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# Freedom of the Press 2012 - Algeria

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## 2012 Scores

**Press Status:** Not Free

**Press Freedom Score:** 62

**Legal Environment:** 22

**Political Environment:** 23

**Economic Environment:** 17

The Algerian constitution guarantees freedom of expression. However, a legal state of emergency was in effect from 1992 until February 2011, allowing the government to penalize any speech deemed threatening to the state or public order. Even after the state of emergency was lifted, there remained substantial restrictions on press freedom. A 2001 amendment to the information code criminalizes writing, speech, and cartoons that insult or offend the president, the parliament, the judiciary, or the armed forces. The constant threat of criminal defamation and other legal charges hinder the press's ability to cover the news.

A new media law was passed in December 2011, though it had not yet come into effect at year's end. The law's proponents hailed it as an important reform that would enhance media freedom by abolishing prison sentences for press offenses and opening up key media sectors to private ownership. Detractors argued that the law's vague language and new restrictions would in fact result in reduced media freedom. The measure included limitations on media coverage of a variety of subjects – among them, criminal investigations and state security – and steep fines of up to \$6,700 for press-related offenses. Journalists who fail to pay the fines are subject to jail time. Furthermore, the law contains strict new eligibility requirements for media ownership, including a minimum of 10 years of media-related experience.

State agencies regularly engage in both direct and indirect censorship. Self-censorship also remains widespread, motivated largely by a fear of defamation accusations or other forms of government retaliation. Reporters occasionally suffer physical attacks or harassment in the course of their work. In February 2011, security forces barred journalists from covering antigovernment rallies in major Algerian cities. Police held Bilel Zehani, a photojournalist with the Algerian news agency Agence NewPress, for two hours and erased his camera's memory card. Foreign media outlets continue to face barriers to free reporting. Officials block distribution of foreign papers when they carry content deemed subversive. In particular, foreign media coverage of issues related to national security and terrorism is restricted. The Algeria office of Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television network remained closed in 2011.

Algeria has a vibrant but fragile independent press, which often acts as a more effective check on the government than opposition parties. There are currently more than 100 private daily and weekly newspapers, 29 of which print over 10,000 copies for each edition. Domestic television and radio, both of which are entirely state owned, broadcast biased information, display favoritism toward the president, and generally refrain from covering dissenting views. Encouragingly, the new media law passed in December 2011 does potentially open these sectors to private ownership. More than 60 percent of households have satellite dishes that provide access to alternate sources of information. The government has tremendous economic influence over print media, as most papers are printed on state-owned presses. In January 2008, the government placed six state-owned printing presses under the direct control of the Communications Ministry, threatening the editorial autonomy of half of Algeria's privately owned newspapers. The state-owned advertising agency favors content with a progovernment bias by controlling the placement of ads for state entities and companies, which form the largest source of income for most papers.

About 14 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2011. In 2009, Algeria adopted a cybercrime law that gives the authorities the right to block websites deemed "contrary to the public order or decency." The government monitors e-mail and online chat rooms, and internet service providers are legally liable for the content they host. Bloggers, like traditional journalists, are subject to defamation suits, and several have been fined for posting "defamatory material." However, there were no reported cases of legal harassment against bloggers or online journalists in 2011. During the February protests, activists accused the government of shutting down internet service providers and attempting to block the social-networking site Facebook. The authorities denied these claims.

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