

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Japan

[Japan](#) | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) |

Press freedom in Japan is constitutionally guaranteed and generally respected in practice. However, in December 2010, the general affairs committee of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly approved Bill 156 to amend the Youth Healthy Development Ordinance, which authors and fans of Japan's popular *manga* (comic books) criticized for limiting freedom of expression. Originally passed in 1964, the ordinance aims to promote the healthy development of minors by restricting their access to harmful published material. The amendment allows for the expansion of the definition of "harmful publications" and allows the government to regulate images if the depictions are "considered to be excessively disrupting of social order." In 2011, a government committee said it planned to submit a bill in 2012 that would create new punishments for leaking "special secrets" related to diplomacy, national security, and public order.

Concerns regarding the lack of diversity and independence in reporting are rooted in Japan's *kisha kurabu*, or press clubs. Through the press clubs, major media outlets maintain cozy relationships with bureaucrats and politicians, resulting in an arrangement under which journalists are granted access in exchange for refraining from writing critical stories. The March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, and the resulting disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, magnified this problem. Members of *kisha kurabu* were among the few journalists admitted to official press conferences, and admission was often granted in exchange for foregoing tough questions regarding the disasters. Additionally, freelance journalists and foreign and online media were excluded from reporting on the nuclear threat and were not allowed into official press conferences. In March 2011, freelance journalist and author Takashi Uesugi was removed from his weekly guest slot on the local TBS radio station because of his regular criticism of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which runs the nuclear plant. Following the catastrophe, a group of independent journalists who were fed up with the system launched the Free Press Association of Japan. It remains to be seen if this group will have any influence.

There were accusations of official censorship in the aftermath of the disaster, but the Japanese government denied that it had attempted to withhold negative information. Self-censorship remains a problem in Japan and was further highlighted after the disaster, as many reporters did not question TEPCO about the radiation leaks until two weeks later. The disaster also highlighted the amount of influence TEPCO has in Japan's advertising industry. TEPCO reportedly spends \$120 million annually on advertising, a factor that contributed to the media's conservative reporting on the company. In mid-2011, press freedom groups voiced concern that the government might take control of TEPCO, but the organization maintained its independence through the year. Intimidation of journalists in Japan is rare, and there were no reported cases of this in 2011.

Japan has one of the highest print readerships in the world, but print outlets were hurt in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Major news outlets recovered quickly. One small newspaper in the town of Ishinomaki—with no

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

22

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

2

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

14

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

6

power or access to a printer or the internet—began writing articles by hand and delivering the papers to evacuation centers and areas where residents were most likely to gather. More than half of the national newspaper market is controlled by “the big three”: the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Asahi Shimbun*, and the *Mainichi Shimbun*. There is considerable homogeneity in reports, which relate the news in a factual and neutral manner. Television news content, once dominated by the public broadcaster NHK, has diversified considerably with the rising popularity of TV Asahi, Fuji TV, the Tokyo Broadcasting System, and satellite television. Japan also has roughly 228 community radio stations. The internet remained an important source of news, and around 80 percent of the population accessed the medium in 2011.

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