



Freedom of the Press 2016 - Ghana

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Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 8 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 12 / 40 (↓2) (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 11 / 30 (↓1) (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 31 / 100 (↓3) (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 27,672,800

Freedom in the World Status: Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 18.9%

Status change explanation: Ghana's status declined from Free to Partly Free due stepped-up attempts to limit coverage of news events and confiscation of equipment; increases in violence directed at journalists by the police, the military, political party members, and ordinary citizens, including the first murder of a journalist in more than 20 years; and continued electricity outages that impaired media production and distribution.

Overview

Ghana's reputation as one of the freest media environments in sub-Saharan Africa was tarnished in 2015 by a series of physical attacks against journalists, often by state officials, as well as by intensifying legal and financial pressure on reporters and media outlets.

Key Developments

- In December 2015, Parliament adopted guidelines requiring the operators of public electronic communications or broadcasting services to submit content to a government media commission for approval before dissemination. The failure to do so can result in fines or a jail sentence of up to five years.
- Two senior judges sued a number of journalists and the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) advocacy group for defamation in connection with an exposé implicating them and other members of the judiciary in a widespread bribery scandal.

- Radio journalist George Abanga was shot and killed in September, marking the first murder of a journalist in connection with their work in more than 20 years.
- Frequent power outages forced media outlets to turn to costly alternative power sources in order to publish or broadcast.

Legal Environment: 8 / 30

While freedom of the press is legally guaranteed, protections for the media have eroded under the administration of President John Dramani Mahama. In December 2015, Parliament approved content standards regulations that compel operators of public electronic communications or broadcasting services to obtain authorization from the National Media Commission (NMC) before the content is disseminated. Violations can result in fines or a jail sentence of up to five years. The measure's passage prompted concern among media freedom advocates that authorities were effectively reintroducing criminal penalties for journalistic activity.

Criminal libel and sedition laws were repealed in 2001, but the publication of false news with intent to "cause fear and alarm to the public or to disturb the public peace" remains a misdemeanor under Ghana's criminal code. Current and former public officials, as well as private citizens, sometimes pursue civil libel suits with exorbitant compensation requests against journalists and media outlets.

In September 2015, a High Court judge, Justice Paul Uter Dery, sued prominent investigative reporter Anas Aremeyaw Anas, three other journalists, and the executive director of the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) advocacy group for contempt of court in connection with an exposé Anas had produced over a period of two years that implicated Dery and more than 30 other judges, as well as over 100 judicial service staff, in a widespread bribery scandal – a story that had a major impact on Ghana's political and judicial systems. Dery also sought an injunction against a video Anas had produced that featured footage of the alleged bribe-taking. In November, Gilbert Ayisi Addo, another High Court judge implicated in the scandal, sued nine parties including journalists, media outlets, and the MFWA for defamation in connection with the public screening of the video, and is seeking heavy damages. The cases were pending at the year's end.

The 1992 constitution provides for freedom of information, but there is no legislation to implement this guarantee. After more than 10 years of consultation between lawmakers and civil society organizations, a draft right to information bill went through a second reading in Parliament in 2015; it had not been passed at the year's end. Observers praised the draft bill for its robust provisions, many of which were inserted following pressure from civil society groups in Ghana.

In February 2015, the National Communications Authority awarded Afriwave Telecom a contract to establish a single clearinghouse through which all voice and data communications would pass. Civil society activists expressed concern that its establishment could permit government monitoring of phone calls, text messages, e-mail, and other communications, and could introduce the possibility of a large-scale telecommunications shutdown for political reasons. They also said it could prompt an overall increase in the cost of telecommunications services for consumers.

Political Environment: 12 / 40 (↓2)

While the constitution protects the state-run Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) from government interference, political parties attempt to influence coverage. Private media face editorial pressure from their owners, particularly those with political connections. Mahama has called for increased regulation of the media in order to avoid the spread of false information that could damage the country's international reputation, and, citing increasing partisanship, has called for radio stations to invite fewer political party representatives to their talk shows.

The constitution prohibits censorship, but Parliament's approval of new content regulations for broadcasters in December 2015 has raised concerns about the issue. Additionally, in August the Ministry of Communication's Information Services Department (ISD) issued guidelines requiring that ISD officials accompany foreign media workers when filming, and that they submit final newsreels to the ISD before they are aired publicly. Journalists who refuse to accept the conditions will be denied permission to work in Ghana.

Journalists faced an increased risk of physical attacks while performing their jobs in 2015, from government and military officials, the police, and members of the public. Such attacks typically went unpunished. In February, police officers attacked reporters who were trying to film a dispute between the police and a motorist. An official investigation was promised but no results had been issued at the year's end. In May, military officers attacked Michael Creg Afful of the private radio station Oman FM while he was photographing a construction site being developed by a firm owned by the president's brother, who was on the scene at time. The officers also seized Afful's phone and deleted photographs he had taken. The same month, supporters of the opposition New Patriotic Party attacked a Starr FM journalist who was attempting to interview them at a meeting. In June, residents attacked journalists from multiple outlets who were covering a demonstration against the demolition of homes in Accra's Old Fadama neighborhood; police failed to protect reporters during the incident.

In September, Stan Dogbe, a top aide to Mahama, assaulted and smashed the tape recorder of a GBC journalist he had accused of eavesdropping; the incident took place at a hospital where members of the presidential press corps were being treated following a car accident. The GBC declined to file a police report, treating the case as an "internal matter." Subsequently, the MFWA and 155 journalists jointly petitioned Mahama to sanction his aide, but they did not receive a response from the president by year's end.

In September, George Abanga, a reporter with the radio stations Success FM and Peace FM, was shot dead in the western Brong Ahafo region by unknown assailants as he was returning from covering a dispute between cocoa farmers. According to local reports, his killing was likely related either to his coverage of defections from the ruling National Democratic Congress party, or to his coverage of the theft of fertilizer from cocoa farmers in the region. His death represented the first time a journalist had been murdered in Ghana in over 20 years, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Economic Environment: 11 / 30 (↓1)

Ghana has a total of 58 authorized television operators and 390 FM radio stations, of which 37 are state-owned, 273 are private, 63 are community-owned, and 17 are operated by universities. Dozens of newspapers, including two state-owned and two private dailies, publish regularly. Use of the internet is growing, but penetration remains low, at approximately 19 percent in 2014. Blogging and social networking have increased in urban centers.

Economic sustainability is a challenge for Ghana's media. The GBC receives inadequate funding from the government and must sell advertising to support operations, which leaves the outlet dependent on the large corporations that can afford its rates. Meanwhile, electricity fluctuations, known as *dumsor*, had adverse effects on media houses in 2015, forcing them to turn to costly alternative power sources in order to publish or broadcast. Journalists are poorly paid, and many are willing to accept money in exchange for covering particular events. In April, Mahama's chief of staff came under criticism for giving between 500 and 1,000 cedis (\$130 and \$260) to prominent journalists he had invited to a meeting, including some known for criticism of the government. Most reportedly accepted the money.

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