threatening or punishing them in a secret way, it will sue them. Some of these cases were publicized through Internet forums. Only a few of them start publicly, like the case with Al-Sabla Al-Omaniya described above. Al-Hashimi indicated that there is a gap in the law. "I call it the branding and punishment law. There isn't anything related to protection in it," he said.

According to Fawziya Al-Amri from *Al-Shabiba* daily newspaper, "Journalists are squeezed between their employers and the Ministry of Information, which is why self-censorship is so high." She added that the Ministry knows how to punish journalists but never helps or protects journalists when they seek it. Nasser Al-Ghilani said, "If you don't write about the bright side of the government you

are in trouble. Journalists tell people what the officials want them to say—without criticism."

Mohammed Al-Bulushi reported, "I met ministers who indicated that media is a problem and the country is better without it. They want their activities to remain a secret." Al-Rajhi wondered, "I don't know why the Ministry of Information isn't shut down. We don't need it anymore."

Average citizens do not know what is happening behind the scenes, and journalists lack the means to publicize it. The Internet can play a helpful role in informing the public, but the public does not necessarily react to it.

There is no special treatment for the media owned by the government, if only because all media outlets get the same information from the same official sources. Oman News Agency is the main official news provider. Readers do not see or feel the editorial differences between the private and the governmental outlets. For all intents and purposes, there is no independent media in Oman.

Libel is a crime under the criminal statutes and the Publication Law. Journalists are usually punished by the imposition of jail time and fines. However, no Omani official has ever been sued or put on trial because of comments they have made that were published or broadcast by a journalist.

Government officials are not obliged by any law to provide journalists or citizens with public information. On the contrary, journalists may face punishment such as jail time or

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.

termination if they find and publish information from other sources regardless of its validity.

Khalid Al-Adawi of *Oman Daily* newspaper illustrated the pressures Omani journalists face: "I was at a crime scene by accident and saw the killer after he killed his victims and then himself. I had my camera, I took pictures, I had wonderful interviews and information. When the police arrived and noticed that I was not one of them they chased me across the city until I reached the newspaper office. The police wanted to take me to jail directly if I did not give them my camera and all the notes I took. The editor-in-chief could not do anything. Finally I had to give in to the pressure of both the police and my editor. Not only this, I had to sign a paper that I will never publish anything about the crime anywhere, even on the Internet."

There are no limitations on media access to, and use of, international news, whether through satellite television or the Internet. Access to international news is much freer than to local news. Cost is not an obstacle to getting the Internet or satellite television. International wire services are accessible and easily affordable through the Internet. Media outlets may use the Gulf, Arab, and international news agencies' stories. Media outlets publish most international news, except information they think the government would consider sensitive to itself or its foreign allies.

Panelists agreed that anybody can write for the newspapers or magazines, but to work as a journalist at a specific media outlet, one needs to register with the police department. Otherwise, the journalist will not receive the professional identification that is issued by the Ministry of Information. This accreditation must be renewed annually. Correspondents of non-Omani media outlets need special work permits.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Oman Objective Score: 1.70

Panelists leveled a harsher judgment of the quality of journalism this year compared to last, and the score fell from 2.13 to 1.70. Most indicator scores fell close to the overall objective average. Only Indicator 7, modern facilities and equipment, stood out, receiving a score slightly more than a half point higher.

Most news stories in Oman come from the same sources of information. Stories are mainly about government events and official interviews. A plurality of sources is not available; journalists can not use more than one source if an official source objects. Journalists sometimes include expert opinions in their reports, however. Panelist Al-Mahrooqi pointed out,

Panelists also placed blame on a lack of professional skills among their colleagues. They mentioned that journalists often do not commit themselves to professional standards due to, in the words of Kalifa Al-Hijri, the "ignorance" of media outlets. "They don't care about professionalism," he said.

"Journalists suffer from the lack of news sources; we have to depend on official sources."

Al-Bulushi added, "Most of the time we find ourselves with one source of information. For example, for anything about the elections we have to go to the Ministry of the Interior where the head of the primary committee is the undersecretary. If he decides not to give information, nobody can [give information]. And the Ministry of Commerce for instance does not allow us to publish anything about economics or trade in the country without their permission." Al-Hasani explained, "It is difficult to get information directly from the sources sometimes, so journalists have to depend on press releases." But these releases are not reliable, because as panelist Al-Abri indicated, "A press release is not objective and not balanced at all."

Al-Mawali voiced the opinion that journalists only repeat what officials say, true or false; they can not discuss or criticize. Sometimes there is information that differs from the official story, but journalists are afraid of publishing it.

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).

Panelists felt that entertainment programs outnumber news and information programs. They also reported that media outlets usually own modern equipment that allows for high-quality production values.

This is true for international news as well. He also said that the new, educated generations are afraid of working in the media because of the authorities. Most who currently work as journalists came to it by accident; few of them actually intended to. Many journalists have left the profession recently or left the country for a better professional environment.

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Al-Hemli said, "We as journalists do our best to get information, to write good articles, to try to be fair and balanced, but we know that the quality of our work is still poor and that is because of the difficulties in getting information and the weakness of sources and sometimes of our skills."

All panelists agreed that none of the media organizations in Oman have a code of ethics, and journalists do not push to adopt one. Panelists said that it is common to get a complimentary gift from a large company at a press conference, without asking for special treatment. Of course the next day all the newspapers will publish the company's story, they said. There are some cases when journalists may get presents from companies such as plane tickets or other kinds of benefits. But journalists do not seek bribes to publish—or not to publish—false information, according to panelists.

As indicated above, in Objective 1, self-censorship is commonplace. Editors-in-chief play the role of internal censor to ensure that nobody deviates from the direction desired by the Ministry of Information. Journalists practice self-censorship out of fear, according to panelists. However, the relationship between editors or owners and the Ministry, which leads to self-censorship, is based on mutual interest: each side receives something in return.

In terms of covering key events, journalists cover all events they are asked to. They cannot freely choose what to cover

or not, and might be threatened or banned from reporting if they disobey.

Al-Mahrooqi said, "Salaries are low and our profession is marginalized." However, journalists' salaries have risen slightly, which feeds hopes that the quality and number of those entering the field will increase. Panelists also voiced the hope that as journalists become more aware of their role in society, they will become more empowered to meet the still-constant challenges to their profession. The salaries in the government-owned media outlet are higher than those in the private sector, and salaries in the private media are low even in comparison with other professions.

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Investigative journalism is almost absent from Omani media outlets. Journalists are asked sometimes not to conduct investigations because the media outlet does not want to face legal or other problems from the government. Panelist Faiza Al-Hemili, a reporter with *Al-Watan*, said, "I am thinking of quitting journalism because of our editors who abandon the profession for other benefits. Several times I wrote investigative stories, but I could not publish them."

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Oman Objective Score: 1.71

Oman's score in this objective last year was 1.91, and it fell somewhat this year to 1.71. Since last year, panelists felt, there has been no progress regarding the plurality of news sources because the government still controls most of them either directly or indirectly. Most indicators scored close to the objective average, and only Indicator 2, citizen access to media, scored even marginally above a 2. Scoring at the bottom of all indicators in this objective was Indicator 3, state media reflect the views of the political spectrum; it received a score just over a half point lower than the overall average.

There are currently 36 print publications in Oman, including a new private Arabic newspaper launched in August 2007 called *Al-Zaman* ("Time"). A small number of private radio stations operate, the first being Radio Hala, which began broadcasting in May 2007. However, local news does not usually feature a wide range of views and opinions. Internet forums give local events more importance, and opinions are more freely expressed. Al-Hajiri commented, "In general,

media is an executive branch of higher government policies. Transparency and trust between readers and journalists is vague and formless." However, Al-Hasani added, "The independent media is very new in Oman. It needs time to perform differently from the mainstream media."

Al-Haqiqa, the only private television station in Oman, can be seen on satellite as well as through cable. It is owned by Mohammed Al-Hashimi, who has a background as an herbal medicine specialist. He appears in most programs giving advice to people in folk medicine. Bader Al-Nadabi said, "I don't know why the Ministry gave permission for those kinds of channels, because most programs are giving false information about herbs to people. If it was more serious and provided what people are really looking for, it would never get the permission."

People have access to media outlets generally, and can afford to subscribe to different local and international sources of news and information. Television is most widely used in Oman, followed by radio. The Internet is becoming popular and the number of people using it is increasing. Print media is less relied upon, as reflected by low circulation figures. The government and businesses are the main subscribers to local newspapers, so most readers come from those sectors. Most media establishments and stations are located in Muscat.

International publications are more popular and they are easily found at newsstands. However, they are subject to official censorship. Al-Hajiri noted, "The Ministry of Information might ban the distribution of any foreign

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.

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publication in Oman if it criticizes the state or does not agree with the nature and the culture of the society."

State-owned media in Oman reflect the government's views and it is the dominant voice; privately owned media is in the minority. In general different points of view do not commonly appear in Oman's television and radio. Some panelists said that the views presented in state media reflect those of the people only when the two coincidentally intersect.

Panelist Al-Mawali mentioned that state broadcasting produces many programs to show the positive side of the Oman revolution since 1970, but no economic or political debates. It is all about the government's achievements. Panelist Zaher Al-Mahrooqi agreed, "Only the positive side that includes economic prosperity for Omani people is reported, but nothing about [the] negative side."

The Oman News Agency (ONA) is the only news agency in Oman, and it is owned by the state. All local media organizations have to use its news without alteration. ONA is considered the representative of the government, and any official news must be taken directly from it, especially the stories which include the Sultan or top government officials.

Private broadcasters do produce some of their own news and information programs. However, as the case with Hala's coverage Cyclone Guno, these independent broadcasts are subject to government pressure and are far from fully independent in the news they present.

Owners of media organizations are generally known by citizens, and most are either part of the government or powerful investors. Non-locals, mainly Indians, run most of the private sector media organizations. This situation often causes conflict between Omanis who do the reporting work and foreigners who have the last word on what should be published.

Regarding coverage of broad social interests and minority issues, Al-Hajiri noted that the media represent wide social interests but not so with minority issues. Minorities form about 23 percent of the population.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Oman Objective Score: 1.75

Panelists' scores for business management this year resulted in a lower score, a 1.75 down from 2.05 last year. Panelists awarded relatively good scores to Indicators 2 and 4, multiple sources of revenue and advertising revenue in line with accepted standards; the latter received a score more than a point higher than the average. However, Indicators 6 and 7, market research and audience measurements, both scored more than half a point lower than the overall average.

The media business is apparently flourishing in Oman if one judges by the number of media outlets. The number of newspapers and magazines as well as broadcasting outlets has increased. For example, in 2007 the first Omani private radio stations opened for business.

However, management issues prevent better media performance, as, according to the panelists, many media establishments bring financial troubles upon themselves. They neither follow professional methods nor do they care about improving their products to address market needs. That is why, as Khalifa Al-Hijiri said, many professionals abandon the industry for other fields.

Bader Al-Nadabi, a reporter with *Al-Shabiba* experienced this situation: "I had to leave the magazine I used to work at because I felt I was used like a machine day and night for the wrong purposes. I could not reach a point where we had a common vision addressing such issues as low salary, professionalism, and the lack of understanding of Omanis' language or society or culture. I don't understand why Omani

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.

investors trust and keep [people, referring to foreign managers] who don't know even the language to run their businesses."

Foreign ownership is aggravated by the fact that the owner-investors tend to place commercial considerations over editorial ones. Despite diverse revenue sources for media, Faiza Al-Hemili noted problems. "The private media gains much profit from advertisements; they can be independent financially but not editorially. They have the choice to be different but not to the extent of upsetting the government," he said.

Hamoud Al-Touqi stated that the minimum legal protections of freedom of expression are in place, but journalists choose to compromise their integrity in favor of sources of funding, such as large companies and powerful investors, especially in the private sector where media outlets depend on advertising revenue. In such situations the freedom of press becomes weak, he said. He explained, "I have my own magazine and sometimes I had to ignore professional standards in order to keep my resources. Some journalists would take the difficult road if they ignore the financial part of the industry."

Advertising is the main source of revenue for the private sector media. Mohammed Al-Bulushi noted, "Newspapers allow advertisement to occupy most or all [of] the front page. Newspapers don't balance between ads and editorial content." But as Al-Hasani explained, "Newspapers don't have other sources of support. The reader's power is weak. Ads are more important." Al-Bulushi replied, "The weakness is in the journalistic structure."

Until 1995 all private newspapers and magazines received government subsidies, but now the government provides only interest-free loans.

Panelists agreed that studies and research are not really used for strategic planning purposes. A few outlets are coming to realize the importance of research but have not yet conducted any to find out what the public wants. Panelists also noted that the journalist is a conduit for market research, but that nobody pays attention to their ideas. Modernizing and innovation are absent from the editors' minds. This is the reason behind low readership in Oman; print media do not look attractive.

No independent organization provides statistics about media in Oman, and reliable figures on ratings or distribution are not available. Outlets announce any figures they want without documentation. Some private media release false data, claiming experts compiled the information. Al-Hijiri said, "There is a need for research especially on the interior and remote towns; most [of] Oman's population is not in the big cities. Media companies should depend on professionals and experts in conducting research. Market research is important for both sides. Trust is needed between media and consumers."

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Oman Objective Score: 1.28

This objective's score is the lowest among the five MSI objectives again this year, and has fallen slightly to 1.28 from last year's score of 1.38. In fact, the average belies a situation that is worse than at first glance. Media-supporting associations and NGOs in Oman are practically absent; even the only relevant association, the Oman Journalists Association, does not pursue journalists' rights or protections and does not support media interests or media independence. As such, Indicators 1, 2, and 3 all received scores of about 0.5 or below. Indicator 4, formal journalism education programs, scored close to the average. Pulling up the average were Indicators 5, 6, and 7, short-term training opportunities, access to printing facilities, and media distribution, which all scored well above the average.

There are no trade associations representing the interests of media owners or media outlets. Similarly, panelists could not identify any NGOs working to support a free and independent media in Oman. Unions are not yet established in Oman, despite a 2006 law permitting them. This law was issued after a trade agreement was signed with the United States, which required that Oman allow the creation of unions as one of the conditions of the agreement.

Many journalists accuse the recently established Oman Journalists Association (OJA) of acting as a government body more than a professional association. The OJA is, like all other associations in Oman, under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Social Development, and under the indirect supervision of the Ministry of Information. The government

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.

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must approve all activities and cooperative agreements with international organizations.

Issues such as freedom of press, journalists' rights, or changing the Publication Law are not favorable issues to the government; seeking approval from ministries to take up such activities is useless from OJA's point of view. Al-Mawali explained, "The law allows establishing NGOs under the supervision of the government. OJA cannot be outside this framework. It has unclear objectives, no influence, and can not apply pressure. The association is paralyzed vis-à-vis the government. Many violations are committed against journalists and OJA would not say a word. It isn't independent."

Al-Mahrooqi added, "OJA is just a decoration, not for real issues. Most good journalists are not members because they don't feel there is a benefit from membership. The communications organizing law, for example, includes a clear article criminalizing those who express 'unsavory' opinions in any communication media and device such as the Internet and cell phones. Why does OJA not do something about it?"

Al-Hijiri responded, "The OJA needs time to gain the experience to function independently. Being professional is essential for OJA to do what is expected of it in terms of protecting journalists and putting their demands as priority. The board of the association lacks the leadership and initiative to earn the trust of journalists, to raise awareness in society and to provide the legal support for those who need it. The association should benefit from the example of similar international organizations." Al-Hasani offered, "OJA is weak because it is young. Its staff and members need the support and education to learn more about how to be a professional association."

Al-Hemili said, "The OJA has been conducting some activities lately, but mostly for their staff and may include a few media people."

Panelists also criticized OJA for accepting members from all related fields, including those working in public relations.

Journalists feel that the association is not committed to journalists only, and because of that it is not focusing on journalism issues.

Panelists certainly expressed the need for a strong, independent association or union dedicated to issues facing journalists. Al-Bulushi said, "Journalists should be stronger than the government, but here journalists are under the control of the government even if they work in the private sector." Fawziya Al-Ameri, senior editor with *Al-Shabiba*, cautioned, "The law does not protect us. If we need help we don't know where to go. If we don't take care of ourselves, nobody will."

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only public university in Oman, is the only higher education institute that offers a degree in journalism and mass communications. The department was created in the College of Arts in 1986. The department accepts a small number of students annually. Sohar, a private university, opened a journalism department in 2003 but it was closed shortly thereafter. Al-Bayan private college offers a media class, but it is still in the experimentation stage. Panelist Al-Hasani explained that new journalism and media departments face several problems. One of them is getting the approval from the government, and another significant problem is attracting the students to fill classes. That does not encourage private colleges to offer this major.

Al-Hashimi added, "The Ministry of Higher Education does not allow private universities and colleges to offer journalism classes. Sometimes the Ministry directs applicants to ask for Sultan Qaboos University approval as a first step."

Bader Al-Nadabi graduated six years ago from SQU. He said, "After graduation it was very hard to find a job. As a journalism graduate, I felt it was useless to study four years to get a degree in this field." Khalfan Al-Abri graduated from the same department two years ago, and added, "It took me more than a year to find a job. I worked for a short period at a privately owned magazine. The salary was so low and the work environment so bad, it was difficult to continue without professional standards. Now I work as a public relations officer in a ministry."

Al-Hasani, who is a teacher at the journalism department in SQU, said, "Our graduates often complain about not finding suitable jobs. We know that the market does not accept them for several reasons, including lack of skills and poor English ability. We noticed other problems regarding students themselves. Few students really want to study and then work as a journalist. Most of them prefer a comfortable PR job in a ministry where salaries are higher and work is easier. Some students enter the department because they were transferred

from another department. Our department accepts students with the lowest grades and skills. The department teaches media and journalism without specialization in one major, so students have classes in all media fields. The market prefers specialized people."

The SQU Journalism and Mass Communication department now accepts between 40 and 50 new students annually, and is working on modernizing the curriculum, providing graduates with more practical skills, and teaching subjects in both Arabic and English. Another development is that students choose a specific major in media in the last two years of study.

Journalists also complain about not having professional development training opportunities after graduation or during employment. Short-term training centers or institutes are not available in Oman. Media organizations do not have their own training centers or departments for professional development. Panelist Al-Hemili said, "Training is the last thing our newspaper would think of." Some lucky journalists are nominated by their supervisors for the rare workshop held in Oman or something offered outside the country. Other panelists said that training is occasionally provided but less than is needed and not for all journalists in the media organization.

Al-Bulushi added, "A professional journalist is stronger and causes more trouble. That is why they don't want to train journalists." Al-Rajih pointed out, "The problem is that training makes a journalist more resistant and serious about his profession, and of course very difficult to deal with."

All daily newspapers in Oman have their own printing press and other printing equipment. Purchasing paper is cheap, but all printing houses must have licenses. Other publications must receive permission before printing. Printing and paper companies are otherwise treated as standard commercial investments, are well managed, and operate profitably. Print media generally handle distribution for themselves and sales are through independent kiosks and small shops.

List of Panel Participants

Taiba Al-Mawali, presenter, Radio of Oman, Muscat

Zaher Al-Mahrooqi, senior anchor, Radio of Oman, Muscat

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

Abdulmoneim Al-Hasani, journalism instructor, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat

Fawziya Al-Ameri, senior editor, *Al-Shabiba*, Muscat

Mohammed Al-Bulushi, head of local news, *Al-Shabiba*, Muscat

Bader Al-Nadabi, reporter, *Al-Shabiba*, Muscat

Basima Al-Rajihi, presenter, Radio Hala, Muscat

Khaled Al-Adawi, reporter, *Oman Daily*, Muscat

Khalifa Al-Hijiri, correspondent, *Oman Daily*, Bediya, Alsharqiya Region

Faiza Al-Hemili, reporter, *Al-Watan*, Muscat

Khafan Al-Abri, freelancer, Muscat

Nasser Al-Ghilani, writer and correspondent, *Oman Daily*, Sur, Al-Sharqiya Region

Saeed Al-Hashimi, freelancer, Muscat

Moderator

Rafiah Al-Talei, program director, Gulf Forum for Citizenship, Muscat

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