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GABON

In this small country of 267,667 square kilometers and about 1,600,000 inhabitants, long regarded as an oasis of peace in Central Africa, the press is highly politicized. Political conflicts overflow into the realm of the media, confirming the African adage that “when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” In the context of Gabon, the elephants of the political microcosm—President Ali-Ben Bongo and his opponent, André Mba Obame—are behind all political events.

Thus, the political climate of Gabon, in its fifty-second year of independence, is characterized by political demonstrations, clashes, and riots that have resulted in many human victims. This is all because the elephants of Gabonese politics do not get along: Obame and the opposition want a national conference to settle the stalemate in the country, and President Bongo threatens: “I won’t let Gabon descend into chaos.”

Because of this, the state of the media has consistently suffered. In fact, on a day of national celebration, August 16, 2012, the transmitter for TV+, the television station of the main Gabonese oppositionist, Obame, was set on fire by armed men. Since then the station has been off the air. This incident occurred in the wake of violent confrontations during a demonstration by Obame’s banned party, the National Union, and coinciding with the return of Obame to Gabon after 14 months of exile in South Africa.

The media are under strict surveillance, to the point that, as one panelist stated, “Radio and television broadcasts have been banned, even on the airwaves of the public-service station, Gabon Television.” This means that the state media, usually a sounding board for the current government’s “heavy hitters,” are themselves suffering from unusual levels of monitoring of their broadcast content.

According to a panelist’s comments, “A beleaguered government is like a hungry pig: it even eats its own children.” Some participants also fearfully recalled that the National Communications Council, responding to the swell of criticism against all media outlets, “imposed some severe penalties on the media, such as with the *Ezombolo* and *Une* newspapers, which were just hit with six-month suspensions.”

The sustainability of the media as a professional, independent industry is highly questionable at best. The acts of repression and violence against the media, the panelists concluded, justify stating that “the freedom of the press is tightly controlled and even flouted in the Gabonese Republic.”

# GABON AT A GLANCE

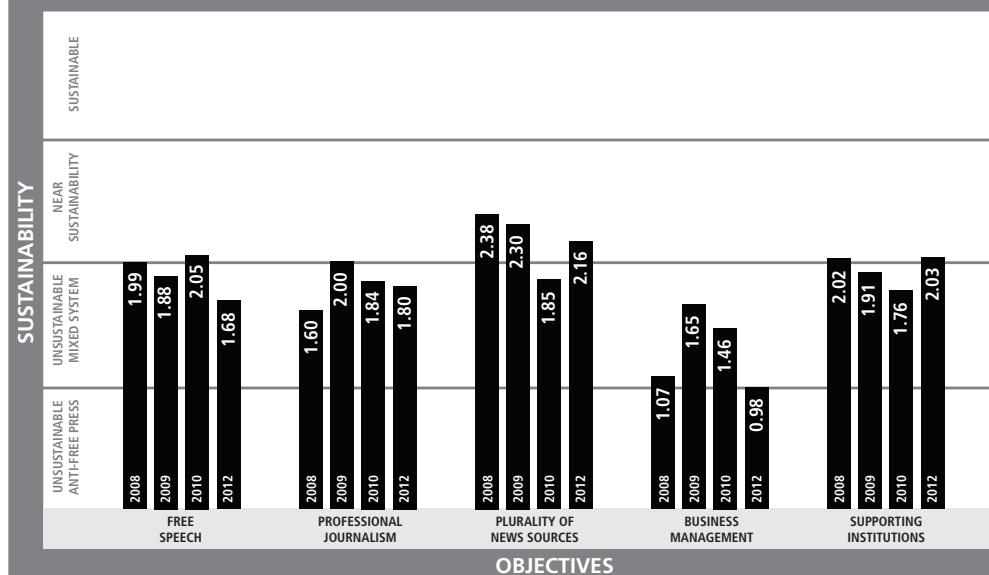
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 1,608,321 (July 2012 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Libreville
- > **Ethnic groups:** Bantu tribes, including four major tribal groupings (Fang, Bapounou, Nzebi, Obamba); other Africans and Europeans, 154,000, including 10,700 French and 11,000 persons of dual nationality (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Christian 55%-75%, animist, Muslim less than 1% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** French (official), Fang, Myene, Nzebi, Bapounou/Eschira, Bandjabi (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2011-Atlas):** \$12.239 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **GNI per capita (2011-PPP):** \$13,650 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **Literacy rate:** 63.2% (male 73.7%, female: 53.3%) (1995 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba (since October 16, 2009)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:**  
Print: 7 regularly published newspapers; Radio stations: 13; Television stations: 4
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Gabonews (private), Internet Gabon (private) (BBC Country Profile)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 98,800 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX GABON



**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

### Gabon Objective Score: 1.68

Since the new president, Bongo, succeeded his father in 2009, relations between the government and the independent media have continued to be strained. The media close to the opposition have criticized the Bongo regime repeatedly. The most illustrative case of this tension is that of TV+, a private television station owned by a former Minister of the Interior who has since gone over to the opposition, and which has been the subject of several attacks.

During the 2009 presidential election in which Obame ran as a candidate against the outgoing Bongo, a group of hooded men conducted an armed attack against the station's transmitters, preventing it from operating for nearly a month.

Faced with the contentious political climate that has placed the media under scrutiny, the panelists considered the wording of Objective 1: "Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information." The panelists noted that this assertion should be understood on two levels. First, it must be recognized that constitutional provisions guaranteeing the freedom of speech and of the press do exist. Théophile Ndong Edda, of Africa No. 1 Radio, commented, "It [has been] one thing to have good laws, and it [has been] another thing to apply them to the letter. Gabon can boast of having laid the foundations, but the mortar is slow to cure." Second, and this is Africa's general misfortune,

#### 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.

*Véronique Niangui, journalist at L'Union, spoke of this duality: "The legislation concerning the media does indeed [have the objective to] protect freedom of expression and access to public information. But the reality is quite different in that various restrictions have been attached to the existing laws to limit the achievement of this objective."*

it must be recognized that the specific laws that frame and implement the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press—in this case, the Communications Code—are, on the other hand, restrictive and repressive.

Véronique Niangui, journalist at *L'Union*, spoke of this duality: "The legislation concerning the media does indeed [have the objective to] protect freedom of expression and access to public information. But the reality is quite different in that various restrictions have been attached to the existing laws to limit the achievement of this objective." That is to say, there is a gap between the Fundamental Law and those laws that implement it, which is filled by politicians with their desire to hold onto power even if it means sacrificing the freedom of speech and of the press.

Ntoutoume Nguema, director of publication for *Le Temps*, said, "There are indeed legal provisions in Gabon that [have called] for the protection and promotion of the freedom of speech and access to public information, but the reality on the ground [has minimized] the significance of this legal framework. For example, it [has] indeed [been] difficult to give voice on the public-service media to individuals whose analysis [has] often [been] unfavorable to those in power. Similarly for the activities of political parties and trade unions not close to the political majority in power. Regarding access to information, it [has been] difficult, or even impossible, for a media outlet accused of being in the opposition to obtain information of a public nature."

Beyond the issue of access to information, all panelists cited again the case of TV+, which was suspended for three months in January 2011 after its owner's self-proclamation of being president of the republic on its airwaves.

The panelists lamented the fact that those in charge of the public media confuse the sense of public service with the interests of those in power. For the panelists, the extreme politicization of the public media accounts for the "media war" often observed between those outlets seen

*As Nguema noted, "There are standards, but many journalists [have] excelled in the contempt of this framework. So, they [have gamed the system] the way they can, usually to satisfy or please those in power, especially in the public-service media."*

as opposition media and those close to the government, especially during elections.

Some participants, however, also pointed the finger at the National Communications Council (known by its French acronym, CNC), which, as a regulatory body, often "shines" in its partiality when it comes to punishing the opposition media while ignoring public-media excesses.

Added to these political intimidations and threats are recurring sanctions on media and journalists, which contribute to self-censorship on issues of public interest, such as corruption, embezzlement of public funds, and human-rights violations.

Regarding indicator 7, Norbert Ngoua Mezui, editor of *Pyramid Média*, wrote, "Access to sources of information [has been] difficult in the Gabonese Republic, particularly for the private media. The withholding of information is common practice, especially when the information is 'sensitive' or classified as a state secret."

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Gabon Objective Score: 1.80

The shortcomings in the Gabonese media are not limited to the existence of laws whose application is quite tenuous. The limitations also affect the professionalism of journalists, who are sometimes held hostage by certain constraints in legislation that they themselves try to follow. Edda explained, "A journalist, full of goodwill and talent and even well equipped, runs afoul of the perennial problem of logistics. A report or an inquiry necessitates above all else a significant amount of basic materials before succeeding in the accomplishment of its mission. Without the personal means to travel or to have meetings, without a consistent budget, how can one be independent vis-à-vis, for example, a candidate in an election that you must follow during a campaign?!" The lack of resources is thus the first obstacle to media professionalism in Gabon.

The second obstacle, said the panelists, is the "interventions of politicians into the media, which does not favor an objective, impartial, balanced, and fair treatment of information." As journalist Goma Yves Laurent, of RFI, wrote: "Many journalists [have] deliberately decided to put themselves in the service of a political camp and saddle the opposing camp with gratuitous accusations, including insults."

The third obstacle is the actual journalist. As Nguema noted, "There are standards, but many journalists [have] excelled in the contempt of this framework. So, they [have gamed the system] the way they can, usually to satisfy or please those in power, especially in the public-service media. In some parts of the media, entertainment takes precedence over news information."

Political interventionism and/or subordination of the media to politicians result, said the panelists, in "the determined holding back of information and blackouts that are very common in the Gabonese media." Goma confirmed that by adding, "Journalists [have been] poorly remunerated and systematically practice self-censorship to avoid the fury of those in power."

It is therefore understandable that media professionals in Gabon are struggling to do their jobs and develop in such an environment, although occasional successes *do* occur, the panelists reported. Niangui condemned the despair of many well-trained, "kept" journalists: "As regards the multiplicity of the media, both public and private, the journalists [have] functioned according to the editorial line of their press outlets. This [has] occurred so much that these journalists, who are well trained, [have] hardly given the best of

## 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).

themselves. Their work and skills [have] been judged by the editorial line of their news outlet.”

Nevertheless, the panelists agreed that the CNC initiates a significant amount of training for journalists to immerse them in the basics of journalism. The commentary of journalist Blaise Mengue Menna is quite instructive: “Gabonese journalists [have] not met the quality standards of professionals [since] information is often not completely verified. Therefore, they do not meet ethical standards. Quite the contrary, self-censorship [has been] practiced to avoid prosecution for libel or sanctions from the media regulator. Some do [however] broach key issues. As for wages, on the whole, they are minimal.”

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Gabon Objective Score: 2.16

In Gabon, there are private and state media. These national media outlets constitute news sources whose informational content is similar. Their objectivity and reliability are often questioned by the public. Indeed, for the panelists, the national media suffer in one way or another from the burdens of national policy. Edda explained, “Information from various sources gets to the citizens, but the problem [has been] in its objectivity and thus its reliability. Unfortunately, manipulation in these matters is pervasive, and citizens have very little in the way of means at their disposal to verify their information. It is too bad.”

#### 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.

*Edda explained, “Information from various sources gets to the citizens, but the problem [has been] in its objectivity and thus its reliability. Unfortunately, manipulation in these matters is pervasive, and citizens have very little in the way of means at their disposal to verify their information. It is too bad.”*

The private media, with no real financial means and not comprised of well-managed companies, ultimately depend on the largess of those in power, who, through advertising and donations, control the content processed and disseminated by the media in return for their survival. The few media outlets that escape government editorial control are treated by this very same government as opposition media and suffer from restrictions on access to public information. And since they are the opposition media, they become, like the state media, partisan. They possess an editorial line and content that can be classified as far from objective and independent.

To this point, Niangui wrote, “Gabonese citizens have multiple sources of information at their disposal. As for whether they [have been] objective and reliable, that depends on the perception of each reader, listener, or viewer, because those are subjective notions.”

The state media answer to the sound of a single bell. This means that the national news sources are hardly objective or reliable. They are not serving the needs of the public and do not represent Gabon’s political spectrum in their news and other programming.

The panelists also recognized that alongside these national sources, the international media, as well as the Internet’s social networks, provide information free of the pressure of local interests. Thus, they constitute sources of verification and corroboration of local information. This, in a small way, improves upon the availability of viewpoints, which otherwise fall into a government/anti-government dichotomy, for Gabonese citizens. Also, the availability of online and international news sources increases the coverage of issues, which range from hyper-local issues to international ones.

*Goma explained further: "There [have been] very few market surveys or studies. Audience ratings [have] often not been a concern for all of the media outlets... Access to advertising is almost impossible. Distribution is unpredictable. The market is too small."*

#### **OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

### **Gabon Objective Score: 0.98**

The panelists agreed that media companies are not viable and well-managed businesses because they are subject to the vagaries of political and economic uncertainty. Ngueda commented, "None of the media in Gabon are operated as press companies. The owners of these organizations believe that the environment [has] not [been] right to transform them into press companies because, as such, they would be much more difficult to manage."

This is the same negative perception echoed by Mezui: "It is difficult to speak of media companies in Gabon, in that they [have been] in an embryonic stage. They therefore cannot be considered well managed, [they have insufficient] resources, and [they have] not mastered all the techniques of press-business management."

The advertising market operates unevenly: advertisers target the public media and radio/television channels controlled

#### **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.

by the authorities from the ruling party. Indeed, as the authorities control the economy and the businesses, the government authorities place advertising only with those elements of the media beholden to them. The lesson to take away from this reality is: "He who serves himself is best served."

The private media are owned by developers whose interests are not only in media and information but who influence the editorial line to promote their own political and economic interests. Hence, editorial independence is not guaranteed.

Ultimately, the panelists acknowledged that in Gabon, news organizations, in terms of management, are in an embryonic stage with very inadequate means, having mastered few of the modern management techniques of media companies. Hence, editorial independence is a rare gift.

Goma explained further: "There [have been] very few market surveys or studies. Audience ratings [have] often not been a concern for all of the media outlets. This may account for the economic difficulties [on] the greater part of the media. Access to advertising is almost impossible. Distribution is unpredictable. The market is too small."

#### **OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS**

### **Gabon Objective Score: 2.03**

While the panelists recognized the existence of a few NGOs that act for the promotion of the interests of media professionals, it was only to immediately make the point that these NGOs have a low operating capacity. There are three primary reasons for this observation. First, the primary critique results from the inability of the professionals to join

#### **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.

together to defend their professional cause. Mezui said, "The Gabonese media professionals [have been] struggling to get together in the framework of associations to develop common synergies in the defense of their interests. Experiments have been attempted, [yet] they have often been unsuccessful." Consequently, these NGOs are weak because they are only scarcely what one would call "representative."

The second reason is that these NGOs do not have the means to carry out the policy of promoting freedom of the press. Hence, their actions are limited to timid, non-impactful communiqués about the realities on the ground. Yet even these are coerced. Goma explained, "The NGOs have [had] a deep sympathy for the work of journalists. The professional communications associations [have not been] effective. They [have been] plagued by infighting. The government has managed to divide them."

Nancy Fanny Miboui, of the *Gabonese Press Agency*, gives another reason for the ineffectiveness of these NGOs: "The support institutions [have] not acted [in] the professional interests of the independent media because these elements of the media [have] often [been] oppositional or not very reliable." Edda highlighted the mainly disorganized state of the NGOs, writing, "The will remains, but often the decision-makers [have been] faced with many difficulties, either [from] the lack of equipment or [from] a financial variety or both. There [have been] the often difficult, or better said, delicate relations, with the country's authorities who definitely [have] intended to control the media sector as a reminder that the 'fourth' in the fourth-estate power vested in the media is not an empty qualifier [i.e., 'fourth and last']."

In 2010 the University of Libreville opened a Department of Communication and Journalism, however panelists noted that it is too soon to judge its effectiveness.

## List of Panel Participants

**Isaac Mackanga**, journalist, *Agence Gabonaise de Presse*, Libreville

**Blaise Mengue Menna**, journalist, *La Nation*, Libreville

**Théophile Ndong Edda**, journalist, *Africa No. 1 Radio*, Libreville

**Nancy Fanny Miboui**, assistant journalist, *Agence Gabonaise de Presse*, Libreville

**Yves Laurent Goma**, journalist, *Gabonactu.com*, Libreville

**Norbert Ngoua Mezui**, editor, *Pyramid Media*, Libreville

**Jean Yves Ntoutoume Nguema**, publication director, *Le Temps*, Libreville

**Annie Chantal Bikene**, journalist, *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui*, Libreville

**Veronique Niangui**, journalist, *L'Union*, Libreville

## Moderator and Author

**Samuel Obiang Mbana Mangue**, journalist and correspondent, *AFP* and *Africa No. 1 Radio*; *Journaliste en Danger*, Malabo, Equatorial Guinea

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