



Freedom of the Press 2013 - Liberia

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 56

Legal Environment: 15

Political Environment: 21

Economic Environment: 20

The Liberian media environment improved in 2012 due to a decrease in libel cases, efforts to repeal defamation laws, and a reduction in violence against journalists. The constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, and the government largely respected these rights. In July 2012, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the second African head of state to endorse the Declaration of Table Mountain, which calls on African governments to abolish criminal defamation laws. The Press Union of Liberia submitted a draft bill to the parliament in late November that would carry out such an abolition, but it had not been enacted at year's end, and some libel charges continued to be leveled against media houses during the year. In addition, the compensation sought and imposed in civil cases is often excessive, leading to severe financial difficulties for journalists and their outlets, and encouraging self-censorship in the media. In February, former senator Nathaniel J. Williams filed a libel suit against the *Independent* newspaper for an article alleging that he had been evicted from his rented home. Williams claimed damages of US\$5 million. In March, Robert Sirleaf, the chairman of the board of directors at the National Oil Company of Liberia and the president's son, threatened a libel suit against the *Independent* if it did not retract an article claiming that he had seized national oil holdings for commercial use. Corruption and bribery in the judicial sector also contribute to a largely unfavorable environment for journalists. In February, three newspaper publishers were ordered to appear before the Supreme Court on possible charges of contempt following the publication of an article that accused the judges of embezzling funds. At the hearing, representatives of two of the papers apologized to the court.

In 2010, Liberia enacted West Africa's first freedom of information law. Both journalists and the general public have the right to access any public document, with exemptions for those related to national security. However, implementation of the law, as well as public awareness regarding how to use it, has remained weak.

According to the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP), there are very few legal provisions to help guide media policy or offer protections to journalists in Liberia. Existing

regulatory bodies are largely ineffective at implementing laws and regulations governing the media, and self-regulatory mechanisms have not yet been developed. A 2008 bill that would establish an independent broadcast regulator with safeguards against government intervention is still waiting to be passed by the Senate. A draft law seeking to convert the state broadcaster into a public-service broadcaster was also still pending at the end of 2012.

Although Liberia's media environment is not heavily polarized, outlets did openly exhibit political loyalties – to either the incumbent Unity Party or the opposition Congress for Democratic Change – in the period surrounding the 2011 presidential election. Many outlets were criticized for "yellow journalism," politically biased reporting, and lack of accountability. In November 2011, four radio stations and three television stations were found guilty of propagating hate messages before the election. While an order to close the stations was quickly rescinded, the argument presented in the case – that the government had the authority to shut down media outlets based on their news content – has the potential to set a negative precedent regarding censorship. Radio Veritas, a Catholic-run station with critical news programming, closed indefinitely in October 2012, raising suspicions of political pressure from the government.

The level of violence decreased in 2012, but journalists still faced threats and intimidation in the course of their work. In February, police attacked and threatened journalist Edwin Genoway of *New Dawn* after he attempted to photograph officers harassing motorists. In March, the acting mayor of Monrovia, Mary Broh, allegedly ordered the beating of journalists Francis Nyan and Charles Yates. The same month, Mae Azango, a journalist for *FrontPage Africa*, received threats after publishing a story on Liberian tribes practicing female genital mutilation (FGM) in rural areas. Azango went into hiding, saying she was not receiving adequate protection from the police.

The media sector includes both state-owned and private outlets. Although about a dozen newspapers publish with varying regularity, including the government-owned *New Liberian*, distribution is limited largely to the capital. Low literacy rates and the high price of newspapers and transportation make radio the primary source of information for most Liberians. Monrovia is home to over 15 independent radio stations, at least two of which broadcast nationwide. Community radio has expanded to over 50 stations across the country, and television has grown to at least six stations. There were no reported cases in 2012 of the government or other parties attempting to influence editorial content through the withholding of advertising. However, reporters commonly accept payment from individuals covered in their stories, and the placement of a story in a paper or radio show can often be bought or influenced by outside interests. Most media outlets are not self-sustaining and rely heavily on financial support from politicians or international donors. According to the Liberia Media Center, most newspapers are owned and operated by journalists, who are rarely trained in business management. Journalism training is also limited, with CEMESP providing one of the only venues for training in journalistic ethics. Both the Press Union of Liberia and CEMESP offer assistance to journalists.

In 2012, an estimated 4 percent of Liberians accessed the internet. There are no official restrictions on internet use, and there were no reports during the year of the government monitoring online communications.

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