# Freedom of the Press 2014 - Liberia


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**2014 Scores**

**Press Status:** Partly Free
**Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst):** 58
**Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst):** 16
**Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst):** 21
**Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst):** 21

Liberia's constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, but these rights were often limited in practice during 2013. 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 (PUL) submitted a draft bill to the parliament later that year that would move forward with decriminalization, but it had not been enacted by the end of 2013. As a result, libel charges continued to be leveled against media houses and journalists. However, the year's cases mainly highlighted another important problem: large financial awards in civil suits, which lead to severe economic difficulties for journalists and their outlets and encourage self-censorship.

In one such case, Rodney Sieh, editor and publisher of the top investigative daily *FrontPage Africa*, was jailed in August for failing to pay US$1.5 million in damages resulting from a libel lawsuit filed by former agriculture minister Chris Toe. His newspaper was also ordered closed following the ruling, although it continued to publish online. In 2010, *FrontPage Africa* had published the results of an investigation that implicated Toe in the disappearance of US$6 million from the Agriculture Ministry. Court proceedings against Sieh at various levels were marred by irregularities, including jury tampering and conflicts of interest. In October 2013, Sieh was granted a 30-day release on compassionate grounds after he contracted malaria in prison. He was ordered back to jail on November 8 but was released the same day after Toe dropped his case; *FrontPage Africa* was allowed to resume publishing about 10 days later. According to the PUL, pending lawsuits filed against media houses in 2012 and 2013 sought more than US$20 million in damages in total. Corruption and bribery in the judicial sector also contribute to a largely unfavorable legal environment for journalists. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, no print outlet has won a libel case against it since Sirleaf's election in 2005.

In 2010, Liberia enacted West Africa's first freedom of information law. Journalists and the general public have the right to access any public document, with exemptions for those related to national security. In July 2013, a court in Monrovia heard the country's first freedom of information case. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiff, ordering the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission to disclose the asset declaration forms of cabinet ministers and other officials to Liberia's Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP). Local media hailed the decision as a victory for transparency.

According to 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 aimed at converting the state broadcaster into a public-service broadcaster was also pending at the end of 2013.

Although Liberia's media environment is not heavily polarized, outlets often display political loyalties to parties – particularly during election periods. Media outlets express a range of political views, generally without restriction, though there were reports that one radio talk show was suspended twice in 2013 over critical content; in each case, the program was allowed to resume broadcasting within a few days.

Violence against the press has declined in recent years, but journalists still face threats and intimidation in the course of their work. In May, the head of the presidential guard, Othello Warrick, came under fire from media and free expression activists over remarks he made during a speech on World Press Freedom Day, in which he told critical journalists, "Be careful, because you have your pen and we have our guns." The PUL called for a media blackout on coverage of Sirleaf until she personally repudiated the comments. Many newspapers ran black front pages, while radio and television stations suspended programming for two hours a day as part of the protest. The PUL announced an end to the blackout after 18 days, and criticized Sirleaf for her silence on Warrick's remarks. While there were fewer reports of physical attacks against journalists in 2013, the government's failure to condemn threats contributes to an atmosphere of impunity.

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 2013 of the government or other entities 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 on a radio show can often be bought or influenced by outside interests. Media houses sometimes accept payment from individuals not to run certain stories. Most media outlets are not self-sustaining and rely heavily on government advertising and financial support from politicians or international donors. According to the Liberia Media Center, newspapers are typically 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.

Nearly 5 percent of Liberians accessed the internet in 2013. There are no official restrictions on internet use, and there were no reports during the year of the government monitoring online communications.