

Costa Rica

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Freedom of the Press

Costa Rica continues to enjoy a free press backed by strong legal and political institutions. The constitution guarantees press freedom, and this right is generally upheld. However, punitive press laws, particularly concerning defamation, are occasionally used to restrict the operations of the media. Provisions from the country's 1902 printing press law that imposed prison sentences for defamation were in effect until the Supreme Court struck them down in 2010. And in December 2011, the Costa Rican courts created an appeals process for overturning criminal libel sentences. There were no active defamation cases against journalists in 2013. However, despite these advances and calls for further reform, journalists remain vulnerable to criminal charges for defamation, which is punishable by excessive fines and the placing of one's name on a national list of convicted criminals. The constitution reserves for readers the right of reply to newspapers in response to information that the readers deem incorrect or egregious. Expanding the issue into social media, Costa Rica's president in June 2013 announced a defamation lawsuit against a hotel owner who posted statements on his personal Facebook page regarding the president's land dealings. This case and repeated threats of similar action drew criticism from social-media users and internet freedom watchdogs.

Accessing government information remains difficult. The Freedom of Expression and Press Freedom Bill, originally introduced in 2002, has been repeatedly postponed, leaving Costa Rica as a regional laggard on implementing comprehensive access to information legislation. President Laura Chinchilla's administration has failed to prioritize passage of the bill. Article 288 of a 2012 computer crimes law prescribed four- to eight-year prison sentences for journalists and other citizens convicted of "improperly obtaining secret political information or information related to public security," according to the Inter American Press Association. The measure received harsh criticism despite the government's assurances that it would not apply to journalists. In November of that year, the Supreme Court temporarily suspended implementation of the law. The National Assembly then revised the legislation in April 2013, eliminating Article 288 and removing prison terms if protected information is released in the public interest.

While fear of legal reprisals encourages some self-censorship, media outlets are generally free to cover a range of sensitive political and social issues and to openly criticize the government. However, the San Jose-based *Diario Extra* newspaper accused the Judicial Investigation Agency (OIJ) and the office of the public prosecutor of monitoring journalists' public and private telephone calls for most of 2013. The supposed targets of the monitoring were potential whistle-blowers. If substantiated, the alleged practice would seriously threaten reporters' ability to protect their sources. Journalists are rarely victims of physical threats or violence in Costa Rica. In 2013, there were no reports of such attacks.

Costa Rica has a vibrant media scene, with numerous public and privately owned newspapers, television outlets, and radio stations. There are nine major newspapers, and cable television is widely available. Radio is the most popular outlet for news dissemination. Private media ownership is highly concentrated, however, and tends to be politically conservative. The internet served as an additional source of unrestricted information and was accessed by 46 percent of the population in 2013. Access to high-speed internet service remains surprisingly low compared with other countries in the region, but the situation is improving.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

18

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

5

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

7

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

6