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ZNCJ Position Brief on the Current Media Practitioners Bill

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Verified citizen journalism Must be adopted in the Media Practioners Bill draft, and as such, citizen journalists must be clearly defined as media practitioners in the bill draft and qualify to be full stakeholders and members of the Media Council of Zimbabwe.

This paper takes the position that adopting media and ICT must be professionalised without discrimination.

Abstract

This paper seeks to establish the significance of the inclusive policy framework to be adopted in the media practitioners bill. Democratic participation in the media is a function of democracy, and as such, citizen journalists and mobile journalists are complementary to the media sector. This paper will argue for an inclusive and tolerant policy framework to clearly define, and mention citizen journalism, new media, and emerging career paths enabled by disruptive technologies in the 4IR. When seeking to co-regulate the media, the law, through the proposed Media Council of Zimbabwe, must recognise and define citizen and/or mobile journalists as media practitioners. This paper argues that excluding citizen journalists from the rights and protections offered to individuals defined as "journalists" is an indictment of their rights to freedoms of expression and use of the internet.

Deciphering the areas of contention

In scrutinizing the current provisions of the Zimbabwean Media Practitioners Bill, certain aspects raise significant concerns, particularly regarding the definition of a media practitioner and the potential validation of professional activities by the Media Council of Zimbabwe. This advocacy position aims to highlight these issues and advocate for necessary amendments to ensure fair representation and recognition of citizen journalism within the proposed regulatory framework.

The current draft of the Media Practitioners Bill lacks explicit recognition of verified citizen journalism. Given the constitutional safeguards against the misuse of social media, it is imperative to acknowledge and include citizen journalism within the bill. The existing vagueness about the acknowledgment and representation of citizen journalism on the Media Council of Zimbabwe raises concerns about potential capture and misuse.

The current framework poses the risk of favoring individuals based on their membership in the Media Council, potentially leading to discrimination against those not defined as traditional media practitioners. This approach to media self-regulation may inadvertently exclude citizen journalists and stifle their freedoms of creation and expression.

Efforts by the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) to champion the Media Practitioners Bill may inadvertently benefit only those falling within the criteria of 'media practitioners.' This approach lacks recognition of the evolving nature of the internet, where citizen journalism and online platforms contribute significantly to creativity and expression. Excluding citizen journalism could limit freedoms and creative expression.

The Media Practitioners Bill's current provisions, particularly Section 12 subsection 2, create challenges for the representation of citizen journalists within the Media Council of Zimbabwe. The stipulation that non-media practitioners cannot participate in voting for Council laws raises concerns about democratic processes and inclusive decision-making.

Without a clearly defined recognition of citizen journalism and democratic participants, there is a risk of sidelining or discriminating against this essential segment of the media. To address this, the Media Council of Zimbabwe must explicitly incorporate citizen journalism into its operations and recognize their contributions through media practice membership.

The current attempt to define journalism exclusively in the 4IR era is problematic. Journalism encompasses a broad spectrum of skills and perspectives. Attempting to define journalists solely based on traditional standards overlooks the accessibility of citizen journalism, which empowers anyone with a smartphone to document and share news. Inclusivity ensures a comprehensive representation of voices and experiences, enriching the overall media landscape.

Critically, the media's stakeholder engagement and write-up workshops were not fully representative of all media communities. Traditional journalists' eagerness to define journalism, without adequate representation from citizen journalists and mobile practitioners, raises concerns about inclusivity and fair representation.

In conclusion, the Zimbabwe Network for Citizen Journalists (ZNCJ) advocates for a comprehensive review of the Media Practitioners Bill to explicitly recognize and include citizen journalists. This advocacy seeks a balanced, inclusive, and democratic regulatory framework that accommodates the diverse landscape of contemporary media, ensuring fair representation, protection of freedoms, and fostering creativity and expression. The ZNCJ stands firm in its commitment to an inclusive media sector that embraces the evolving nature of journalism in the digital age.

The integration of citizen journalism into the Media Council of Zimbabwe holds substantial potential for enhancing the country's media sector in various dimensions.

Facilitating Democratic Media Participation:

Mainstream media frequently overlooks the coverage of underreported issues in remote areas of Zimbabwe. The inclusion of citizen journalism and new media platforms in the national regulatory framework provides an avenue for individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their perspectives. This paradigm shift contributes to a more democratic and participatory media landscape within Zimbabwe. For instance, citizen journalists documenting village court proceedings in rural Zimbabwe can disseminate their footage through platforms like YouTube, amplifying voices that may have been otherwise marginalized.

Safeguarding the Right to Freedom of Expression in Zimbabwe

Citizen journalism and new media play a pivotal role in ensuring accountability among Zimbabwe's government and influential entities. The establishment of equitable regulations for media practitioners, embedded in Zimbabwean legislation, serves to uphold their inherent right to freely express ideas and access information. This

legislative framework fortifies and safeguards fundamental rights related to freedom of expression within the context of Zimbabwean media.

Adapting to the Dynamic Media Environment in Zimbabwe:

Given the swift evolution of the media landscape, traditional approaches within Zimbabwe are grappling with the rapid pace of change. Recognizing and endorsing citizen journalism and new media through comprehensive legislative frameworks facilitates the adaptation of regulations to contemporary developments within Zimbabwe. This alignment ensures that regulatory measures remain pertinent, efficacious, and relevant in the context of Zimbabwe's present-day media milieu.

Fostering Creativity and Narrative Diversity in Zimbabwe:

Citizen journalism and new media introduce novel perspectives and innovative narrative approaches within the Zimbabwean media landscape. Through the endorsement of these mediums with judicious policies, Zimbabwe's media sector becomes enriched with diverse and compelling stories. This augmentation benefits not only content creators within Zimbabwe but also enhances the experience of media consumers, contributing to the overall richness and variety of news and information within Zimbabwe.

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