

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

South Korea

[South Korea](#) | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) |

Media freedom remained somewhat constrained in 2011 due to the government's ongoing attempts to censor online content and restrict access to news from North Korea under its increasingly strict interpretation of the 1948 National Security Law. Even though freedom of the press is guaranteed under the constitution and is generally respected in practice, the country has experienced a noticeable decline in freedom of expression since the inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak in 2008. Article 7 of the National Security Law remains a source of contention, as it allows imprisonment for praising or expressing sympathy for North Korea. Due to rising political tensions with North Korea, as well as the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in December 2011, the Lee administration appears to have become more concerned about the expression of pro-North Korean sentiment, particularly online.

Defamation is a criminal offense, and charges are occasionally threatened or brought against reporters or commentators who express criticism of the government. Chung Bong-ju, one of South Korea's most popular political commentators, was imprisoned in late 2011 after being convicted of spreading rumors about Lee's connection to alleged stock fraud. In an earlier case, four producers and a writer for the television program *PD Notebook* had been indicted on defamation charges in June 2009 for a 2008 report on U.S. beef imports that sparked weeks of protests. The accused had faced five-year prison sentences, but were exonerated in January 2010.

The government has been accused of seeking to extend its influence over several state-controlled broadcast media companies. Since Lee's inauguration, former presidential aides and advisers have been appointed to key positions at a number of private media companies as well, despite the objections of journalists seeking to maintain the broadcasters' editorial independence. Under the Lee administration, more than 180 journalists have been penalized for writing critical reports about government policies, as well as for advocating press freedom. At the end of 2011, six journalists were still out of work at the Yonhap Television News station for their participation in such acts.

South Korea has a vibrant and diverse media sector, with numerous cable, terrestrial, and satellite television stations and more than 100 daily newspapers in Korean and English. Many newspapers are controlled by large industrial conglomerates and depend on major corporations for their advertising revenue. There are both public and private radio and television stations, including an American Forces Network for the U.S. military. The public Korea Broadcasting System (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) maintain the highest television viewership. Five new cable television channels—four general-programming and one all-news channel—were launched in December 2011, two and a half years after the government revised a set of media laws to allow investment by conglomerates and newspaper companies in the broadcasting sector. These new channels are expected to affect the market dominance of KBS, MBC, and Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), all of which had previously held exclusive rights to offer general programming, ranging from news and

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

32

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

9

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

14

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

9

documentaries to sports and entertainment shows. According to Reporters Without Borders, following the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan*, allegedly by North Korean forces, the South Korean government resumed the dissemination of propagandistic messages to North Korea via radio.

Approximately 84 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2011, and a significant number of young people get their news exclusively from online sources. South Korean online media are especially vigorous and innovative. Aside from pro-North Korean content, the internet is generally unrestricted, but the government requires all website operators to indicate whether their sites might be harmful to youth. The number of people prosecuted for pro-North Korean online activities increased from 5 in 2008 to more than 50 in 2011, and the number of South Korean websites shut down for pro-North Korean content rose from 2 in 2008 to more than 170. Over 67,000 web posts were deleted by the police in 2011 for “threatening national security by praising North Korea and denouncing the U.S. and the (South Korean) government.” This represented a sharp increase from 1,793 in 2008. These statistics prompted both the United Nations and Amnesty International to express concern about backsliding on freedom of expression. In addition, the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC)—an official body responsible for censoring content on websites and social-media accounts—has increased its oversight of all social-networking outlets, podcasts, and mobile phone applications. For example, in May 2011, the KCSC ordered the blocking of the Twitter account “@2MB18nomA,” whose name combined the current president’s nickname, “2MB,” with a reference to a commonly used Korean curse word. The case remained pending at year’s end.

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