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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Papua New Guinea

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News media in Papua New Guinea (PNG) have traditionally been among the strongest and most independent in the South Pacific, but press freedoms eroded following political turmoil in 2011 that left the country with two prime ministers and two administrations. The crisis was resolved in 2012 with the reelection of Peter O'Neill as prime minister. He pledged to protect and enhance media freedom, but critics argued that the media environment continued to deteriorate.

Freedoms of speech, the press, and information are guaranteed under Section 46 of the constitution. Journalists can be sued for defamation in civil cases, but it is not a criminal offense. In November 2011, the Malaysian timber company Rimbunan Hijau, which runs the single largest logging operator in PNG and owns the country's top-selling daily newspaper, the *National*, filed a major defamation suit against that paper's rival, the *Post-Courier*, over its coverage of an official investigation into the company's logging interests in the Pomio District of East New Britain Province. In November 2012, the *Post-Courier* ran an apology that retracted its "incorrect accusation" that the logging operation in the area was in

violation of a court order.

PNG does not have an access to information law. The Media Council of Papua New Guinea (MCPNG) serves as a buffer against government pressure by lobbying for media freedom, managing a complaints process, and undertaking media research. The council also has a well-developed code of ethics, which member journalists follow. However, the MCPNG's executive director, Nimo Kama, was suspended in June 2011 after an independent audit of Australian government funding to the organization found evidence of fraud. The future of the council remained in limbo in 2012.

Threats and harassment against journalists and attempts to interfere with their work occur occasionally, particularly in reprisal for investigative reporting on corruption issues. At least four major assaults on journalists were reported in 2012, some of which were committed by security forces with apparent impunity. In January, soldiers threatened to shoot journalist Tauna George of PNGFM radio when he requested an interview at the Murray Military Barracks in Port Moresby after hearing shots fired inside. In March, Patrick Talu, the business editor of the *Post-Courier*, was threatened with a grenade by an armed policeman and ordered to leave a park in a suburb of Port Moresby where angry landowners were meeting politicians to discuss a controversial gas pipeline project. In April, police officers attacked and broke the nose of Mark Kayok, a police reporter with the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), over "negative" reporting. In October, another *Post-Courier* reporter, Michael Koma, was cornered by four men at the home of a relative and assaulted over a news story that questioned the appointment of several district administrators in the province of Chimbu. The *Post-Courier* later identified the attackers as supporters of newly appointed administrator Francis Aiwa and his deputy.

Both of the country's daily newspapers are foreign owned. The *Post-Courier* is owned by an Australian subsidiary of the U.S.-based News Corporation, while the *National*, which now has a larger circulation than its older rival, is owned by Rimbunan Hijau. Broadcast media consist of the main public broadcaster, the NBC; several major commercial radio networks, such as Nau FM and FM 100; and the main private television station, EMTV. A number of private outlets are owned by Fiji-based companies. Radio is an important source of news due to the country's isolated settlements and low literacy rates. According to a media monitoring website, radio news services in PNG are seen as leading the fight against endemic

corruption, whereas newspapers are alleged to have been compromised by corporate interests. The government does not restrict access to the internet, but lack of infrastructure limited penetration to just over 2 percent of the population in 2012.

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