
Al Zuwaidi's case was the latest in a series concerning Internet blogs, forums, and websites in Oman. Journalists and bloggers have stated that they view this case as a serious threat to the freedom of expression in the country, and said that it runs counter to the interest of the state's development efforts.



OMAN

Dashing hopes that the spreading use of the Internet in Oman could provide a more open alternative to traditional media, in 2009 the Omani government began clamping down. A major turning point was the trial of a web moderator, Ali al Zuwaidi, for criticizing the government in a popular Internet forum. The authorities questioned and detained al Zuwaidi for 11 days over an anonymous post that alluded to corruption in the state telecom firm Omantel, and for publishing a cabinet directive aimed at ending live radio phone-ins.

Al Zuwaidi's case was the latest in a series concerning Internet blogs, forums, and websites in Oman. Journalists and bloggers have stated that they view this case as a serious threat to the freedom of expression in the country, and said that it runs counter to the interest of the state's development efforts. MSI panelists said that corruption plagues some institutions, and journalists must have the right to challenge and criticize that state of affairs.

Al Zuwaidi's trial did spark calls for Oman and the Persian Gulf Arab states to ease their grip on the media and improve business transparency. For example, it prompted a joint letter from the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and Reporters Without Borders on March 25, 2009, which expressed great concern over the case. The joint letter, addressed to Sultan Qaboos Bin Said al Said, urged "Please do not let your Kingdom be included among those countries in the region that repress freedom of expression." Al Zuwaidi was eventually fined and given a suspended 10-day jail sentence.

Following Sultan al Said's 2008 order that all Oman journalists undergo training, the question of professional development continued to generate controversy across Oman's media sector. Although many journalists consider training important and effective, others claim that it is useless, as freedom of press and expression is absent. Still, hundreds of journalists participated in the training campaign. The programs taught journalists mainly the basics of the profession, writing skills, investigative journalism, and the relationship between mainstream media and new media.

One panelist working for *Oman* said that the programs are very helpful, but not really new. She noted that the working environment is the most important issue for journalists. Many journalists are professional enough to practice media, she emphasized—the problem is the supervisors who play the role of gatekeepers.

One of the more popular seminars, "Omanization in Journalism and the Media," addressed the huge unemployment rate among Omanis—around 20 percent—and the competition between Omani journalists and foreigners in the English print and broadcast media outlets. Given the pool of skilled Arab journalists, inexperienced young Omani graduates find it hard to compete.

OMAN AT A GLANCE

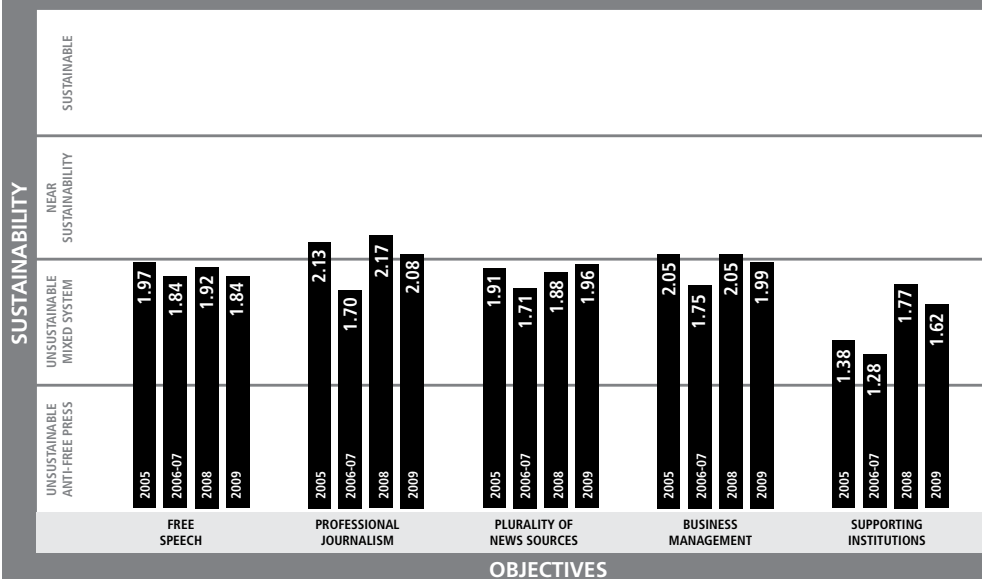
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,027,959 (2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Muscat
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Arab, Baluchi, South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi), African (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Ibadhi Muslim 75%, other (includes Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Hindu) 25% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** Arabic (official), English, Baluchi, Urdu, Indian dialects (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$49.83 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$24,530 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 81.4% (male: 86.8%, female: 73.5%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** Sultan and Prime Minister Qaboos bin Said al Said (sultan since July 23, 1970 and prime minister since July 23, 1972)

MEDIA SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 9 dailies (5 in Arabic, 4 in English), 40 other newspapers and magazines, 13 bulletins; 8 media establishments and 70 printing presses Radio Stations: 2; Television Stations: 2 (Ministry of Information)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top 3 by circulation: *Al Watan* (circulation 34,000), *Times of Oman* (circulation 34,000), *Oman Daily* (circulation 26,000) (Arab Press Network)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Oman News Agency (state owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 1.46 million (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: OMAN



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

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

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

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

Near Sustainability (2-3):

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

Sustainable (3-4):

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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Oman Objective Score: 1.84

Oman continues to score in the unsustainable, mixed-system category for freedom of speech. Although the Basic Law of Oman—its constitution—guarantees the protection of free speech, it falls short of providing a bulwark against attempts to curb such freedoms. For example, Oman’s 1984 press and publications law is considered one of the most restrictive in the Arab world, and the calls from the media sphere to change it have been ignored. Furthermore, many unwritten rules restrict journalists.

Salem Al Tuwiyah, a blogger who participated in the MSI panel, said that Oman’s constitutional rules do not grant the freedom of expression—in fact, they punish journalists and prevent them from publishing freely. He expressed particular concern over the publication law and the telecommunications law. When the government decided that these two laws were not enough to prevent journalists from covering sensitive issues, such as disclosing corruption, lawmakers introduced an amendment to the telecommunication law in order to punish those who “abuse the use of the communication tools” with jail sentences and fines. By that definition, offenders can include journalists and publishers as well as anyone who sends a text message.

Any publishing of “secrets” is likely to draw punishment—depending on the people enforcing the law and their interpretations, not on the law itself. As examples, al Tuwiyah mentioned the blocking of Sablat Al Arab forum in 2008 and the more recent trial of Ali al Zuwaidi.

Wardah al Lawati, a senior reporter at *Oman*, said that the state-owned media have less freedom than the private media organizations. But most panelists agreed that the freedom of press—whether private or state-owned media—is very limited, despite appearances that privately owned media have more freedom. MSI panelist Faiza al Himli, who has worked for several newspapers and magazines in the private sector, said that the laws in Oman are neither clear nor specific, and do not encourage the freedom of expression or the freedom of the press. But another MSI panelist, Hamood al Touqi, owner of *Al Waha* and a former reporter for *Al Waten*, shared his view that the clarity of the laws in Oman makes journalists’ work easier. The publication law prohibits writing or talking about politics and religion in a way that might raise problems between people. Laws in Oman directly prohibit criticizing the sultan.

Furthermore, some of the “laws” that curtail journalist efforts most effectively are unwritten. Social protection of free speech is weak as well; society’s calls for freedom are fickle and depend on the issues.

Just a few years ago, Oman had a very limited number of media outlets, but in the past eight years, the market has witnessed establishment of many newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations. All these institutions require permission from the Ministry of Information to launch. Al Tuwiyah shared the view that the Ministry of Information, which controls the licensing process, employs a competitive process. To support his view, he cited the publication law’s chapter 2, article 4, which stipulates that any person seeking to establish a publication should obtain permission from the Ministry of Information. Article 6 sets forth appeals procedures, stipulating that any applicant refused by the ministry may write a letter of grievance to the committee of publication, part of the ministry. However, he agreed that in all cases, permission is not granted without the approval of the minister of information.

Speaking from personal experience, Aziza al Habsi, a journalist retired from *Oman* who tried to establish her own magazine, said that the Ministry of Information controls all licensing decisions strictly. The ministry demands financial conditions that are nearly impossible for average professionals to meet, making it very hard for journalists to establish their own media projects.

The ministry requires OMR 500,000 (\$1,300,000) to establish a newspaper, and OMR 250,000 (\$650,000) for weekly and monthly periodicals and magazines. In general, only powerful business owners or individuals with close ties to the government have this amount of capital. In addition,

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.

the ministry grants licenses only to enterprises that the government trusts will follow the written and unwritten laws—whether or not they can afford the deposit.

Legal protection in Oman is not enforced or is very weak, said al Tuwiyah. As a result, many writers use pen names. Authorities have investigated, threatened, and arrested some writers that are not well known. Al Tuwiyah mentioned the al Zuwaidi trial as an example. He said that al Zuwaidi was tortured psychologically after his arrest, then gave a false confession of publishing what was considered a top confidential document.

Al Zuwaidi has written for many Omani newspapers since 1986, including *Oman*, *Al Watan* journal, and *Al Omaniah* magazine. In addition, he was a regular Internet writer, especially in forums visited by many Internet activists in Oman. In August 2008, while moderator of the discussion forum “Sablat Oman,” he allowed the publication of an article on the suspicions of corruption surrounding the Omani telecommunications company Omantel. The article was based on a formal complaint filed by Mohammed Bin Ali al Wuhaibi, the executive manager of the company. Officials in the forum removed the article, signed “from anonymous writer,” but al Zuwaidi was detained in August 2008.

Prosecutors alleged that the story violated article 61 of the Omani communications law, amended in 2008, which stipulates punishment for “anyone who uses a system on a device or a means of communication to direct a message while knowing it is untrue or causes harm to a person or a service.” Under this article, violations are punishable by up to one year in prison, and fines of up to OMR 1000 (approximately \$2,600), or both.

Al Zuwaidi faced a second charge under more general professional secrecy laws within the standard criminal code. That charge was for leaking a confidential Council of Ministers document that related to a radio program, *Haza Al Sabah (This Morning)*. The show had been used as a live forum for the public to criticize government performance, until allegedly the ministers decided to cancel it.

In a verdict announced in April 2009, al Zuwaidi was found not guilty on the first charge, violating article 61. He was found guilty on the second charge, sentenced to 10 days in prison, and ordered to pay a fine of OMR 200 (\$520). He was released, though, as his time served following his arrest exceeded 11 days.

A blogger on the MSI panel characterized the case as a settlement of accounts and a punishment for al Zuwaidi for continuing to express his opinion and criticize the government and the telecommunications sector (many Internet activists complain of poor service.)

Al Tuwiyah offered examples of crimes against journalists, but also said that investigations, arrests, and threats do not happen very often, because the government has found self-censorship to be such an effective tool.

Regarding access to information, Bader al Nadabi, a director in Oman Radio, said that access is very much restricted. Al Touqi confirmed that the Oman News Agency (ONA) is the only official source of government news and information. Journalists cannot publish news about the government if ONA has not confirmed the story, unless an official talks publicly about the issue.

Al Himli currently works for the Royal Court in the media department. She left her positions at private media outlets because of their limited freedom of the press and restrictions on journalists. Now, al Himli is tasked with providing journalists with certain and limited information. She said that the Royal Court is one of the most powerful ministries in Oman, and its employees use their power to pressure journalists and media. The media department issues orders to journalists on acceptable reporting topics.

As noted in the 2008 MSI, journalists can access news from foreign sources and the Internet without restrictions, except for stories that Oman or friendly states would consider sensitive.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Oman Objective Score: 2.08

The panelists scored Objective 2 the highest among all the categories, though on the MSI scale, its score is still relatively low. In general, the panelists had the opinion that journalism in Oman meets professional standards, although the lack of freedom and access to information weakens journalists' efforts. Panelists were divided as to whether the journalists or the media organizations are responsible for the dilution of professional standards, with some believing that journalists are professional enough, but others accusing journalists and writers of a biased approach. They said also that aside from coverage of sensitive topics, media organizations would give equal opportunity to all sides to present their cases, but such a balance is not possible on issues related to people with financial or political power.

Al Habsi said that objectivity is absent in journalists' news reporting, due to a limited number of professional journalists. As an example, she pointed to *Oman*: in the past four years, its most professional journalists have resigned because of the poor working conditions and the lack of appreciation for their work. Al Habsi said that such conditions affect journalists' performance, and have led to dependence on

young, inexperienced journalists. Most privately owned media do not hire trained journalists, tending to employ less expensive novices.

The panelists underscored that the ongoing difficulty of obtaining information is a major impediment. According to al Lawati, most journalists try to include different sources, but there is a serious lack of transparency among sources—especially government sources, which frequently deny any information journalists use.

The 2008 MSI panelists noted that Omani journalists still have not adopted a collective code of ethics, nor do any media organizations in Oman have an ethics code. Still, Omani journalists show an acceptable adherence to ethical practices on their own, according to that year's MSI, with the exception of some media organizations.

Censorship, especially self-censorship, is one of the main obstacles to the advancement of journalism in Oman. Al Lawati said that certain issues and cases are considered sensitive, and journalists find it impossible to write or report about them. One journalist said that writers for the state-owned Oman Radio and Television must obtain approval for their writing; every single day, writers have to consult with higher-ups before using a word or a phrase that might be used for the first time or in a different context.

Al Nadabi remarked that the pressure to self-censor is a nightmare for journalists. He said that he understands journalists' hesitation: punishments for veering from safe topics can be severe. Journalists are afraid of losing their jobs, and are highly aware that any suggestion of criticism of the government can lead to their detention or questioning by the authorities. One 2008 panelist noted that typically, editors prefer to accept commercial influence over the challenges of upholding professional and independent editorial policies. Often they censor their reporters to the point that the original piece bears little resemblance to the published product.

Al Lawati noted that the media do not cover many important events, such as political issues, likely to generate controversy. Human rights and corruption topics are very sensitive for Omani media, and they find it very difficult to deal with those topics or track related cases. Some journalists dare to challenge norms and regulations, and are then punished. But in general, journalists are forced to ignore such sensitive cases, because they are afraid of consequences for themselves and their families.

Al Touqi expressed the belief that it is possible to report on and discuss publicly virtually everything, except the sultan or the royal family. But he added that journalists are not professional enough in dealing with some issues, such as hard news and serious affairs. The media tend to fill space with entertainment

stories rather than covering news and issues relevant to the community. Journalists have little freedom to pitch their own story ideas; they follow topics as directed by editors.

According to al Lawati, journalist salaries are high enough to keep them away from bribes and corruption. But another panelist disagreed. As noted in the 2008 report, private journalists, in particular, do not make a lot—salaries can be as low as \$500 a month. This gives them little incentive to turn out more professional work, some panelists said. Al Tuwiyah mentioned that some journalists specialize in favorably covering news related to powerful, influential individuals and in exchange receive money, travel tickets, and even land—essentially serving as public relations agents to maintain shiny and clean images for these VIPs.

On the other hand, al Touqi maintained his position that journalists do not meet journalism standards, and that many media workers are just looking for a job that provides a monthly paycheck, and have no other professional goals.

As noted in the 2008 MSI, the split between news and entertainment is different in broadcast media than in print. Newspapers tend to present greater balance between news and entertainment, while entertainment dominates radio and television clearly.

Panelists said that media facilities are well equipped generally, with modern technology. The government's large digital studio complex has kept pace with the latest techniques of broadcasting and television, enhancing the possibilities of production and broadcasting and leading to more efficient broadcast operations and superior reception. The complex, housed within the Ministry of Information,

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).

includes digital studios, four floors with a total area of 21,000 square meters, and accommodates up to 13 studios.

Given the degree of censorship and self-censorship seen across the media, investigative journalism is rare in Oman. Journalists that pursue investigative reports have little hope of publishing them. Quality specialized reporting is also rare; for example, journalists covering economic issues often repeat information given by their sources without adding any analysis.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Oman Objective Score: 1.96

By the end of 2009, Oman had nine daily newspapers, with four in English. *Al Roaya*, an economic paper published in Arabic, is the newest newspaper. For the English-language print media, *Oman Daily* was introduced in 2009. Also in 2009, a number of tabloid-sized magazines emerged, such as the weekly *CARS* magazine. Four other magazines were published in 2009, three of them monthly. They include *Al Thaqafiya*, by Sultan Qaboos Center for Islamic Culture; *Al Shura*, by the Oman Consultative Council; and *Al Mustaqbal*, by Mazoun publishing house. In addition, the Oman Association for Fine Art publishes the quarterly *Al Berwaz* magazine.

Most of the journalists serving on the panel agreed that citizens have access to multiple news sources, and to the extent possible, the sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news. Al Lawati stressed her belief that there is plurality in public and private news sources, including print, broadcast, and Internet materials, and that these sources are affordable.

Al Himli, on the other hand, argued that news sources might be many in number, but they are lacking in originality or quality. The country has many newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, but all of them share the same sources and format, she said; people read, see, and hear the same piece of news or information regardless of the channel. Most media outlets are reluctant to stand out with original content, for fear of unwanted attention from the government. Al Himli brought up the example of swine flu. All media outlets dispensed information directly from the Ministry of Health; no one tried to investigate or find another source of information at a time when people were hungry for more accurate information.

The 2008 MSI noted that the Internet is available widely in Oman—but professional, independent news websites are not stepping in to take advantage of the relative freedom that the Internet offers. Still, the 2008 panelists noted, Internet forums address local events and allow some opportunities for free expression.

For the most part, citizen access to domestic and international media is not restricted, panelists said. Although most media outlets are based in Muscat, most people have access to local and international media outlets and can afford to buy or subscribe. As the 2008 study reported, Omanis tend to rely heavily on radio and television, including regional and international satellite offerings, for news. Print is less popular; the government is the biggest subscriber.

According to al Lawati, state-owned media do not reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, and in many cases do not serve the public interest. The country has no truly public media, either—only state-owned outlets, which dominate all media and the broadcast sector especially, heavily reflecting governmental news.

Oman has no independent news agencies that gather or distribute news for print and broadcast media. The only new agency in the Sultanate is the state-owned ONA, considered the government's mouthpiece. However, the 2008 MSI reported that most Omani citizens do not trust government sources, preferring to get their news from journalists directly.

In 2009, ONA introduced a new system (PTF) to broadcast and receive news through the exchange of files, allowing the agency to receive several news feeds that were not available before. But media professionals have lodged complaints about delays in news broadcasting. Media people told the MSI moderator that news about Oman is sometimes broadcast long before ONA picks it up, because the agency's decision-making officials hold news until they get approvals from higher security officials.

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.

Al Lawati said that journalists use international news agencies, mainly via the Internet, and benefit from their services. Yet Omani journalists generally add little local perspective to such reporting, making any changes with great caution. Al Nadabi commented that journalists can use information available on the Internet and satellite channels. But still, anything related to high government issues requires ONA confirmation.

Al Lawati said that independent media produce their own programs, albeit in small quantities. But Fatima al Ismaili, a media specialist in the Ministry of Health, said that true independent broadcast media do not exist in Oman. She said that several broadcast and print media outlets in operation are owned by business people, but they are not independent. Most media owners retain ties to the government or powerful business influences.

Al Habsi explained that independent media have tried to create their own programs, but have failed because they take orders from the Ministry of Information about the quality and sorts of programs that should be produced. Thus, she said, they do not produce news programs; only superficial entertainment programs. As an example, she pointed to HALA FM Radio, which broadcasts poor news bulletins that include soft news instead of political or hard-hitting news stories. She described the independent media as a childish imitation of the state-owned media.

State-owned broadcast media produce their own programs, but they mainly express the government's views.

Amira al Talai, a columnist at *Al Roaya*, had the opinion that media ownership is transparent enough to allow consumers to judge the objectivity of news. She said that media outlets are not concentrated in the hands of the state or a few businesspeople.

Although the panelists said that media in Oman reflect and represent a broad spectrum of social interests, media tend to focus on the official side of stories. Furthermore, sometimes powerful and high-ranking officials order media outlets not to cover certain social topics. As noted in the 2008 MSI, issues including marriage, racism, and homosexuality are considered extremely sensitive.

As the 2008 MSI noted also, Oman does not allow minorities to own media; owners and editors-in-chief have to be Omani. However, al Lawati said that Oman has no law that prohibits the publication or broadcast of minority media. She mentioned that some minority-owned newspapers written in minority languages and printed outside the country are imported to Oman.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Oman Objective Score: 1.99

The panelists agreed that media outlets operate as efficiently and professionally as political and governmental powers allow. Although the panelists said that they think that media outlets and supporting firms are profit-generating businesses, media success is relative, as the advertising market is very weak in Oman compared to neighboring countries. Another problem, as noted by the 2008 MSI panelists, is that the many media companies run by businesspeople with no journalism backgrounds might be too focused on profits, rather than producing strong reporting.

While some journalists said that media receive revenue from a multitude of sources, others said that the amount of revenue depends on the degree of loyalty to state and powerful figures. Al Lawati confirmed that although advertising is the main revenue stream for media outlets, the advertising market is not very strong. Furthermore, the older, large newspapers that started several decades ago tend to monopolize the advertisement market.

The 2008 MSI noted how new media promise to change the advertising field, opening up possibilities that might enhance independence for some private media outlets. Some media outlets now use text messaging or other platforms to advertise, as well.

Al Touqi, the owner of *Alwaha*, said that advertising agencies and related industries support the advertising market, but advertisers hesitate to put too much money in media outlets, because they do not trust the periodicals' distribution system.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Al Touqi had the opinion that the media's weak content, which leads to very small readership, also plays a role in this mistrust. He mentioned also that advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is not in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.

Al Lawati said that some independent media receive government subsidies, and could not survive without assistance above and beyond subsidies. However, that assistance comes in the form of easy loan terms, government subscriptions, and government advertising—all with strings attached, according to the 2008 MSI study.

Al Habsi said that most newspapers and broadcasting outlets do not depend on market research to formulate strategic plans or enhance advertising revenue. Media outlets do not use research to tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences. She gave the example of *Al Zaman*, which was first published in 2008. This privately owned newspaper is failing financially due to, in her opinion, the absence of research and strategic planning.

However, al Tuwiyah said *Al Zaman* tried to be different, and published stories that the press had not raised before, including banned topics. *Al Zaman* also published names of officials without their titles, such as His Excellence and Highness and other glamour titles, which led to the newspaper forming enemies and advertisers pulling funding. *Al Zaman* has faced censorship and close monitoring as well.

According to al Lawati, Oman has no independent organizations that provide broadcast ratings or produce reliable circulation figures. Generally, print media outlets announce any figures they wish, providing no evidence, and, panelists believe, quoting inflated numbers.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Oman Objective Score: 1.62

Again in 2009, Objective 5 drew the lowest scores from the panelists of any objective. Generally, the panelists said, supporting institutions do not exist in Oman. The country has no trade associations representing publishers or broadcast station owners.

As for associations representing journalists and media professionals, the Oman Journalists' Association (OJA) and the Oman Writers' Association (OWA) are in operation. Despite the 2008 MSI panel reporting encouraging signs of improvement from these two bodies, the 2009 panelists expressed disappointment with the associations' efforts. The two groups do not truly represent or support the interests of

journalists, panelists said, nor do they lobby the government on behalf of the media or advocate for media independence and professionalism. However, panelists said that OWA has shown more courage in making statements on behalf of journalists and writers under threat. For example, OWA supported Ali al Zuwaidi during his trial, and has stood by other writers that have been arrested or placed in custody.

OJA, on the other hand, behaves as though it is a department in the Ministry of Information, some panelists said. The OJA board includes well-known media people that are close to the government.

Al Habsi, however, remarked that professional associations are still very new in Oman, and they are busy building their capacities and organizing internal issues. They have very unclear objectives, and are not yet equipped to pressure the government to change the working environment for journalists and writers.

Oman has no other organizations devoted to supporting the media. The 2008 panelists explained that real media NGOs do not operate in Oman because of its law that prohibits NGOs from dealing with political issues. (Lobbying for freedom of speech and protecting journalists' rights are considered political.)

In terms of education and training, al Habsi said that the journalism field in Oman lacks educated, trained professionals. This shortcoming affects the quality of media production directly, and affects the profession generally. The country's colleges, such as Sultan Qaboos University, provide media and journalism training, but media outlets do not have much faith in the quality of graduates. In al Lawati's view, however, Oman does have quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience—the problems stem from the workplace. Old generations refuse new ideas, technologies, and methods introduced by younger generations, she said.

Another problem, detailed in the 2008 MSI, is that most of the public universities offer training in Arabic, while English is needed more in the media market. English literacy is necessary partly because so many sources—especially online—on topics such as economics are in English. The competition between Omani journalists and non-Omanis is felt primarily in the English print and broadcast media outlets. Very few Omanis have an opportunity to join the English publishing and broadcasting sectors, due to the language barrier. Most Arabic media organizations hire Omanis or Arabic-speaking journalists, but given the pool of skilled Arab journalists, young Omani graduates have difficulty competing.

Last year's enthusiasm about the training programs ordered by Sultan Qaboos appear to have dimmed. Al Lawati said that despite the order, short-term training and in-service

training programs remain very limited. In many cases, the classes do not allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills—rather, they tend to offer repetitive lessons on skills that the journalists have learned already. Most of the government-ordered training programs take place in in-country institutions, such as Sultan Qaboos University. Some workplaces host their own training programs, and other courses are held abroad.

The panelists discussed the “Omanization in Journalism and the Media” seminar, organized by the Omani Journalists’ Society in collaboration with the Ministry of Manpower. The Omanization process is very popular in Oman, given its huge unemployment rate of around 20 percent—considered the highest of the Gulf countries. The seminar covered four working papers on the reality and aspiration of Omanization in the journalism and media sector, the role of the liaison officer in Omani journalism, stability at work, employment of Omanis in the English-language print sector, and the media environment in Muscat. The seminar was attended by representatives from the ministry, journalism institutions, private magazines, and the Sultan Qaboos University College of Tourism; students in the university’s Journalism and Media Department; and others interested in Omani journalism and media affairs.

Panelists said that this seminar was important, as the working conditions are not fair for the younger generations, especially in the private sector. They noted that a majority of Omani journalists work for the public sector or the state-owned media organizations. Ministry representatives said that the media sector has strong potential, as Omanis have practiced journalism and other media jobs since the early 1970s and have proven that they can work in the media field at the administrative, executive, specialized, or senior management levels.

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.

Al Habsi, however, remarked that professional associations are still very new in Oman, and they are busy building their capacities and organizing internal issues. They have very unclear objectives, and are not yet equipped to pressure the government to change the working environment for journalists and writers.

The panelists said that despite this lip service, the ministry is not serious about Omanization, especially at the management levels; most of the jobs offered to Omanis are lower-level. Soon after such media seminars are held and recommendations are issued, officials forget about them.

As noted in the 2008 MSI, each year the Diplomatic Institute (part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) offers training as well—including investigative reporting training—for three journalists from each media organization. Overall, many journalists complain that there are not enough in-service training opportunities.

On the surface, sources of newsprint and printing facilities appear to be unrestricted and in private hands, but anything related to publishing and distribution requires permission from the Ministry of Information.

List of Panel Participants

Salem al Tuwiyah, editor-in-chief, *Al Waha*, Muscat

Hamood al Touqi, blogger, Muscat

Wardah al Lawati, senior reporter, *Oman*, Muscat

Faiza al Himili, media specialist, Royal Court, Muscat

Fatima al Ismaili, public relations officer, Ministry of Health, Muscat

Bader al Nadabi, director, Oman FM Radio, Muscat

Aziza al Habsi, independent journalist, Muscat

Amira al Talai, writer, *Al Zaman*, Muscat

Moderator and Author

Rafiah al Talei, program director, Gulf Forum for Citizenship, Muscat

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missing "t" in "Musca" added by Omni