Freedom of the Press 2012 - Burkina Faso

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2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free
Press Freedom Score: 42
Legal Environment: 13
Political Environment: 16
Economic Environment: 13

Article 8 of the constitution and the information code of 1993 guarantee the freedoms of expression, information, and the press. Article 49 of the information code allows every journalist free access to sources of information, with exceptions for information pertaining to the internal and external security of the state, military secrets, strategic economic interests, ongoing investigations or legal proceedings, and anything that threatens the dignity and privacy of Burkinabés. In practice, these exceptions are used frequently by officials, and accessing government information remains difficult. Libel is a criminal offense, and the burden of proof is on the defendant, but few journalists have been charged in recent years.

Burkina Faso's media regulatory body, the High Council of Communication (CSC), consists of 12 members appointed by the government, and has been criticized for inconsistent and mismanaged licensing procedures. The body has the power to summon journalists to hearings about their work, which can be followed by a warning that the CSC will not tolerate further "noncompliant behavior." The council issues approximately five summonses each year. While the CSC has approved a growing number of private radio stations, newspapers, and television channels, as well as requests for radio frequency spectrum, critics argue that it should focus additional efforts on addressing the economic sustainability of media outlets.

To avoid aggravating public authorities, state-run outlets generally refrain from covering controversial subjects, though programming allows for coverage of the opposition. Conversely, the private media are generally free of overt censorship, do criticize the government, and investigate more sensitive topics. Journalists occasionally face harassment by public authorities for coverage that is deemed unfavourable, leading some to practice self-censorship. In April 2011, musician and radio presenter Sam K. Le Jah (Sama Karim) was prohibited from entering the offices of Ouga FM, the privately funded radio station where he worked. The station's owner, Bakry Joachim, was apparently displeased that Le Jah had attended an opposition political party meeting earlier that day.

The media were affected by political tensions in the first quarter of 2011, when the military agitated for better service conditions, causing the president to declare a state of emergency. A press vehicle was seized by mutinous soldiers in March, preventing journalists with the Pan-African Television Network (Africable) from covering the release of a fellow reporter who had been held by the military; the vehicle was returned three days later. In April, soldiers ransacked and vandalized the premises of Savane FM, which had criticized the mutiny. Several protests during the same period featured instances of violence and attacks by the public and military against the media. In March, students from Ouagadougou University attacked Ahmadou Dicko and Urbain Somé of the state-owned Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina (RTB) for allegedly censoring a previous report on a protest during which a student died. Journalists Arsène Evariste Kabore and Issa Kafando, also from the state media, were prevented a few days later from covering a meeting between the Burkina Labor Union and the government in retaliation for their outlets' treatment of a "high cost of living" protest held earlier in the month.

More than 239 radio and television stations operate in the country, and there are at least five national dailies. A 2009 study by the Norbert Zongo National Press Center found that *L'Observateur Paalga*, a private newspaper, was the most popular print outlet in the country. The official daily, *Sidwaya*, displays a progovernment bias but also allows opposition figures some space to present their views. Although the private print media are growing, including through newsmagazines, ownership still lacks transparency. The print sector's struggles with interrupted production, low literacy rates, and poor economic conditions make the broadcast media the preferred choice for news and entertainment. RTB was established as the national broadcaster in 1963, and remained the only television channel for many years. A handful of private television stations, including Canal 3, now compete with RTB. However, radio is still the country's most popular medium and source of information. Community radio stations are prevalent throughout the country, and play a significant role in local development and community building. Foreign radio stations are able to broadcast freely. Low levels of training and expertise, as well as low salaries, affect the integrity of journalism as a profession.

Infrastructural deficiencies and poverty limited internet usage to 3 percent in 2011. There were no reported restrictions on internet content.