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BAHRAIN

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Bahrain's media performance in 2008 mirrored the island kingdom's deteriorating political and economic situation. Escalating sectarian rifts shook the country, whose native population is mostly Shiite Muslim but whose ruling family is Sunni Muslims. In the hope of restoring their own professional neutrality and exerting an unbiased influence on society, journalists in Bahrain took an unprecedented step, announcing an anti-sectarian professional code of honor signed by more than 200 journalists and other media workers. A group of website operators sought to fashion a similar code. The Bahrain Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI) closed down three websites for their clear sectarian discourse, and while members of the press had renounced sectarianism, they opposed the administrative decision and called for a court ruling.

Another galvanizing issue was the government's proposal to amend to Press Law 47 of 2002. The amendments that the MOCI proposed and submitted to the cabinet would abolish imprisonment, including precautionary detention, for violations of the press law. However, they opened the door to much harsher penalties by allowing prosecution of cases against journalists under the penal code and terrorism laws. The proposed amendments frustrated observers, who have long awaited approval of a separate set of amendments that have been tied up in the legislative authority.

Although the government maintained its monopoly over broadcast media, the number of private newspapers continued to grow, with a new weekly established in June 2008. But in a country of just 1 million people, expansion of the number of publications only made competition for advertising more intense. Such unfavorable conditions were reflected in the exit of a number of veteran journalists to more professionally and financially satisfying careers.

Overall, the score this year showed slight improvement. Objective 2, professional journalism, and Objective 5, supporting institutions, showed no change. However, the other objectives did receive different scores compared to last year: Objective 4 (business management) declined by a quarter of a point, while Objective 1 (freedom of speech) and Objective 3 (plurality of news) received moderately higher scores.

BAHRAIN AT A GLANCE

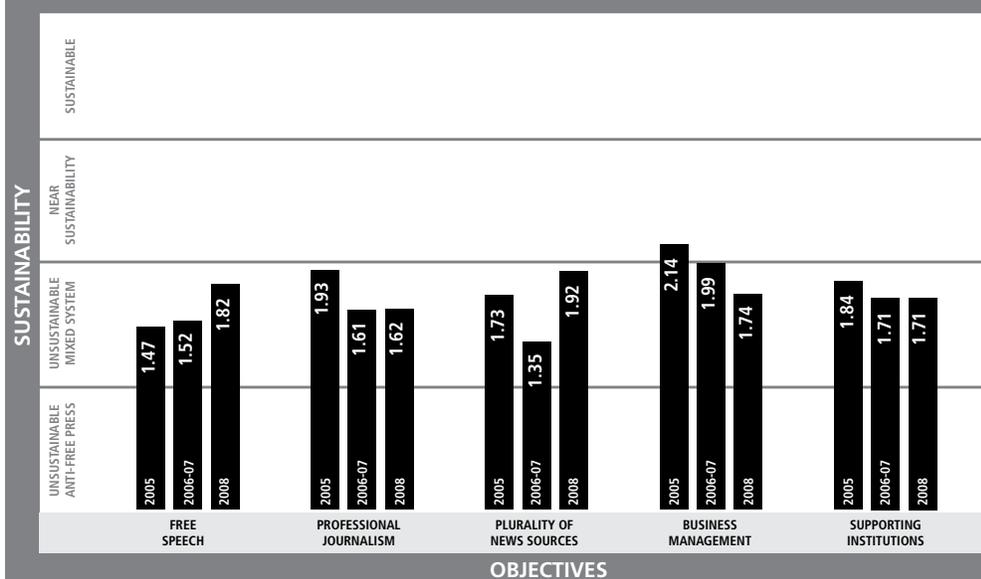
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 727,785 (includes 235,108 non-nationals) (July 2009 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:** Arabic, English, Farsi, Urdu (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GDP (2007):** \$15.8 billion (UNDP Human Development Report, 2009)
- > **GDP per capita (2007-PPP):** \$29,723 (UNDP Human Development Report, 2009)
- > **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)

MEDIA SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: Five main daily papers; one state-owned Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation (BRTC); Radio: One radio station beaming eight channels with different programming (source: BRTC); Television Stations: One TV station with five different channels along with the main satellite channel, Bahrain TV, that is viewed throughout the Arab world through Arabsat and Nilesat (source: BRTC)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Al-Ayam*, *Al-Meethaq*, *Akhbar-Al-Khaleej*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** BRTC (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Significant foreign investment in the media:** None
- > **Internet usage:** 402,900 (2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BAHRAIN



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

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

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

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

Near Sustainability (2-3):

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

Sustainable (3-4):

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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.82

Articles 23 and 24 of Bahrain's 2002 constitution guarantee freedom of expression, but several factors can restrict the full exercise of that freedom of expression. For example, Article 23 states that "Everyone has the right to express and disseminate their opinion verbally, in writing, or otherwise in accordance with the terms and conditions specified by the law." However, the same article requires "observing the principles of the Muslim faith and the people's unity, as well as not causing division or sectarianism." Article 24 guarantees freedom of the press, printing, and publishing, but only in keeping with "the provisions of the previous article."

The Journalism and Publishing Law 47 of 2002 organizes press, printing, and publishing activities in Bahrain. Using language similar to the constitution, Article 1 of the law states that "Everyone has the right to express and disseminate their opinions verbally, in writing, or otherwise in accordance with the terms and conditions set forth in the law, all without compromising the principles of faith and the unity of the people, and in a way that does not cause division or sectarianism."

Nawaf al-Sayed, a lawyer who works closely with journalists, said, "Some articles of the Bahraini penal code or the Press, Printing, and Publishing Law are loose and broad. They may have more than one interpretation. Examples include observing the sanctity of the Muslim faith, the unity of the people, or national security—in contradiction with the constitution's stipulations. The interpretation and revision of such restrictions must be addressed in court to regulate controls in a way that contributes to expanding the margin of press and publishing freedom."

However, al-Sayed and other panelists said that they believe that legal norms have shown relative progress, and that Bahrain's judiciary and courts deal positively with the concepts of freedom of opinion and expression. The harshest restrictions on freedom of expression, they concurred, come not from the kingdom's laws but from its beliefs and norms. "Society exercises pressures and imposes freedom restrictions that may exceed those imposed by legislation," al-Sayed said. "There are many red lines. For example, our social reality rejects criticism of the clergy, heads of political associations, or important public figures. We have sometimes witnessed Bahrain's parliament pressuring the media on various issues."

"I can't publish negative news about Gulf and Bahraini ruling families, for example," explained Ahmed al-Abidaly, a researcher and journalist with *Al-Waqt* newspaper.

Ibrahim Bashmi, *Al-Waqt's* editor-in-chief, agreed, saying: "Newspapers bear responsibility for the news they decide to publish. The nature of our society imposes some journalistic traditions, but there is no related legal prohibition. Can I publish in a newspaper the same naked photos [shown] on foreign programs? Our religious and social systems do not accept them."

Al-Sayed contended that press freedoms are subject to legitimate legal constraints, such as restricting coverage of ongoing court cases. "There are certain controls to prevent press publication in order to achieve the higher goal of justice," he said.

Restrictions on the freedom of expression may also come from within media outlets themselves, either to avoid clashes with the authorities that may marginalize them in Bahrain's small community, or for fear of financial damage through withheld government advertising. Panelists estimated that the various government institutions allocate a total of BHD 5-8 million (\$13-\$21 million) each year for newspaper advertisements. The government can withdraw advertising from any paper that publishes material that these institutions do not want to be made public. Bashmi affirmed that the government withdrew advertisements from his newspaper when an article revealed the inefficiency of one of the ministries. The same is true for the private sector, where advertisers can similarly control news trends.

Al-Waqt writer Ghassan al-Shihabi said he does not foresee an end to political and economic control over free expression

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.

in newspapers “as long as top men in newspapers keep frequenting councils and places where they meet senior officials. They do not wish to listen to reprimands concerning what is published in their newspaper. Rather, they want these official circles to be satisfied with them. Such cases are well known in Bahrain. Each newspaper is affiliated to one of the country’s dominant politico-economic authorities.”

In Bahrain, the MOCI has the authority to issue licenses for newspapers. The state holds a monopoly on broadcast media, so there is no broadcast licensing procedure. A law drafted in 2007 to regulate the broadcast sector still awaits consideration by the legislative authority.

Article 44 of the press law states that “newspapers may only be established when the minister issues a license, and is conditional on the approval of the cabinet.” Article 45 requires a minimum of five people to apply for the license. Newspaper companies are registered with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

An applicant for a daily newspaper license must have capital of at least BHD 1 million (\$2.6 million), while weekly papers are required to have BHD 50,000 (\$133,000). In addition, Bashmi pointed out, “An insurance amount of 10 percent of a newspaper’s capital is deposited with the information ministry under the claim that it guarantees rights in case of a future lawsuit against the publisher.”

According to Mohamed Fadhel, a writer with *Al-Waqt* and secretary general of the Bahrain Journalists’ Syndicate, “financial constraints are the greatest impediment to granting the licenses stated in the law.” He added that the decision to issue licenses is a political decision, as the cabinet issues the final approvals. Al-Abidaly agreed with Fadhel, noting that the 10 percent set-aside “affects newspapers with little financial resources and impedes the entry of new blood to the media.”

Article 51 of the 2002 press law states that the MOCI must decide whether to grant a license within 60 days of application and it must state its reasons in cases of rejection. Lack of a response is an implicit rejection. Proposed amendments to the law would reduce the decision period to 45 days. The Shura Council—the appointed upper house of Bahrain’s parliament—has proposed that failure to respond to applications within 60 days would constitute implicit approval rather than rejection, according to Bashmi, who is a member of the council.

Bahrain does not have a tax system except the fees imposed for government services. However, panelists found discriminatory restrictions on the media that did not apply to other activities. Bashmi pointed out that the 10 percent of a newspaper’s capital deposited with the MOCI represent a loss because it is “frozen in a bank account. This condition is not imposed on other [industries].”

Journalists have not been the victims of crimes in Bahrain, most panelists agreed, and their security is not threatened except when they are exposed to violence while covering sensitive events that take place during marches or demonstrations. However, Esmat al-Musawi, a writer with *Al-Ayam* newspaper, said that she believes that the word “security” has broader meaning, and that obstructing investigative journalism or threatening to withdraw advertising could be classified as terrorizing the media.

Government-owned media and outlets very friendly to the government enjoy preferential treatment when the government leaks news. Bashmi said that public media, as government agencies, enjoy the possibility of requesting interviews with senior officials and ministers, who likewise will often ask to be interviewed on public media. He pointed out that the government appoints officials in the state media.

Libel cases are currently tried in criminal courts. Regarding libel of public officials, Article 72 of the Journalism and Publishing Law 47 of 2002 states: “Publishing material that questions the acts of a civil servant, a person who enjoys public parliamentary capacity, or a person performing public service that involves defamation renders the editor-in-chief and the writer subject to the libel penalty stated in the penal code, unless the published incidents were verified and related to the profession or service.”

Under the penal liability chapter of Law 47, journalists can be punished with imprisonment for between six months and five years for acts related to addressing religion or the king, or acts that incite crimes and overthrowing the regime. “The king and prime minister refuse the imprisonment of journalists, but the current law is not opposed to it,” Shihabi pointed out.

Al-Sayed, the lawyer, said that “journalists who commit defamation are punishable under the law similar to other citizens.” He added that judges seem to favor journalists if libel is proven to be without malice. Al-Sayed also pointed out that the burden of proof is on the plaintiff, not the defendant. Bashmi concurred: “It is the responsibility of officials to prove a journalist’s ill intention. I do not have to prove my good intentions... Acquitted journalists have the right to demand civil compensation.”

The MOCI in 2008 submitted to the cabinet a package of amendments to the press law that would abolish imprisonment, including precautionary detention, for libel cases brought under the press law. Prior censorship of domestic publications was also abolished, restricting it to imported publications. But press freedom advocates expressed disappointment with the proposal, saying that even as it removed the possibility of going to prison for press law violations, libel would be easier to prosecute under other laws—including the criminal code and terrorism laws—that carry harsher prison sentences.

The cabinet approved the MOCI amendments on World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2008, and referred the draft law to the Legislative Authority for consideration during its next session, which began in October 2008.

“The issue of libel is somewhat complex in Bahrain because many journalists were previously political activists rather than media professionals,” Shihabi explained. “Thus, their treatment of issues lacks balance, while they are unaware of legal considerations.”

Blogger Mahmoud al-Yusuf, owner of the Mahmoud Den website, criticized treating libel as a criminal offense. “At the international level, libel cases are civil rather than criminal,” he said. “Even if a journalist harshly criticizes a public official, it is not considered a crime internationally. The dominant philosophy in other countries is that public servants serve the people and thus accept criticism.”

The 2002 press law guarantees free access to information. Article 30 gives journalists “the right to obtain information, statistics, and news available for dissemination, from their sources, in accordance with the law.” Journalists also have the right to publish the information they obtain. Article 31 prohibits “the imposition of any restrictions that may impede the flow of information or prevent equal opportunities among various newspapers in obtaining information or that may disrupt the right of citizens to information and knowledge, all without prejudice to the requirements of national security and defending the homeland.” The law also protects journalists and their sources through Article 30, as it does not allow for “the opinion issued by a journalist or the correct information they publish to become reason for jeopardizing their security. Moreover, journalists may not be forced to disclose their sources of information, all within the limits of the law.”

However, panelists agreed that these guarantees do not meet acceptable standards, as their loose wording lends them to more than one interpretation. Moreover, failure on the part of officials to provide information is compounded by ignorance on the part of journalists of their legal rights to information.

Al-Musawi said that she believes that officials are frequently reluctant to disclose information for fear of jeopardizing their positions. “It is a real problem for journalists, because officials fear for their chairs,” she said. “I sympathize with [journalists] because the higher [the official] position, the further away they want to stay from the press.”

However, Shihabi said that obtaining information has become easier over time. Since establishment of a parliament in 2002, he said, “Shura Council and parliament members obtain accurate information from officials, which guarantees a reasonable flow of information to journalists.” *Al-Watan* journalist Fatima al-Hajari agreed, saying: “Representatives

now share the role of posing questions to officials with journalists, with the difference that answers are not obligatory in the case of [those coming from] journalists. Journalists can use the information provided by answers to queries made by representatives.”

Panelists agreed that the government places no restrictions on accessing international news, either through the Internet—available to all professional journalists—or through the news agencies to which newspapers subscribe. However, Bashmi said that costly subscription rates may be an obstacle to emerging newspapers. He pointed out that the average annual news agency subscription costs about BHD 80,000 (\$200,000).

Journalists can disseminate information from external media in accordance with re-publishing and intellectual property rights laws. Actual news selection, however, is based on personal evaluation and the extent to which the news approaches so-called red lines.

Panelists also agreed that the authorities do not interfere with the selection of newspaper personnel. They acknowledged that journalists must register with the MOCI, which issues a press card to be presented on demand when covering news. Fadhel said that authorities abuse the issuance of permits in the case of foreign correspondents. Because of “complicated procedures and the absence of criteria, the legal authority to accredit reporters can be exploited if the government so wishes,” he said.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.62

Despite the presence of seven daily and two weekly newspapers, the media still lack professionalism. “Poor professionalism represents one of the fundamental weaknesses of Bahrain’s press and media,” said Fadhel, who heads the Bahrain Journalists’ Syndicate. He lamented that “in general, there are no professional traditions entrenched in newspapers, despite the courage in addressing some issues and the freedom in presenting controversial topics.”

Panelists agreed that those working in local media have low standards and need further education in neutrality, objectivity, balance, and how to search for information. “The press suffers from the lack of professionalism in general. Journalists need a lot of training,” Mussawi said.

Al-Hajari said that “the growing market demand and the scarcity of journalists led to the entry of many people to the profession without giving them real training opportunities. Newspapers do not care for professional standards. It is easy

for journalists to join a press institution and have their names in the paper the following day.”

These problems are compounded when journalists allow their own political and sectarian affiliations to affect their work. Adel al-Marzouk, a journalist with *Al-Wasat* newspaper, said that “professional inadequacy was apparent to a large extent in sectarianism,” which led the Bahrain Journalists’ Association to draft a code of ethics, called Journalists Against Sectarianism, which was adopted on May 3, 2008.

Shihabi said that newspaper management is also to blame for the lack of professionalism. “Newspaper managers do not pay attention while journalists destroy professionalism [because of their] party or sectarian affiliations, which are stronger than professional affiliation.” He added that “journalists are often hasty and ignore other points of view related to topics they cover.”

Despite the adoption of the anti-sectarian code, Bahraini journalists do not have an official code of ethics. Al-Mussawi said that those in charge of media institutions should prepare a written, unified code of ethics outlining media’s general principles, moral responsibility, and professionalism.

Panelists said the lack of a code has led some journalists to accept gifts under various pretexts. “Some receive a number of computers annually,” al-Hajari said. Bashmi said that some news sources pay monthly salaries to some journalists. Al-Musawi said that such ethical breaches need to be exposed, but that newspaper managers instead turn a blind eye to them, forgetting that they undermine a journalist’s professionalism or a newspaper’s credibility.

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 affirmed the presence of self-censorship for many reasons, some rooted in the Bahraini press, others in customary relations between official agencies on the one hand and newspapers and journalists on the other. “Self-censorship is not linked to modern issues, such as losing a job. It is linked with a cultural tradition that belongs to decades of repression, the lack of freedom, individualism, the fear of individual initiative, and the deep-rooted terror of the state’s unlimited power,” al-Abidaly said.

Bashmi said editors-in-chief are forced to practice self-censorship and pass it on to editorial staff below them. This is not, he said, because of fear of accountability and dismissal from their position, which might only happen as a result of cases of inexcusable acts. Rather, they practice self-censorship because ministers or officials personally call them at 7 a.m. and exert pressure when they see a topic that touches them or their ministries. He added: “In the small community, one must endure things because of social characteristics. Small [considerations] unrelated to the state or the law interfere. This is where social responsibility should come in.”

Panelists said journalists choose not to publish information that may already have been published by foreign media if it relates to topics that go beyond Bahrain’s red lines. In such cases, publishing would be considered tantamount to defamation or placing a person under the media spotlight. Al-Sayed explained that Bahrain has no laws governing such behavior, but it is a matter of local custom or the standards of an individual journalist or newspaper. “Those who only repeat blasphemy in newspapers are still considered infidels,” he said.

Most panelists agreed that the media enjoy freedom to cover major events and issues. They acknowledged, though, that some factors interfere with the freedom to write about certain topics. “Journalists suffer from the dominance of capital owners through the familiar tool of pressure, which is commercial advertising in the case of the private sector, and the issue is similar with government advertisements,” al-Marzouk said. He pointed out that his newspaper, *Al-Wasat*, was deprived of advertising from the Electricity and Water Authority and the telecommunications company, which combined represented 2 percent of the paper’s total income. Advertisers can control editing and freedom of expression in newspapers on certain topics.

Editors do not prevent journalists from covering external events, but they do not spend money to send correspondents overseas. Instead, they use paid news services and the Internet.

Media wages are low, although the establishment of new papers in close intervals and the scarcity of journalists

are changing that reality. Media workers are not given benefits or annual raises like those given in government and other private organizations. Most panelists agreed that this situation has had differing effects on media workers in general, and journalists in particular. A large number have abandoned the profession in favor of more rewarding careers, while some work as part-time journalists. The media sector has therefore lost the generation that could have trained the coming generation of journalists.

"The last year in particular has seen a large number of veteran and new journalists leaving the profession to more stable and generous fields," Shihabi said. "This demonstrates that newspapers failed to fulfill the professional and material aspirations of journalists." Al-Musawi agreed, saying: "Journalism is not a profitable profession. That's why journalists leave it to pursue other careers."

This deterioration in the financial situation of journalists has led them to search for additional sources of income. "As a result of financial issues, a number of journalists found themselves obliged to perform paid work for official political circles or as writers for parliament and Shura Council members," Shihabi said. "Those who write for a member in secret must also write for them in public." He cited an incident in which a number of journalists were about to file a lawsuit against a former Shura Council member because he had "exploited" them to write speeches, then failed to pay the agreed amount.

Al-Abidaly said that he does not believe salaries are low, but they are not high enough to render recipients comfortable.

Most panelists agreed that newspaper management and readers prefer serious news to entertainment, lifestyle, and social news. Al-Musawi cited her own work as an example. She writes one column a week on a human interest topic related to love and life, while her daily column for the rest of the week addresses political, social, and economic topics. She said she was faced with attack and ridicule by those who considered the weekly column beneath the level of her political writing.

Bashmi said the proportion of entertainment news does not exceed 15 percent of the content of a newspaper. "There is no balance between entertainment and serious news," he said.

Journalism and printing establishments employ modern technology and equipment. Print media companies provide journalists with computers and fixed telephone lines, in addition to a communications bonus for the use of mobile phones. Some journalism outlets provide reporters with laptop computers to take to interviews. Moreover, newspaper managers possess modern equipment that can produce exceptional work.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.92

Bahrain has many public and private news sources, including newspapers, official broadcast media, international satellite channels, and the Internet.

There are six daily Arabic newspapers: *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*, *Al-Ayyam*, *Al-Wasat*, *Al-Mithaq*, *Al-Watan*, and *Al-Waqt*. The weekly newspapers are *Al-Ahd* and the recently established *Al-Naba'*. A seventh daily newspaper, *Al-Bilad*, was founded late in 2008. The newspapers focus on local news, and have much to cover amid the relative openness of the past seven years.

The income levels of most Bahrainis allow them to purchase daily newspapers, and everywhere in the country one can see newspaper subscriber boxes at the entrances of houses.

According to Bashmi, the maximum local newspaper circulation is estimated at 12,000 copies each. Publishers do not disclose minimum circulation. The Internet vastly increases readership. "There is a big difference between the number of copies distributed and Internet access. Daily visitors may reach 50,000," Bashmi said.

The government does not own any newspapers, but it continues to monopolize broadcast media.

Websites are considered a part of Bahraini media, although their credibility is questionable. "I do not consider online news sources reliable," Shihabi said. "Moreover, due to the affiliations of those in charge of them, some do not observe professional standards." Al-Hajari agreed: "Websites are politicized and can often be termed 'yellow journalism' because they lack balance. Thus, they are not up to professional documentation and information standards."

Bahrain has 500 registered websites, and unregistered ones far exceed that number. Villages are increasingly starting their own websites. Each village has at least three sites, the majority of which are unregistered and address public issues and news from their own perspective rather than addressing village-specific news.

The persistence of unbalanced discourse on some websites recently led Information Minister Jihad Bukamal to issue an administrative decree suspending three sites on charges of sectarianism. At the invitation of the cabinet, a committee was formed, headed by the interior minister with representatives from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, the MOCI, and persons the ministry deems appropriate to monitor adherence to relevant laws. Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Slaman al-Khalifa has said that he "will not tolerate any transgression from platforms, newspapers, or websites against national

values and constants, particularly with regard to His Highness the King, the Crown Prince, national unity, the issue of sectarianism, and Bahrain's Arab identity."

The number of Internet users in Bahrain reached more than 400,000 in 2008. "Internet is widespread in Bahrain, and Internet services are affordable," al-Abidaly said. He added that "there are no restrictions on accessing and contacting written and audio foreign news. High prices no longer represent an obstacle to accessing regional and international newspapers, as long as the Internet is available to the vast majority."

Al-Yusuf, the blogger, disagreed. "Some foreign sites are banned, such as missionary, atheist, and some political sites... I told the information minister that anyone who shuts websites risks looking like a fool. The minister agreed, but officials said it was necessary to have state-banned sites."

Al-Yusuf noted that 26 websites are blocked in Bahrain. When al-Musawi cited the blocking of the Google Earth site, al-Yusuf explained that "the site was closed for one day, then reopened, because it would be difficult to actually control people's access. Violations continue, however."

Official media is not independent of the state, as official news accounts for most radio and television coverage. Bashmi said that state television "broadcasts interviews with important and controversial figures, as is the case with the program *The Last Word*, hosted by journalist Sawzan al-Shaer, and *The Balance*, which hosts opposition figures from various spectrums of society."

Other panelists disagreed, pointing out the existence of an official censor. "There is an official interior ministry censor

on the program *Bahrain in the Morning*," Fadhel said. "I do not know if this system continues until now, but it was there in 2002." Shihabi said: "The radio program *Keep Us on Your Mind* was banned because it addressed potentially prohibited issues."

Al-Mussawi said she sees a link between the way the rest of the world views Bahrain and the way the government addresses the issue of freedoms, including media freedoms. "The freedom that the state allows the media fluctuates," she said. "When the state index drops in international reports, the state improves media freedom on some programs, even as an exception."

Despite the presence of the Bahrain News Agency (Bahrain's only news agency, operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of the Interior), it is only used for official news. Journalist Shihabi said: "Government media do not cover all viewpoints, but rather those of the entity that funds official agencies, namely the government. However, they sometimes present some anti-government positions in the parliament without a quantitative balance with what the official side presents." Newspapers, on the other hand, depend on their correspondents and the international news agencies to which they subscribe for access to international coverage.

According to Bashmi, subscribing to foreign agencies is costly but necessary to follow and deliver news to readers. The agencies are used in a way that observes intellectual property rights: The name of the agency is mentioned in the byline or the agency is referred to when its news story is used.

Electronic commercial registration systems maintained by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce's Investors Center allow everyone to identify newspaper owners and investors. Panelists said that they believe that some of the names registered may be fronts for political forces that want their own media outlet but prefer not to be directly visible. However, in Bahrain's small society, interested parties can obtain information about ownership one way or another.

The government has sole authority to invest in broadcast media.

Despite the apparent non-interference of newspaper owners in editorial content, newspapers in fact must consider owners, as seen when some papers refrain from publishing news about certain companies controlled by owners for fear of angering them.

Newspapers generally address all local and regional issues, with less attention to external news. Moreover, Bahrain has no newspaper for minorities. Only reprints of Sudanese and Indian newspapers not edited in Bahrain are available for members of those communities.

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.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.74

The continuing establishment of new newspapers suggests that they are potentially successful business ventures. This is what prompted the creation of a second weekly paper in mid-2008, and a seventh daily by year's end. Bashmi said that established papers have flourished, while newly established ones suffer from slow commercial progress. Mussawi said that although newspapers are good businesses, "stable newspapers no longer develop professionally, but rather become lax and stick to a rigid approach."

Panelists held differing views on the quality of media management in Bahrain. Bashmi said that he believes that newspapers are run well. Fadhel said that independent media projects are profitable businesses, but their "management methods have only evolved slightly." He pointed out that "the profitability now sought by press institutions leads to succumbing to economic influence groups, such as major companies."

Newspapers depend mainly on two sources of income: advertising and circulation. According to Bashmi, 80 percent of income comes from advertising and 20 percent from circulation.

Media industry personnel believe that newspapers suffer from financial pressures that render them susceptible to the influence and control of advertisers, be they private companies or the government, which considers advertisements a type of indirect support. In fact, the proliferation of newspapers has served to congest the market. As the readership pie is divided among a larger number of papers, advertisers gain the upper hand in controlling editorial material, which undermines independence. "Media projects were supposed to be good business ventures run in a purely commercial way," Shihabi said. "However, owing to weak organization and funding, they shortly start to seek the largest number of advertisements, which renders them vulnerable to losing their independence and giving up fixed values in order to stay alive."

"Yes, advertising affects editorial material," Bashmi said. "Newspapers waive standards for major advertisers. In return for regular advertising with the paper, there is a bank which asks that a photo accompanied by bank news be published on page 1. Its demand is met."

Fadhel said that "the relationship between press institutions and advertisers, particularly major advertisers, is currently dysfunctional. Press institution owners have no vision to defend their independence without giving in to advertiser pressures."

Panelists affirmed that government media are less vulnerable to arm-twisting than private media.

The Bahraini advertising market is relatively small compared to other states in the Persian Gulf region. "The evolution of advertising in Bahrain is estimated at half that of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar," Bashmi said. "Bahrain's position in the gulf has also retreated, in terms of advertisement spending, from fourth to fifth position, even though we previously enjoyed higher growth rates."

Bashmi said that an ideal division of advertising to editorial content would be 40 percent to 60 percent but that "newspaper advertisements here represent 15 percent [of space], compared to up to 60 percent in other gulf countries."

According to Bashmi, there are about 60 advertising agencies in Bahrain. "International advertising agencies control 80 percent to 90 percent," he said. "Without them, there would be no Arabic press."

The government allocates funds for public media in the MOCI budget, but according to the panelists, it does not grant financial assistance to newspapers, which are all private. "The last grant was given to *Al-Ayyam* newspaper, which was established in the late '80s," Bashmi said. "The government also gave special assistance to *Al-Mithaq* newspaper, but there is no publicly announced state assistance."

Marzouk, on the other hand, concluded that government assistance either exists or is available, because at an editors' meeting in 2007, participants were asked to pledge not to request or accept any government assistance. Two newspapers refused.

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.

Al-Abidaly said: "Official policies no longer provide direct assistance to media institutions... However, the government spends about \$21 million annually on advertising, which constitutes a means of influence."

Indeed, newspapers receive direct support from the government in the form of full-price subscriptions and advertising. However, this official support comes at a price, Bashmi said: "Government ministries and institutions have suspended advertisements after the publication of articles that criticized their policies and performance, despite the presence of a system of equally dividing government advertising among newspapers."

The two regional institutions that research and evaluate media outlets are used by all of Bahrain's newspapers, as well as advertising and public relations agencies. The institutions evaluate newspapers and their performance based on research results, but they do not enjoy any credibility among media workers. According to Shihabi, "despite the large size of the two institutions, they are known to serve anybody who pays them. They manipulate issues to suit their clients. Advertising agencies are aware of this but accept it, because interests are interlinked."

"Annual evaluations conducted by classification and research institutions are gathered in a book about media situation indicators," Bashmi said. "Regardless of its credibility, advertising and marketing agencies depend on it when classifying newspapers and media to advise clients."

Research and development are not commonly practiced by newspapers. "Newspapers that have the funds will conduct studies, while newspapers that need the studies do not have the financial ability to do so," Bashmi said.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Bahrain Objective Score: 1.71

Panelists agreed that professional support institutions in Bahrain are not effective. There is a Journalists' Association, from which the Bahrain Journalists' Syndicate split over disagreements regarding membership terms. The syndicate lost most of its members partly due to ineffectiveness and partly because half of its board of directors left journalism for other occupations. Panelists agreed that the Association also is ineffective, except in appointing lawyers to help journalists. "The journalists' association exists, but does not provide anything to journalists," said Al-Mousawi, a former financial secretary for the Association.

Panelists also consider the Association not independent. "The association receives annual sums from the government as support for its work," said Fadhel, who heads the syndicate. "The headquarters is also leased from the ministry, which is certain to affect its independence." Marzook, a member of the Association's board, said that "professional institutions in Bahrain are weak and a subject of controversy among journalists. Their effectiveness is less than it should be."

The bar association and civil society institutions concerned with human rights work closely with journalists. For example, a number of lawyers have volunteered to defend journalists or other media people in courts, an effort organized by the journalists' association and syndicate. The Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) issued a statement of opinion on the MOCI's draft amendment to Law 47 regulating the press and publishing. Despite welcoming some of the draft's amendments, which it considered a step forward, BCHR stated that others "affected the essence of the right to freedom of expression and opinion and constituted a violation of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the freedom to receive and impart news."

Bashmi, however, accused these institutions of not being serious about legal support for journalists. "I got no reply to my formal request for legal advice from the lawyers' association on the constitutionality of abolishing the imprisonment of journalists," he said. El-Sayed, the lawyer, explained that "voluntary work is not sustainable, as volunteers lose enthusiasm after awhile."

The University of Bahrain offers a bachelor's degree in media and public relations, and other national universities

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.

offer similar academic degrees. However, press institutions complain that graduates lack journalism and media skills because the majority focus mainly on public relations. Al-Shihabi noted that the demand for journalists is greater than the supply, mainly because many move to other careers after acquiring practical experience. This has led to recruiting journalists from other Arab countries. Thus, he said, the profession “may suffer in the future from the absence of journalists who grew up in the profession until they reached top editorial positions.”

Civil society organizations organize training courses for journalists, but there is little demand for them for several reasons, including workloads and pressures on journalists and the failure of media companies to promote the journalists who receive training. “No one attended the four-day legal training seminar that the lawyer’s association had organized for journalists, although it was free,” el-Sayed said.

Media organizations and institutions, particularly foreign ones such as Internews and Reporters Without Borders, often offer short courses. The MOCI also organized a number of short courses last year on economic and investigative reporting, part of a plan to organize 12 courses annually. But Al-Musawi criticized the ministry for bringing trainers from outside Bahrain, rather than using veteran local journalists to train new reporters.

Press institutions do not consider training a priority but do not mind that employees attend courses inside or outside Bahrain, particularly if costs are covered by the host. “The main reason for institutions’ lack of attention is that training is not a main objective in the vision of press organizations themselves,” Fadhel said.

Bashmi defended institutions, saying: “We pay the labor ministry for training. We have journalists learning English, while others participate in advanced production courses. The MOCI attracted Arab media professionals to provide training, but journalists lack self-motivation and fail to commit to participation.”

Bahrain has four printing presses that print the daily newspapers. Three publishing houses own their presses: *Al-Ayyam*, *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*, and *Al-Wasat*. *Al-Watan* is expected to operate its own printing press in the near future, and *Al-Waqt* and *Al-Mithaq* have placed printing orders with *Al-Ayyam*.

Newspapers that do not own printing presses face difficulty in pursuing coverage of news until the last minute before going to print. Bashmi, of *Al-Waqt*, said: “I do not have a printing press, and I have to submit supplements early. The cost of printing represents a major obstacle for me.”

Presses obtain paper from outside Bahrain. “Importing paper is a purely commercial operation,” Bashmi said. “Paper imports are subject to a 5 percent tax, as is the case with most imports. Newsprint is no exception.”

Distribution is organized by each newspaper. “Bahrain lacks a professional distribution network,” al-Abidaly said. “Each newspaper has its own distribution network, thus adding to its cost. We hear from time to time about foreign companies setting up a distribution company.”

List of Panel Participants

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

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

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

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