

Freedom of the Press 2013 - Burkina Faso

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2013 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 1993 Information Code guarantee the freedoms of expression, information, and the press. However, media outlets are prohibited from insulting the head of state and publishing or broadcasting graphic images. Libel is a criminal offense, and the burden of proof is on the defendant. Although few journalists have been charged in recent years, in October 2012 two journalists for the private weekly *L'Ouragan* were sentenced to 12 months in prison, a fine of 1.5 million CFA francs (\$2,900), to pay total damages of 4 million CFA francs (\$7,800), and a six-month newspaper suspension for criminal defamation of the state prosecutor.

Article 49 of the Information Code grants every journalist free access to sources of information, with exceptions for information pertaining to the internal or 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.

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. A constitutional amendment in June 2012 institutionalized the CSC. The body has the power to summon journalists to hearings about their work and monitors media content for compliance with ethical standards and the law. The publication of graphic images of victims of ethnic clashes by *Le Quotidien* in December led the CSC to impose a one-week ban on the paper. There are no specific government restrictions on internet access or content, though the CSC does

monitor websites along with other media. In May, the council issued a warning to a website on which criticism of the president had appeared.

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. Indigenous programming that broadcasts in local languages and addresses issues such as gender equality, reproductive health, and domestic violence has contributed to diversity of content. Journalists occasionally face harassment by public authorities for coverage that is deemed unfavourable, leading some to practice self-censorship. However, no cases of serious physical attacks were reported in 2012.

More than 200 radio and television stations operate in the country, and there are at least five national dailies. Government-owned media demonstrate a progovernment bias, but the opposition has significant access to state-run media such as the official daily, *Sidwaya*. 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. Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina (RTB) was established as the national broadcaster in 1963 and remained the only television channel for many years. A handful of private television stations now compete with RTB. 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. 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. 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 penetration to 3.7 percent of the population in 2012.

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