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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Belize

[Belize](#) | [Freedom of the Press 2013](#) | - Select year -

The constitution protects freedom of expression, and that right is generally respected in practice. However, it is subject to several legal limitations. Individuals who question the financial disclosures of public officials risk a fine of up to BZ\$5,000 (US\$2,500) and a prison term of up to three years. Newspapers are subject to criminal defamation laws, but the laws have not been invoked in recent years.

A Freedom of Information Act was adopted in 1994, but it exempts documents related to national security, defense, and cabinet proceedings. The Belize Broadcasting Authority (BBA) is empowered to preview broadcasts with political content and remove material it deems libelous. The rising incidence of violent crime in Belize, stemming from the international drug trade, led to calls in 2012 for the BBA to begin regulating the portrayal of violence in the media. The authority was considering new restrictions on media content at year's end.

There have been some reports of intimidation of journalists from media outlets aligned with the opposition. In October 2012, the cars of two journalists who were critical of the government were vandalized in what opposition media deemed attacks on media freedom. In one case, the nuts securing the tires to a journalist's car were removed. Nevertheless, the motives for the incidents remained unclear.

While there are no daily newspapers in Belize, there is a vibrant market for weeklies, which are privately owned. In general, reporting covers a wide range of opinions. Government-operated radio was privatized in 1998, and today there are eight television stations and 33 licensed radio stations. The ruling United Democratic Party (UDP) and the opposition People's United Party (PUP) are both affiliated with specific newspapers and radio stations, and many other media outlets display a partisan bent. There are concerns about increasing government intervention in the media, particularly with regard to ownership of distribution channels. In 2009, the government renationalized Belize Telemedia, the country's leading private telecommunications provider, and its owners, the Ashcroft Group, were allegedly offered no compensation. The PUP branded the action an expropriation. In June 2011, Belize's Court of Appeal ruled that the nationalization of Telemedia was unconstitutional and returned the company to its original owners. However, the government amended the country's constitution in order to renationalize Telemedia a second time in July 2011. In June 2012, the Supreme Court nullified that amendment and declared the second renationalization unconstitutional, but stopped short of returning control of the company to its former owners. At year's end the case was awaiting a judgment from the Court of Appeal.

While the government does not restrict internet access or use, lack of infrastructure and high costs limited penetration to 25 percent of the population in 2012. A 2012 survey showed that Belize had the slowest and most expensive internet in the Caribbean region.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

22

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

8

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

9

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

5

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