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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Belgium

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Freedom of the press is safeguarded under Articles 19 and 25 of the Belgian constitution, and the rights of the media are generally respected in practice. The law prohibits hate speech, including Holocaust denial, which carries a maximum sentence of one year in prison. Journalistic sources are protected under a 2005 law, which also protects journalists from search and seizure. A 1994 law allows individuals to obtain access to official documents held by executive and judicial authorities, and stipulates that public authorities must offer an explanation of the document if requested. The print media are self-regulated by the Federation of Editors, an industry body in which all major newspapers are represented.

There are no government restrictions on use of the internet, though the authorities continue to block The Pirate Bay and other file-sharing websites on the grounds that they promote copyright violations. In 2011, the Belgian courts had ruled that the U.S. technology firm Google had breached Belgian copyright and database laws by posting articles without authorization on its Google News service. In reaction, Google blocked several Belgian Francophone newspapers from its web search results for a few days in July 2011. The six-year-long dispute ended in December 2012, when Google and Belgium's French-language publishers finally reached a deal regarding use of their content. Cases of harassment and physical attacks on journalists are rare.

Media ownership is highly concentrated, and a small number of media groups own the main newspapers. Ownership and distribution are distinct in Belgium's two linguistic regions, Flanders and Wallonia. Three major companies dominate newspaper distribution in Flanders, and two in Wallonia. The two regions have completely autonomous public broadcasters, with one broadcasting in French and the other in Flemish over both radio and television channels; each also has its own private broadcasting networks. Access to cable-based and foreign television channels is widespread. The Belgian media industry has suffered severely from the economic downturn that began in 2008, as outlets are largely dependent on advertising revenues. Most media companies have sought to reduce staff, by up to a third in some cases. In 2012, 82 percent of the population had access to the internet.

## 2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

**Free**

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**11**

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**2**

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**4**

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**5**

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