



Freedom of the Press 2015 - Dominican Republic

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 42

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 8

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 21

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 13

Legal Environment

The 2010 constitution guarantees freedom of expression and access to public information, but some laws and government actions undermine these rights in practice. Criminal defamation laws remained a major concern for journalists in 2014. Conviction for defamation or insult of the head of state can result in penalties of up to one year in prison and the loss of basic rights, such as voting or standing in elections. Liability for defamation is shared at various levels: Newspaper editors hold the greatest liability, followed by journalists, printers, and then vendors and distributors. Newspaper owners must assume the financial damages against editors and journalists. Defamation and libel are criminalized both in the penal code and in the Law on Expression and Dissemination of Thought.

In July 2014, the country's largest newspapers – *El Día*, *Listín Diario*, *Diario Libre*, *El Nacional*, *Hoy*, *El Nuevo Diario*, and *El Caribe* – published a petition calling on the Constitutional Court to repeal the country's defamation laws, arguing that they result in self-censorship in the media and penalize normal journalistic activities. They also asked for the elimination of the laws that make editors primarily responsible in cases of defamation or libel. The papers had originally filed the

petition in February 2013, and the government expressed its intention to eliminate prison sentences for such crimes, but no action had been taken by year's end.

Journalists in 2014 continued to be brought to trial on accusations of defamation against politicians or private citizens. In July, a judge cleared television journalist Marino Zapete, who has programs on the news network SIN as well as the channel Teleradio America, of charges brought by the president of the National Unity Party (PUN), Pedro Corporán. Zapete had reported on financial irregularities at a government agency headed by Corporán. An appellate court confirmed the initial verdict in November. Separately, the Supreme Court ruled against radio journalist Juan Taveras Hernández on a procedural matter in September, as part of an ongoing case brought by Senator Félix Bautista, whom Taveras had accused of corruption. Bautista demanded \$1.16 million in damages. In the Supreme Court appeal, Taveras had sought authorization to present evidence that he said would prove the truth of his original allegations. In another case that month, radio reporter Rosendo Tavárez of Z-101 was sued by Celso Marranzini, a former head of the Dominican Society of Electric Companies, who charged that Tavárez had sullied his character. A verdict was pending at year's end.

The Dominican Republic enacted a freedom of information law in 2004, making it one of seven countries in the Caribbean region that currently have such laws in place.

Political Environment

Media outlets sometimes face political pressure from government officials, and journalists at privately owned newspapers or broadcast stations have an incentive to engage in self-censorship to avoid damaging the owners' political or business interests. President Danilo Medina declared in 2014 that his government fully supports freedom of expression, but some papers complain that the administration has held few press conferences. An October editorial in *Hoy* said reporters covering the executive branch encountered bureaucratic obstacles when attempting to interview senior officials.

Attacks and intimidation against the press by both state and nonstate actors continued to be problems in 2014, especially for reporters investigating corruption and the drug trade. Members of the media experience episodic police brutality, arbitrary detentions and inspections, equipment confiscations, threats, and verbal and physical harassment in both urban and provincial areas.

In June, journalist Gerardo de Jesús Abreu had his camera and mobile phone confiscated by officers from the Dominican National Directorate for Drug Control while attempting to cover a drug raid in the central province of La Vega. He was told by police that he needed a "good beating" for interrupting police activity. Later that month, Pedro Fernández, a correspondent for *El Nacional*, had his car attacked by unidentified gunmen while driving through the town of San Francisco de Macorís, though he escaped unharmed. The shooting followed an tear-gas attack on his home a week earlier, and a note warning him to cease investigating the drug trade in the region. Fernández reported in January that a local drug dealer was plotting to kill him.

Three days after the attack on Fernández, unidentified gunmen fatally shot cameraman Newton González of Canal 25 in the northern city of Santiago in broad daylight. The police discarded robbery as a motive, as nothing was taken, but it remained uncertain whether the crime was linked to the victim's work. In September, three television journalists, Yaniris Sánchez and José Cruz, both

from Telenoticias Canal 11, and Silvino da Silva, from Canal 9 National Information Service, were struck with stones and bottles during a clash between Haitian protesters and police in the capital. In October, the daily *Diario Libre* alleged that an armed mob detained some of its vehicles, apparently in connection with a lawsuit against the paper by radio commentator Raúl Pérez Peña.

Economic Environment

The Dominican Republic has several major daily newspapers, scores of radio stations, and over 60 terrestrial and cable television stations. However, ownership of many of these stations and the country's newspapers is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful individuals and companies. There are two state-owned television stations and one state-owned radio station. Community radio and television stations, as well as news websites, are becoming increasingly active. Approximately 50 percent of the population used the internet during 2014, and there were no reports of government restrictions on access. Several online news sources produce content in English and Spanish, and the use of social-networking websites is growing rapidly.

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