



Human Rights Bulletin



Number 120 English

August 2016

The role of the media

Introduction

This bulletin explains the role of the media in a democratic society. Media is the cornerstone of any democracy. The term media is derived from the word medium, meaning mode or carrier. It is intended to reach and address a large target group or audience. Media influences society in a number of ways. It is through the media that society is kept updated and informed about what is happening around them and the world. In general media is responsible for information dissemination, education, entertainment and advertising. Over the years the media has evolved to become more active in shaping the social, political and economic lives of individuals and societies.

Types of media

There are basically three types of media namely:

- a. Print media: refers to the traditional or the oldest form of media that include, newspapers, magazines, books and any

printed material. Although the use and reliance on print media has declined over the years, most people still read newspapers.

- b. Broadcast media: These are news reports broadcast via radio and television
- c. The Internet: Include electronic newspapers and social media such as facebook, twitter and cell phones.

The role of the media

Media plays an important role in a democratic society. It has been described as the 'Fourth Estate', 'agenda setter', 'watchdog', 'force multiplier' and 'gatekeeper'. All these descriptions demonstrate the influence of the media in all spheres of life. The following are some of the roles played by the media:

- Informing the public on what is going on thereby creating and shaping public opinion;

- Provoking public debates leading to greater public participation in social, political and economic deliberations and decision making;
- Through responsible or irresponsible reporting the media can make or mar an enabling environment for investors;
- It raises public awareness on important issues thereby informing democratic choices through the clarification of complex issues;
- It acts as a watchdog to protect public interest against malpractice and abuse;
- Alerting and mobilizing public opinion to humanitarian causes/injustices;
- Keep politicians attuned to public opinion while offering politicians a medium to explain policies/decisions to public opinion and build the necessary support;
- Allow political pluralism to express itself by advertising different views/ideological approaches to certain issues; and
- It enables citizens to hold their governments and elected officials accountable leading to better policies and service implementation.

Legislative framework

As media plays an important role in societies, freedom of the media is legally guaranteed in domestic, regional and international conventions.

Domestic legislation

In Zimbabwe, freedom of expression and freedom of the media is provided for under section 61 of the Constitution. Section 61 (2) states that “*every person is entitled to freedom of the media ...*”. However, the government can put restrictions on the use of media in the interests of defense, public safety, the economic interests of the state, public health, public morality, public order, or to protect the rights, freedoms, and reputations of other people or the private rights of persons involved in legal proceedings. Section 61 (5) of the Constitution elaborates freedom of expression and of the media excludes-

- a) incitement of violence;
- b) advocacy of hatred or hate speech;
- c) malicious injury to a person's reputation or dignity; or
- d) malicious or unwarranted breach of a person's right to privacy.

Regional and International legislation

Zimbabwe has ratified regional and international conventions on freedom of the media which include the **African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)** and the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**. Article 19 of the **ICCPR** states that everyone shall have the right “to hold opinions without interference” and to “freedom of expression” which shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of his choice.” In 1991, the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation** adopted the **Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press**. The declaration says that the “maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation and for economic development.” While in 2002 the **ACHPR** adopted the **Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa**, which provides useful benchmarks for any media policy in Africa.

Media in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the media industry is monopolised by the State. The government owns the only television network and all radio stations with the exception of one ZiFM. However, the ZiFM is linked a Minister who is the ruling party's Member of Parliament. In the print media the government dominates alongside a number of private players publishing daily and weekly newspapers.

In addition, the media is polarised with clear divisions between the public/state and private media. The state owned media that should serve the public interest is used mainly to promote government and ruling party policies and propaganda and to attack government opponents, both domestic and foreign. The privately owned media acts as government watchdogs reporting mostly on human rights violations and corruption. Because of this role played by the private media, the government views the private

media as rivals pursuing a regime change agenda. The government has enacted legislation to unjustly control the media. The following pieces of legislation were enacted to curtail media freedom; the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), 2002, Public Order and Security Act (POSA), 2002 and the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) of 2001. Following the current wave of popular protests by citizens mainly through the use of social media, the government is considering monitoring and regulating the use of social media for the purpose of national security through a proposed Computer Crime and Cyber crime Bill. Media rights violations involving harassment and intimidation of journalists have also been recorded in

Conclusion

Media plays an important role in shaping a healthy democratic society. It is the media that helps people to get information, form opinions and make informed judgments regarding various issues; it is through the media that people become aware of the social, political and economic activities taking place throughout the world. The government must guarantee citizens of their right to free and unfettered news and information and freedom of the media must be safeguarded.

The Human Rights Bulletin is produced by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum ("the Forum") with support from the EU and is distributed **free of charge** through its member NGOs. If you would like to distribute copies, please contact us at **Suite 4, Number 1 Raleigh Street, P. O. Box 9077, Harare. Telephone (04) 772860 or 770170**

email: research@hrforum.co.zw or admin@hrforum.co.zw

www.hrforumzim.org

