
International interest in the media as a tool to check government excess has increased support for media development. That created more news sources, and there are now community radio stations and many daily newspapers.



SIERRA LEONE

S

Sierra Leone has undergone profound social, economic, and political changes over the past 15 years. After one-party rule, characterized by tribalism, nepotism, widespread corruption, and political harassment, Sierra Leone was plunged into what the UN described as the most brutal civil war on the continent of Africa. During the war, which started in 1991 and lasted for 11 years, thousands were killed, and many others had their limbs crudely amputated by rebels and renegade soldiers in a bid to spread terror. Many women and girls were raped. Hundreds of thousands more fled into exile in neighboring countries, particularly Guinea and Liberia. The socioeconomic fabric of the country was completely destroyed.

Today, Sierra Leone relies heavily upon donor support, mainly from the British government and the European Union. The nation's productive capacity is destroyed, and direct foreign investment is almost nonexistent. By the time the war ended, the media counted among the casualties. Journalists were divided, with some openly supporting the various sides (the rebels, the government, and the remnants of the defeated Sierra Leone army and their allies in the three military juntas that briefly took power at different times during the war). Some journalists fled abroad. Newspapers were replete with petty infighting among journalists. High school dropouts became journalists and editors overnight on newspapers set up by unscrupulous politicians to settle scores or puff up their images in the hope of obtaining political appointments or lucrative government contracts. The media lost all credibility.

However, in the years following the war, much work has been done to restore the image of journalism in Sierra Leone, ranging from physically rehabilitating media institutions to training personnel. As the MSI shows clearly, the international attention that Sierra Leone received from the UN peacekeeping mission and the support of foreign governments and international organizations led to a commitment by the then-ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) to promote free speech and freedom of the media. With a few exceptions, the media gained more freedom to write or say anything about the government. International interest in the media as a tool to check government excess has increased support for media development. That created more news sources, and there are now community radio stations and many daily newspapers. However, professional journalism standards suffered badly, and the nation must now contend with a flood of unskilled people who found their way into journalism to fulfill political agendas.

On the political front, Sierra Leone has recently witnessed a wave of political violence involving the two main political parties, the ruling All People's Congress (APC) and the SLPP. The SLPP office in Freetown was attacked three times within a short time span. To end the violence and intimidation of the opposition, the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone organized talks for both parties in Freetown that culminated in both parties signing a communiqué pledging to promote peace and reconciliation.

SIERRA LEONE AT A GLANCE

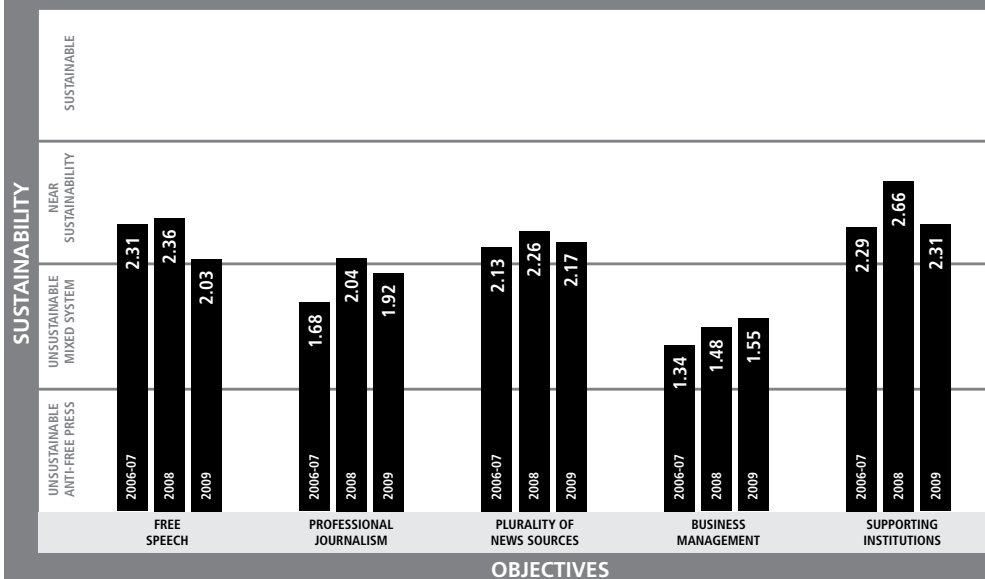
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,245,695 (July 2010 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Freetown
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Temne 35%, Mende 31%, Limba 8%, Kono 5%, Krio 2% (descendants of freed Jamaican slaves who were settled in the Freetown area in the late-18th century; also known as Krio), Mandingo 2%, Loko 2%, other 15% (includes refugees from Liberia's recent civil war, and small numbers of Europeans, Lebanese, Pakistanis, and Indians) (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 60%, Christian 10%, indigenous beliefs 30% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** English (official, regular use limited to literate minority), Mende (principal vernacular in the south), Temne (principal vernacular in the north), Krio (English-based Creole, spoken by the descendants of freed Jamaican slaves who were settled in the Freetown area, a lingua franca and a first language for 10% of the population but understood by 95%) (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$1.938 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$790 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 35.1% (male 46.9%, female 24.4%) (2004 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Ernest Bai Koroma (since 17 September 2007)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 39; Radio Stations: 53; Television Stations: 2
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** *Awoko* (privately owned), *Concord Times* (privately owned), *Premier News* (privately owned)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top three ranked stations: Radio Democracy (privately owned), Capital Radio (privately owned), Radio Mount Aureol (university owned)
- > **News agencies:** Sierra Leone News Agency
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 13,900 (2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: SIERRA LEONE



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

Sierra Leone Objective Score: 2.03

Sierra Leone's 1991 constitution guarantees the freedom to "express views and impart knowledge." Furthermore, in section 11, it obliges the media to "uphold the fundamental objective contained in this constitution and highlight the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people." Many journalists point to this section to underline the important role the media are expected to play toward the growth of democracy in Sierra Leone. However, Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai, of the Society for Democratic Initiatives, a lawyer by training, said this provision is more aspirational than enforceable.

However, the constitution is conspicuously silent on the issue of access to public information. Additionally, successive governments have invoked a number of common-law provisions contained in part (5) of the Public Order Act of 1965 against the critical press. The panelists said that government functionaries have used these legal provisions in their evidently futile attempts to rein in journalists.

Since 2002, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) has pressed the government to expunge the criminal and seditious libel provisions of the Public Order Act of 1965. Lawyers for SLAJ and Ernest Bai Koroma's government have concluded arguments in the Supreme Court of Sierra Leone on the constitutionality of part (5) of the Public Order Act,

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.

Abdulai's opinion differed slightly; he said the judiciary "hasn't proven to be independent... they have refused to ruffle feathers" and noted that most judges are appointed by the government on contract.

in light of Section (25) 1 of the constitution of Sierra Leone. At the time of the MSI panel, judgment was still pending, and in June, SLAJ issued a press release reminding the courts of their obligation to deliver a decision within a reasonable timeframe. SLAJ also stated, "The failure by the Supreme Court therefore to rule in the SLAJ case up to now, after the final arguments had been made on 9 March 2009, leaves much to be desired. This, according to SLAJ, is a violation of the country's constitution by the highest court in the land." Noting that there are no higher courts to appeal to, SLAJ called on the president to make real his campaign promise to repeal this law.

Regarding the independence of the judiciary in free-speech matters, Mansaray noted, "The judiciary is generally independent, but when big guns are involved, lots of other issues are in play, and it cannot be said that they are totally independent." Abdulai's opinion differed slightly; he said the judiciary "hasn't proven to be independent... they have refused to ruffle feathers" and noted that most judges are appointed by the government on contract. Christo Johnson, of Reuters, agreed that the Sierra Leone judiciary will never be independent as long as it involves the authorities.

However, Hindolo Tornya Musa, a media lecturer at Fourah Bay College, said that while journalists must be able to conduct their work as in other democracies, laws must exist to regulate the industry—because if journalists do not behave professionally, it could also undermine democracy.

Over the past two MSI surveys, panelists assigned relatively high scores for Sierra Leone's broadcast licensing system. This year's panelists also agreed generally that broadcast licensing is largely free of political considerations—but warned that is beginning to change.

The panelists accused the IMC of making a political decision by withdrawing licenses from the two radio stations owned by political parties (Unity Radio 94.9 FM, belonging to the SLPP, and Voice of the Rising Sun 88.0 FM) recently. Abu Bakar Joe Sesay, editor of the *Democrat*, claimed that the fairness of the IMC in granting broadcast licenses is "evidenced by the proliferation of community radio stations across the country."

At present, all 14 of the community radio stations are in arrears on license renewal fees for more than three years—in some cases running into millions of leones.

However, he said that he is “of the opinion that the closure of the two radio stations is politically motivated in the sense that the action taken by the vice president initially [to close the radios] was never condemned by anybody.” Abdulai expressed concern that the IMC apparently gave up its jurisdiction on the issue, allowing the vice president to step in and make the call.

Julius Spencer, managing director of a public-relations agency, shared his opinion that in this case, the IMC made “fundamental errors... they violated the IMC Act in the way they went about withdrawing the licenses.” He added, however, “Clearly... my view about the radio stations is a separate matter. I also think that we should not have party radio stations in Sierra Leone; I don’t think they will do us any good.” On the last point, Francis Sowa agreed. “Those two radio stations have no business operating in Sierra Leone,” he said. Steven Mansaray, a lawyer, described the banned radio stations as “a menace to the population” and noted that as far as he is concerned, “the IMC is apolitical.”

The panelists generally agreed that the tax structure for media businesses does not differ from other types of entrepreneurial activities. In fact, Spencer argued, “Media institutions have been generally treated quite leniently in terms of paying taxes.” Betty Alimamy Sesay, of Radio Mankneh, noted that her radio station has already been dragged to court by the National Social Security Scheme (NASSIT) for failure to pay the mandatory social-security contributions for staff. Franklyn Kamara, of the Initiative for the Mobile Training of Community Radio (INFORMOTRAC), argued that the tax structure is skewed against community radio stations that have a large volunteer workforce: “The concern here is that these radio stations have to meet this commitment [NASSIT tax], and they also have to pay licenses and spectrum fees—it is an added burden. Meanwhile, SLBS [the state broadcaster] does not.”

At present, all 14 of the community radio stations are in arrears on license renewal fees for more than three years—in some cases running into millions of leones. Recently, the chairperson of the IMC urged president Koroma to ask local councils to support community radio stations.

Compared with other countries in the region, crimes against journalists in Sierra Leone are rare, according to most of

the panelists. Abu Bakar Joe Sesay noted, however, that when they do occur they are not prosecuted vigorously. He mentioned the case of Sitta Turay, editor of *New People*, who was allegedly attacked and wounded by APC partisans for writing articles critical of the president.

When it comes to prosecuting cases, Spencer said, “Journalists are not treated any better or worse than ordinary citizens. Most people cannot get justice through our court system anyway. The only people who can get justice quickly are the powerful and the rich.” He also said that he is not sure there is a public outcry when crimes against journalists occur. “I think the attitude generally... is that [journalists] are not serious, and it’s their fault.”

State media do receive preferential treatment, according to the panelists. Franklyn Kamara said the IMC gives preferential treatment to government-owned broadcast facilities; they are exempt from paying annual license fees while community radio stations must pay. They gain favored access to the State House to cover the president’s activities. Mustapha Sesay, secretary general of SLAJ, noted that SLBS is “government-controlled and is open to manipulation by the ruling party.” Sowa added that as long as the president appoints both the chair of the board and the director general of the SLBC, there is “no political independence” in the operations of the SLBC.

Shortly before the MSI panel convened, parliament passed the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation bill into law under heavy UN and donor pressure. However, there were complaints that there was no public debate of the bill and that even now, the proposed SLBC is not insulated from government interference and manipulation as the president appoints the head of the institution. A section of the new act specifies that the director general “shall be appointed by the president, subject to such terms and conditions as the president may determine.”

In Sierra Leone, libel is both a civil and criminal matter. Abdulai expressed particular concern that in libel cases, the burden of proof rests with the accused. He noted, “I see a shift in the cardinal principle that says he who asserts must prove.” Regarding the question of judiciary corruption in such cases, Abdulai argued, “I don’t think there is an issue of corruption among the judges; I think it’s more an issue of the patronage system that is operating in the country whereby the judges are all obligated to the politicians.”

Spencer noted that “instead of the public official being held to higher standards... it is even more difficult for the accused if it is a public official.” He continued, “The judges, of course, are scared when it has to do with a government official, and they would have made up their minds even before any evidence is presented... most cases taken to court under

this law have not been prosecuted to conclusion; it is simply used as a means of punishing journalists.” Furthermore, Johnson noted that the government normally argues and gets permission from the court for such trials to be conducted by “judge alone... that is a serious indictment on the system.”

Regarding access to public information, the panelists were unanimous that public information is extremely difficult to get and that there is no law guaranteeing right of access to such information. But Mustapha Sesay also noted that journalists have limited knowledge and skill on how to obtain public information and argued that journalists need proper training.

There is no restriction in Sierra Leone for any media house wanting to access and publish or rebroadcast international news. There are three international broadcasters relaying transmissions into Sierra Leone, which many radio stations carry even without permission—VOA, BBC, and RFI. Accessing the Internet for news, however, is expensive.

Entry into the profession is open; the government does not require licensing of journalists. The only restriction is that to become a newspaper editor, membership in SLAJ is required. The membership process takes about three months.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Sierra Leone Objective Score: 1.92

Panelists were just about evenly divided on the quality of Sierra Leone journalism, but there was general agreement that over the years there has been great improvement—but a lot more work remains. Garrick Olabisi, a producer at

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).

Abdulai recalled a particular experience with journalists his organization took to cover an event in the northern city of Makeni. Only three journalists out of the 20 who covered the event wrote about the story. He noted, “It is no longer whether an item is newsworthy; it is about how much you can give... and then you are depriving the people who are buying the newspapers.”

Radio Democracy 98.1 FM, argued that the real problem with fairness and objectivity rests with some newspapers; he claimed that if they cannot confirm everything, some simply go ahead and publish their story and try to retract it later if necessary.

Many panelists agreed that the main problem is that many journalists fail to carry out adequate background research before embarking on an interview. “Getting experts is difficult, but it pays to be persistent,” according to Olabisi. But, Betty Alimamy Sesay, of Radio Mankneh, a community radio in the northern city of Makeni, described the unique problem confronting her station: “The ministry of education in Makeni will only talk to SLBS and nobody else.”

As far back as 2001, SLAJ developed a media code of practice for its members, but very few journalists knew about it or bothered to follow it. The IMC subsequently developed another media code of practice in collaboration with SLAJ, with support from the PANOS Institute of West Africa. Largely based on the Code of Practice of the Press Complaints Commission in the United Kingdom, it was discussed and presented to parliament in 2007. It is violated regularly; the IMC has a Complaints Committee that meets weekly. In its 2008 annual report, the IMC noted they deliberated on a total of 34 complaints in 2007 and 32 in 2008—a far greater number of complaints than received in previous years. The IMC report noted, “The reason for the increase has been attributed to the fact that some media institutions took sides with one political party or the other during the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections.”

As to whether media professionals accept payments in exchange for coverage, the panelists said that is a fact of the profession in Sierra Leone, and it cuts across all ages and professional experience. According to Spencer, it is so “ingrained in the mentality of the journalists in Sierra Leone that they think that is natural.”

Abdulai recalled a particular experience with journalists his organization took to cover an event in the northern city of Makeni. Only three journalists out of the 20 who covered the event wrote about the story. He noted, "It is no longer whether an item is newsworthy; it is about how much you can give... and then you are depriving the people who are buying the newspapers."

There was no doubt among the panelists that self-censorship exists in newsrooms across the country, but they blame this on different reasons. Abu Bakar Joe Sesay said he would "attribute that to the one-man business trend... editorial policies that are normally designed by the publisher and not a board. He elaborated, "We have certain individuals or institutions we do not target [report on]... it mostly has do with he who pays the piper calls the tune... the rules are unwritten, but in my own situation the publisher tells you... these are our interests."

Spencer argued that the business interests of media institutions are the most important factor driving self-censorship in Sierra Leone; he cited the example of the biggest mobile-phone operator in Sierra Leone, ZAIN, which rarely gets bad press because of the amount of advertising it provides. However, Mustapha Sesay said he is sure that "the fear of the Public Order Act and of physical attacks" is the most significant factor restraining journalists.

Generally, the media in Sierra Leone cover all events and issues, even though some media outlets face more restricted access than others. State media have more access to the government and its agencies than the private media. However, during the civil war years, reporting on security issues was restricted severely. The participants also noted that reporting on certain societal issues, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), is extremely risky. In February 2009, in the Eastern City of Kenema, three female journalists were abducted by traditional *sowes* (FGM practitioners) and paraded half-naked in the streets and detained for several hours until the police intervened. The journalists had conducted radio interviews on FGM in observance of February 6, 2009, as the fifth anniversary of the international day on zero tolerance for FGM, which angered the *sowes*.

The panelists agreed that in more than 90 percent of media outlets in Sierra Leone, many journalists are not paid a salary, and their organizations do not pay their mandatory social-security contributions to NASSIT. Sowa put it bluntly: "We have more volunteers in the media than paid staff." Compared with other professionals, Mustapha Sesay argued that journalism salaries are dismal, and therefore some journalists have been quitting the profession in search of better pay, such as joining corporations like banking institutions—or abandoning Sierra Leone altogether.

Unfortunately for the profession, many of the best are leaving—particularly those who do not want to compromise their integrity. The participants agreed that the private media pay more than the state broadcaster.

Many radio stations in Sierra Leone operate a fixed news bulletin schedule; no 24-hour news radio exists here. The panel agreed that entertainment programs dominate about 60 percent of broadcast time, as a way of attracting young listeners drawn into the hip-hop and rap culture sweeping Sierra Leone now.

Almost all radio stations have relatively decent on-air digital studio facilities, but the area of greatest need is field equipment to collect materials to help enrich programs. Many radio stations have resorted to cheap phone-ins, studio-based discussions, and syndicated programs produced by NGOs and international production houses to fill airtime. Finding people with expertise in maintenance and repair of broadcast equipment is very challenging.

Niche reporting is still not well-developed in Sierra Leone. The country has a lot of generalist reporting and hardly any history of real specialized reporting. This is not to say that there have not been attempts in the past, and some journalists are beginning to move toward specialization. There is the Parliamentary Journalists Group, and there are journalists specializing in court reporting, mining, and HIV/AIDS.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Sierra Leone Objective Score: 2.17

To date, only the UN radio, 103 FM, has anything close to national coverage. Its signals cover more than half of the country, but in terms of program content, it leans a bit heavily toward Freetown and other major cities. As far as newspapers are concerned, all but one is based in Freetown, and circulation outside the capital is very limited. Out of a total of at least 10 newspapers published daily, fewer than three reach areas outside the main cities. The panelists said that even when they do, it is through the effort of an obliging bus passenger, and the papers are a day or so late.

Rural populations thus rely upon one of the many community radio stations for news and entertainment. Unless something spectacular happens, the news often sounds repetitive. But Sowa said, "Even where the news is the same, two things must be considered... the angle, in most instances, is different... [when] you listen to various broadcasts and read the papers you see the interest of certain media houses, their

editorial policies, their political affiliations—you see a slant or a twist in the way the news is published or broadcast.”

Few ordinary people can afford to use the Internet for news; it is generally restricted to some journalists, business executives, and a growing number of English Premiership Football supporters, who are focused primarily on news about their teams. Mobile-phone companies like ARFICELL provide a news alert service for their subscribers.

According to the panelists, there are absolutely no government restrictions on citizens wanting to access news from any local or international sources. Foreign broadcasts from VOA, BBC, and RFI are relayed to the country in clear FM quality around the clock. Foreign newspapers, particularly from the United Kingdom, are available in some stores in Freetown—but they are very expensive. Satellite news service provided by DSTV is available across the country. In rural areas, it is most popular for sports programming.

The panelists were unanimous that the state broadcaster, SLBS, is not truly independent and has in fact always been controlled by the ruling party; they also agreed that this indicator is a particular weak spot for Sierra Leone. Parliament just passed into law a bill that promises to make the new SLBC a true national broadcaster; however, SLAJ has expressed concern that it will be counter to the media’s interests and has asked the president not to sign the bill into law.

Editorial slant generally depends on the ownership of the radio station. But the greatest problem is with state radio, where self-censorship is rife. For example, Betty Alimamy

Sesay mentioned a meeting for the three main political parties, organized by the Political Parties Registration Commission. She said, “All the three political parties made statements, and the only one aired by SLBS was the statement by the All People’s Congress [the ruling party]... In our station, I made sure I brought everybody’s view.”

There is only one local news agency in Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone News Agency, which is under-resourced and has lost all of its good reporters to newspapers and radio stations. When it operated at full strength, its stories were picked up mainly by the state broadcaster free of cost. International agencies like Reuters, AP, and AFP have local correspondents based in Freetown.

All radio stations in Sierra Leone produce their own programs, but the quality and volume of programs depend on the availability of equipment and the professional capacity of the journalists. Hindolo Musa pointed to what he thought is a dangerous trend developing among community radio stations that depend heavily on one service for news. He explained, “Cotton Tree News [CTN]—a news service jointly run by Fourah Bay College and the Swiss-based Foundation Hironnelle—dominates the news activity for the independent radio stations... most of the rural community radio stations merely rely on CTN news broadcasts.”

Foreign news agencies have private arrangements with radio stations like Radio Deutsche Welle and Culture Radio in Freetown to rebroadcast their news, and for print media, about four newspapers have arranged with XINHUA to carry its stories.

To some panelists, media ownership in Sierra Leone is not considered a big mystery. Newspapers, in particular, generally publish their owners’ names as the managing editor, executive editor, or publisher. The IMC Act of 2000, amended in 2007, makes it possible for any member of the public to learn the ownership of a given newspaper or radio by reviewing information on file. However, Spencer noted, “The legal owner may not be the real owner; in many cases you have people behind the scenes who finance media institutions.” According to Abdulai, “They all have their interests... we know a couple of newspapers are sponsored by politicians, fronted with more neutral people posing as the owners. They basically want it to look like an independent radio or newspaper... then, when these papers publish something on them or their interests, it has a more persuasive aura of neutrality.” There is no foreign-owned newspaper in Sierra Leone, but British businesspeople co-own Capital Radio. However, significant grants from foundations like the Open Society Institute for West Africa have helped set up community radio stations, and British government aid has flowed to the state broadcaster.

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.

Some panelists claimed there is no resistance to the inclusion of any social interest topics in the media; they said it is only self-censorship that prevents social and minority issues from being addressed in the media. However, the description of the treatment of radio journalists discussing the issue of FGM appears to contradict this impression.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Sierra Leone Objective Score: 1.55

Most media institutions, particularly newspapers, are sole proprietorships. Even some newspaper-owned printing facilities are run in the same manner. Abu Bakar Joe Sesay confirmed this, citing an example: "We have the media business owner controlling virtually everything; that is what happens in most newspapers I know, including mine... they operate as profit-generating businesses, but they do not operate as efficiently as they could." For example, only a handful of newspapers and some radio stations hire professionals to operate their institutions. Many community radios are not run on a sustainable basis, panelists said, because of their dependence on foreign grants. Another obstacle to sustainability is the heavy operational overheads that burden many of these stations, given that they are located in poor rural communities with no electricity.

Some panelists charged that the state media are corrupt. The former director general, Kasho Wellington, was recently prosecuted—successfully—by the Anti-Corruption Commission for stealing money from the station. His accountant was also convicted.

Private media outlets are typically financed by advertising revenue, loans from financial institutions, and sponsorships;

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.

advertising is typically the key source, however. A one-minute radio jingle costs SLL 3,000 (\$0.75). The cover price of newspapers is SLL 1,000 (\$0.25); newspapers do not profit from the sale of copies.

The state broadcaster is poorly funded, and the process is not insulated from government control. The new SLBC Act is not yet operational; the station budget remains under the ministry of information.

Community media depend on grants and a clutch of agreements with NGOs to advertise their programs in exchange for money or equipment. In a relationship like this, the media are disinclined to broadcast anything negative about such NGOs or advertisers. As a result, the panelists said, editorial policy is definitely affected—particularly in private and community media.

There is a growing advertising industry in Sierra Leone, especially following the recent arrival of about seven banks (mostly from Nigeria) that advertise an array of services. Previously, businesses wanting to advertise contacted the media institution directly. Now, advertising agencies more often occupy that middle ground, producing and distributing material for broadcast or publishing. All the advertising agencies are based in Freetown, and the agencies are largely Sierra Leonean.

The government gives no money to private media by way of subsidies. The IMC has called on the government to support community radio stations in rural areas, but even that has not materialized.

No market research is conducted, nor are broadcast ratings or circulation figures produced officially in Sierra Leone. All media make their own claims about circulation and penetration. Although there are no official circulation figures, the panelists believe that circulation is very low.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Sierra Leone Objective Score: 2.31

Again this year, the panelists reported that there is still no broadcaster's association, despite agreement by the panelists, particularly the broadcasters, that there should be one, perhaps even as an affiliate of SLAJ. The Newspaper Publishers Guild, set up a few years ago, has collapsed.

SLAJ is the legally recognized professional association of journalists, both broadcast and print. According to the panelists, SLAJ's main focus, apart from conducting training for young journalists, is in advocating for legal reforms and providing legal support for members sued for libel and defamation.

At present, there are a few other professional associations representing the interests of journalists, such as Women in the Media of Sierra Leone and the Reporters Union—both trying to further the welfare of their members and affiliated with SLAJ.

There are a few NGOs actively supporting Sierra Leone's media community. The Society for Democratic Initiatives is actively involved in media-rights issues; it paid the legal fees for a law firm that argued the case for the repeal of the seditious and criminal libel laws in Sierra Leone. It is also working with the Media Foundation for West Africa to set up a legal-aid scheme for journalists and is working with SLAJ and other groups to enact the Freedom of Information law.

But the process has not been smooth among the partners, according to Abdulai. He commented that he sees a sense of competition; the partnership is strained. He feels SLAJ considers itself the only organization focused on the media and wants all media advocacy initiatives to go through it, which creates tension.

The West African Media Development Fund is working to help media institutions set themselves up as viable businesses.

The only institution that grants degrees for journalists is the Communication Department of Fourah Bay College at the University of Sierra Leone. The bulk of journalism graduates have gone into public relations with banks and parastatals; only a handful have gone on to work as journalists. The demand for places at the journalism school is high. In 2009, about 200 applied, but after the normal diagnostic English test, only about 60 were admitted. A few journalists have been trained abroad; the panelists estimated that about 30 percent have returned home.

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.

Both local and international groups organize many short-term training courses, mostly in basic journalism and radio program-production. Professionals of varying levels of experience are accepted for such trainings; however, media managers take very little interest in such trainings, almost always sending low-level representatives instead. In Sierra Leone, journalists who attend such training programs are paid per-diem and transport allowances; otherwise attendance would be extremely poor.

According to the panelists, it is very true that sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and not restricted in Sierra Leone.

List of Panel Participants

Garrick Olabisi, journalist, 98.1 FM, Freetown

Christo Johnson, correspondent, Reuters News Agency, Freetown

Kelvin Lewis, managing editor, *Awoko*, Freetown

Francis Sowa, station manager, Radio Mount Aureol, Freetown

Betty Alimany Sesay, producer, Radio Mankneh, Makeni

Abu Bakar Joe Sesay, managing editor, *Democrat*, Freetown

Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai, director, Society for Democratic Initiative, Freetown

Steven Mansary, legal practitioner, Freetown

Franklin Kamara, media trainer, Initiative for Mobile Training of Community Radio Stations (INFORMOTRAC), Freetown

Mustapha Sesay, secretary general, Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, Freetown

Tonya Musa, lecturer, Mass Communication Unit, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Freetown

Julius Spencer, managing director, Premier Media Advertising, Public Relations Agency, Freetown

Moderator and Author

Isaac Massaquoi, acting head of the Mass Communication Unit, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Freetown

The Sierra Leone study was coordinated by, and conducted in partnership with, Media Foundation West Africa, Accra, Ghana.