The number of killings of journalists in 2014 decreased, although violent attacks, harassment, threats, and legal action against members of the press remained serious problems. Impunity for such abuses was compounded by significant setbacks in the trials related to the 2009 Ampatuan massacre, an election-related crime in which 32 journalists and other media staff were among the 58 people killed. Also during the year, the legal and regulatory environment for media in the Philippines was clouded by the Supreme Court’s decision to uphold the constitutionality of key sections of the Cybercrime Prevention Act, the advancement of an expansive privacy bill in the House of Representatives, and continued delays in efforts to pass a freedom of information bill and decriminalize defamation.

Legal Environment

The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of expression, and legal limitations such as privacy or obscenity laws are few. However, national security legislation introduced in 2007 can be used to curb journalists’ traditional rights and access to sources, as can the National Security Clearance System, which was designed to “protect and ensure the integrity and sanctity” of classified information against “enemies of the state.”
Existing legal protections have failed to prevent or punish violence against journalists, leading to an entrenched climate of impunity. In a prominent indicator of ongoing impunity, the Ampatuan massacre trials remained encumbered in 2014 by legal technicalities and procedural delays, and potential witnesses continued to be threatened or killed. In February, state prosecutors indicated to the court that they were ready to rest their case against 28 of the accused, including primary suspects, and by year’s end the Department of Justice was investigating allegations that some prosecutors may have received bribes to subvert the legal process. A journalist reporting on these claims received anonymous death threats.

In February, the Supreme Court upheld sections of the controversial 2012 Cybercrime Prevention Act that criminalize online libel, although only for the original authors of content—criminalization for individuals who simply react to or receive such content was rejected. The court also struck down other provisions, including sections that empowered the authorities to engage in real-time collection of internet traffic data and allowed the Department of Justice to restrict access to content based on initial evidence of a legal violation. The law had originally been enacted without input from journalists or journalist organizations, prompting public protests; it was then quickly suspended by the Supreme Court, pending a review. The legislation raises the penalties for libel from a minimum of six months’ imprisonment per count for libel in print, to a minimum of six years per count for online libel. The Supreme Court’s decision was met with protests by activists and media organizations working to decriminalize libel. Opponents of the law said they would push Congress to replace it with less restrictive legislation.

In August, the draft Protection against Personal Intrusion Act passed a second reading in the House of Representatives, renewing concerns that it could be used to target journalists, citizen journalists, or even citizens taking pictures or videos for personal use. The bill would allow civil suits for recording images or audio of people without their permission and for trespassing on private property for that purpose.

Defamation is a criminal offense that can be punished with prison terms and large fines. A campaign to decriminalize defamation has met with resistance, and cases continued to be filed in 2014 against journalists whose reporting angered authorities. In August, for example, a member of Cagayan de Oro City’s mining regulatory board filed a libel complaint against the entire editorial staff and a correspondent of Gold Star Daily over a report on allegedly illegal mining operations in an outlying area of the municipality. A city councilor had filed a complaint against the editor in chief and two correspondents for the same paper in July, after it published another councilor’s allegedly libelous accusations against him.

Efforts to enact a freedom of information bill continued in 2014. The Senate approved the bill in March, but the House of Representatives had not given approval at year’s end. National security justifications are regularly employed to obstruct the public’s access to government information.

There are no restrictive licensing requirements for newspapers or journalists.

Political Environment
While the media collectively offer a range of views, reporting by private outlets tends to reflect the political or business interests of their owners and financial supporters. Both the private media and the many publicly owned television and radio stations address numerous controversial topics, including alleged election fraud, ongoing counterinsurgency campaigns, and high-level corruption cases. A censorship board has the power to edit or ban content for both television and film, but government censorship does not typically affect political material.

Beginning in August 2014, journalists were denied access to the proceedings in the Ampatuan massacre trial; authorities did not provide an explanation or even information on which agency had ordered the ban. Journalists are at times prevented from accessing certain areas of the country, and have also faced harassment in the field by local officials. In November, it emerged that the government had barred entry to nine Hong Kong journalists for “heckling” President Benigno Aquino III during a 2013 summit in Indonesia; the ban was lifted shortly afterward, following criticism by journalists’ organizations.

Journalists are frequently subject to harassment, threats, stalking, illegal arrests, and raids on their outlets. In February 2014, a television crew was injured in a bomb attack on a convoy of vehicles in Maguindanao, and a photojournalist was beaten by police while covering protests in Davao City.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the number of killings of journalists declined from six in 2013 to four in 2014. Nevertheless, the Philippines remained one of the deadliest countries in the world for journalists, with more work-related killings between 1992 and mid-2014 than any country except Iraq. In April, tabloid newspaper reporter and radio host Rubylita Garcia, who had exposed abuses by local police, was killed by gunmen who entered her home in Bacoor City; her murder was confirmed as linked to her work. In May, radio broadcaster Richard Nadjid was shot dead in Bongao, and another radio host, Samuel Oliverio, was shot and killed near his home in Digos City. In June, radio anchor Nilo Baculo was shot dead in Calapan City after receiving multiple death threats.

Eyewitnesses to the killings of journalists also face grave danger. In July in Davao City, unidentified men shot and killed a witness to the murder of a journalist in Digos City in 2010, despite measures provided by a witness protection program. In November, a prosecution witness in the Ampatuan massacre case was ambushed and shot to death while traveling in a remote area of Maguindanao Province.

Although President Aquino pledged to end killings and impunity upon his election in 2010, little has been accomplished under his administration, and government officials have publicly played down the issue. During a September 2014 visit to Belgium, Aquino reportedly expressed doubts about the motives for some killings, and was quoted as saying, “Did they die because they were investigative journalists? Were they exercising their profession in a responsible manner, living up to journalistic ethics? Or did they perish because of other reasons?”

Those advocating for an end to impunity have called for a strengthening of the country’s witness protection program, enhancement of the police’s ability to investigate cases, and reforms of antiquated court rules that have delayed trials. A new law that took full effect in January 2014 allows journalists to carry licensed firearms outside their homes due to the
risks associated with their profession. Previously, like other citizens, individual journalists had to prove that they were “under real threat” in order to carry a weapon.

**Economic Environment**

Most media outlets are privately owned. Among those television and radio stations owned by the government, a wide variety of views is presented. There are hundreds of newspaper titles, but private television ownership is more concentrated, with the two largest broadcast networks (ABS-CBN and GMA-7) controlled by wealthy families with interests in other sectors of the economy. These networks dominate audience share and the advertising market. Radio is a popular medium, and there are more than 600 stations in the country. Nearly 40 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2014.

Internet use is not restricted, and Filipinos are among the region’s most active users of social-media websites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which often carry news content. Fixed-line broadband penetration remains low, particularly in rural areas, and many users access the internet through their mobile phones.

The practice of using bribes or strategic “favors” to elicit positive coverage is widespread; it is a subject openly debated among journalists, and various organizations offer ethics training in an effort to combat bribery. In another common practice known as block-timing, individuals or groups lease airtime from broadcast stations using their own sponsors. Block-time programs are often designed to promote or attack political interests, especially during election campaigns, though they are also used by local environmental, human rights, or anticorruption activists. These programs are seen as prone to sensationalism and unethical practices, and their hosts are frequently victims of violence.