

Press freedom is limited - Study reveals that less than 50 per cent of Jamaicans believe media has a free voice, while trust is declining

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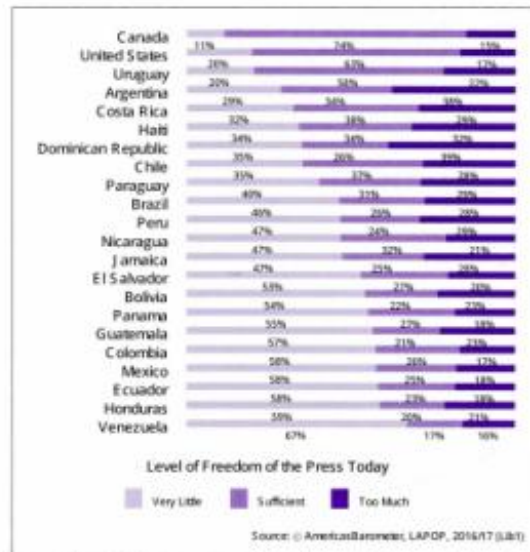


Figure 2.1. Assessments of Freedom of the Press, 2016/17

Figure 2.1. Just under half (47%) of Jamaicans report that there is very little, 21% report that there is too much, and 32% report that there is a sufficient level of freedom of the press in their country.

Less than 50 per cent of Jamaicans believe the country enjoys freedom of the press, according to the latest findings by the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), a regional research group.

The study was conducted by the Centre for Leadership and Governance in the Department of Government at the University of the West Indies, Mona (UWI), in collaboration with Vanderbilt University in the United States.

When asked, “Do you believe that nowadays in the country we have very little, enough, or too much freedom of the press?” The data revealed that 47 per cent of Jamaicans surveyed responded that there is very little press freedom in the country.

Conversely, 21 per cent of Jamaicans said that there is too much freedom of the press, and 25 per cent stated that the level of press freedom in Jamaica is sufficient.

“This is not necessarily about the legal environment, it’s about the individual perceptions of the extent to which the media are able to operate freely,” reasoned Elizabeth Zechmeister, LAPOP, Vanderbilt University director.

“Jamaica sits in the middle of the countries where we had asked this question, with Canada (11 per cent) at the top and Venezuela at the bottom on 67 per cent of those polled.”

Representing a sample size of 1,515 persons, the survey further revealed that on average, trust in the media in Latin America and the Caribbean has been declining since 2004.

The data showed that more than half the Jamaican population trusted the media in 2006. However, the trust factor steadily declined to a low of 37.9 per cent in 2017, after reaching a high of 58.3 per cent in 2010.

Jamaica sits only above Colombia (35.8 per cent) and even more surprisingly above the United States, where a mere 29.8 per cent of that country’s population said that they trust the media, as reported by LAPOP.

Veteran newspaper columnist and radio talk show host, Ronald Thwaites, said that he was surprised by the findings.

“I have been involved in media for more than 40 years and there has been great press freedom. There is no impediment like in other countries. The press is easily accessed, so I am surprised that at this time we are saying that press freedom is limited,” Thwaites said.

“By and large, there is no structural impediment to accessing the media in Jamaica. I really doubt the validity of this research.”

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF

He said the findings were contrary to popular belief and previous assessments, which painted a more favourable picture of the Jamaican media landscape.

Ironically, Jamaica had moved up two places to eight on the 2017 World Press Freedom Index.

The LAPOP study showed that geographic location, social status, and education affect the views on press freedom in Jamaica.

Jamaicans living in rural areas (48.7 per cent), compared to those in urban areas (46.5 per cent), feel there is very little freedom of the press.

According to the data, 49.7 per cent of persons with education at least to the secondary level believe there is too little freedom of the press.

That number decreases to 39.7 per cent of those with post-secondary education, who say there is little press freedom, while 46.3 per cent of respondents with education to the primary level or no education at all say there is too little press freedom.

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