



The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society

Maldives

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Book Title: The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society

Chapter Title: "Maldives"

Pub. Date: 2020

Access Date: December 23, 2019

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781483375533

Online ISBN: 9781483375519

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483375519.n387>

Print pages: 1000-1002

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The Maldives is a geographically dispersed island state in the Indian Ocean, with 1,192 small coral islands (spread across 767 kilometres), of which only 188 are inhabited. According to the Maldives National Bureau of Statistics, 39% of the total population of fewer than 400,000 live on the capital island Malé. Tourism, fishing, and the service sector account for the country's main income-generating activities.

While Maldives is well known as a tourist destination, authoritative information about the Maldives and its society is sparse in published literature. This entry provides an overview of media in Maldives, outlines laws governing mass media, and then describes usage of popular traditional and new media, in particular social media.

Overview

The Maldives historically was inhabited by people who were Buddhist; Islam was adopted in 1153 and has been the only religion practised since then. In spite of having British protectorate status from 1887 to 1965, the Maldives lacks any *colonial imprint* as the British took no hand in the internal administration of the country. In 1968, a referendum established the country as a presidential republic, with a democratically elected parliament. A new and modern constitution, with a chapter on fundamental human rights and freedoms, was adopted in 2008.

The country historically has maintained a literacy rate above 90% in the local language, for both males and females. While Dhivehi is the national language, and legal and official correspondence is conducted in Dhivehi (written in the Thaana script), English is used as the primary medium for teaching throughout the educational system. The English language was introduced to the education system in the 1960s, and the younger generations are literate in English. Many Maldivians are familiar with Hindi and Arabic: Hindi because of the prominence of Indian movies in Maldivian popular culture and Arabic given its association with Islam.

Government ministries and other public agencies have their websites in both Dhivehi and English. There are a number of local news websites in Dhivehi, including the facility to comment in Dhivehi. Blogs and discussion forums have identified the importance of access to a keyboard using Thaana font as an alternative to writing in Romanised Dhivehi. Computers using a Windows operating system have access to a virtual Thaana keyboard, and discussion forums offer solutions to Mac users whose computers do not feature a virtual Thaana keyboard.

Regulating the Media

For the large part of postindependence years, there have been significant restrictions on freedom of speech and expression, with strict regulations on what can be published. Legislation, particularly those laws introduced between 2012 and 2018, covering the media, has been considered contentious. In 2015, the Public Service Media Act dissolved the Maldives Broadcasting Corporation, the national broadcaster, and instituted a new media company called the *Public Service Media*. Opponents criticised the legislation as a way to take control of the national broadcaster. Preceding that, from 2009 to 2012, the state media were operated under the Maldives National Broadcasting Corporation. The Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act of 2016 gave authority to the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC), a regulatory body established in 2011 under the Broadcasting Act, to receive complaints against written and spoken actions as well as gestures and images, which are considered defamatory, contrary to the tenets of Islam, or to *general societal norms* or are deemed to threaten national security. Under the Act, the MBC is empowered to take action against media outlets and individual reporters without conducting an enquiry. Subsequent penalties can include fines; those failing to pay fines can be taken to court by the Prosecutor General and may face jail sentences of 3–6

months. Social media users can also face prosecution.

Since the passing of the legislation, the MBC has imposed significant fines on a number of media outlets and individual journalists for defamation, including a total fine of MVR 3.7 million on Raajje TV over several individual cases and MVR 0.4 million on VTV. Opponents of the Act consider these actions to be arbitrary and aimed at cracking down on media freedom and curtailing freedom of expression. Newspapers and magazines must be registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs, as has been the case for many years since early 1980s. As a result of a regulation introduced in February 2018, blogs must also be registered. The Communications Authority of the Maldives is mandated to block websites that contravene laws on anti-Islamism, pornography, and child abuse, among others.

Newspapers

Newspapers have been in existence for some time—the first daily was published in 1952. *Haveeru*, *Aafathis*, and *Miadhu* remained popular print newspapers for several decades. However, *Haveeru News*, established in 1979, was dissolved in 2016 after a controversial court case regarding an ownership dispute. *Aafathis* and *Miadhu* became online newspapers. *Mihaaru*, the only print newspaper in circulation as of 2018, also has an online version. A number of other online newspapers are in operation, including but not limited to *Vaguthu*, *Avas*, *Miadhu*, *Times of Maldives*, *Sun Online*, *Maldives Independent*, *Dhuvas*, *Kulhudhuffushi Online*, *Addu Online*, and *Raajje MV*. These newspapers are predominantly in the Dhivehi language, most based in Malé and others from the atolls, focusing mainly on local issues with selected news items written in English.

Maldives Independent, formerly *Minivan News*, registered in 2005 has been the longest surviving English-language online news service. In contrast to other local media outlets, *Maldives Independent* was edited by foreign journalists until the internationally acclaimed local journalist, Zaheena Rasheed, took over the editorial post between 2015 and 2017. *Maldives Independent* has come under pressure a number of times for reports critical of government policies or commentary on human rights violations.

In 2018, Reporters without Borders noted that Maldives was in 120th place on the Press Freedom Index, a significant fall since 2009 when it was in 51st place. Freedom House has rated the press freedom status in 2017 as *not free* because of ongoing harassment by the police, violence at the hands of gang members, and the passage of the Defamation and Freedom of Speech Act 2016, which have contributed to increased levels of self-censorship among journalists.

Broadcast Media

Radio has been the oldest form of communication within the islands, and traditionally, radio and television broadcasting was state owned. The first private channels were launched in 2007 when the government allowed for broadcast licensing. The Broadcasting Act was enacted later on August 22, 2010. According to the MBC, in 2018, there were eight radio channels and 24 TV channels aired through private broadcasters. Most of these private TV channels, including Raajje TV, VTV, SunTV, SanguTV, and Channel13, emerged as offshoots from the media platforms of individual political parties or affiliates. DhiTV, the first private TV channel, which opened in 2008, closed in 2016.

The Public Service Media broadcasts four radio channels and seven TV channels. It replaced the Maldives Broadcasting Corporation and its predecessor, which was formed in 2009, as a regulatory body to oversee Television Maldives and Voice of Maldives. Television Maldives, which began broadcasting in 1978, and Voice of Maldives registered in 1962, are the oldest TV and radio channels, respectively. The second local public

TV channel, TVM Plus, a special entertainment channel, did not emerge until 1994.

In addition to these local channels, Cable TV is widely accessible with hundreds of channels from around the world, including CNN, StarMovies, and Al Jazeera, streamed through decoders as well as satellite. Medianet, formed in 2005, had 20,000 subscribers (according to Medianet) in 2016 and is the most popular cable TV service in the Maldives. In 2015, one of the leading telecom operators in Maldives, Dhiraagu, introduced the first IPTV called *DhiraaguTV*, which carries 60 international channels.

Telecommunications Access

Maldivians are keen users of mobile technologies and the Internet. Although fixed/landline telephone subscriptions are low (around 5.8 per 100 inhabitants), in June 2018, according to the Communications Authority of Maldives, there were 246 mobile phone connections for every 100 people. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2016, 54.7% of households in Maldives had Internet access at home, and there were 78.5 mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 people. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in September 2016, 65% of access to social media was via a mobile device, and there were 71 active social media accounts per 100 people.

Social Media

Facebook is popular among community groups and organisations in civil society as a means of providing information in a variety of formats around issues of concern. However, many of these pages are used for a one-way dissemination of information, with the functionality of commenting turned off. Even when it is possible to interact with the content of a Facebook page, comments are often rare. Tourism is so significant to Maldives that it is no surprise that the volume of Facebook pages, websites, and blogs written and maintained for tourists can appear to overwhelm local sites.

Twitter is frequently used by individuals and government officials to disseminate news of events quickly and outside the constraints of formal media. YouTube, Instagram, and SoundCloud are widely used for entertainment (e.g., YouTuber Aal Naseer; Instagrammer Mariyam Azza).

Maldives was once recognised for its vibrant blogosphere, which peaked between 2007 and 2008. The self-funded project, mvblogosphere, used data visualisation techniques to map the growing Maldivian blogosphere between 2006 and 2014, by which time 2,028 blogs were listed, giving a picture of the social, cultural, and economic life at the time. Many of these blogs carried regular postings, with comments showing interaction among a number of people. Blogging was a way to raise controversial issues, and for a while, blogs were considered important sources of news, with the broadcaster Maldives National Broadcasting Corporation using excerpts from blogs in one of its weekly programmes.

However, bloggers themselves have been harassed, threatened, and attacked. In 2010, Ismail Khilath Rasheed, known as *Hilath*, a staunch supporter of religious tolerance and gender diversity, was arrested and his website was closed down. In June 2012, at his residence, he survived a near fatal stabbing in the neck. In August 2014, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a journalist who blogged under the name of Moyameehaa (meaning *the madman*), disappeared. In April 2017, Yameen Rasheed was stabbed to death in the stairwell of his residence after receiving death threats because of his satirical approach to the Maldivian political and religious authorities in his blog *The Daily Panic*.

The social media campaign set up to draw attention to Rilwan's disappearance shows a sophisticated use of

social media in activism. The campaign, FindMoyameehaa, set up a Facebook page, website, Twitter hashtag, and YouTube channel and called for a thorough investigation of Rilwan's disappearance. The campaign utilised information-based tactics, such as organising events through the Facebook page, linking to expressions of support from organisations such as Reporters Without Borders and Amnesty International, and calling directly on the police, for example using the @ function in Twitter. Commenters on the Facebook page used recognised symbols of protest, including humour and memes as well as sketches and poems, to express their solidarity in seeking action from the police and their sense of loss at the disappearance of a young activist and journalist. The new government that came to office in November 2018 has set up a Presidential Commission to investigate this and other cases of disappearances and killings.

See also [Media and Human Rights](#); [Reporters Without Borders](#); [Social Media](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483375519.n387>

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Further Readings

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