

Malawi: Government concedes failure to regulate online publications

As the world commemorated World Press Freedom Day yesterday, 3 May 2011, the government of Malawi conceded that it is worried that regulating new media outlets such as online publications and social networks like Facebook and Twitter has become very difficult.

 By Gregory Gondwe 4 May 2011



Acting director of information Bob Chilemba in the Ministry of Information and Civic Education noted this last Saturday, 30 April 2011, during a debate to mark the commemoration for the central region of the country part of the phased celebrations the Malawi media has set to conduct this year.

The debate, under the theme "Access to information and new media: opportunities and challenges for Malawi", offered an opportunity to express its misgivings over the proliferation of tools for the new media.

"The new media has brought challenges that need to be looked at critically and effectively if the information and communication technology sector is to gain some progress," he said.

Chilemba said, much as we appreciate the role that the new media plays, government is worried that some of such media outlets have become reckless as they publish information which is not accurate and can bring confusion among communities.

Traditional media outlets are registered entities which, when they report something that is not accurate or defamatory, an apology can be made or can be sued.

Issue of cyber security

He said the issue of cyber security is of great concern as there have been cases of hacking, claiming that the Malawi government website has suffered serious hacking attacks in the past. Government is not just sitting idle as it has now started training a team of experts who will gain the technical know-how to be able to manage cyber media.

Lilongwe bureau chief for Nation Publications Limited Mabvuto Banda, who is also Malawi's Reuters correspondent, said as much as such challenges have bedeviled the media, the media should be able to regulate themselves.

As part of the World Press Freedom Day celebrations, the office of the UNDP in Malawi has issued a statement that says many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have made significant progress in the last 20 years in broadening political participation and more countries than ever do hold regular elections.

"On this 20th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration for the promotion of free and pluralistic media, we reflect on the role it plays today in enhancing people's ability to actively participate in shaping their destinies," said UNDP associate administrator Rebeca Grynspan, the signatory of the statement issued on the occasion of World Press Day 3 May 2011.

Highlighting the role old and new media can play

The statement said the theme for this year's World Press Freedom Day, 21 Century Media: New frontiers, new barriers, "reminds us of the many events, some still unfolding, where the popular call for democratic change reiterates the home-grown cry for choice, participation and transparency."

"It also highlights the role old and new media can play in allowing different voices to be heard in the public space - from radio and television through to mobile telephony and the internet," added Grynspan.

The Malawi chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa MISA-Malawi has also issued a statement where it is appealing to government authorities to consider making the environment freer to journalists, media workers as well as advocates of media freedom and freedom of expression.

"[This can be achieved] by considering repealing all laws that are inconsistent with the Constitution such as Section 46 of the Penal Code and other laws that are, in our view, an insult to the media fraternity in Malawi," said MISA Malawi is also appealing to government to consider advertising in all private media outlets," said MISA Malawi acting chairperson Anthony Kasunda in the statement.

ABOUT GREGORY GONDWE

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