
The Freedom of Press in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a journalistic oasis in Latin America. Ranked sixth by Reporters Without Borders (2017), the country's press is independent of government influence and has constitutional protections. It is not without its limitations, as it has many laws regarding defamation, though some of the country's harsher laws have been overturned. Since its early days, the country has been democratic and has given its citizens many constitutional personal freedoms, press included.

Costa Rica's constitution allows free access to all government interest that is in the public interest of the audience. The only exception to this rule applies to classified information. Article 29 of the Constitution also states that "Everyone may communicate their thoughts by words or in writing and publish them without prior censorship; but they will be responsible for the abuses committed in the exercise of this right, in the cases and the mode that the law establishes." Because of this article, the press has the ability to write about subjects that they choose, but there have been instances of journalists being threatened or even killed as a result of alleged defamation.

In 2001, a popular radio journalist named Parmenio Median was killed after an investigation into a drug-smuggling cartel that was believed to be laundering money. His radio show, *La Patada*, had a reputation of exposing corruption, which meant that people were unhappy with his work. He had many enemies, and based on a study taken by a newspaper in the country, this was common among Costa Rican journalists at the time. According to Press Reference, around the early 2000's, "Some journalists ... [were] reluctant to investigate important cases, such as Medina's murder, because Costa Rica has a harsh penal code that could lead to imprisonment or heavy fines". However, in 2010 the Supreme Court struck down a 1902 law ordering prison sentences for defamation. This doesn't mean that there is no punishment for defamation in the country — now, journalists accused of defamation may be subject to fines or placed on a list of convicted criminals. Still, it is a step in the direction of more press freedom for Costa Rican journalists.

This issue affects the autonomy of journalism in Costa Rica. The fact that certain journalists would avoid investigating a topic for fear of threats or fines means that certain issues that are very prevalent to citizens may not have been covered. Journalists now are able to choose their own stories and don't feel pressure from the state, but there is some pressure coming from powerful organizations that tells them what not to write about. That being said, since new rulings have come into play in recent years, journalists face less pressure than they did previously.

Costa Rica has taken more legal steps in the past few years to make journalism freer. In 2014, *Diario Extra*, one of Costa Rica's popular daily newspapers, discovered that the government had been secretly monitoring their phone records for at least ten months (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2014). The Supreme Court declared this unconstitutional and a violation of journalists' privacy. The state's intervention in journalism is something that citizens of the country have found undemocratic and unjust.

Costa Rica has been described as "central America's most stable democracy" (Arcos, 2018),

though it is currently in a state of political turmoil. There is a great divide between the country's conservative National Restoration Party and the left-leaning Citizens' Action Party over issues like gay marriage, family values, and sex education. Still, citizens have taken part in a democratic society almost consistently since the constitution was written. The only blip was in 1913, when Alfredo González was appointed president after an election ended with no candidate having a majority of votes. González's dictator-like style caused him to lose popularity and surrounding countries refused to recognize his regime, which led him to resign in 1919 (Stansifer, Elbow, Parker, Karnes, 2018, p. 9). This strong democracy means that citizens of Costa Rica have access to the information they need to make informed decisions about the state.

Journalism in Costa Rica was previously funded heavily by conservative organizations, which led to questions about bias in media. Media is mostly privately owned, and alternative media outlets have had trouble taking off since "media and business owners were 'one and the same'" (Press Reference). It's a similar situation to the United States where most media outlets are owned by the same few companies (Freedom House, 2015). However, the state itself has no intervention in journalism.

The question of political bias due to the funding of media was more prevalent in the 1980s, but now the press works to inform the people in any way possible. A non-profit newspaper, La Voz de Guanacaste, has been in existence since 2002 and is followed widely online. The paper makes money in part through advertisements, but as it is non-profit, editors are able to keep their work unbiased and independent (Nalvarte, 2017).

The press of the country seeks to serve the people, especially in cases like Parmenio Median's, where journalists aim to expose corruption and illegal activities. Journalists don't work to appease the government, and many, including Parmenio Median, take on a kind of journalistic style that echoes the efforts of muckrakers in early twentieth century America (Press Reference).

In addition, many local newspapers work to build communities and bring people together. La Voz de Guanacaste works to do just this, as well as "to make journalism that is ethical, participative, and of quality" (Nalvarte, 2017). This type of journalism is essential for a thriving democracy, which Costa Rica still boasts.

Though Costa Rica's press has had a slightly inconsistent and rocky history, it has evolved to a point where media outlets are independent. Journalists have had to be careful with their work in the past, but thankfully the judicial branch of the government has ruled in favor of a free press, specifically in the past decade. Costa Rica takes a different side from the countries that surround it, and has upheld a press that is free and autonomous, which will hopefully continue long into the country's future.