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Freedom of the Press 2015 - Côte d'Ivoire

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 53

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 14

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 20

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 19

The media environment in Côte d'Ivoire was notably more open in 2014 than in the past, as the country maintained many of the gains achieved since President Alassane Ouattara took office following the disputed November 2010 presidential election and a related civil conflict. More diverse news content has become available to citizens, journalists have much greater freedom to cover important events, and violence against journalists has fallen dramatically. Further progress during 2014 included the implementation of a new freedom of information law and a continued reduction in violence.

Legal Environment

Freedoms of speech and of the press are protected in the constitution and the country's laws, though there are prohibitions on speech that incites violence, ethnic hatred, or rebellion. In October 2014, the Ministry of Communication began public consultations on revising the 2004 press law, with the aim of "further liberating and professionalizing" the media and online media in particular. Press offenses cannot result in prison sentences, but defamation carries a fine of up to 15 million CFA francs (\$30,000), and libel against the head of state or other state institutions is punishable by fines of up to 20 million CFA francs (\$40,000). In February 2014, the National Press Council (CNP) suspended the newspaper *Le Monde d'Abidjan* for three months for "insults of extreme gravity" against the president.

A new law on freedom of information was passed in December 2013. In March 2014, the government announced that it would form a new Commission on Access to Information to monitor the law's effectiveness and implementation, and in December the Council of Ministers appointed members of the commission. An existing government web portal allows the public to freely access some official information, with regular updates of communiqués from council meetings and other documents.

Under former president Laurent Gbagbo, media regulatory bodies such as the CNP were frequently used to control critical journalism, and this pattern persisted during President Ouattara's first two years in office, with Gbagbo-aligned outlets as the targets. In 2013 and 2014, the CNP's activities appeared less politically motivated, but the body has been strict in suspending journalists and publications for perceived violations of professional ethics. Among other cases in 2014, the opposition-aligned paper *Le Quotidien d'Abidjan* received a two-month suspension for publishing articles "bordering on invention"; Valence Kouamé Sibahi, a reporter at *Notre Voie*, was suspended for one month over a story about a CNP suspension that did not take place; and the president of the journalists' union and manager of *L'Intelligent d'Abidjan*, Moussa Traore, received a six-month suspension for allegedly trying to bribe the manager of a satirical newspaper to censor a story about the minister of finance. The CNP's broadcast counterpart, the High Authority for Audiovisual Communications (HACA), did not issue any such suspensions during the year, partly because there are very few private outlets in the broadcast sector.

In 2012, Ivoirian journalists, in collaboration with the Media Foundation for West Africa, adopted a new code of ethics that met international standards. Entry into the profession of journalism is open and does not require a particular degree or background. In October 2014, the commission responsible for administering press cards, under the auspices of the HACA and the CNP, distributed nearly 970 cards, of which about 700 were renewals; 114 applications were rejected.

Political Environment

The media landscape is relatively polarized, with most outlets taking editorial lines that support one of the country's political factions. Nevertheless, the severe restrictions on access to independent news sources that were imposed during the postelection crisis were largely lifted in 2012, and have not been reinstituted since. International media, including Radio France Internationale (RFI) and the UN radio station Onuci FM – both of which were banned under Gbagbo – have operated freely since Ouattara took office. The president has even pointed to Onuci FM as a model of independent broadcasting. Members of the local press have also observed an easing of restrictions on their ability to cover the news, and the government did not block websites or constrain internet access in 2014. The government continued to express its desire to ensure that state media were accessible to all political parties, and though many outlets still seemed to favor the Ouattara administration, they covered opposition political events more regularly and with less bias than in the past.

While conditions improved in the south, particularly in Abidjan, access to news and information in the north, where some districts are largely controlled by local warlords, remained limited. Abidjan-based outlets are expanding their networks of reporters in the north, but progress is slow.

The minister of communication drew criticism from press freedom groups in May after she asked her counterpart in Benin to suspend two television programs that carried partisan criticism of the Ivoirian government, despite Ouattara's public commitment to a more open media environment.

Physical attacks against journalists were a serious problem in Côte d'Ivoire in the past, particularly under the Gbagbo regime, but only one minor incident was reported in 2014. In May, a journalist with *Le Temps* was assaulted by a bodyguard when he attempted to join other reporters in the home of an opposition politician. Unlike in 2013, no journalists were detained or jailed by police during the year.

Economic Environment

The media sector in Côte d'Ivoire is vibrant and growing, though the state still controls the largest radio stations, including the only one with national reach, as well as *Fraternité Matin*, the largest-circulation daily newspaper; a news agency; and the national television broadcaster,

Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI). In 2012, the government opened up the television and radio industries to private broadcasters after more than two decades of promises to liberalize the airwaves. Under the 2004 media law, the few authorized private radio stations had been limited to entertainment and cultural programming, and no private television stations were permitted. Although private broadcast outlets can now legally cover political events, no private television outlets had opened as of 2014. This may be a result of the particularly high fees – over \$3 million for a commercial television station. However, private radio stations now offer some coverage of public affairs.

The independent press in Abidjan has equal access to modern printing facilities, and a variety of news producers are able to reach the public through popular satellite services and the country's many print vendors.

Nearly 15 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2014, and urban, literate Ivoirians are increasingly turning to online sources for news and information. Online news sites, like Abidjan.net, are beginning to rival print news in terms of both professionalism and breadth of coverage, and the government is keen to develop regulations to govern online press.

As the private media market continues to expand, lack of funding has become a more urgent problem, with a larger number of outlets competing for limited advertising revenues. The government does not explicitly give financial aid to any private media outlets, but backdoor financing from political actors is not uncommon. Independent outlets that provide investigative reporting sometimes have difficulty securing advertising from the government or private businesses. Ivoirian media in general suffer from a lack of professionalism and limited logistical capacity. Journalists are poorly trained, and salaries are low, leaving many media practitioners vulnerable to corruption.

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