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BAHRAIN

Rapid and unexpected events witnessed in late 2008 influenced media sector performance in 2009. The bottom line result was considered by some as a setback to the freedom of expression. Meanwhile, the severe global financial crisis that started in the last quarter of 2008 continued to impact the media as stifled business activity in turn contracted the advertising market, which is the main source of revenue for most media.

Media circles were surprised when Information Minister Jihad Bu Kamal was fired from his post after only one year following the broadcast of a television program where the secretary general of the liberal National Democratic Action Society (Waad) criticized the failure of the Financial Audit Bureau report the Royal Court's budget in a live interview. The weekly program that hosted Waad's secretary general was also changed from a live to a recorded program.

The Minister of Culture and Media, who succeeded Bu Kamal, issued a decree to block a number of politically oriented websites beginning in the second quarter of 2009. This decree obliges all telecommunications companies and Internet service providers to block more than 60 designated websites.

Journalist solidarity declined in the face of the sectarianism that beset the country since last year. The website launched in August 2008 that established a code of ethics for anti-sectarian websites in the wake of journalists' enthusiasm and desire to fight sectarianism was closed. Among other issues, the founders of the website attributed this failure to the fact that the Ministry of Information declined to sign on as a supporter after having initially blessed the initiative.

Bahrain's launch of a Freedom of the Press award and a Social Press award represented two of 2009's positive initiatives. The King of Bahrain gave special attention to World Press Freedom Day, giving an address on the importance of the freedom of speech on the 70th anniversary of the establishment of Bahrain's first newspaper.

On the legal level, the year did not witness the passing of any of the draft laws aimed at improving the Press Code and laws on broadcast media; these have been shelved since 2006. Without better laws in place, the unfavorable media conditions have resulted in a number of veteran journalists changing to more professionally and financially satisfactory careers. This exodus jeopardizes the storehouse of skills in the profession and the ability to transfer those skills to a new generation of journalists.

The media also suffered from the prevalence of political and sectarian affiliations to the disadvantage of professional standards and neutrality. The preoccupation of media outlets with competition and failed attempts to overcome unstable financial conditions further prevented them from improving professionalism.

# BAHRAIN AT A GLANCE

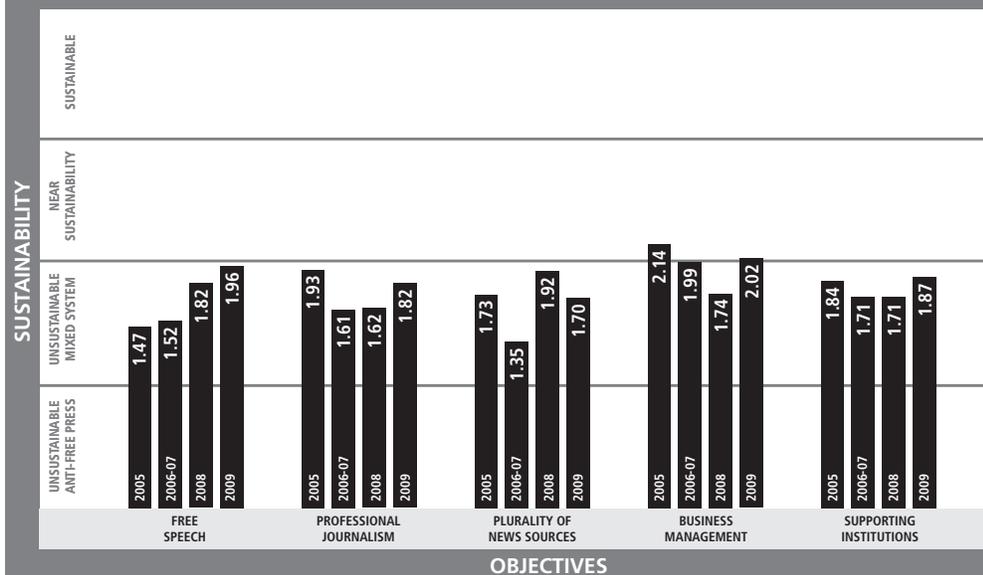
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 1,214,705 (including 235,108 non-nationals) (July 2011 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: 6 main daily papers; Radio Stations: 1 radio station owned by the Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation offering different programming on eight channels; Television Stations: One TV station with five different channels along with the main satellite channel, Bahrain TV.
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top 3 by circulation: *Al Ayam*, *Al Meethaq*, *Akhbar al Khaleej*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Bahrain News Agency (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 419,500 (2009 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: 1.96

The year 2009 has seen little action on amendments to the law regulating the press, printing and publishing, which has been kept in Parliament's drawers for more than five years. The media sector looks forward to Parliament's considering the mentioned amendments in 2010. Meanwhile, freedom of expression receded through a number of decisions issued by media regulators, most notably the decision to halt a television program that addressed topics considered prohibited. The Information Minister was dismissed as a result of this program airing criticism and discussion of controversial topics. The Information Ministry also continued to block websites under the pretext that they promote sectarianism. However, observers believe the blocking to be inaccurate and random as many of the blocked sites are not related to politics or pornography, but rather are intellectual in nature. Panelists said that there is no way to appeal the decision to block a website. Nevertheless, participants believed some indicators in this objective witnessed improvement.

In Bahrain articles 23 and 24 of the constitution guarantee the freedom of expression. Article 1 of Law 47 of 2002 regulating the press, printing, and publishing also guarantees the right to expression, stating: "Every person has the right to express their opinion and publish it orally, in writing or otherwise, in accordance with the terms and conditions set

#### 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.

*Abdullah al Ayoobi, journalist and local news director for Akhbar Al Khaleej, explained that "State bodies do not interfere directly with publishing issues. However, we can say generally that legal protection for freedom of opinion is not enforced. It is frequently ignored, particularly in the case of issues related to the state."*

forth in the law, provided this is done without prejudice to the principles of faith, the unity of the people and without giving rise to discord or sectarianism." However, this freedom meets with a number of restricting factors. The Criminal Liability chapter of Law 47 punishes journalists with imprisonment terms ranging between six months and five years for criticizing religion or the King, inciting felonies, and overthrowing the government.

There was consensus among panelists that, despite the various loosely-worded supporting articles, the law's guarantees of freedom of expression are not necessarily applied in practice, as social norms still restrict freedom of expression. Society often fails to support courageous journalists trying to push the limits of what can be reported. *Al Ayam* journalist Esmat al Mosawi affirmed the existence of "clear self-censorship in newspaper management," pointing out that restrictions are justified as protecting the journalist, "while in reality the management is protecting itself and its high-level figures." Journalist Ghassan al Shihabi, journalist and member of National Charter Action Committee, said, "We have—through custom and habit—individuals that the press cannot touch." He continued, "Society no longer supports press courage and we no longer hear that even journalists support each other in courts." He attributed this to a loss of enthusiasm within the profession on the one hand, and to the numerous lawsuits filed against media professionals on the other. Lawsuits have become a familiar occurrence and the public does not react with calls to organize sit-ins or other support.

Abdullah al Ayoobi, journalist and local news director for *Akhbar Al Khaleej*, explained that "State bodies do not interfere directly with publishing issues. However, we can say generally that legal protection for freedom of opinion is not enforced. It is frequently ignored, particularly in the case of issues related to the state." Backing al Ayoobi's statement, Hussain Khamis, journalist for *Al Wasat*, said that the articles of the Penal Code and the Press Law are "elastic," thus allowing the authorities to impose restrictions on the

*Fatima al Hajari, senior journalist for the weekly economic newspaper Aswaq, said that, "Accessing information is still a daunting task due to blocking a lot of information regardless of its confidentiality."*

freedom of expression and publication. Khamis noted, "Of particular note, the authorities prohibited publishing about a number of issues that it felt affected state security, such as former counselor Salah Al Bandar's report; journalists were referred to court for having violated the state ban on publication." Al Shihabi described this measure as "storing the law on a shelf until some of its articles are needed to interfere with publication issues."

The editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Al Bilad*, Moenes al Mardi, tempered the severity of other panelists' criticism of the freedom of expression atmosphere by reminding others that, "We have never heard of a journalist having been fired for speaking boldly about political figures in the kingdom, although websites are full of such criticism." He pointed to Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman al Khalifa's call upon journalists to criticize him personally if there was reason to do so.

Most participants agreed that Ministry of Information licensing for non-broadcast media is fair and professional. Al Mardi said, "The situation improved a lot, and requirements have become clear. Licenses are granted once conditions and requirements are fulfilled." However, DPA correspondent Mazin Mahdi pointed out the difficulty of obtaining licenses for websites, which have now become prevalent as media. He added: "These websites will also face difficulties later." The law places the Ministry of Information (currently called the Media Affairs Authority) in charge of issuing press licenses after companies are established for this purpose under Bahrain's Companies Law.

There are no laws in Bahrain that regulate licenses to establish radio and television stations, which are still a government monopoly. The Shura Council draft law has not witnessed any developments since 2007. Media circles await the discussion of this law during the Shura Council's next session, which will include newly-elected members.

Panelists agreed that there is no organized initiative to perpetrate crime against journalists, and most described the situation as comfortable and not reaching the level of systematized abuse. Al Mardi said that this type of crime results from fear of a journalist as a witness, and sometimes

takes place unintentionally within tense security situations, such as demonstrations. On the other hand, Mahdi reported having been repeatedly subjected to abuse by security agents while working as a photojournalist. Al Ayoobi also mentioned that, "Harassment against journalists is focused on verbal attacks through the Internet." He added that such crimes are met with leniency as offenders are not legally pursued.

Both al Shihabi and al Mosawi agreed that, "If [abuses are] repeated it becomes an indicator that the Executive Authority does not have clear instructions on how to deal with journalists and photographers, which is cause for concern."

In Bahrain, all newspapers are independent and the government owns radio and television stations. Regarding state-owned broadcasters, last year's MSI reported that these outlets enjoy preferential treatment when the government leaks news and that the government appoints officials in the state media.

This year's panelists further discussed that even private newspaper independence is not complete. Al Mosawi said: "Neither newspapers nor editors-in-chief enjoy independence." Al Shihabi, on the other hand, mentioned that "BHD 9 million in advertisements is distributed among newspapers. Fear of losing government advertising—particularly at this time—undoubtedly affects independence." He mentioned that one year a Ministry of Information official met with editors-in-chief and indirectly threatened to stop advertising if the papers did not act as the government pleased. Within the same context, Khamis said that, "Newspapers are only independent in appearance. Most newspapers adopt the government line with limited differences in news coverage." Al Ayoobi agreed with this opinion saying: "Media professionals have no freedom as the editorial material is prepared in line with the state orientation."

In Bahrain the Penal Code includes cases of defamation. Claimants are asked to prove the harm they suffered due to defamation. Participants agreed that no journalists have faced imprisonment for a defamation case, as penalties in such cases involve fines. According to Khamis, "This fine is no deterrent, such as imposing a fine of BHD 50 on the *Akhbar al Khaleej* editor-in-chief in a case that a member of the Human Rights Center had filed against him." However, all participants pointed out that lawsuits filed against journalists are on the rise.

Al Shihabi believes that the law in such cases serves as a scarecrow rather than a tool to imprison offenders. Moreover, al Mosawi said that, "In Bahrain matters do not reach their peak. When a defamation case becomes famous we find that the official closes it quietly for fear of scandals."

Although the right to access information is guaranteed by law, it is not fully implemented. Journalists accessing information are subject to the whim of officials in charge of such information. Article 30 gives journalists “the right to access information, statistics and news the publication of which is permitted in accordance with the law from their sources.” Article 31 “prohibits the imposition of any restrictions that may impede the flow of information or equal opportunities among various newspapers in accessing information, or which may undercut citizens’ rights to information and knowledge, all without prejudice to the requirements of national security and homeland defense.” The law also protects journalists and their sources through Article 30, which states that “opinions issued by journalists or the correct information they publish may not be grounds for harming them. Journalists may not be forced to divulge the sources of their information, all within the limits of the law.”

Panelists agreed that these laws include loose conditions that may have more than one interpretation. Moreover, the refusal by officials to provide information is met by journalists with ignorance of their legal rights, thus losing the opportunity to punish guilty officials. Fatima al Hajari, senior journalist for the weekly economic newspaper *Aswaq*, said that, “Accessing information is still a daunting task due to blocking a lot of information regardless of its confidentiality.”

Panelists discussed some of the agencies that are still difficult to reach to obtain information. Al Mosawi gave the example of the real estate sector, and Khamis affirmed this by pointing out the blocking of information from the Land Survey Authority and Real Estate Registration Bureau since the outbreak of the financial crisis. Only oil trade figures have been published since 2008 and items in the government budget were hidden.

Al Mardi believes it possible for journalists to reach any minister for comment. Other panelists felt this was theoretically right, but they noted that the type of requested information determines the extent to which ministers are accessible and open. Al Shihabi said, “The law provides for the right to access information, but entities not wishing to disclose information pursue a method of leaving journalists thirsty: they do not refuse to provide information but rather stall and postpone until journalists get tired and give up.” Mahdi, as a local journalist working for a foreign agency, complained of the reluctance of officials to provide him with information; he claimed that they prefer dealing with foreign journalists.

Panelists agreed that there are no impediments to accessing international news sources in Bahrain, particularly through the Internet. Moreover, all newspapers may subscribe to news agency services. However, they considered the closing down

of some websites an impediment to accessing some news sources. Bahrain’s Publication and Dissemination Law requires obtaining prior permission to correspond with any foreign press or media.

Journalists are licensed, which is a pressure point for some whose reports cross what the government considers “red lines.” Within this context, al Ayoobi said, “The Information Ministry may withdraw a journalist’s license if a report he wrote contained encroachments, regardless of the validity of the report’s content.”

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Bahrain Objective Score: 1.82

The participants agreed unanimously that the majority of press reports are not professionally prepared for a number of reasons, including the fact that most journalists lack necessary skills and the absence of quality standards at newspapers. Some attributed it to some newspapers’ tendency to influence news and reports to render the coverage one-sided, serving the interests of certain parties.

Al Ayoobi said, “We believe that most reports tend towards being inflammatory or biased in favor of a specific entity. Not all parties to an issue are listened to. Thus, many reports are incomplete in terms of information and professionalism. Some are even prepared for specific objectives that serve one party at the account of another.” Al Hajari shared Al Ayoobi’s view saying that, “Commitment to professional standards is almost at its lowest level in Bahrain, particularly in light of the large number of newspapers that forgo preparation

#### 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).

*Khamis expressed sorrow "for the low salaries that render journalism a bridge to cross over to other professions."*

or training of new journalists, thus leaving them without consensus on professional standards."

Participants agreed that there are no unified professional standards. Deteriorating financial conditions at newspapers have resulted in management making concessions on previous standards that once prohibited journalists from accepting gifts or travel tickets because management cannot provide alternatives. This has negatively affected professionalism and credibility. Al Mardi said that, "Our situation makes us consider these gifts a type of courtesy."

Al Mosawi mentioned that a number of journalists are known to seek gifts from sources, and their newspapers have not taken any measures against them except when it became somewhat of a scandal. Al Shihabi called for the quick "drafting of a code of ethics and a code of conduct that imposes penalties in cases of violations," pointing out that the idea existed but implementation may face resistance and difficulties.

Panelists agreed that journalists suffer from self-censorship imposed by newspapers to protect themselves and their management. Khamis confirmed that, "Newspaper management sometimes interferes by deleting phrases or sentences that are not consistent with the newspaper's inclination and that affect their interests." Al Shihabi said that, "Management protect themselves before thinking of protecting journalists," while Al Ayoobi attributed the existence of self-censorship on the part of newspaper management to "the effect of years when we lacked freedom of expression, in addition to journalists' fear to lose their source of income if they address issues related to the interests of government institutions or some businesses that have commercial interests with the newspapers."

Journalists are mostly allowed to cover all news and events. However, lately security authorities have been issuing orders preventing publishing on issues they deem sensitive. They also take to court journalists who ignore these orders. Al Mosawi insisted that there was interference with publishing, pointing out that her articles on "state property" were stopped due to the sensitivity of the issue. This led Al Mardi to acknowledge that "news is covered, but the issue is different with articles and opinions." Al Ayoobi affirmed this opinion saying that, "In recent years there was a quantum leap with relation to covering security incidents, such as demonstrations, acts of

sabotage and riots. There are usually no interventions in a journalist's daily work, but security personnel sometimes interfere with journalists' work to the point of confiscating cameras, for example."

In contrast, there are no reservations on covering international news because newspapers in most cases only use what they receive from news agencies.

Panelists believed there is a major gap between the salaries of editors-in-chief and journalists. Journalists' modest salaries lead them to seek means to support their incomes. Khamis expressed sorrow "for the low salaries that render journalism a bridge to cross over to other professions." Otherwise, some journalists accept giving up ethics and take bribes and gifts to polish the image of certain entities, particularly in light of the lack of a unified, strong Press Charter that defines violations.

It is rare for journalists to work for only one publication. They prepare reports and news for other publications, and sometimes in favor of government entities or companies, which divides their loyalties among these entities at the expense of professionalism.

Panelists agreed that media are serious and tend towards serious news at the expense of entertainment.

Despite the decline in professionalism, media outlets enjoy high levels of technically advanced equipment and modern printing presses.

Participants agreed on the absence of specialization in press coverage and reporting because of the lack of qualified journalists, in addition to the reluctance of management to invest in helping journalists specialize. There is also a lack of investigative reporting, which requires a serious time investment but journalists are under deadlines to fill pages on a daily basis. Al Shihabi pointed out that "The training of media professionals is almost non-existent. Press institutions do not have the methodology for sophisticated media." He also talked about the lack of development in television talk shows from mere questions and answers that do not offer analysis.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

**Bahrain Objective Score: 1.70**

In Bahrain people obtain news from several public and private sources, which include newspapers of all sorts and affiliations, in addition to state television and radio, international satellite channels, and the Internet. Al Shihabi referred to the fact that print is better than broadcast media in obtaining information. He said that citizens seeking

information about Bahrain turn to the printed press, and only watch television for official news.

Panelists shared broad agreement on the ease of access to media as well as the affordability of prices. Al Ayoobi pointed out that Bahrain's small area and the availability of Internet services eliminated problems in accessing media. However, Mahdi believed that the closure of websites sites pointed to actual restrictions on accessing some information. Al Mardi disagreed with him saying that, "Site closures aimed to stop sectarian arguments and controversy," pointing out that people did not object to the closure of sites displaying sexually explicit material. He described the freedom called for as one-eyed freedom. However, Al Mosawi disagreed with Al Mardi, as she pointed out that website closures were random and included some used for research and other purposes, such as blocking the site of Lebanese magazine *Jassad (Body)*. Al Mardi attributed this to society not being accustomed to the bold writing of this magazine.

Al Ayoobi said that broadcast media is state-owned and thus most material these media broadcast is official news that represents the official point of view. "Government media is not neutral. Opposition political powers cannot benefit from the radio or television," he said. Bahrainis may find opposition news and controversial reports from regional and global channels, but they never expect them from Bahrain's television or radio.

The government-run Bahrain News Agency is the sole news agency operating domestically. It dispenses only official news.

#### 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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With regard to media ownership, besides the state-owned radio and television, all newspapers are independent and privately owned. It can be said that newspaper ownership is transparent, as most of them are joint stock, registered companies the data of which is available on the website of the Investor Center where all of Bahrain's companies are registered. However, Khamis pointed out "the prevalent belief that these investors are just interfaces to other owners who prefer not to disclose their identities to continue using the publications in their favor." Al Mardi pointed out here that this applies even in the United States as real media owners are not disclosed, in addition to some regional newspapers published in foreign countries. He referred to the overlap between journalism and business, saying that, "Media owned by investors rather than journalists or media professionals become profit seeking commercial ventures subject to non-professional considerations dictated by their owners."

There are no non-state broadcasters that could prepare newscasts independent of the government. Private newspapers, however, do prepare their own news stories.

As reported last year, Bahrain has no newspaper for minorities. Only reprints of Sudanese and Indian newspapers not edited in Bahrain are available for members of those communities.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

##### Bahrain Objective Score: 2.02

The global financial crisis that started in the United States in the last third of 2008 changed the perception of newspaper projects as viable, successful businesses because advertising, which constitutes a major proportion of newspaper revenues, began to decline. Thus, newspapers tended to reduce their work and numbers of pages, as well as lay off some

*Al Mardi said, "Newspapers have to depend on advertising as a main source of income equivalent to up to 95 percent of total income."*

employees in order to reduce expenses. Indicators of the exit of some market players were becoming clear.

However, contrary to views that see a decline in viewing newspapers as successful business ventures, Al Ayoobi believes that his newspaper, *Akhbar al Khaleej*, "is one of the successful media projects, as management is under a successful commercial mentality that enabled it to be successful both in terms of income and circulation." Further, those who had the idea of establishing a weekly economic newspaper insisted on moving ahead and launched the newspaper *Aswaq* in February 2009.

Al Mardi was unconvinced, saying, "If the market were healthy, newspapers would not be concerned with advertisers and would enjoy more freedom to criticize companies and major institutions. However, the current deteriorated financial situation pushed newspapers to be a bit cautious in order to survive."

Khamis believed that some newspapers were able to create diverse sources of revenue but are still hostage to the desire of their owners to seek more profit and their fear of raising the ire of the government and the resulting negative impact on their interests. Al Mosawi affirmed that the board of directors' control over a newspaper's activities leads to trading professionalism for the security of continuity.

#### 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.

Thus, editorial policy must be influenced by shareholders' tendencies even if it contradicts the stated policies of a newspaper.

Al Hajari agreed with these opinions, saying that independent media, as business ventures, are keen on having independent editorial policies, but within strict limits. The net result is that Bahrain has only one independent newspaper (*Al Wasat*), which also is subject to the temptation of generous government advertising.

Panelists confirmed the importance of advertising as a main source of income for newspapers because circulation does not represent a major percentage of income, particularly for newspapers that do not own their own printing presses. Al Mardi said, "Newspapers have to depend on advertising as a main source of income equivalent to up to 95 percent of total income." To demonstrate how impossible it is to survive on circulation alone, he pointed out that the cover price of a newspaper is one-third its real cost, taking into consideration the cost of material, printing services, etc.

In Bahrain there is currently no government subsidy for the press. However, government advertising can be regarded as support to newspapers, taking into consideration that there is a policy of rotating advertising between local newspapers. This advertising is often published during feasts and celebrations, mostly courtesy advertising that does not promote services or goods. Embargoing government advertising is also used as a tool through which the government expresses its dissatisfaction when material it does not approve of is published.

Al Mardi said, "The government stopped granting newspapers annual financial support worth BHD 30,000 [\$80,000] since *Al Ayam* newspaper was published in the late 80s. Newspapers depend on their own resources since then." He also said that the government subsidy for paper only serves the printing industry rather than newspapers.

Two regional institutions, Ipsos and Park, engage in media research and are relied on by the advertising industry and public relations firms for information. Advertisers evaluate newspaper performance based on Ipsos and Park research. However, many media professionals do not give any credibility to these two institutions, although their reasons may be based on self interest. Nonetheless, this perception reduces the effectiveness of the research and limits its use by the media industry.

Al Shihabi said that, "Despite the size of these two institutions, they are known to serve the interests of those who hire them and manipulate issues in their favor. Advertising agencies know this but accept it because all interests are intertwined." Al Mardi openly questioned the

credibility of these institutions, pointing out that the recent research conducted by Ipsos, the institution to which firms go for marketing purposes, has rated his newspaper lower than *Al Mithaq* newspaper, which he said is “almost suspended.” He believed that this shows that research is not based on a sound statistical basis.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Bahrain Objective Score: 1.87

The Journalists’ Association in Bahrain was established as a representative body for members of the profession. The Journalists’ Syndicate splintered from the association due to disagreements over the terms of membership. The latter, however, lost most members due to its perceived ineffectiveness and the fact that half of its board of directors changed careers. The Journalists Association has become in effect the only representative organization of journalists. Panelists concurred that, in their opinion, the association lacks effectiveness and impact on the profession of journalism. Its role is restricted to appointing lawyers for journalists who face lawsuits. Al Ayooobi felt that even here the association falls short and that it does not sufficiently defend journalists’ rights. It is almost non-existent if it were not for reminders of its presence when news is published about occasional formal meetings with similar regional organizations, as well as when it organizes the odd course, according to Khamis.

Panelists also questioned the association’s independence because it receives financial support from the Media Affairs Authority, which is the landlord for the association’s headquarters.

#### 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.

*Khamis said, “It is difficult for journalists to practically follow training due to the lack of time and the fact that their newspapers do not provide enough time.” He pointed out that journalists failed to show interest in an investigative reporting course organized by Areej Investigative Journalism Network, which required that they apply their learning.*

Al Mosawi and Al Shihabi agree that the lack of awareness on the part of journalists has contributed to marginalizing the association and its role. Al Mosawi pointed out that she, as former treasurer of the association in its early days, has a tough time when trying to persuade journalists to pay the negligible (\$15) membership fee. Al Mardi supported this opinion by mentioning the association’s chairman’s complaint about the failure on the part of members—even board members who fought to reach their positions—to attend meetings.

There are no trade associations that focus their work on the media sector.

On the other hand, the Bar Association and civil society institutions concerned with human rights are the closest allies of media professionals. A number of lawyers volunteer to defend journalists put on trial.

Draft laws affecting the media are also scrutinized by such associations. The Bar Association has issued two statements regarding the draft amendments of Law 47 issued by the Ministry of Information in mid-2008, where it rejected the introduced amendments, considering that they “affect the essence of the right to expression and freedom of opinion, and considering it a violation of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which renders absolute the freedom to receive and impart news.” The Bar Association also stated that, “The amendment to Article 68 of the current Press Law, which refers cases related to the press, printing, and publication to other laws, is another means of imposing penalties against the freedom of opinion and expression.” The Bahraini Association for Human Rights believes that conferring the jurisdiction to the High Criminal Court as stated in Article 77, rather than the High Civil Court, may impose stricter criminal penalties than those made by the High Civil Court when addressing issues of the press, printing, and publication, which constitutes

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another element to put pressure on journalism, printing, and publishing personnel.”

Panelists complained of poor media and press qualifications provided to graduates of Bahrain’s universities. Although journalists working in this field require specialized programs, panelists found that there are few available courses. It is also difficult to measure the impact of the courses on graduates’ proficiency afterwards.

The Journalists’ Association and the Media Affairs Authority organize some training courses and workshops for journalists in cooperation with regional and international press organizations. Khamis said, “It is difficult for journalists to practically follow training due to the lack of time and the fact that their newspapers do not provide enough time.” He pointed out that journalists failed to show interest in an investigative reporting course organized by Areej Investigative Journalism Network, which required that they apply their learning. He believed that the pressures of their daily work left no room for more in-depth work, and hence a lack of willingness to commit to undertaking it as part of the class.

Al Mardi affirmed that, particularly under the current financial situation, training is not in general among the priorities of media outlets. However, they do not mind that employees enroll in training courses inside and outside Bahrain, particularly if the costs are covered by the host. Within this context, Al Shihabi said, “I think that employers in newspapers prefer that journalists invest their time at work rather than training, particularly with the modest [professional] requirements they place on their journalists and reporters.” Al Hajari agreed with him, noting, “Press institution management does not encourage journalists to participate in courses.”

Newspaper printing presses obtain their newsprint supplies from external commercial sources, subject to a five percent import tax. The constricted financial situation has reduced newspapers’ use of paper as they eliminated annexes dedicated to news and sports and economic reports. Economy and sports pages are now back to being part of the newspaper. There are no specialized distribution companies; each newspaper distributes its own copies.

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## List of Panel Participants

**Esmat al Mosawi**, journalist, *Al Ayam*, Manama

**Ghassan al Shihabi**, journalist; member of National Charter Action Committee, Manama

**Moenes al Mardi**, editor-in-chief, *Al Bilad*, Manama

**Hussain Khamis**, journalist, *Al Wasat*, Manama

**Amani al Masqati**, journalist, *Al Wasat*, Manama

**Fatma al Hajari**, journalist, *Aswaq*, Manama

**Abdullah al Ayoobi**, journalist and local news director, *Akhbar Al Khaleej*, Manama

**Mazin Mahdi**, correspondent, DPA, Manama

## Moderator and Author

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