

[Print](#)

Freedom Of The Press - Mauritania (2011)

Status: Partly Free
Legal Environment: 17
Political Environment: 19
Economic Environment: 17
Total Score: 53

Mauritania's media environment continues to open up in spite of its history of military dictatorship and the August 2008 bloodless overthrow of the first democratically elected president by an army general, Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz. Abdel Aziz subsequently ran in and won elections held in July 2009. Since then, his administration has passed a number of reforms to improve media freedom in the country.

Article 10 of Mauritania's 1991 constitution guarantees the freedom of opinion, of thought, and of expression. Legal and regulatory reforms enacted in 2006 eliminated prepublication government approval for newspapers, established journalists' legal right to protect sources, and created the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector (HAPA), whose board members are appointed by the president without representation from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and journalists. HAPA is also responsible for nominating the heads of public media organizations and the Mauritanian News Agency. Libel remains criminalized and journalists are often charged and sentenced to fines and imprisonment, although no cases were reported in 2010. Mauritania has no legislation guaranteeing access to information.

In July 2010, the parliament passed a bill, previously introduced in 2006 but shelved after the 2008 coup, to liberalize the broadcasting sector by opening it up to private operators, in an effort to end Mauritania's status as the only West African country without a private radio or television station. The bill, which was not expected to take effect until 2011, will also insulate the state-owned media from government influence. However, there remains a need for simple, standard criteria for the registration of print media and the accreditation of journalists. Likewise, the inclusion of provisions for new media such as blogs and the lowering of license costs for broadcast frequencies are reforms that could further increase the number of actors and the quality of news production in the country.

Journalists sometimes face harassment and intimidation. A reporter for the privately owned Arabic daily *El-Hayat*, Mohammed Ould Abdel Latif, was detained for several hours in July while interviewing traders in Nouakchott. Latif was investigating police involvement in tax collection at the time. He was released without charge.

Though the Mauritanian media express a variety of views, journalists practice a degree of self-censorship in their coverage of issues such as the military, foreign diplomatic missions, corruption, and Sharia (Islamic law). There are 30 regularly published and privately owned newspapers, many of which tend toward sensationalism. The only two daily newspapers, *Horizons* (French-language) and *Chaab* (Arabic-

language), are owned by the government, as are all broadcast media. A new public television station began broadcasting in October 2008 and devotes airtime to the country's minority languages of Pular, Soninke, and Wolof. Mauritania now has two public television stations, two public radio channels, and two private, internet-only television stations. However, Radio France Internationale rebroadcasts locally, and Mauritians have access to international satellite television. HAPA provides state subsidies to several independent newspapers, and most papers have access to the state's printing press. In September 2010, the Mauritanian Press Rally, an umbrella group of more than 20 private organizations, announced a press blackout to protest rising printing costs, a lack of government support, and the exclusion of the media from covering some news events, but the blackout did not occur.

Internet access is not restricted by the government, but its usage continues to stagnate at 3 percent of the population in 2010. Cellular telephone subscriptions are within the reach of more than 66 percent of the population. The impact of online media has grown in recent years. However, existing legislation does not address the legal void in relation to online journalism, as was evident in the 2009 arrest and sentencing of Hanevy Ould Dehah, editor of the news website *Taqadoumy*, on a trumped-up charge of "offending public decency." Dehah was due to be released in December 2009 but was retried on the same charges for which he had already served a six-month sentence, and was handed a harsh two-year jail sentence in February 2010 for violating public decency, inciting revolt, and "criminal publication." Fortunately, he was released along with 100 ordinary offenders as part of a presidential pardon in late February.