

Annual State of Media Freedom in Liberia

2022

Table of Content

General Overview	1
Introduction.....	3
Methodology.....	4
Legal Framework	4
Freedom of Expression Violations	6
Analysis of trends.....	8
Status of Redress	9
Safety of Journalists' Issues	10
Professional Standards and Sustainability Concerns.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
Recommendations	13
References	15

General Overview

Liberia is a country along the coast of West Africa and is home to a lush rainforest containing a rich diversity of flora and fauna. It is bounded by Sierra Leone to the northwest, Guinea to the north, Côte d'Ivoire to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south and west.

Liberia is a member of two regional economic unions—the Mano River Union, a free trade group that has Sierra Leone and Guinea also as Member states, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Liberia is the only black state in Africa never subjected to colonial rule and is Africa's oldest republic. It was established in 1821, named Liberia in 1824 and was proclaimed independent in 1847. The country enjoyed relative stability until a rebellion in 1989 escalated into a destructive civil war in the 1990s that did not fully cease until 2003. The country's first post-conflict elections, held in 2005, brought into power Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman to be elected head of state in Africa.

The country's population is a little over 5.2 million.¹ Low literacy rate, together with distribution challenges, limits newspaper readership in the country.

In January 2022, there were 1.15 million internet users in Liberia, and internet penetration rate stood at 22 percent of the total population. There were also 748,200 thousand social media users in Liberia in January 2022.²

In line with the constitutional provision guaranteeing freedom of expression, the authorities generally respect this right. Individuals can generally criticise the government, even publicly without fear of reprisals, although defamation suits are often used to harass journalists and media houses. Political party militants often attack journalists and activists who are critical of their political parties. This acts to restrict free expression and impose self-censorship.

Two radio stations were attacked in 2022 by unknown thugs in what is believed to be linked to their programming.

¹ Liberia announces provisional results of its 5th national population and housing census, United Nations Liberia, <https://liberia.un.org/en/220493-liberia-announces-provisional-results-its-5th-national-population-and-housing-census>

² Digital Liberia: 2022, Datareportal, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-liberia>



The charred remains of Radio Kintoma

Introduction

Liberia has nearly 50 newspapers and magazines, about 130 radio stations, a few TV channels and a significant number of online media outlets, the Liberian media sector has enjoyed a boom for the past 20 years, aided by the socio-political stability of the post-civil war (1999-2003). Radio continues to be the main news source.

While these figures may point to a tiny media space, it is nevertheless a steep climb from the numbers that prevailed two decades ago. “In 2002, Liberia was home to two independent daily newspapers, the *Inquirer* and the *News*. Another independent newspaper, *New National*, publishes biweekly.”³ according to Media Reference⁴. The huge leap in the number of media outlets is largely due to more favourable laws on the establishment and operation of media enterprises following the post-war return to constitutionalism.

A dispatch on the 2021 Afrobarometer report said almost four in 10 Liberians regularly get news from social media and the Internet⁵. The radio sector in particular had for a long time seen the state broadcaster enjoy a monopoly. Now liberalized, the airwaves have exploded with scores of FM radio stations springing up across the country.

In line with recent trends in Africa, many politicians and business people with political connections have exploited the opportunities presented by the new liberal laws to establish media organisations. The phenomenon is increasingly breeding a brand of political journalism that is characterised by mis/disinformation and partisanship. The unprofessionalism associated with these media threatens to undermine public trust and confidence in the media.

Liberia was ranked 75/180 on the RSF World Press Index in 2022. Although this is a 23-place improvement on its 98th position in 2021, it is not good enough for a country that has all the progressive laws for media practice.

This report tracks press freedom issues in Liberia for the year 2022. The report contains an overview of laws, policies and institutions governing the media space in Liberia. It also contains some of the key press freedom and safety of journalists’ issues; a summary of press freedom violations recorded over the period, analysis of trends of violations, key perpetrators and victims; status of redress of violations; and

³ <http://www.pressreference.com/Ky-Ma/Liberia.html>

⁴ <http://www.pressreference.com/Ky-Ma/Liberia.html>

⁵ <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad483-liberians-want-free-media-within-limits-and-unrestricted-access-social-media/>

recommendations to both governmental, and non-governmental stakeholders on how to improve the situation.

Methodology

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) monitors and documents key developments that affect press freedom or the exercise of the right to freedom of expression in Liberia. It shares information on press freedom violations with its national partner organisation in that country and receives alerts from its correspondent. This report is based on these pieces of information and desk review methods. It presents the data and reports gathered on abuses and violations, policy pronouncements and changes in policy, legal, regulatory environment.

The information is complemented by interviews granted by media professionals who provide insight into their own experiences and observations about press freedom in Liberia. The respondents include reporters, editors, media owners and media managers.

The report is presented under the following sub-themes; legal framework, freedom of expression violations, analysis of trends and status of redress. It highlights the issue safety of journalists as well as media standards and sustainability and concludes with recommendations to various stakeholders on measures to take in order to improve press freedom in Liberia.

Legal and Policy Framework

Liberia's constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press. Chapter three, Article 15 of the country's Constitution and the proceeding sub-subsections, provide the foundational principle and guarantee of individual and collective rights to exercise freedom of speech in a form and manner consistent with international best practice.

Article 15 (c) also guarantees the public's right to information, particularly on governance issues. The country also adopted the Freedom of Information Act 2010 on September 16, 2010 which, spells out the administrative procedures for formally requesting information from public institutions and the remedies available in case of refusal.⁶ The government also established the Independent Information Commission.

The Freedom of Information Act 2010 grants the right to request and receive information to everyone without the applicant having to give any reason or

⁶ Freedom of Information Act, <https://www.rti-rating.org/wp-content/uploads/Liberia.pdf>, accessed on November 6, 2022

justification or to have a “legal interest” in the information. All public agencies of the Government of Liberia are required to provide information under the FOI law. These agencies include. All private bodies performing public duties, providing services or receiving public funds are obliged under the law to disclose information upon request. Information holders are required to respond to FOI requests within 30 calendar days, with 30 additional days allowed if reasonable cause is shown.

Exempted is information on national security, defense, or international relations, criminal investigations, trade secrets and privileged communications.

Liberia Telecommunication Authority (LTA), which is under the Ministry of Information, is responsible for issuing and regulating broadcast radio frequencies. There are concerns that the Executive’s influence on the issuance of frequencies is abused to favour certain applicants and players while frustrating others perceived to be pro-opposition. The authorities shut the Monrovia-based critical radio station Roots FM in 2019 under controversial circumstances and have since not allowed the station back on air.

Liberia is also a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 19 of which enshrines the right to freedom of expression and speech.

In July 2012, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the second African head of state to endorse the Declaration of Table Mountain, a statement on press freedom in Africa issued by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and World Editors Forum (WEF). The Declaration is named after the South African city where it was adopted in June 2007. Through this Declaration, WAN-IFRA has stated its conviction that Africa urgently needs a strong, free and independent press to act as a watchdog over public institutions, a crucial role that the press is hindered from and punished for playing by the widespread resort to 'insult laws' and criminal defamation, in particular.

Six years after President Johnson-Sirleaf endorsed the Table Mountain Declaration, President George Weah followed up on the commitment by signing into law on February 28, 2019, the Kamara Abdullah Kamara Act of to abolish criminal liability for libel and sedition as contained in Sections 11.11 and 11.12 the Penal Law of 1978.

While the repeal has led to a considerable reduction in incidents of arrest, detention and criminal prosecution of journalists, the country continues to record violations. For example, broadcast journalist, Zenu Miller died on February 15, 2020, exactly

21 days after the President Weah's elite body guards, [attacked him](#)⁷ on duty at the Samuel Kanyon Doe Stadium.

Press Freedom Violations

In the course of the year, seven cases of press freedom violations were recorded in Liberia. These were physical attacks on journalists, including arson attacks on radio stations. The equipment of a journalist was also seized.

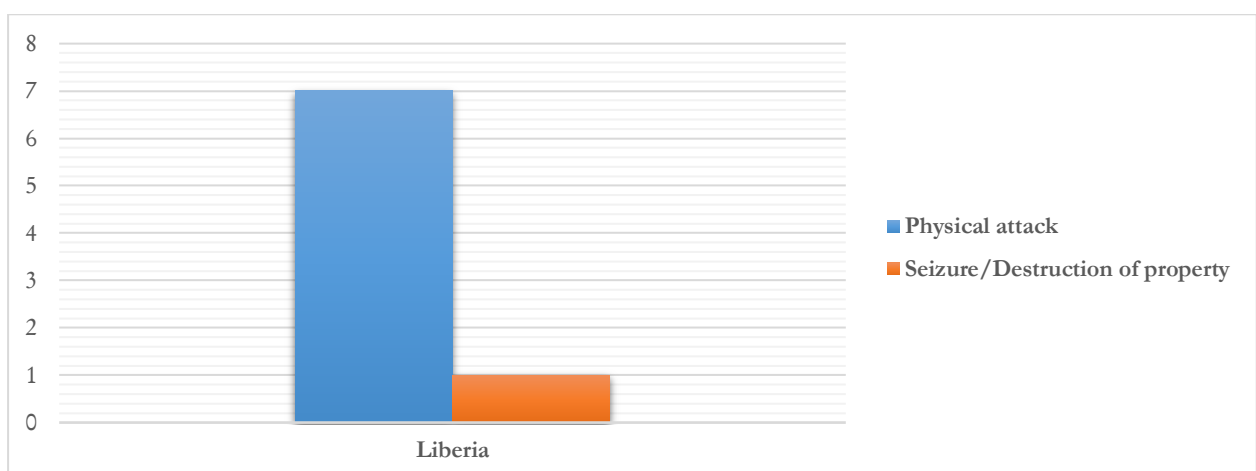
Below are brief narratives on the incidents reported.

- On February 19, 2022, superintendent Nelson Korquoi of Nimba County brutally [assaulted](#) journalist Franklin Doloquee of FrontPageAfrica while he was reporting live on Facebook. The journalist was interviewing traders who were expressing disappointment in the authorities and bemoaning the lack of responsiveness from the government although citizens have paid their levies to the city authorities in Ganta. As Doloquee was conducting the live interviews, Nelson Korquoi appeared on the opposite side of the street of Gompa, in Ganta. The journalist moved towards the superintendent to interview him on the complaints against his administration. However, Korquoi grabbed the journalist by the collar of his shirt and hit him in the face and seized the journalist's cell phone.
- On March 5, 2022, some unknown individuals in Foya, Liberia [sneaked](#) into the premises Radio Tamba-tiakor at night to cause mischief. The attackers curiously set fire to a motorbike which the station used for its dispatch services and errands, without touching any other property. The incident is believed to have been aimed at intimidating the radio station.
- On April 23, 2022, the building housing Radio Kintoma, a community radio station based in Voinjama, Lofa County, went up in flames at about 4 am. The station manager, Tokpa Tarnue, told the MFWA that the management had received reports that the traditional authorities in the community were upset with the station's crusade against female circumcision, a common cultural practice in the area.
- On June 28, 2022, an aide to President George Weah, Cleopatra Cummings [physically assaulted](#) journalist Joyclyn Wea a judicial reporter with the *New Republic* newspaper. Cummings attacked the journalist for taking photographs of her in a Monrovia court immediately after the former had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

⁷ <https://www.mfwa.org/country-highlights/security-forces-brutalise-journalists-at-football-match-in-liberia/>

- On June 28, 2022, an aide to President George Weah, Cleopatra Cummings [physically assaulted](#) journalist Joyclyn Wea a judicial reporter with the *New Republic* newspaper. Cummings attacked the journalist for taking photographs of her in a Monrovia court immediately after the former had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment.
- On June 29, 2022, secuSrity officers of the Liberia National Police [physically assaulted](#) journalists Emmanuel Kollie of the state Radio ELBC and Amos Korzawu of Fortune TV. The Journalists who travelled to Foya, Lofa County (northernmost part of Liberia) reported that they were assaulted and beaten in front of the police station while covering clashes between supporters of the Unity Party and the Coalition for Democratic Change
- On December 5, 2022, the *Voice of Liberia* complained to the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) that its reporter Patrick T. Saah was attacked by security guards es at the Ministry of Justice, according to a [PUL report](#).⁸ Managers of the radio station said the reporter had gone to the Ministry on assignment to conduct interviews on punctuality to work by civil servants and political appointees. The journalist was attacked and driven away apparently on the orders of officials who were uncomfortable with the subject of the interview.
- On December 18, 2022, Journalist Nyan Flomo, Jr. complained to the PUL that he was attacked by Lofa County Attorney, Atty. Luther Sumo while he was covering a match between Lofa and Nimba Counties in Voinjama. According to the journalist, the County Attorney ordere him and other reporters to quit the touchline, and turned physical when he (Flomo) tried to explain that they were reporters covering the match.

Table 1 below shows the types of violations recorded in 2022 and the frequency of their occurrence:



⁸ <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-pul-raises-concern-over-brutalities-against-journalists>

Analysis of trends

a) Trends of violations

The records show that there were four cases of physical assaults and two incidents of suspected separate arson attacks on two radio stations. In one of the cases of assault, the journalist victim's phone was also seized.

All the attacks on the journalists occurred when the victims were in the line of duty, covering subjects that the assailants find embarrassing or unfavourable.

b) Victims of the violations

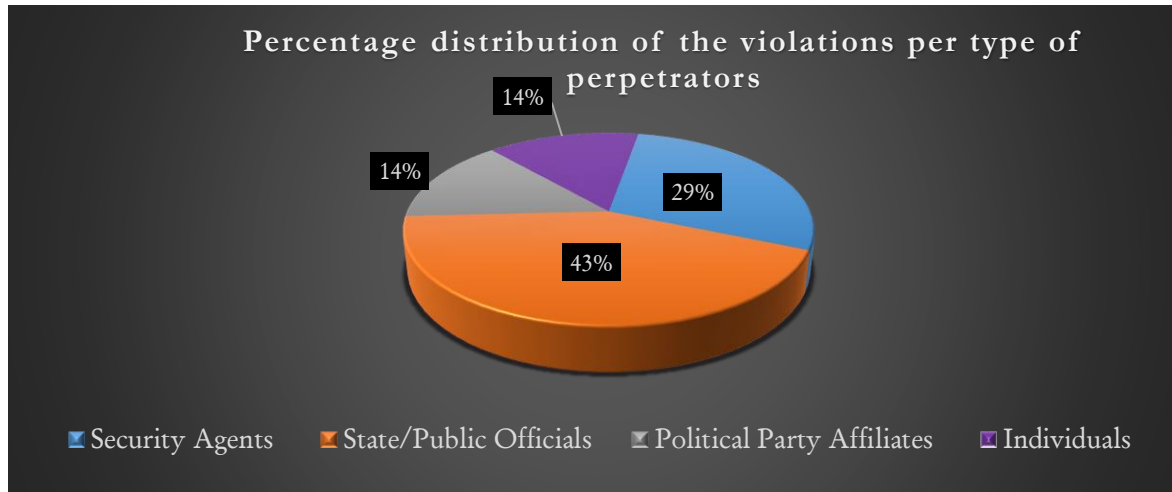
From the review, it is clear that the primary victims of violations of media freedom are journalists who had five violations targeted at them. Two radio stations were victims of suspected arson attacks.

c) Key perpetrators of the violations

The key perpetrators of the alleged violations against journalists and civil society activists under the period of review are:

- i. Public/Public Officials
- ii. State Security Agents
- iii. Political Party Affiliates
- iv. Unknown individuals

The graph below shows the percentage distribution of violations carried out by each type of perpetrator.



Status of redress of violations

Out of the recorded violations, three are still under police investigations, with no redress action initiated in respect of the rest. Following the attack on reporter Joyclyn Wea by a presidential staffer, for example, the office of President Weah remained silent, prompting the MFWA to issue a statement to condemn the lack of reaction three weeks after the incident.

“Despite the fact that Cumming’s act of violence against the reporter did not take place in the course of her duties as a presidential aide, we expect the office of the president to publicly express its abhorrence of her shameful conduct,” the MFWA [lamented](#).

Nonetheless, the ruling coalition redeemed themselves somehow when they publicly and swiftly condemned their supporters’ attack on peaceful demonstrators.

The four individuals who were arrested among the many, have been charged by the police with multiple offenses including criminal mischief, disorderly conduct, and obstructing highways and public passages. They are now being trialed at the Monrovia City Court.

Defendants Fofee Marvie Jr, Henry Jallah, Francis Mawolo, and Alvin Soe were arraigned before the Monrovia City court, after being turned over by police.

They were subsequently remanded⁹ at the Monrovia Central Prison after their legal team could not secure a criminal appearance bond, which could have prevented them from being sent to jail.

- i. 3 violations resulted in no legal action being taken against the violators; and
- ii. 3 violations with no serious investigation have been carried out by the Police, with only an apology being proffered on behalf of the violators.

Until now, no one has ever been brought to book for any of the violations, and the climate of impunity for crimes against journalist persists.

Safety of journalists' issues

In addition to the violations that journalists suffer in connection with their work, they are also often harassed or assaulted or detained gratuitously in the course of their work, although not necessarily because of their work. Radio stations also get invaded by disgruntled thugs who are targeting a guest for expressing views that the hooligans or their paid masters deem disagreeable.

On December 2, 2022, for instance, an Associate Magistrate, Melvin McCauley ordered the detention of Richard Duke Baysah, a journalist of the Liberia News Agency (LINA), at the premises of the Kakata Magisterial Court. The journalist's crime was that he had parked his car at the place designated for him (judge McCauley). Duke Baysah was charged with contempt of court and briefly detained. The Press Union of Liberia negotiated his release and had the matter settled.

On December 5, 2022, a group of hooligans suspected to be sympathizers of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC), besieged the premises of a local radio station, *Voice of Liberia*, and held hostage an opposition politician Lewis Brown. They caused confusion at the station, pelting the politician's car with stones as the

⁹ <https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-lewis-browns-attackers-appear-court>

police arrived to escort him out. While this incident involved a politician, there have been instances in the past when thugs have gained easy access to the premises, even studios, of radio stations, to attack journalists and destroy equipment.

This brings into focus the issue of safety of journalists which has been at the centre of the MFWA's activities in Liberia. Together with its partners in the country, the MFWA has made a number of interventions in that regard in recent years.

In 2020, the MFWA, with the collaboration of its Liberia partner organisation, the Center for Media Studies and peacebuilding (CEMESP), [carried out a study](#)¹⁰ on the state of safety journalists' conditions in Liberia. Key issues the study looked at included the number of media outlets that have a safety policy or manual and those with a specific policy for female journalists. It discussed the quality of the policies where they exist in the media houses and how effectively they are used to ensure safety for staff. The study revealed that none of the forty media outlets selected for the study had a codified general safety policy, underlining the fact that the safety of journalists is not prioritised by many media outlets. The study also looked trends in press freedom violations, the principal victims and perpetrators. It established that State security agents are the dominant perpetrators of violations against the media, with journalists as the principal victims. The study recommended the adoption of a national safety of journalists' mechanism to spell out the roles of all stakeholders in ensuring better protection for journalists and an end to impunity for attacks on the media.

In line with this recommendation, the MFWA and CEMESP convened a national forum on safety of journalists in Monrovia on July 22, 2022. Stakeholders at the meeting made up of both state and non-state actors, including journalists, agreed to set up a Committee on the Safety of Journalists. This came to consolidate the initiative of the Press Union of Liberia to set up the National Media Council as a self-regulatory body. The Committee on the safety of journalists has as its main objective to collaborate among the various stakeholder members to create a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers,. It is a coordinated inter-agency mechanism focused on promoting the safety of journalists in line with The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

¹⁰<https://www.mfwa.org/publication/report-on-safety-of-journalists-policies-and-practices-in-media-houses-in-liberia-2020/>

The setting up of the Committee also formed part of an elaborate safety of journalists' initiative which was crowned by the adoption of the [Comprehensive Framework for the Safety of Journalists](#)¹¹. The framework was developed by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) with support from our national partner organisation in Liberia, Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP). Developed through an inclusive process involving media actors and state actors in the country, the Framework aims to guide efforts to reduce incidents of media rights violations, increase redress for violations and to reduce impunity for crimes against journalists in Liberia.

Professional Standards and Sustainability Concerns

Liberia's near 20 years' civil war and its devastating impact on the country's economy has had a knock-on effect on the media industry. With much of the country's road network, water and electricity systems as well as industries destroyed in the war, much of the post-war recovery has been focused on rebuilding the critical public infrastructure. It was not until the last 15 years that the country began to emerge from the ground zero to attempt achieving some economic growth. As a result of the relatively small population and tiny economy, the media has fared very badly financially.

The weak business environment translates into a limited advertising market and low revenues. Consequently, salaries are abysmally low and often in arrears. It also impedes the ability of media organisations to acquire and deploy new equipment to match current innovations, provide adequate training to staff and produce quality, impactful journalistic pieces. Another effect of this penury is that journalists and other media workers tend to be poorly trained and hardly professional.

Also, the government imposes no restrictions on entry into the journalism profession, and no licensing is required to operate a media organisation. While this

¹¹ <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Comprehensive-National-Framework-on-Safety-of-Journalists-in-Liberia-Jan-18-2023.pdf>

liberal attitude facilitates the establishment of media enterprises and promotes press freedom, it has the negative effect of spurring unregulated proliferation of media outlets and flooding the space with half-baked, unprofessional, poorly equipped and demoralised journalists.

Adding to the media's struggles is the fact that many of the best qualified journalists and technicians in the industry fled Liberia during the heady days of the civil war. The country has had to produce a new generation of media workers from scratch, amidst the challenge of inadequate teachers and training facilities. In view of the above factors, journalistic standards are generally low, leading to poor patronage and thus reinforcing a dismal chain of causes and effects.

Conclusion

The media is pivotal to democracy by providing space for citizens to express their opinions, thus facilitating inclusivity and enhancing participation in governance. By its education role the media helps keep the populace informed and aware about the management of public resources by public office holders. Also, the media's watchdog function keeps under scrutiny public office holders and the quality of their service, enabling the population to demand integrity, accountability and value for money.

Given the above crucial role of the media in advancing these basic principles of good governance, it is important for it to be free to operate without any interference from any actors. In this respect, the government of Liberia should be commended for adopting an array of progressive laws to provide a conducive environment for media practice and public discourse. While the violations recorded in this report and the near total impunity with which they were perpetrated may be inconsistent with the progressive legal environment, Liberia's press freedom situation is still relatively positive.

The media must therefore take advantage to assess the effectiveness of the country's governance institution's and the quality of their services to the people of Liberia. The work of journalists, the media and civil society must empower citizens to participation meaningfully and from an informed position in governance and decision-making.

With Liberia due for general elections to elect the President, House of Representatives and half the Senate in October 2023, it is imperative that the media and civic space get enough room to operate to accompany the process. In view of this, all stakeholders in the electoral process must work together to ensure that journalists, civil society and political activists are able to work freely to ensure a decent, issue-based campaign and transparent polls.

To this end the following recommendations are addressed to the relevant stakeholders

Recommendations

a) To the Government of Liberia

- i. Ensure that assault on journalists and media workers are swiftly and thoroughly investigated and prosecuted.
- ii. Show commitment to fighting impunity by calling to order state actors like the police, who are among the principal perpetrators of attacks on journalists and demonstrators.
- iii. Provide tax breaks and financial support to the media sector to improve sustainability and standards
- iv. Establish a national media regulatory mechanism to proactively monitor and sanction inappropriate content, as well as handle complaints to prevent hostile reprisals

b) Media Organisations and Journalists

- i. Work with high standards and professionalism at all times.
- ii. Provide journalists with appropriate equipment, training in personal security and establish safety protocols in newsrooms to build a culture safety awareness among staff
- iii. Media managers must commit to using all legal means to ensure justice for media persons whose rights are violated in the line of duty.

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