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Freedom Of The Press - Austria (2011)

Status: Free
Legal Environment: 8
Political Environment: 8
Economic Environment: 5
Total Score: 21

The federal constitution and the Media Law of 1981 provide the basis for free media in Austria. Freedom of information legislation is in place, and the government generally respects these provisions in practice. Libel and slander laws are in place to protect politicians and government officials, but according to a 2007 report released by international watchdog group Article 19, "a large number of defamation cases in Austria are brought by public officials and even judges themselves." Many press freedom advocates urge the Austrian government to revise its stringent libel laws. There is no official censorship, although any form of pro-Nazism or anti-Semitism is prohibited by law. In 2010, there was an issue of editorial confidentiality as the Vienna Higher Regional Court ordered the Austrian Public Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) to release unedited tapes of a documentary. These tapes became controversial because they provided footage of Heinz-Christian Strache, leader of the Austrian Freedom Party, encouraging two men to give a Nazi salute, illegal under Austrian law, at a rally. The defense claimed that the tapes should be protected by editorial confidentiality under Article 31 of the Austrian Media Act, and the case was still underway at the end of 2010. Physical attacks or harassment of journalists are rare.

Daily national and regional newspapers are fiercely competitive and are both publicly and privately owned. Following amendments to the Broadcasting Law in 2004, Austria's public broadcaster has faced growing competition for audiences from private outlets. Cable and satellite are widely available, providing both Austrian and German stations, some of which tailor programming for the Austrian audience. Media ownership is highly concentrated. The largest newspaper also owns the only radio station in many regions of Austria, despite the fact that the Cartel Court must check to ensure media diversity. The Austrian government provides all daily and weekly newspapers with annual direct payments, with larger amounts of money going to newspapers considered especially important contributors to the diversity of opinions. A 2003 law reformed this press subsidy scheme, in order to promote regional diversity, professional development of journalists, and special projects. In recent economic times, these subsidies have helped newspapers to survive and to contribute to media pluralism. Receiving these subsidies does not require any obligation regarding content. Internet access is unrestricted, and 72 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2010.