

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Bhutan

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The media environment continued to be somewhat restricted in 2011, and government influence on private media was evident in many instances. The constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, adopted in July 2008, guarantees the right to free speech, opinion, and expression. However, the 1992 National Security Act prohibits criticism of the king and has strict provisions on “words either spoken or written that undermines or attempts to undermine the security and sovereignty of Bhutan by creating or attempting to create hatred and disaffection among the people.” The constitution also guarantees the right to information, but efforts in 2010 to pass a right to freedom of information act, which would put into effect the provisions in the constitution, stalled in 2011. Media workers expressed concerns that the government was not committed to bringing the act to fruition. There are only a few registered media rights organizations, and there is no press council or broadcasting code.

There were very few incidents of threats and intimidation toward journalists in 2011, but there is a high level of self-censorship. Stories critical of the royal family and the clergy are not published and matters considered “sensitive,” such as exiled people of Nepalese origin in refugee camps, are not covered.

Seven newspapers, six radio stations, one television channel, four internet service providers, and one newsmagazine operated in Bhutan by early 2011. Almost all media agencies are based in Thimphu, the capital and largest city. Bhutan’s main print publication, the state-owned biweekly *Kuensel*, generally reports news that portrays the kingdom in a favorable light, but has increasingly been highlighting societal problems and carrying stories critical of the government. Except for the Dzongkha-language newspaper *Druk Neytshuel*, most of the other print media are English-language publications that carry Dzongkha-language supplementary inserts. There are no private television broadcasters, but cable television services carry uncensored foreign programming, albeit with bans on channels that provide “controversial content” as well as high sales taxes and regulatory obstacles that render costs prohibitive for many citizens. In February 2010, the Bhutan Media Foundation was established with the aim of supporting the development of mass media through scholarships, training programs, and internships. However, many journalists expressed fears that the foundation would be used by the monarchy to impede the independence of media outlets.

Internet usage is growing in Bhutan, but was accessed by only 21 percent of the population in 2011. The government occasionally restricts certain websites considered to be offensive to the state or pornographic.

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