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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Liberia

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free
Press Freedom Score: 60
Legal Environment: 16
Political Environment: 23
Economic Environment: 21

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government largely respected these rights in 2011, with some exceptions. Despite enacting West Africa's first Freedom of Information law in 2010, Liberia saw increased attacks against journalists in 2011, both in the form of physical violence, as well as the use of libel charges by politicians to silence journalists. Violence and intimidation of journalists markedly increased around the presidential elections in the fall of 2011 as tensions rose between incumbent President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's United Party (UP) and the opposition Congress for Democratic Change (CDC).

Libel is still a criminal offense in Liberia, and several libel charges were threatened and leveled against media houses and freedom of expression activists in 2011. Fines sought and imposed in civil cases are often astronomical, leading to severe financial difficulties for journalists and their outlets, and encouraging self-censorship in the media.

Corruption and bribery in the judicial sector also lead to a largely unfavorable environment for journalists. In February, the former agriculture minister filed a \$2 million defamation suit against the newspaper *FrontPage Africa* over articles linking him to a rubber industry corruption scandal. A jury unanimously passed down a guilty charge, and fined the paper \$1.5 million in damages. In November, the minister demanded payment of the damages, and at year's end, the newspaper risked closure. In other cases, in March the mayor of Monrovia threatened to file a lawsuit against the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) after it alleged in a report that she had ordered her bodyguards to arrest and jail Love FM reporter Nimpson Todd. In November, a former chairman of the opposition Liberty Party filed a \$10 million libel suit against the *Liberian Journal* for publishing a story accusing him of attempting to flee the country after being indicted for embezzling funds from LoneStar Cell MTN.

According to CEMESP, Liberia is an "unregulated multi-media society" with very few legal provisions to help facilitate media policy. There are some regulatory bodies in place; however, they have failed to effectively enforce media policies due to the lack of legal and economic protections for journalists and media institutions. A 2008 Independent Broadcast Regulator draft bill, which would establish an independent regulatory body free from government intervention, is still waiting to be passed by the Senate.

Additionally, a draft law seeking to convert the state broadcaster into a public service broadcaster was still pending at the end of 2011.

Although Liberia's media environment is not heavily polarized, media outlets did openly exhibit political loyalties – between the incumbent UP and the opposition CDC – in the period surrounding the November 2011 presidential election. Many media outlets were criticized for "yellow journalism," politically biased reporting, and lack of accountability. Media houses on both sides of the political spectrum reported being victims of violence and intimidation prior to and during the elections. In September, Johnson-Sirleaf suspended and replaced Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS) Director General Ambrose Nmah, allegedly due to the broadcast of a press conference in which the leader of a main opposition party was critical of the president. Two opposition stations, Love FM and Love TV, were targets of arson attacks in October. In November, four radio stations and three television stations were found guilty of propagating hate messages before the presidential election. While the 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 for censorship in the media.

Reporters also face difficulty in covering the news, and there were several attacks on journalists in 2011. A reporter for Truth FM was attacked in April by a mob loyal to a local political candidate after he inquired about an alleged personal scandal involving the candidate. In May, two journalists were forcibly removed and their equipment confiscated after taking pictures of lawmakers in the Capitol building. After having initially authorized their removal, the Speaker of the House later issued a written apology to the journalists. In September, four reporters with Renaissance Communication Incorporated were attacked by members of the Liberty Party for attempting to report on the former party chairman's release from prison.

The media sector includes both state-owned and private outlets. Although about a dozen newspapers publish with a varying degree of regularity, of which the government-owned *New Liberian* is one, distribution is limited largely to the capital. Low literacy rates and the high price of newspapers and transportation made radio the most important source of information for most Liberians. There were 15 independent radio stations in Monrovia and 24 community radio stations outside the capital, as well as three television stations. There were no cases in 2011 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 and 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 journalism ethics. Both the Press Union of Liberia and the CEMESP offer assistance to journalists. In 2011, the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism teamed up with the UN Development Programme to offer a short-term training program for rural female journalists.

In 2011, 3 percent of Liberians accessed the internet. There are no restrictions on the use of the internet and there were no instances of government monitoring e-mail activity or internet chat rooms.

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