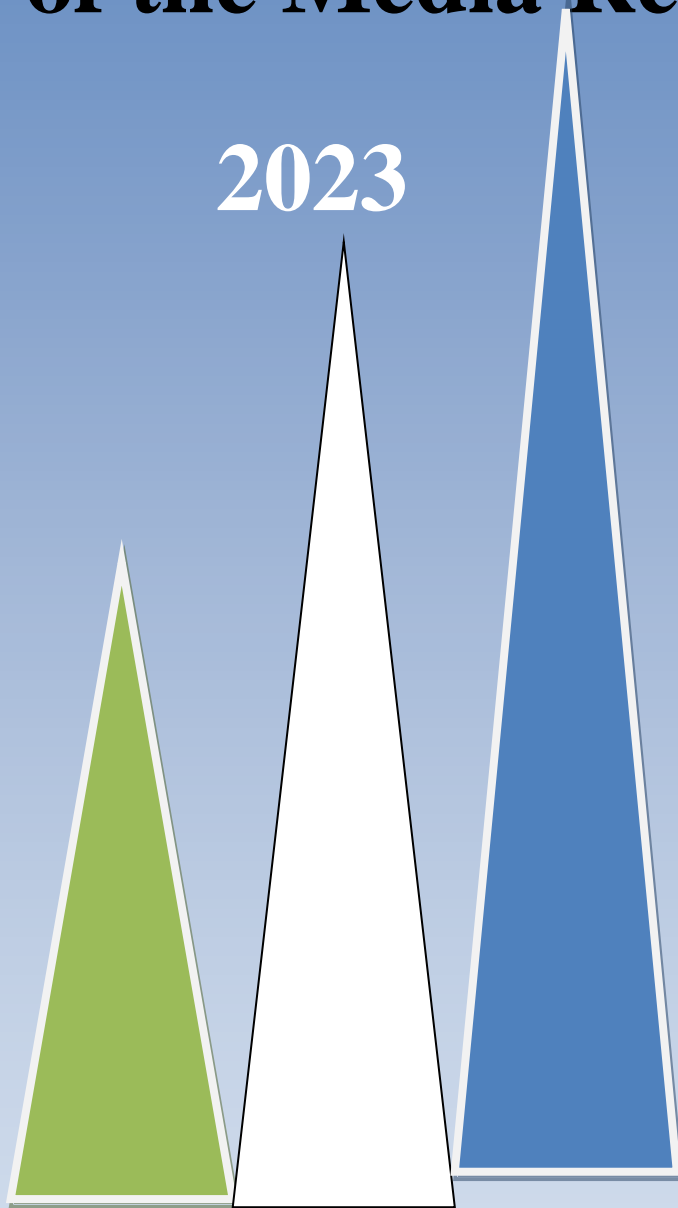# Sierra Leone

# State of the Media Report

# 2023

# Sierra Leone

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# 2023

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State of the Media Report 2023

Edited by: Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (PhD) and Francis Sowa (PhD)

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# Foreword

When one systematically interrogates the trajectory of our intellectual origins and practices, as a discipline, Communication & Media practice in Sierra Leone, since 2013 (the emergence of the MRCG), has vastly improved, virtually, in every domain, despite the slipups intermittently by media and communication practitioners. The result of this volume is a massive work done by surveying a particular body of research in media and communication that would be interesting to the general readers, students and academics.

In adopting the above approach this journal produces the following: Media Ecosystem in Sierra Leone: Practices, Operations, Regulations, Freedom and Capacity Building, the Report examines the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone. Key aspects covered are operations, regulations, freedom, capacity building, and the media's contributions to national development. The article is informed by theoretical constructs in the political economy of the media. Media and elections and media as a catalyst for sustainable development were also interrogated.

To help the rigor of the analyses, authors employed Mixed Methods (Qualitative and Quantitative), including Critical Analysis. These analytical frames guide one to follow the principles or procedures of inquiry in a particular field of study. Rather than continuing with outdated approaches, they embraced modern *methodologies* that match today's challenges to produce robustly researched articles.

As a professional journalist, with extensive years of experience and, as an academic in the communication and media discipline, I have personally benefited from previous academic and technical writings of contributors to the MRCG journals. The authors are not just qualified in their disciplines, but their abilities to simplify and transmit complex, striking and usable pieces of information for different categories of people are remarkable.

The Advisory Board of the MRCG profusely and sincerely extends its best wishes for a successful and productive 2024 to the past and present contributors to the MRCG's academic and professional work for over 11 years now.

Lastly, as Chairman of the Advisory Board of the MRCG-SL, I am beholden to our Partners, Board members and Staff of the MRCG for their immeasurable support and substantial inputs to making the production a reality.

*Victor Massaquoi, PhD*
*Chairman, MRCG-SL Advisory Board*

# INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS, MEDIA FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY, AND DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

**Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (PhD)**

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To the extent that the most important event of the year 2023 in Sierra Leone was the General Elections –presidential, parliamentary, council, and paramount chief—which took place on the 24th of June, this State of the Media Report aims to take a look at how the apparent twin notions of media freedom and the social responsibility of the media played a part in the largely peaceful voting. As the first three articles particularly argue, there is a plethora of research that supports the role of freedom of the press and access to information in democratic elections.

For all you know, journalists are good at not only informing voters about the priorities and programmes put forward by different political parties and candidates, but also, and perhaps more importantly, they can educate them by providing them with a comparative analysis of relevant issues of the day. Simply put, the media have the potential to set the agenda for the electorate in an election cycle. I go with the argument made by Rajesh Shukla

following the work of J S Mill in his celebrated *On Liberty* published in 1859 that 'a free and fair exchange of ideas is crucial not only to the exercising of electoral rights but also to the very idea of democratic citizenship.'(Shukla,2018:1) I cannot agree more! Yet, as Shukla and Mill put it, with the increasing spate of disinformation, misinformation, and fake news, especially in this digital era, in the mediation of democratic elections in most parts of the world, the media have rarely used their hard-earned freedom to promote democratic citizenship; rather their focus has largely been on meeting their political and corporate agendas.

This is what James Curran and Jean Sutton described as power without responsibility which is the title of their flagship book with the seventh edition published in 2010. That is to say the media have largely failed to strike a fine balance between the relative freedom they enjoy while practicing their trade and their social responsibility to the public good. What

is worse is that this failure has largely manifested during democratic elections.

The above scenario is no different from what happened in the general elections that took place in Sierra Leone on 24th June, 2023. In their post-election results, the National Elections Watch (NEW) took a swipe at how the media conducted themselves in what turned out to be a largely politically polarised media landscape. A Report released by NEW, an elections NGO watchdog, on the role and conduct of the media, found that the media was very divided in their reporting of the June 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone. Yet the polarisation of the media along party lines, especially between the two rival traditional parties—the ruling Sierra Leone's People Party (SLPP) and the main opposition All Peoples Congress (APC) is nothing new in Sierra Leone. 'With party newspapers, party radio stations and privately owned (but mostly biased) media, the media environment in the country is polarised along party lines, and pro- and anti-state media organisations.'(M'bayo, 2013:41). M'bayo (2013) referred to an example in February 2009, when radio stations owned by the two main parties, the main opposition SLPP and the ruling APC party traded inflammatory remarks that were ostensibly meant to incite their party members. Thus, taking the cue from what they did during earlier election cycles, such as the one above leading to the 2012 elections, the traditional media houses, including community radios, provided more airtime and space to the candidates they were comfortable with during the June 2023 elections. The NEW Report added that social media also became awash with toxic attacks and counter-attacks, including the use of hate speeches, misinformation, and disinformation by bloggers who were sympathetic to both main political parties in the country. It turned out to be a zero-sum game with anticipated winners and losers. This did not only raise the political tempo to alarming heights, but it had the potential to disrupt meaningful dialogue and constructive engagements among key actors of the main rival political parties.

However, the above is a far cry from the normative role of free media in any democratic dispensation where the media performs various functions ranging from 'to inform, to discuss, to mirror, to bind, to campaign, to challenge, to entertain and to judge (Curran and Sutton,2010). For the free media to properly and efficiently carry out the above functions, it is imperative that it can report freely and fairly on the politics of the day in an unbiased manner; it can examine the political agenda and the platforms of different political parties and their candidates; it has the ability to publish these views via different media formats such as online news, newspapers, and television; and finally, 'an informed citizenry that has respect for facts and is open to human reasoning, logic and rational persuasion.'(Mill 2002, 43-45).Thus it

is easy to see that 'fact based reporting and the facilitation of public discussion so that there is a 'telling of truth to power' can easily be regarded as important characteristics of a free and fair media in liberal democratic states'(Shukla, 2018:2). As Fletcher (1994) put it, for voting to be considered a meaningful act of political participation, voters must have access to a wide-range of information, not constrained by inequalities of wealth or power. This suggests that the media have the responsibility not only to inform the electorate about the processes and procedures of how to cast their vote during the electoral cycle but also to educate them about the choices of candidates and issues at stake in the elections.

Dominick (2009) notes that the normative role of the media is not just to inform the public about what is going on in society but also to provide context on why the events happened in the first place and how important they are to the public and other stakeholders. Yet as M'bayo (2013) argues, most journalists have suddenly become political spin-doctors who present information and opinions on the side of their political patrons to maximum advantage (McQuail, 2005). Thus, the media in many democratic transition countries such as Sierra Leone are generally lacking the qualities that would make them qualify to play a key role in consolidating democracy because they are too close to those who hold political power to serve as effective watchdogs. What is more, reporting about politics is often 'too opinionated and lacking objectivity and professionalism', and journalists often confuse the role of watchdog with that of attack dog, thereby undermining the stability of new, still fragile, political institutions (Voltmer, 2008:2). Thus instead of imbibing new professional standards and practices in performing their role in a democracy, they quickly resort to using political bias, sensationalism, personalisation and political instrumentalization' in plying their trade in countries experiencing democratic transitions (Voltmer, 2008). This is more evident in electoral cycles where the media quickly become polarised along political party lines in a some what zero-sum winner-take-all manner with professionalism going out of the window.

It is this interplay of political control of the media on one hand and media freedom and responsibility on the other hand that largely inform the discussions in the articles in this Report. The Report is made up of two main parts: The first comprises the first article, which critically examines the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone in 2023 with a special look at media operations, regulations, freedom, and capacity building. The article is informed by the theory of the political economy of the media. It shows that despite the Repeal of Part 5 of the Seditious Libel law, which has considerably improved the media freedom environment in the country, few cases of harassment of journalists, some in the line

of duty while others off the line of duty, were recorded during the year under review. This was particularly evident during the immediate pre and immediate post-June 24 2023 general elections. The review in this article shows the various changes in the country's operations and regulation of media institutions. The article highlights the launch of the National Fund for Public Interest Media (NafPIM) as one of the most important steps taken in 2023 to improve the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone. There is also a reference to the series of capacity-building workshops and related activities organised by Media Reform Coordinating Unit and other stakeholders for media practitioners on how to report on the presidential, parliamentary, and local council elections that were held on 24th June 2023.

The second part of the Report is made up of three articles. The first article, authored by Francis Sowa, Augustine James and Sheku P. Kamaraand titled: **Media and Elections: Monitoring and Reporting on the 2023 General Elections in Sierra Leone** reviews the performance of the media and its challenges in reporting the 2023 General Elections in Sierra Leone. The findings of this article show that while media institutions played a pivotal role in the electoral processes, there were complaints of unprofessional practices and inadequate resources for the media to perform their roles fully.

The second article in this Part, titled: **Beyond Media Poverty: Addressing Media Unaccountability,** authored by Francis Sowa, provides a critical examination of the concepts of 'media poverty' and 'media unaccountability' and demonstrates how both are key to influencing media development, sustainability, and profitability. The author makes a compelling argument that despite the fact that there is media poverty, drawing on Denis McQuail's social theory of the media, which suggests that the media in Sierra Leone is poor because it is a reflection of the poverty that is in the country, the poverty that the media in Sierra Leone is experiencing can be attributed to the media unaccountability in the country which suggests a lack of prudent financial management and governance in most media institutions in the country.

The third and final article in this Part, authored by Chernor M. Jalloh and titled: **Media as a Catalyst for Sustainable Development: Reporting, Monitoring, and Implementation of SDGs in Sierra Leone** explores the nexus between media and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Sierra Leone's context. It makes the convincing argument that despite the acknowledged importance of media in shaping public opinion and fostering transparency, there is a notable gap in understanding its specific contributions to SDG attainment. While recognising the study's limitations in this article, the author

calls for empirical research to elucidate the nuanced mechanisms through which media can effectively contribute to SDG realisation in Sierra Leone.

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# PART ONE: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND MEDIA FREEDOM

## 1. Media Ecosystem in Sierra Leone: Practices, Operations, Regulations, Freedom and Capacity Building in 2023.

By

Francis Sowa (Ph.D.), Senior Lecturer and Dean, Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies, FBC, USL and National Coordinator, Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), Khalil Kallon, Executive Secretary, Independent Media Commission (IMC) and Augustine James, Head of Programs, Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG)

### Abstract

*This section of the Report examines the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone in 2023. The key aspects covered are operations, regulations, freedom, capacity building, and the media's contributions to national development during the period under review. The article is informed by the theory of the political economy of the media. The data collection tools and methods used were documentary, archival search, and observation. The review shows the various changes in the country's operations and regulation of media institutions.*

### 1.1 Introduction

Significant steps were taken in 2023 to improve the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone. One major highlight was the launch of the National Fund for Public Interest Media (NaFPIM). Since it was an election year, many capacity-building training programmes were conducted for the media to cover and report on the presidential, parliamentary, and local council elections. Regulations dealing with media ethics were also passed into law and rolled out. In 2023, more media houses were registered and given licenses to operate.

However, most media houses can still not cope with the country's economic situation. Hence, they are primarily off-air or published only occasionally. This section addresses several factors that account for this situation.

### 1.2 Political economy of the media

The political economy of the media concerns the media's survival, control, and management. Studying the political economy of communications is no longer a marginal approach to media and communication studies in many parts of the world. For instance, the Political Economy Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) has grown dramatically over the last decade, attracting numerous scholars worldwide (Wasko, 2014). Thus, the political economy of the media (PEM)

examines issues of media ownership, survivability, organisation, and production of media content. As new scholars engage in studying PEM, an even broader range of issues and themes has emerged. Wasko (2014) addressed the following themes: commodification/commercialisation, diversification/synergy, and horizontal/vertical integration and concentration. These themes describe media and communication resources as commodities sold for profit and the level of competition in the market.

The issues covered in this article are within the province of the theoretical constructs of the political economy of the media. This includes the survival and organisation of the media ecosystem, which—within the context of Sierra Leone—is shaped by a statutory institution, the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and other market forces. The IMC issues radio, television, and Direct-to-Home services licences and registers newspapers and magazines.

By 31 December 2022, there were 555 registered and licensed media institutions in Sierra Leone. They fall into various categories: newspapers and magazines, radio, television and direct-to-home (DTH) services. Among them, 224 radio stations were active/operational and 14 inactive/ non-operational; 20 Television stations were active and four not active; eight DTHs were active and four not active; 151 newspapers active and 104 inactive; and 12 magazines were active

and 14 inactive. The data exclude Radio/Television licensed by the IMC but await Frequency allocation from the National Telecommunication Authority (NatCA). Radio and television stations are further categorised into public, commercial, community, and religious institutions.9 Newspapers and magazines are not classified into specific types

## 1.3 The media landscape – the numbers

The table shows that from January to December 2023, the Commission registered and licensed **28** media houses: **10** Radio Stations, **13** Newspapers, **two** magazines, **two** Terrestrial Televisions, and one online DTH service Provider.

*Table 1: Registered and Licensed media institutions in 2023*

| Category | Year 2023 | Number of Registered/Licensed Media |
|---|---|---|
| **Radio** | | |
| Public Service | 2023 | 0 |
| Community | 2023 | 1 |
| Commercial | 2023 | 9 |
| Religious | 2023 | 0 |
| Relay/rebroadcast | 2023 | 0 |
| Teaching | 2023 | 0 |
| **Total** | 2023 | **10** |
| **Television (Terrestrial)** | | |
| Public Service | 2023 | 0 |
| Community | 2023 | 0 |
| Commercial | 2023 | 2 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Religious | 2023 | 0 |
| Relay/rebroadcast | 2023 | 0 |
| Teaching | 2023 | 0 |
| **Total** | **2023** | **2** |
| **Direct-to-Home (DTH)** | | |
| Television | 2023 | 0 |
| Online | 2023 | 1 |
| **Print media** | | |
| Newspaper | 2023 | 13 |
| Magazine | 2023 | 2 |

**Source: IMC Data 2023**

## 1.4    Media laws, regulations and freedom

There are various laws used to regulate the country's media ecosystem. These laws are established in the constitution, statutes and codes of the institutions that are set to implement them. Sierra Leone, as a country, has specific and other statutes (Acts), regulations, policies and institutions governing the media landscape. The major laws used to regulate the media are the Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991 (Section 25 (1) and Section 11), the Independent Media Commission Act 2020, the Defamation Ordinance 1961, the IMC Media Code of Practice, and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) Code of Ethics.

During the period under review, the Independent Media Commission (Print and Electronic Media) Regulations, 2022 (Statutory Instrument No. 11 of 2022) and the Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations, 2022

(Statutory Instrument No. 17 of 2022) were enacted by parliament. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) is the regulatory body responsible for registering newspapers and licensing radio and television stations. The National Communications Authority (NatCA), formally the National Telecommunication Commission (NATCOM), allocates spectrums/frequencies based on recommendations of the IMC.

The year under review witnessed changes in the country's media laws, regulations, and freedom. Among them are the Independent Media Commission (Print and Electronic Media) Regulations, 2022 and the Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations, 2022, which replaced almost the entire Media Code of Practice of 2007, except for the section on Advertising under review. Parliament also enacted the Right to Access Information Regulations 2022. The Regulations ensure the right to access information and outline various codes guiding the coverage and reporting by media institutions.

The National Communication Authority Act of 2022 provides for the licensing and regulating of electronic communications operators and other new developments in the ICT/telecommunications sector to fit in with the present-day telecoms industry worldwide. The Act introduced twenty-seven (27) new Parts, some of which were embedded in other

parts of the Telecommunications Commission Act 2006. It protects licensees and consumers through complaints and conflict resolution. Part VII, sections 27 to 32, outlines how the authority can settle disputes and resolve conflicts between licensees and consumers. Part XX, sections 103 and 104, provides that the authority may impose obligations on licensees involved in anti-competitive behavior.

## 1.5 Freedom of Expression and the Press: Cases and Actions Taken

Within the period under review (2023), MRCG and its constituent bodies produced the eleventh and twelfth editions of 'Press Freedom, Information, Internet and Digital Rights in Sierra Leone'. These editions are built upon the foundation of previous editions, and extensive follow-ups were done on unresolved cases from the police, judiciary, and the victims. From the first to the 11th editions (2018-2023), the MRCG had monitored **66** cases, **50** of which were concluded, settled, resolved, dropped or abandoned because of lack of progress; **9** were in court, and **17** were under police investigation. In 2023, the MRCG monitored **12** cases/issues dealing with arrest, detention, intimidation, physical and verbal assault, attack, and cyber-attack issues.

**The case of Edmund Abu - the Executive Director of the Native Consortium and Research Center**

On 10 January 2023, the Executive Director of Native Consortium and Research Centre, Edmond Abu Jnr., was arrested and detained for twenty-one (21) days at the Pademba Road Correctional Centre about social media publications and utterances he made on the radio regarding the court matter between his organisation and Mobile Network Operators and the National Telecommunications Authority. The Judiciary of Sierra Leone's press release dated 18 January 2023 stated that Edmond Abu Jnr. was arrested for contempt of Court by provisions of Section 120 (5) of the Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act No. 6 of 1991. The release further stated that on 26 February 2021, the court had granted an Order restraining Mr. Abu from publication and comments on the case as it was 'sub judice.' [Read more here.](#)

**The case of journalist Gibril Gottor-a freelancer in Kambia District**

On 18 January 2023, journalist Gibril Gottor, a freelance journalist in Kambia, reported to MRCG, alleging that a police officer made a verbal threat against him while covering a story at Malal Police Checkpoint in Magbema Chiefdom, Kambia District. "I reported the said officer to the Local Unit Commander (LUC) of Kambia Police Division, Chief Superintendent Abu Bakar Magona, but nothing has been done about it", he added. The LUC told MRCG that he had not received a report from Gibril. He said, "My officers at the checkpoint had informed me that Gibril

wanted to obstruct their work at the checkpoint. In subsequent follow-ups on the matter, there has been no progress relating to the verbal threat made by a police officer on Gibril Gottor. The Police also maintained that they had not yet got a witness or evidence to substantiate the complaint made by Gibril to aid their investigation.

**The case of Alie Tokowa, Station Manager of Fountain of Peace in Moyamba District**

On 28 March 2023, the MRCG monitored the alleged attack and assault of the Station Manager of Fountain of Peace Radio (FOP) in Moyamba District, Alie Tokowa, at the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) office in Moyamba by its supporters on the instruction of the outgoing District Council Chairman Mr. Joseph Gbogba. In an interview, Tokowa said that he was invited by one Haja Simbo, to do an Outdoor Broadcast (OB) of the party's nomination event at the SLPP party office. He said while at the SLPP Office on the assignment, arguments ensued during the deliberation among supporters of the aspirants. He continued that the former District Council Chairman, Mr. Gbogba spotted him taking a video of the argument and instructed his boys to beat him and take his phone from him. In an interview, the former District Council Chairman, Joseph Gbagbo, denied instructing anyone to attack the station manager of FOP Radio. The Head of Media and Public Relations of the SLP, ASP Brima Kamara, told MRCG that the Sierra Leone Police 10

(SLP) was waiting for the victim to return from the hospital in Freetown to file in a complaint and an investigation would be instituted into the matter. SLAJ, in a press release dated 31 March 2023, condemned the attack on the journalist and called on local authorities to protect journalists and their media houses from intimidation, threats, and attacks by politicians and members of the public who feel aggrieved about their work. SLAJ also called on the Police to impartially investigate the matter and bring to book the alleged perpetrators. In a follow-up on the matter, the Chairman of Civil Societies in Moyamba, Gerald Foday, told MRCG that they had filed a formal complaint of the matter to the Sierra Leone Police in Moyamba and that four suspects were arrested but later released on bail. The Local Unit Commander (LUC) of Moyamba Police Station, Assistant Superintendent Franklyn Bawoh, confirmed receipt of the complaint and sent the matter to the State Counsel for legal advice. "The next line of action will be taken after the advice", he said.

**The Defamation case of William F. Sellu- Inspector General of the Sierra Leone Police**

On 2 June 2023, the Inspector General of Police, William F. Sellu, through his Lawyer, Demba Barrie, instituted an action against Radio Democracy FM 98.1 (First Defendant) and Producer Alex Lawrence Koroma (Second Defendant). According to a press release from

the Judiciary of Sierra Leone, an appearance was entered by The Tanner Legal Advisory on behalf of the defendants, but "failed to file a Defence to the action" as provided for in the country's High Court Rules 2007. The High Court of Sierra Leone in July 2023 delivered its first judgment in default of defence in a civil defamation matter after repealing the Criminal and Seditious Libel Laws in the country in 2020. The matter between the Inspector General of Police and The Society for Radio Democracy FM 98.1 and Alex Lawrence Koroma concerns a defamatory broadcast in May 2023. Hon. Justice Alhaji Momoh-Jah Stevens entered Judgment for the Inspector General pursuant to Order 22 Rule 3 of the High Court Rules 2007. The Court ordered damages against the radio and Mr. Koroma, retraction of the broadcast, and an apology to the Inspector General. The Court ordered the lawyer for the Inspector General "to file a separate Notice of Motion for assessment of damages after the High Court vacation in October 2023." The matter was expected to commence in November 2023 for assessment of damages. The matter, which was to be heard in October 2023 for assessment of damages, was rescheduled for November 2023. The matter commenced in November 2023 for assessment of damages, in which the High Court asked the defendant to present the cost of damages.

**The IMC case of William F. Sellu-Inspector General of the Sierra Leone Police**

On 13 June 2023, the Board Chairman of radio Democracy FM 98.1, Dr. Julius Spencer, in the 'Good Morning Salone' flagship program, publicly apologised to the Inspector General of Police (IGP) William Fayia Sellu for the unprofessional broadcast made against him by their staff, Alex Lawrence Koroma, Producer at Radio Democracy 98.1 FM, on a radio broadcast against his person on 'Good Morning Salone' show on 22 May 2023, and promised to take necessary actions. This follows a complaint to the Independent Media Commission (IMC) by the Inspector General of Police, William Fayia Sellu. The Commission's Complaints Committee on 24 May 2023 conducted hearing on the complaint by the Inspector General of Police against Alex Lawrence Koroma, Producer Society for Radio Democracy 98.1 FM, on a radio broadcast against his person on 'Good Morning Salone' Show Monday 22 May 2023. Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP), Brima Kamara, who restated the complaint on behalf of the Inspector General, said that on Monday, 22 May 2023, Alex Lawrence Koroma on "Good Morning Salone Show" on Radio Democracy 98.1 FM, smeared the character and person of the Inspector General, Mr. William F Sellu, on a land-related issue and did not get his side of the story. Responding to the complainant, Alex Lawrence Koroma, said the broadcast was never meant to destroy the good image of Mr. William F Sellu and that it was a mistake. He pleaded with the Complaints Committee to

give him time to do a retraction with equal prominence as soon as possible. The Chairman of the Board of Radio Democracy made an official apology to IG during on a 'Good Morning Salone' programme.

**The case of Umaru Fofana, BBC Correspondent in Sierra Leone**

On 14 June 2023, the BBC Correspondent in Sierra Leone, Umaru Fofana, was attacked by supporters of the All Peoples' Congress (APC) party during the press conference at the New Brookfields Hotel in Freetown. The APC officially invited him to cover the event. According to Umaru, the perpetrators' hostility persisted as they pursued him to the hotel's car park, where they continued to subject him to further indecent language and gestures, and he was threatened physically. In a press release dated 15 June 2023, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) condemned the attack on its former president and called on the party's leadership to take prompt action. The National Publicity Secretary of the APC, Sidi Yayah Tunis, confirmed receipt of a complaint from Umaru and promised to take it up with the party's leadership. On 11 November 2023, Mr. Fofana told MRCG that he had called on the leadership of the APC, which promised to put out a press release condemning the actions, but they have yet to do so. The National Publicity Secretary of the APC, Sidi Yayah Tunis, told MRCG that the matter was still under investigation. It was still inconclusive at the time of reporting this report.

**The case of Ibrahim Alusine Kamara, Managing Editor for Salone Compass Newspaper**

On 26 June 2023, Ibrahim Alusine Kamara, Managing Editor of Salone Compass Newspaper, complained that security officials assaulted him, endangered his life and vandalised his vehicle during an incident at the APC's press conference on 25 June 2023 at the party's headquarters in Freetown. He told MRCG that he had also officially reported the matter to the police, but the police were yet to acknowledge receipt of the letter or take action. The Head of Media and Public Relations of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), ACP Brima Kamara, told MRCG that the police received the complaint and instituted an investigation into the matter. In subsequent follow-ups on the matter, due to delay in the investigation, Mr. Kamara's lawyers, Marrah and Associates, in October 2023, wrote a letter to the police and requested an urgent investigation of the matter, pursuant to regulation 3 Sub regulation 1 (c) (d) and (h) of the Independent Police Complaint Board (IPCB) Regulations 2003. In November 2023, the journalist told MRCG that police started investigating the matter only after his lawyers had requested the Independent Police Complaint Board (IPCB) on 18 October 2023 to investigate the matter, pursuant to the IPCB Regulations 2003. He continued that the Board

had obtained statements from him and two witnesses. They requested all receipts of his expenditures for the maintenance of his car that was vandalised during the incident, noting that upon providing all requested documents, the police had proceeded to the next stage of the investigation.

**The shutting down of Radio Democracy FM 98.1**

In August 2023, there was a shutdown of Radio Democracy FM 98.1's broadcast of its flagship 'Good Morning Salone' program. The Station Manager, Michael Kapindi Jamiru, told MRCG that the shutdown was caused by a power outage at their transmitting facility on Leicester Peak. "Africell mobile company, which provides the radio with electricity to transmit from Leicester Peak, told us during the shutdown that they had a technical issue from their power plant at Leicester Peak, which caused the sudden shutdown of the morning broadcast." The government was accused of shutting down the radio station to stop the broadcast of an interview with the then United States of America's Ambassador to Sierra Leone, David Reimer, containing critical comments on the outcome of the country's elections. Through the Minister of Information and Civic Education, Chernor Bah, the government denied the allegation.

**The case of Musa S Kamara, Reporter at Radio Democracy FM 98.1**

On 20 August 2023, Musa S. Kamara, working for radio Democracy 98.1 FM, reportedly received "death threats" online from anonymous individuals. This followed an exclusive interview he had conducted with the United States of America's Ambassador to Sierra Leone, David Reimer, on the current post-election crisis in the country. Musa told MRCG that the online death threats against him were related to the interview he had done with the Ambassador, which some anonymous individuals didn't want him to broadcast. President of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, said that Musa brought to the attention of SLAJ the online death threats against him and he advised him to report the matter to the SLP further. The SLP's Head of Media and Public Relations, ACP Brima Kamara, told MRCG that Musa had officially reported the matter and the police had begun investigating it. In subsequent follow-ups, Musa told MRCG that he received calls on 3 and 5 October 2023 from the United Nations Senior Human Rights Adviser, Uchenna Emelonye, and the Human Right Commission for Sierra Leone, respectively, asking for his consent to report his story, which he agreed, but said that he had not received any other update from anyone on the matter, including the police. Police said they were still investigating the matter.

**The case of Robert Kamara, Organizing Secretary of the APC in Bonthe District**

On 4 October 2023, the Organizing Secretary of the opposition, APC Party in Bonthe District, Robert Kamara, was arraigned before Principal Magistrate Lyoud Jusu of Court Number One in Bo, for allegedly insulting Dr. Julius Maada Bio, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone. The accused was charged with three counts ranging from 'Cyber Bullying, Sending False Message by Means of Computer System and Sending 12 Insulting Message by Means of Computer System', contrary to Section 44 of the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021. The accused was denied bail during his first and second appearances on 4 and 9 October 2023 and was adjourned to 7 November 2023. The National Organizing Secretary of the APC, Sidi Yayah Tunis, told MRCG that their party and the Government of Sierra Leone in the 'peace dialogue' had agreed to release all political detainees for alleged election and civil protests. He said the release process started but was put on hold due to the 26 November 2023 incident across Sierra Leone. The accused was denied bail on 7 November 2023 and was still in remand.

**The case of Hope FM 93.3 in Makeni.**

On 23 October 2023, the office and staff of Hope FM 93.3 in Makeni, Northern Sierra Leone, Mohamed S. Bangura, Ishmail S. Bangura, Mahmood Fofana, Mohamed John Kanu and Serefiana Kargbo were attacked by a group of thugs allegedly sent by the landlord of the premises housing the radio. Mr. Stanley Bangura, proprietor of the radio, told MRCG that he had reported the matter to the police. In its press release dated 23 October 2023, SLAJ vehemently condemned the attack and called on the authorities to thoroughly investigate and bring the culprits to book. According to the release, the attackers forcefully entered the radio station, vandalised equipment, physically manhandled the members of staff and assaulted the proprietor. The North-East Regional Commander of the SLP, Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG) Aiah Edward Samadia, also told MRCG that the police conducted their investigation and sent the findings to the State Counsel, who would advise. In November 2023, the proprietor of the radio told MRCG that the matter was in court, adding that the defendants pleaded with him, Ahmed Sahid Nasrallah, SLAJ President and Umaru Fofana, for an out-of-court settlement of the matter. He continued that he agreed on one condition: for the defendants to reinstate the radio's tenancy and pay for the damaged pieces of office property. The matter was still in court.

**The defamation case of Kutubu Koroma- a resident of Maryland, United States of America.**

The spokesperson for the Judiciary of Sierra Leone, Elkass Sannoh, confirmed to MRCG their Twitter post, which stated that Justice Momoh Jah Stevens, on 21 November 2023, ordered Kutubu Koroma, a resident in

Maryland, USA, to pay NLe 1,500,000 (approximately USSD 63,291.14) as compensation to John Akar Foundation and Yada Williams Esq. He noted that the judge also ordered Mr. Kutubu to apologise for his libelous and defamatory publications on social media. When the report was put together, Mr. Kutubu could not be reached.

## 1.6 Internet Freedom and Digital Rights

Since the enactment of the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021, arrests have been made for breach of its provision(s). The Act, among other things, provides for the prohibition, prevention, detection, prosecution, and punishment of cybercrimes and the protection of privacy rights.

Mobile operators in Sierra Leone increased their mobile data tariffs nationwide on 13 January 2023. MRCG, in a press alert, expressed concerns about the increment, stating that it may negatively hinder information access and dissemination in the country. Read more here.

## 1.7 Ownership, governance and management

The ownership, governance and management of media institutions have been serious concerns. The year under review saw some changes in the governance and management of media institutions. The types of ownership largely remained the same in the IMC Act 2020. They are a body corporate established by an Act of Parliament or registered under the Companies Act 2009 (Act No. 5 of 2009), a

partnership registered under the Partnership Act 1890 and a sole proprietorship.21

The 2023 data about radio ownership show that the 10 registered radio stations are companies (one of them is a non-profit) with no proprietorships or partnerships. In the area of Television ownership, there is no partnership or sole proprietorship. The two registered TV stations in 2023 are companies. Most newspapers are registered as sole proprietorships, but a few of them are companies.

## 1.8 Post National Media Investment Conference

MRCG and BBC Media Action convened a two-day post-media viability and investment conference workshop on 16 and 17 September 2023. The workshop brought together participants from the media, government, and CSOs to track the progress made in implementing the recommendations agreed on at the National Media Viability and Investment Conference. Participants reviewed the draft implementation plan for the Roadmap/National Action Plan developed at the Conference and developed a strategy for implementing the Roadmap/National Action Plan. At the end of the conference in 2022, seven key recommendations were made.

1. The Government of Sierra Leone should continue to show the political will necessary to drive media market reforms

2. The existing legal and regulatory framework for the media needs to be reviewed.

3. The media should commit to re-engineering the industry in order to boost the potential for attracting private-sector investment and public subsidies.

4. The Government should take affirmative action to promote community media and the public service broadcaster, the Sierra Leona Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC)

5. A national policy on advertising should be introduced.

6. Government and development partners should commit to a national fund for public interest media.

7. Stakeholders should seek to address the existing gender imbalance in the media industry.

The workshop employed an interactive approach, combining presentations and small group discussions on the draft documents and proposed strategy. At the end of the two-day session, participants reviewed the document on the progress made in implementing the recommendations agreed on at the National Media Viability and Investment Conference. The draft implementation plan for the Roadmap/National Action Plan was reviewed and updated, and a new strategy for implementing the Roadmap/National Action Plan was reviewed, with clear timelines and monitoring evaluation mechanisms set. The workshop concluded with group discussions and presentations

## 1.9 National Fund for Public Interest Media (NaFPIM)

The concept of a National Fund for Public Interest Media in Sierra Leone stems from the National Action Plan for Media Viability, which was agreed upon with key stakeholders after the Sierra Leone National Media Viability and Investment Conference, held in April 2022. The conference generated the following recommendations: "Government and development partners should commit to a national fund for public interest media" (Recommendation 6 (3).

The initiative is based on the perception that Sierra Leonean media face tough economic challenges, which limit their ability to produce content that serves the public interest. Stakeholders have called for a funding mechanism combining government subsidies with contributions from international donors and disbursing this funding through a transparent and inclusive process.

In April 2022, the Ministry of Information and Communications and its partners, including the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and other national media organisations, such as the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), with support

from the BBC Media Action under the PRIMED project, organised the first ever National Media Viability and Investment Conference. The conference explored ways all stakeholders can work together to create a healthier information ecosystem where a steady flow of trusted public interest media content is more freely and widely available to the people of Sierra Leone.[1] A national consultant led regional consultations preceding the conference with support from an experienced international media viability professional. The national conference was held with industry actors, local and central government, the judiciaries, the private sector, donors, and international development partners. The expected outcome of the conference was the development of a Roadmap/National Action Plan for media viability in Sierra Leone with clear action points for government, regulators, media houses, media support organisations and donors.

In 2023, the project's pilot phase implemented some activities, including establishing the National Fund for Public Interest Media, developing its operating framework, and communicating the Fund's vision, purpose, and work to relevant stakeholders and the public.

## 1.10 Key Activities of national institutions and media organisations

The MRCG seeks to strengthen democratic dialogue and accountability, consolidate peace and ensure development through professional, independent and sustainable media, based on the right to freedom of expression and the press. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Africa Check, International Media Support (IMS), Minority Right Group (MRG) and the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), the Secretariat implemented the following activities in the year under review.

On 26 January 2023 MRCG monitored the laying of papers in Parliament by the Deputy Minister of Information and Communications, Solomon Jamiru Esq. They were the Right to Access Information Regulations 2022 (Statutory Instrument No. 9 of 2022), Independent Media Commission (Print and Electronic Media) Regulations 2022 (Statutory Instrument No. 11 of 2022) and the Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations, 2022 (Statutory Instrument No. 17 of 2022). The proposed pieces of legislations were to introduce new regulations on the right to access information, media ethics and coverage and reporting of elections respectively.

The MRCG, with the renewed support from NED, in March and April 2023 on diverse dates, trained 220 journalists, including station

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[1] Introduction to the Sierra Leone National Media Viability and Investment Conference, MICS, SLAJ, UKaid, PRIMED and BBC Media Action.

managers and editors, on 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.' The objectives of the training was geared towards training journalists, editors and station managers on elections and conflict sensitive reporting; enabling journalists, appreciate the need to engage in conflict sensitive reporting during elections, increasing the knowledge and capacity of journalists in reporting on electoral processes including nominations, manifesto readings, campaigns, voting, counting and announcement of elections results, enabling journalists fight election-based disinformation and misinformation, increasing accurate information for digitally connected and unconnected audiences, pre, and post-elections, enabling journalists fact check their news to prevent mis/disinformation, expanding their knowledge on the safety and security of journalists, enabling participants avoid publishing and broadcasting hate messages and fake news, and exposing the participants to the ethical guidelines on reporting elections in the Independent Media Commission Elections Regulations, 2022.

The training was a training of trainers (TOT), in which all the participants (editors and station manager) in turn conducted in-house training for their staff, using the skills and knowledge from the training. It helped journalists and media workers across the country to accurately report on the June 2023 general elections with little or no casualties from any journalist or media house. Unlike the 2018 general elections in which the MRCG monitored and reported on significant safety issues faced by journalists, the Sierra Leonean journalists covered and reported on the 2023 general elections with calmness and ease, primarily due to the training of the MRCG.

On 27 and 28 April 2023, MRCG and Africa Check, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy, conducted a two-day Media Literacy workshop for 15 selected journalists nationwide. The workshop strengthened their capacity to fight election-based disinformation and increase accurate information for digitally connected and unconnected audiences before and after the June 2023 elections in Sierra Leone. Read more here.

This training was also a training of trainers, where the 15 participants were selected based on their impacts and the reach of their media houses. They, in turn, trained the staff from their media houses on fighting election-based dis- and misinformation and to increase accurate information for digitally connected and unconnected audiences. In the course of this, a series of audio and video messages were produced in 7 main local languages in Sierra Leone on identifying fake websites and blogs, dealing with fake news, and verifying authentic information on elections, which were

widely disseminated to help educate the citizens of Sierra Leone.

On 3 May 2023, MRCG and its constituent member organisations joined other press freedom groups worldwide to commemorate the 30th anniversary of World Press Freedom. As this year's theme is "Shaping a Future of Rights: Freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights," MRCG continues to call on the Government of Sierra Leone and other sector players to at all times guarantee the safety of journalists and to ensure a conducive environment for freedom of expression and of the press to thrive, especially as the country approaches its 24th June general elections. Read more here.

On 19 May 2023, the MRCG and Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) organised a Forum on Media Professionalism and the Safety of Journalists in Sierra Leone. The forum attracted journalists, representatives of media associations, the judiciary, the security sector, political parties, and civil society organisations. The forum's initiative was to highlight safety and security issues relating to journalists, particularly as the country approaches its general elections in June 2023, and to increase stakeholders' awareness of the safety and protection of journalists in their duty. Read more here.

On 6 June 2023, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and MRCG, with support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands in Ghana, organised a training on Digital Literacy Skills and Women's Rights Online Issues for female journalists in Sierra Leone. Participants were introduced to ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance their journalism skills and address online privacy issues.

On 17 June 2023, MRCG, with support from the International Media Support (IMS), organised a one-day capacity-building training on elections reporting and the safety and security of journalists during elections. The event was graced by journalists, especially from community media, and those who had issues with security sector personnel. During the workshop, there were brief presentations on international documents (the UNESCO Framework on Safety and Security of Journalists and national studies and reports (MRCG's press freedom reports) on the safety and security of journalists, and was climaxed with intense discussions, group work and presentations on ways to ensure safety and security of journalists.

From 19 to 21 June 2023, the MRCG, with support from IMS, held a joint Police-Media Dialogue Forum in Freetown, Makeni, and Bo, respectively, to help ensure collaboration between the media and the police. The Forum brought together senior police officers and media professionals from across the country, who discussed and identified concrete modalities for Police-Media collaboration and

mechanisms for ensuring the safety of journalists during the electioneering period.

On 23 June 2023, MRCG, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), launched its Media Situation Room (MSR) in Freetown. The Situation Room was established to monitor the country's media performance during the elections to promote professional media coverage and conflict-sensitive reporting of the 2023 general elections in Sierra Leone.

The MRCG, together with the Ministry of Information and Civic Education (MoICE), with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), on 7 September 2023, convened a workshop at Dohas Hotel in Bo to review the draft National Media and Information Policy. The workshop brought together 21 media stakeholders, including representatives from the Ministry of Information and Civic Education, the Sierra 13 Leone Association of Journalists, the Independent Media Commission (IMC), the Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC), the British Broadcasting Cooperation Media Action (BBC-MA), Law Officers Department, the Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA), Association of Communication, Journalism and Media Educators (ACJME), and other senior journalists and media stakeholders in Sierra Leone. The draft national policy document contained discussions on key issues that could inform future policy decisions. The policy, upon completion, would serve the critical role of a well-defined information policy in reducing confusion, enhancing coordination and improving information flow in Sierra Leone.

The policy would also address the digital age, particularly in addressing misinformation, disinformation, and cyber security issues.

On 29 September 2023, the MRCG, with support from IMS, convened a one-day post-election Police, Political Parties, CSOs, and Media National Dialogue Forum with key stakeholders to share experiences gained and challenges encountered during the June 2023 elections and to proffer possible solutions that will continue to strengthen the media-security relationship in the country.

On 2 November 2023, commemorating the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, the MRCG intensified calls for the safety and security of journalists in the country. MRCG's press release dated 2 November 2023 highlighted that the safety of journalists extends beyond encounters with politicians and security officers. It also noted reports of attacks on journalists by local authorities, youth, and members of the public.

In the release, MRCG continued to urge the Government of Sierra Leone, politicians, media organisations, media owners and managers, civil society organisations, and the public to ensure the safety and security of journalists at all times.

The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) monitored and advocated for press freedom and journalists' safety under the period under review. They issued out various press releases on the following:

SLAJ, on 13 February 2023, joined the rest of the world in observing WORLD RADIO DAY. World Radio Day is the day that UNESCO encourages the world to acknowledge and appreciate the role and importance of radio in our everyday lives, in the prevention of conflict and promoting peace and national cohesion, and in the development of nations. The year 2023 marks the Centenary of Radio in Africa. Radio is still the dominant mass medium in Africa, particularly Sierra Leone, with the widest geographical reach and the highest audiences. Read more here.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), on 14 February 2023, held an inception meeting for system and process review for the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) at the Association's Headquarters at Campbell Street, Freetown. President of the Association, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, thanked the ACC for answering their call to look into SLAJ's administrative, management, and financial systems and processes since the association was now receiving annual subvention for the media from the Government of Sierra Leone and funds from donors to implement projects. Read more here.

SLAJ Executive, on 23 February 2023, welcomed the Minister of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), Dr David Moinina Sengeh, and his team at its office at Campbell St Freetown.

The discussion underscored the importance of the media's role in supporting education transformation in the country and how both SLAJ and the Ministry could work together to support the free quality school education (FQSE) and other efforts by the Ministry to transform the sector. SLAJ President Ahmed Sahid Nasralla emphasised the role of the media in providing information on the FQSE, public education and sensitisation, as well as highlighting gaps, challenges, and exposing corruption and other malpractices in the delivery of the government's flagship program. Read more here.

The President of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, witnessed the Sierra Leone Bar Association (SLBA) Annual General Meeting 2023 at Fabulous Resort, York Village, Western Rural District, Sierra Leone on 17 March 2023. Read more here.

SLAJ, on 24 March 2023, officially launched a project to combat disinformation around Sierra Leone's 2023 public elections at the Elections Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) conference hall, Tower Hill, Freetown. The project, supported by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), aimed to

ensure the integrity of the information landscape during the electoral cycle and promote free, fair, and non-violent elections. [Read more here.](#)

SLAJ on 26 March condemned the use of religious rhetoric for votes. It was concerned, worried, and troubled after watching a video on social media where the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) Mayoral aspirant, Mohamed Gento Kamara, was seen campaigning in a mosque and appealing to religious sentiments for votes. SLAJ condemned the type of campaign messaging from a political aspirant and further condemned the leadership of the mosque for allowing a politician to use their place of worship to campaign on such grounds. SLAJ believed the 2023 elections were not about religion, tribe, region, or any other extreme considerations but should be about issues that can develop Sierra Leone and raise the standards of living of her people. [Read more here.](#)

SLAJ, on 29 March 2023, condemned the alleged attack on the Station Manager, Fountain of Peace Radio (FOP), Alie Tokowa. It received a complaint from the Management of Fountain of Peace Radio in Moyamba District, Southern Region that Mr. Tokowa was assaulted whilst on duty allegedly by supporters of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) on the instruction of the former District Council Chairman Mr. Joseph Gbogba on Tuesday 28th March 2023 at the SLPP party Office in Moyamba District. [Read more here.](#)

The President of the SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, on 1 April 2023, departed for the United States of America to participate in the U.S. State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). The IVLP is the U.S. Department of State's premier professional exchange program designed to introduce emerging foreign leaders to their American counterparts, U.S society, culture and values. [Read more here.](#)

On 9 April 2023, SLAJ condemned the killing of ASP Mathew Moiwah Gbanya and expressed concerns about general safety and security as the country headed into public elections on 24th June 2023. ASP Gbanya was killed on Saturday night, 8th April 2023, in the Northern Headquarter town of Makeni,

On Wednesday, April 26, the president of SLAJ, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, visited the offices of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Washington, DC. A cross-section of the NED Program Team on Africa and Sierra Leone warmly welcomed the SLAJ President.

On May 3, 2023, SLAJ joined the rest of the world to commemorate World Press Freedom 2023 to take stock of the press freedom situation in various countries, looking at the successes, challenges, and future. Sierra

Leone's environment was relatively free, safe, and conducive to being a journalist. No journalist was detained or put in prison for doing their work. According to the Independent Media Commission (IMC), the Commission receives an application to register a media company almost every month. Read more here.

On 5 June 2023, President Ahmed Sahid Nasralla officially launched the SLAJ Media Manifesto 2023: The Media We Want for empowered and inclusive media in Sierra Leone.

On 9 September 2023, SLAJ and the Embassy of Ireland unveiled a groundbreaking Gender Equality Policy for the Media. In a historic move aimed at promoting gender equality within its media industry, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) launched a pioneering gender equality policy aimed at fostering diversity and inclusivity within journalism associations, news outlets, and journalists across the country. The Gender Equality Policy for the Media (GEP), which was launched on 9 September 2023 during the 52nd Annual General Meeting of SLAJ at Dorwaila Inn & Suites in Kenema City, Eastern Sierra Leone, is among the first significant initiatives specifically targeted at the news media in West Africa and the African continent at large. Read more here.

On 20 October 2023, SLAJ commended the AU, ECOWAS, and the Commonwealth for successfully mediating political dialogue between the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and the main opposition All People's Congress (APC) political party, and the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPN) for steering the process. SLAJ urged Sierra Leoneans at home and abroad not to give up on their beloved country but to develop a positive mindset of seeing the national glass half-full and support genuinely to fill it so that every Sierra Leonean, irrespective of allegiance and status, will drink from it.

On 11 December 2023, SLAJ cautioned journalists amid heightened security. In the morning hours of Friday, 8 December 2023, two foreign journalists and one local journalist (names withheld) were apprehended around the Central Business District area by security officials and questioned at the Cyber Unit of the Criminal Investigations Department of the Sierra Leone Police for taking photos and footages of security officials in the line of duty in a public space without permission. Their equipment- camera, SD Card, and smartphone- were confiscated before they were released to report the following day. In this light, SLAJ called on journalists to be cautious and aware of the restrictions during this heightened state of security in the country. Foreign journalists are advised to go through the appropriate authorities to report from

Sierra Leone and to respect the laws and regulations relating to their work in the country.

On 21 December 2021, led by President Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, SLAJ and its affiliate bodies and members held an engagement with the New UNDP Resident Representative Frederick Hans Ampiah and his core team at his Fourah Bay Close office in Freetown. Nasralla briefed the UNDP Resident Representative and his team on SLAJ and the media landscape in Sierra Leone. He talked about media pluralism (its positives and negatives), media ownership, media poverty and reporters' welfare, media viability and sustainability, media freedom and responsibility, countering disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and hate speech, and the strides the association and its local and international partners (including the Government of Sierra Leone) are making towards media development. Read more here.

On 17 April 2023, Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL) and AdvocAid signed an MOU to work together for the next three years to provide media training opportunities for AdvocAid staff and female journalists and coverage of events of women and girls who are caught up in the legal system. The partnership would help enhance the skills and knowledge of both female journalists and AdvocAid staff and enable them to better advocate for human rights issues in the

country. Overall, the partnership between AdvocAid and WIMSAL is a positive step towards creating a more just and equal society in Sierra Leone.

On 9 August 2023, WIMSAL paid a courtesy visit to the office of the First Lady, Her Excellency Madam Fatima Bio, intending to address compelling issues affecting women and girls across the country.

On 19 November 2023, WIMSAL celebrated 16 incredible years of dedicated service to empowering female voices in the media and advocating tirelessly for the rights and well-being of women and girls in Sierra Leone.

On 2 December 2023, as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone and in a collaborative effort, the Rainbo Initiative, in partnership with WIMSAL North and the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, organised a sponsored walk in Makeni city.

## 1.11 Conclusion

The year under review witnessed various developments within Sierra Leone's media landscape. Successes in creating an enabling legal environment for the media and media development initiatives were noted. However, other challenges to media development remain. These include inadequate media infrastructure and equipment and a lack of

financial, technical, and logistical support to aid the work of media institutions.

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# PART TWO: MEDIA AND ELECTIONS, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

## 2. Media and Elections: Monitoring and Reporting on the 2023 General Elections in Sierra Leone.

**By**

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**Abstract**

*Sierra Leone conducted its Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Council elections on 24 June 2023. Since the end of the country's 11-year civil war in 2002, the media has played a pivotal role in covering and reporting elections. The media provides information about the election to citizens, functions as a watchdog on behalf of the public, and serves as the voice of the voters. This article examined the media's role in Sierra Leone's electoral process. It reviewed the media's performance in the elections and highlighted the successes and challenges. Data were collected from documentary analyses, key informant interviews and qualitative content analysis of media publications and broadcasts in reports produced by various organisations and institutions. The findings show that while media institutions played a pivotal role in the electoral processes, there were few complaints of unprofessional practices and inadequate resources for the media to perform their roles fully.*

***Keywords:*** *Elections, media, coverage, reporting, performance, situation room,*

**Introduction and brief literature review**

Following consultation with the President, the Chief Electoral Commissioner and Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) proclaimed the presidential election date as 24 June 2023 on 14 March 2022. On 11 March 2022, the Office of the President announced in a statement that Parliamentary and Local Council elections would be held on the same day. The ECSL initiated and executed various programmes and activities to conduct the polls.

Elections in Sierra Leone are held every five years. The Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act No. 6 of 1991, mandates the Electoral Commission to register voters. Section 33 of the constitution provides that: "Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, the Electoral Commission shall be responsible for the conduct and supervision of the registration of voters for, and of, all public elections and referenda; and for that purpose shall have power to make regulations by statutory instrument for the registration of voters, the conduct of Presidential, Parliamentary or

Local Government elections and referenda, and other matters connected therewith, including regulations for voting by proxy."

Since the end of the country's 11-year civil war in 2002, the media has played a pivotal role in covering and reporting elections. The media is very powerful in informing citizens about governance issues. The country's media played a crucial role in the electoral processes up to the 2023 elections. The Sierra Leonean media played an essential role in the elections, including reporting on the activities of elections management bodies like the ECSL and the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC).

Free media have long been recognised as a cornerstone of democracy and play an essential role in influencing political discourse during elections; free and balanced, traditional media (print and broadcast) foster transparency and disseminate crucial electoral information. The rise of new media – such as social media sites, blogs, email and other new media platforms – provides further avenues and possibilities for participatory citizenship, information and knowledge sharing, and inclusion and empowerment. Traditional and new media can play a vital watchdog role and serve as a campaign platform, a forum for public debate, and a public educator, ultimately strengthening democracy (Samer and Gallagher 2015).

There is little doubt that the media play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy. The most prominent role of the media in a democracy is that of a ―watchdog. By undertaking scrutiny and disclosure of the functioning of the government and various arms of the state, as well as the performance of elected representatives, the media can arm the public with the information necessary to evaluate the sincerity and effectiveness of the people they elect into power and to hold them to account (Joseph, 2011).

In managing elections, the media play three critical roles: Firstly, they provide information about the election to citizens. Since people's awareness of the election depends largely on media content, journalists must report factually and fairly on the platforms and campaigns of all the participating political parties and/or candidates so that the electorate can differentiate between them and make informed decisions. The media must also provide interpretation and analysis of events and issues, often by creating space for the diverse opinions of various columnists and commentators. Another essential task involves passing on information from the election commission to educate citizens on elections' basic facts and processes. Also, the media function as watchdogs on behalf of the public, keeping close tabs on the election campaign and the voting process. It is the media's job to report on any violations of the rights of candidates or voters (including the right to free

speech), any corruption in election and voting procedures, any misdemeanour by political parties, and/or any sins of omission or commission by the election management authorities. Finally, the media need to serve as the voice of the voters. Elections are not just for politicians; they are an opportunity for ordinary people to speak up and identify the issues they think need highlighting and why. Journalists must go out into the community to seek and provide a forum for the voices of ordinary voters who have something to say, especially those who hesitate to voice their opinions on public matters in the public sphere or have been ignored or even prevented from doing so in the past (Joseph, 2011).

**Media's preparations for the elections**

In the 2023 general elections, MRCG implemented a program called 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone' funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). One of the program's components was training sessions nationwide on 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2023' Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone,' respectively. The training sessions enhanced and strengthened the skills of over 700 local journalists (including editors and station managers) from regional media houses in Sierra Leone to provide professional media coverage and conflict-sensitive reporting of the 2023 multi-

tier elections in Sierra Leone. The participants were taught the role of media amid conflict, both how it can prolong and exacerbate a conflict and its role in preventing conflict and promoting reasoned political dialogue; methods of conflict-sensitive reporting and how to effectively and professionally report on the electoral cycles and adherence to the Independent Media Commission's (IMC) Regulations on Reporting Elections.

In June 2023, MRCG received support from International Media Support (IMS) to implement an election project entitled 'Media and Elections Project,' which was geared towards ensuring the safety of media workers so they would be able to produce reliable and professional reporting that would contribute to providing credible and peaceful elections in Sierra Leone. The initiative was to strengthen the relationship and coordination between the media and the security sector; enhance the capacity of journalists to be safe while covering the elections; build the capacity of journalists to report effectively on election-related issues; develop a good working relationship between the media and elections officials, political politicians and politicians and community leaders; and provide for an opportunity to identify best practices and lessons that can be learnt from such a rapid and one-off intervention. The initiative was a fast-response intervention aimed at ensuring the safety of journalists and media workers so they could produce reliable and professional

reporting that would contribute to credible and peaceful elections in Sierra Leone.

On 17 June 2023, a one-day national capacity building for journalists on safety and security during election coverage was convened, in which the journalists were selected across the country, and specific attention was paid to community media and media institutions and journalists that have had issues with security sector personnel. The capacity building took a participatory approach with brief presentations on international documents (the UNESCO Framework on Safety and Security of Journalists and national studies and reports (MRCG's press freedom reports) on the safety and security of journalists). The capacity-building workshop had intense discussions, group work and presentations on ensuring journalists' safety and security. From 19 to 21 June 2023, the MRCG held a joint Police-Media Dialogue Forum in Freetown, Makeni and Bo, respectively, to help ensure collaboration between the media and the police. The forum brought together senior police officers and media professionals from across the country who discussed and identified concrete modalities for police-media collaboration and mechanisms for ensuring the safety of journalists during the electioneering period.

Journalists and editors nationwide, as well as senior police officers from the Sierra Leone Police, brainstormed security and safety issues related to journalists and the professional and responsible policing of the 2023 multi-tier elections without fear or favour. The rationale was to pitch possible partnerships and cooperation between the police and the media, information sharing, and general coordination during the 2023 elections.

After the regional training, an outcome document was produced recommending that: Journalists to be very professional in covering and reporting on the elections; a forum of communication to be created for adequate flow of communication between the top management of the police and the media; political parties to sign a pledge and ensure the protection of journalists during and after their press conferences and other public gatherings; there should be mutual respect between the police and journalists; journalists to ensure that they get the necessary accreditation and identification cards for the coverage of the elections; there should be complete and effective implementation of the MoU signed between SLAJ and the Security Sector Institutions; the police to improve on their communication to ensure a proactive and timely dissemination of information; there should be continuous joint capacity building trainings for the police and journalists as a way of fostering collaborative and good working relationship; the police to ensure the safety and security of journalists at all times, including during the elections; journalists and police to develop and improve on systems and channels of communication that would help to

address any possible misunderstanding between the two institutions.

**Media's Coverage of the Voter Registration for the 2023 General Elections.**

One key activity in the pre-electoral phase is voter registration. Voter registration took place between 3 September and 4 October 2022 in two phases: the first phase lasted from 3 September to 17 September 2022, and the second phase lasted from 20 September to 4 October 2022.

The media in Sierra Leone developed a series of approaches to cover and report on the electoral process since the pronouncement of the dates for the elections. For the MRCG to understand the media's approach to voter registration, it conducted a series of interviews with stakeholders in the Sierra Leone media industry, including journalists from various media houses. MRCG's findings show that all media institutions developed an approach that covered voter registration. The President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, told MRCG that the media played a very significant role in terms of informing citizens about the importance of voter registration and also encouraged people to register to become eligible voters for the general elections. The National Coordinator of the Independent Radio Network (IRN), Ransford Wright, stated that IRN continued to contribute to peace, free, fair and credible elections in

Sierra Leone; hence, they had been putting out quality and reliable information on the electoral processes, including the voter registration process. The Chairman of the Guild of Editors, Donald Theo-Harding, said the print media were publishing various articles on voter registration and monitoring the entire electoral process.

The public service broadcaster, the *SLBC*, covered and reported on the electoral processes. At the commencement of the exercise, the *SLBC* had a program called 'Voter Registration Exercise.' "It was the only nationwide TV and radio program (simulcast) on that event, moderated by two presenters hosting three guests (ECSL, All Political Parties Association (APPA) and a CSO). All six SLBC stations in Makeni, Magburaka, Kono, Bo, Kenema and Kailahun broadcast the program.

> We got live TV reports from Kamakwie, Pujehun, Kailahun, Kono, Falaba, Port Loko, Kambia, Bo, and Kenema. Twenty-one partner radio stations in the regions linked up, including Universal Radio in Freetown. Our Outside Broadcasting (OB) was also deployed, giving a live feed of the exercise and capturing the president's live registration. Staff at headquarters were deployed to capture centres around their localities.[2]

The guests responded to issues regarding registration criteria, the registration process method, voter education challenges, etc.

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[2] Alimamy Kamara, Deputy Director-General, SLBC

During the second phase of voter registration, the SLBC conducted a series of radio and television programs on the registration process. These programs reviewed the first phase of the exercise and anticipated the second phase. They also covered voter and civic education, the challenges of voter registration, and security and political issues related to the process. The tables show analyses of the SLBC radio and TV programs. The IRN focused on contributing to the conditions for free, fair and peaceful general elections in Sierra Leone.

> To achieve that particular goal, we set out to ensure that quality, reliable, and impartial information is provided and that citizens participate in the process. Citizens' access to credible and timely information is a component of free and fair elections.[3]

IRN had a two-pronged approach to cover voter registration: national simulcast from the IRN hub and supporting local radio stations in producing programs within their local contexts. There was no national simulcast by the IRN on the commencement of the voter registration exercise, but the individual partner radio stations did the coverage. IRN produced a jingle which was repeatedly broadcast across its member radio stations. IRN could not get enough funds to roll out the national broadcast at the commencement of the process. One of the initial challenges was that IRN's partnership with ECSL "is not as strong as it used to be. ECSL has a different approach. But ECSL is committed to IRN in providing information and accreditation."[4] IRN, at the end of the first week of voter registration, organised its programme with ESCL and NCRA, serving as guests to enlighten the public about many issues in the registration process.

In the second phase, IRN contributes to free, fair and peaceful elections in Sierra Leone by providing news and information about the entire electoral process, including voter registration.

The *African Young Voices (AYV)* launched a program called 'Sierra Leone Decide 2023', which exclusively covered and reported the electoral processes. On the first day of the voter registration, it ran an exclusive coverage of the process for the entire day. The African Young Voices (AYV) continued to use their program 'Sierra Leone Decide 2023' to cover and report the electoral processes exclusively.

*Star TV* had a special program called 'Election Hour' that focused on the electoral process. In every edition of the program, staff of ECSL, National Elections Watch (NEW), CSOs, and media stakeholders discussed topics related to the 2023 general elections. *Freetown Television Network* told MRCG that though they did not have a specific program dedicated to elections, they discussed voter registration in all their current affairs programs. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) records showed that 31 newspapers were published on Monday, 5

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[3] Ransford Wright, IRN National Coordinator

[4] Ibid

September 2022. The newspapers published various stories on voter registration.

The coverage and reportage of elections by the media were not done without its attendant problems, which ranged from lack of release of timely information and sharing by ECSL to media practitioners, logistical challenges for media institutions to meet the operational costs to cover and report on the elections; adequate capacity building for media practitioners to effectively report on the electoral processes; poor knowledge of the use of mobile journalism; mobility, weak internet, faulty phone lines; unavailability of ECSL accreditation for journalists to access registration centres; inadequate funding to roll out sustained national programs for particularly IRN which has a niche in elections reporting; political parties 'skew' and use the information to their interests, which they wanted the media to publish and broadcast, and thereby affecting the voter registration process; there was the 'politicisation' of the voter registration process. Politicians put out mixed messages containing information on voter education and campaigned for their political parties; there was a weak partnership with ECSL on the voter registration process; ECSL did not distribute jingles to be broadcast on particularly community radio stations.

One key recommendation from the first phase of the voter registration process was collaboration between ECSL and media institutions for a timely flow of information. ECSL, on 23 September 2022, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with *AYV* for coverage of the 2023 elections. Also, as part of its partnership building, the SLAJ Executive paid a courtesy call to ECSL's Chairman and called for cooperation on access and information integrity for the June 2023 Elections. SLAJ noted the importance of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ECSL and SLAJ for easy access to information flow, managing disinformation, and accreditation for all activities related to the electoral processes.

It was also recommended that ECSL be more open and easily accessible and ensure the timely release of information.

**ID Cards Distribution and Nomination Process.**

The ECSL continued implementing activities according to its schedule. In April and May 2023, ECSL commenced the distribution of voter ID cards to voters across the country and the nomination of candidates for the various elections. As per the first published timeline of the electoral activities for external stakeholders, the distribution was supposed to have commenced from 17 to 26 March 2023. However, in a press release dated 13 March 2023, the ECSL rescheduled the distribution to begin from 7 to 16 April 2023. The media continued monitoring and reporting on the electoral activities, including distributing voter

ID cards and selecting candidates for the Paramount Chiefs Member of Parliament Election (PCMP). The ECSL, in a press release dated 7 April 2023, announced the collection of voter ID cards in all 3 630 registration centres across the country. The process lasted for 10 days and had successes and challenges that the media reported.

SLBC radio, during their morning program 'Morning Coffee' in April 2023, hosted officials from ECSL that discussed the voter ID card distribution about various public opinions on the quality of the ID cards and the distribution process. From a vox pop that was done by the said radio station from the public, there were mixed feelings regarding public opinion about the quality of the cards. However, ECSL official, during their media engagement, allay the fears of the public over the quality and try to persuade the public to look at the special security features of the said ID cards.

Also, for the nomination process of the various elections, the SLBC, in its 'Morning Coffee' programs in May, hosted senior officers of ECSL and PPRC to discuss issues relating to the nomination process. Their discussions included the nomination process, the role of the eligible political parties in the nomination, the management of the said process, the challenges faced by ECSL in conducting the nominations, the experience of political parties during the nomination process,

and the observation of the nomination process by PPRC, among other things.

In their quest to update citizens on the ongoing electoral process, SLBC TV, during its programs (Good Morning Sierra Leone and the Podium), also hosted guests from ECSL, political parties, PPRC, and CSOs to discuss issues related to the nomination process. Key issues highlighted in their discussions included an update on the nomination process, an explanation of political parties' eligibility to participate, and concerns raised by some political parties that were not part of the nomination process.

In April, the station hosted guests from ECSL and representatives of political parties to discuss issues related to voter ID distribution, nomination, and other electoral processes in one of its flagship programs, the Gud Morning Salone.

The MRCG monitors monitored the print media daily and noted headlines and sources related to the electoral processes. Like the broadcast media, the print media raised concerns daily about card distribution, the quality of the cards, the low turnout of voters to collect cards, the nomination process, the works of EMBs, and political party cries.

In a press release dated 17 April 2023, ECSL announced the declaration of an uncontested PCMP duly elected as PCMP in Sierra Leone.

Among the fourteen (14) districts, seven (7) districts had uncontested PCs: Kailahun, Kono, Tonkolili, Karene, Port Loko, Bo and Moyamba. The ECSL, on 20 May 2023, as per the election timeline, conducted the PCMP election for the other seven (7) districts.

The nomination period for councillors, members of parliament (MP), mayoral candidates, and presidential candidates commenced on 19 April and ended on 9 May 2023. For each election, ECSL requested the various political parties submit a list of their approved candidates, which they had internally agreed on.

## ECSL's Public Information and Media Relations Approach.

The ECSL puts out statements on the outcomes of the voter registration exercises. On 19 September 2022, a press statement was issued informing the public about the update of the field data captured at the end of the first phase of voter registration. The Commission announced that the first phase ended on 17 September and the second on 4 October 2022. Based on reports from 80% of centres recorded nationally, the provisional first phase registration data was that a total of one million, three hundred and forty-five thousand, one hundred and seventy-six (1,345,176) citizens registered in the first phase across the country. The ECSL reminded the public to call the situation room as it had been actively receiving calls from all over the country and

promised to continue to provide that service throughout the registration period. According to its press statement of 3 October 2022, ECSL stated that the second phase of the voter registration exercise was very successful, and it was satisfied with the turnout and the data collection process. The Commission noted that they took cognisance of the initial challenges encountered with setting up equipment and staff deployment, which delayed opening some centres across the country in the first phase of the registration process. In rectifying the challenges, the ECSL proclaimed the extension of the voter registration process by two days from 7 - 8 October 2022. The extended period was limited to all thousand eight hundred and fifteen (1,815) registration centres of the first phase.

In an interview, ECSL confirmed to the MRCG that the Commission was satisfied with how most media houses reported on the second phase of the voter registration process across the country. The Commission noted the efforts of the media in educating voters on how to vote, updating the public on the progress of voter registration, providing space for political parties to air their views, reporting on the challenges of voter registration, and scrutinising the voters' registration process from the part of Elections Management Bodies (EMBs) to ensure fairness during the process. The ECSL called on the media to remain independent in electoral reportage. To have a proper flow of information, the ESCL told

MRCG that they created WhatsApp groups for media houses in all the regions, conducted regular press briefings and put out releases; MOUs were signed with some media institutions, and election hour programs were done in some media houses. The ECSL said it encountered some challenges in countering misinformation from some media houses as they refused to get the side of the Commission on sensitive issues.

One key recommendation from the first phase of the voter registration report was collaboration between ECSL and media institutions for a timely flow of information. ECSL, on 23 September 2022, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with African Young Voices (AYV) for coverage of the 2023 elections. Also, as part of its partnership building, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) executive paid a Courtesy Call to the ECSL Chairman and called for cooperation on access and information integrity for the June 2023 Elections. SLAJ noted the importance of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ECSL and SLAJ for easy access to information flow, managing disinformation, and accreditation for all activities related to the electoral processes. The ECSL appreciated the effort of SLAJ and assured of effective collaboration with the media in all aspects of the 2023 elections.

However, the ECSL's website has documents indicating its approach to public information. The ECSL has a situation room for receiving and processing information and a toll-free line (838) for mobile companies. The ECSL has held press conferences on voter education. The ECSL also developed an accreditation guideline for observers, including media. For media institutions (Print and Electronics), both national and international media houses are accredited by the ECSL. There is a Code of Conduct for accredited observers.

ECSL said it encountered challenges countering misinformation from some media houses, which refused to support the Commission on sensitive issues.

**Media Monitoring Analyses (Weekly and Monthly).**

The broadcast media contents monitored were from the current affairs programs from the different media houses. The print media monitoring was done on news stories, features, opinions and editorials. The monitoring covered media institutions in all the regions of Sierra Leone. In March 2023, 59 broadcast contents on elections were monitored and analysed: 34 from 4 radio stations across the country and 25 from 2 TV stations in Freetown. In April 2023, 68 broadcast contents were monitored and analysed: 37 from 5 radio stations across the country and 31 from 2 TV stations in Freetown. In May 2023, 102 broadcast contents were monitored and analysed: 61 from 6 radio stations across the

country and 41 from 2 TV stations in Freetown. In June 2023, 80 broadcast contents were monitored and analysed: 46 from 2 TV stations in Freetown and 34 from 5 radio stations across the country. The highest amount of radio content was monitored on SLBC, predominantly from the 'Morning Coffee' and Radio Democracy's 'Good Morning Salone' programs. Television contents were mostly monitored on *SLBC TV*, predominantly from the 'Good Morning Sierra Leone, 'We Yus' and 'Bottom Line' programs and *AYV TV* on the 'AYV on Sunday,' Sierra Leone Decides, 'Wake Up Sierra Leone,' and 'Lunch Time Show' programs.

The MRCG observed that media houses (radio/TV) generally had their programs moderated well, and the tone of the coverage was positive and conformed mainly to professional standards. Most of the time, the categories of guests to discuss some of the issues were diverse. They hosted representatives from different political parties, civil society activists, observers, security personnel, and officers of EMBs. However, there were issues with some media houses that were not ethical in their presentation. SLAJ, MRCG, IRN, NEW, inter-religious council and other civil society organisations were fully involved in all the electoral processes.

**Establishment of the MRCG's Media Situation Room.**

In the 2023 general elections, MRCG implemented a program called 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone' funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). One of the program's components was to set up and operationalise the first Media Situation Room (MSR) in Sierra Leone. The Situation Rooms analysed media contents of the 2023 elections, provided real-time information on the media performance, and provided mentoring and coaching that helped to broadcast and publish unprofessional content on the polls. As part of the programs, there were training sessions nationwide on 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2023' Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone,' respectively. The training sessions enhanced and strengthened the skills of over 700 local journalists (including editors and station managers) from regional media houses in Sierra Leone to provide professional media coverage and conflict-sensitive reporting of the 2023 multi-tier elections in Sierra Leone. The participants were taught the role of media amid conflict, both how it can prolong and exacerbate a conflict and its role in preventing conflict and promoting reasoned political dialogue; methods of conflict-sensitive reporting and how to effectively and professionally report on the electoral cycles

and adherence to the Independent Media Commission's (IMC) Regulations on Reporting Elections.

The setting up and establishment of MRCG's Media Situation Room (MSR) was to monitor the country's media's performance during the 2023 general elections. The MSR relied on raw information from print and broadcast media content from around the country gathered by the MRCG. The data were processed and analysed to provide real-time information on the media's performance reporting on elections and conflict-sensitive issues. The data added to earlier MRCG reports show the media's coverage and reportage on the elections and their adherence to ethical standards set out in the Independent Media Commission (Print and Electronic Media) Regulations, 2022 and the Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations, 2022). Media situation room daily reports were produced by media professionals and academics, headed by veteran journalist and lecturer at the University of Sierra Leone, Mr. Joshua Nicol

**Overall Analyses on the Elections Day.**

On a general note, the various media channels (Radio and Television) provided coverage of the voting process across the country, some in real-time (Live) and others through recorded reports. IRN provided the largest source of information with its member radio stations across the country covering and reporting on the elections. In the South, it was reported that there was little or no cause for alarm. MRCG's monitors said things were peaceful' without chaos or panic. They said most of the district's radio stations were linked to IRN. However, few others were doing independent broadcasts and conforming to the IMC Elections Coverage and Reportage Guidelines. In the Northwest, there were reports from three (3) radio stations (Bankasoka, Kolenten and Lunsar) about alleged intimidations and tensions from political party stakeholders (predominantly from the All Peoples Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). Regarding the East, MRCG's monitors said that media houses and journalists were executing their duties professionally and that things were peaceful and normal. They noted that the IMC and the MRCG contributed to that by training the journalists very well, noting that no professional misconduct had been reported in the region.

A Social Media post by an APC Strongman, Dr Richard Konteh, alleging that SLPP thugs beat the APC Ward Coordinator in Kenema was debunked by the SLAJ's i-Verify team as false. MRCG's Monitor in Makeni reported a peaceful and conducive atmosphere around the city. There was an alleged case of someone illegally possessing ballot papers; the matter was handed to the police. All the radio stations in the city broadcast according to the IMC Code of Practice.

The Public Service Broadcaster, *SLBC TV,* had a dedicated TV Elections program. The program contained no hate speech, inciting or misleading messages, or information from political parties or their supporters. The *SLBC* hosted the ECSL staff, explaining the reason for the delay in voting in some regions. *AYV TV* and *Star TV* transmitted the voting process since the commencement of voting. *AVY* had an 'On the road' program, and reporters were seen covering different parts of the country. *Star TV* also had a studio-based moderator, with reporters filing in from various parts of the country, especially in Freetown. *AYV TV* and *Star TV* provided in-depth coverage of the APC presidential and municipal candidates' voting process compared to *SLBC TV.*

On Election Day (24th June 2023), the mainstream media (Radio and Television) acquitted itself with credibility and glory through its Elections Day programming.

MRCG Monitors observed the misuse of social media by both individuals and political actors. Throughout the day, social media was overstocked with videos, photographs and texts, making accusations and counter-accusations. One of the most prominent claims included a letter purported to have been written by the APC Freetown Mayoral Candidate, Yvonne Aki-Swayer, calling for the boycott of the elections. Fact-checking organisation Dubawa debunked the letter as

False! There were claims about ballot stuffing and other forms of irregularities around the voting process in some parts of the country. SLAJ's i-Verify also published a factcheck on one of such cases where social media claims suggested that someone had pre-marked ballot papers in favour of SLPP Presidential candidate Julius Maada Bio. The verdict of the fact checks was that the materials and papers were voter education materials and not authentic ballot papers.

**ECSL's and Elections Observations Reports on the media**

In its Annual and Multi-Tier Elections Report 2023, under Collaboration Strategies and Outcomes, the ECSL noted that it developed its Communication Policy and Strategies and used them to implement its engagement and collaboration with political parties, civil society, the security sector, the media, development partners, and the GoSL. The Commission held a series of engagements with diverse stakeholders and partners at national and district levels on electoral education, awareness raising, and preparedness.

The National Election Watch (NEW) 2023 Electoral Cycle Report on the role and conduct of the media noted that the media was very divided and conflicted during the 2023 electoral cycle. However, that has mostly been the case in the country's history. The traditional media houses provided more

airtime to the candidates they were most comfortable with, which was also observed with community radio stations. NEW observed that the intimidation by security actors of institutions and individuals critical of the government undermined the ability of some journalists to be objective. Thus, the media was largely uncertain of what may happen if a report was made unfavourable to the government. NEW also observed that very few journalists had the skills and knowledge to undertake real-time election reporting and how to conduct themselves as journalists ethically. The lack of professionalism and integrity on the part of some journalists and media houses also contributed to the tension experienced in the country.

NEW added that social media became an outlet for information and a space for expression of view regardless of the nature of the news. Thus, it became a toxic space with attacks and counter-attacks by bloggers of the main political parties. Hate speeches and false news were traded from various quarters, heightening the country's tension. It also affected the potential for meaningful dialogue and constructive engagements among the political actors. Thus, by the time the country went to the polls, there were heightened levels of mis/disinformation, hate-speech and verbal abuse both online and offline.

NEW recommended that the IMC develop a code on political advertising in publicly funded media houses and work with SLAJ and other media houses to develop a code for digital and social media to regulate the digital space effectively. It is also recommended that IMC and the media fraternity provide constant training for traditional media and new media to reduce the pollution of digital space. SLAJ and IMC should provide a system of monitoring for media houses to ensure fair, equal and balanced reporting of campaign activities of political parties; the SLBC should publish its airtime allocation schedule for all political parties and the media should ensure gender-sensitive programming and awareness-raising, and provide space, the NEW's report added.

The ECOWAS Election Observation Mission to the 2023 Multi-Tier Elections in Sierra Leone's Final Mission Report noted that campaigns on broadcast media platforms were generally respectful. However, the use of social media and the anonymity of its users, especially bloggers, raised concerns. Social media was used to propagate hate speech and cyberbullying against political opponents. Although Sierra Leone has a cybercrime law to regulate social media usage, its application remains very limited. The report pointed out that although some politicians own media organisations, the IMC insists on strict adherence to its editorial independence guidelines. Unlike in the past, media organisations are no longer allowed to endorse candidates and are obliged to grant all candidates equal coverage. To ensure strict

adherence, the IMC has set up a media monitoring unit with monitors at regional and district levels.

In its preliminary statement, the African Union Election Observation Mission called on the ECSL to provide Early voting for ECSL staff, media, and security personnel working on election day. It further called on political parties to refrain from violence, hate speech, and any other acts that could undermine the country's stability.

In its final report, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) noted that media provided extensive campaign and elections coverage, despite technical and financial hardships, especially affecting outlets outside urban areas. Many radio stations operated sporadically and faced additional challenges during the rainy season, coinciding with the election campaign's start. Also, disinformation and fake news from social media often entered the radio and TV broadcasts, as observed by the EU EOM. Most media outlets face multiple financial and technical challenges, which in turn significantly affected the quality of editorial outputs to the detriment of voters. The public broadcaster Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) did not receive state funding regularly, and often funds received did not reach regional offices, thus impeding their operations. Community and private radio stations also struggled financially. The report noted that in the highly polarised pre-election information environment, lack of funding also made media vulnerable to political interference with editorial decisions.

According to the report, broadcast media closely followed the campaign, devoting most of its prime-time news to election-related topics, and focusing primarily on the campaigns of the APC and SLPP. A handful of well-established radio and TV stations strived to offer balanced coverage and engaged in fact-checking, helping voters navigate the pre-election environment. At the same time, many other outlets were either owned by politicians or their affiliates, or they financially hinged on government advertising. These outlets openly rallied either for the APC or SLPP and allowed divisive language to be used on air. Public broadcaster SLBC's TV favoured the SLPP and was devoted to the ruling party, the President and his family. Some 90 per cent of all prime-time newscasts are predominantly in a neutral tone.

The report stated that private broadcasters better facilitated the ability of voters to make an informed choice by equitably dividing the prime-time news between the APC and SLPP, with an overall neutral tone. The African Young Voices (AYV) Radio and Democracy Radio undertook a more diversified approach. They analysed the President's record in office in their news and gave some airtime to parties not represented in the Parliament. Positively, debates among candidates for various

elections were organised by media and civil society organisations in at least eight districts, allowing voters to compare candidates directly.

According to the report, the online campaign by APC and SLPP was vivid, with engaging yet confrontational discussions unfolding across various social media platforms. Aggressive and divisive messages added to the already tense pre-election information environment, playing a significant role in online communication on political and electoral matters. A diaspora blogger, Adebayor, made the most damaging messages, whose calls to boycott the elections and to protests in mid-June reached at least 58,000 people on Facebook alone. His posts were also widely shared on WhatsApp and re-played at community gatherings, reaching those who seldom use social media. Disinformation was mainly spread through WhatsApp groups to confuse voters and impair
their electoral choices. Outright false content rarely featured on Twitter and Facebook.

The EU EOM report stated that communication between independent media houses and the ECSL was difficult, undermining the media's editorial independence. For the first time since 1996, the ECSL informally discouraged the IRN, Sierra Leone's largest platform of radio stations, from reporting the provisional results from the polling stations.

The IMC introduced the 2022 Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulation to orient media outlets on how to report and election stakeholders on how to interact with the media. Prior to the elections, the regulator organised numerous trainings for journalists and monitored broadcasters' coverage of the campaign. After the elections, the IMC published the results of their countrywide media monitoring, with an overall positive assessment of journalists' work. Media professionals perceived the regulator as effective and fair. The IMC upheld principles of professional journalism and implemented sanctions in an overall effective manner. After a review of complaints, the regulator suspended live call-in programmes of three radio stations – Citizen, Justice and Tumac. The report stated that two of those radio stations were APC and one SLPP leaning.

The EU EOM recommended the protection of the independence of the media regulator by granting in the law financial independence and sustainability of the IMC, as well as by further facilitating the autonomy of the IMC, with the Chairman being appointed by an independent board of media professionals and legal experts, through an open, inclusive, and competitive pre-selection process. It also recommended that the citizens' right of access to information are ensured by transforming Sierra Leone Broadcast Corporation into a genuine public service broadcaster. This

includes a clear legal separation of SLBC from any government institution and an open and competitive pre-selection process for the appointment of the management, with the participation of industry professionals and an independent board.

The Carter Center Sierra Leone 2023 National Elections preliminary statement on the elections did not contain any specific comments on the media.

**Conclusion.**

The role of the media in covering and reporting electoral activities remained apt for the entire electoral activities in 2022 and 2023. With renewed support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the MRCG was able to monitor and document the media's coverage of the electoral processes leading to the June 24 elections. NED provided a four-month grant support with its core objective: to promote professional media coverage and conflict-sensitive reporting of the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone. The grant included regional training of 200 journalists on promoting professional media coverage and conflict-sensitive reporting of the 2023 elections, monitoring and reporting on the media's performance in elections coverage, and establishing the MSR.

The main activity for the grant was training journalists on the theme 'Promoting Professional Media Coverage and Conflict Sensitive Reporting of the 2023 Multi-Tier

Elections.' On diverse dates in March and April 2023, the MRCG trained 200 journalists (80 from the Western Urban and Rural Areas, 60 from the Southern and Eastern regions, and 60 from the Northern and Northwest Regions). The training was a Training of Trainers (TOT), and participants primarily included editors and station managers who, in turn, held in-house training with their staff members. The participants were introduced to topics including conflict-sensitive reporting, reporting on elections in Sierra Leone, elections preparedness and the Proportional Representation (PR) systems, Independent Media Commission Elections (Coverage and Reporting) Regulations 2022, and the safety and security of journalists during elections. The sessions were conducted by senior lecturers from the faculty of communication and media studies – Fourah Bay College (FBC) and IMC and ECSL staff.

The MRCG, in collaboration with Africa Check, transcribed and distributed media literacy content on various topics aimed at addressing mis/disinformation on the elections. The contents were transcribed into six local languages widely spoken in Sierra Leone and broadcast on different radio stations nationwide. There were also various posters with topics on elections that were published through multiple social media platforms. The MRCG recruited media monitors who were responsible for effectively monitoring the mainstream media in all the regions of Sierra

Leone. The monitors sent daily reports on media situations in the regions using the monitoring checklist. The reports were sent to the MRCG's Media Situation Room, compiled and analysed to produce real-time situation reports of the media's coverage of the June 24 general elections on weekly and monthly bases at the start of the electoral period and daily during the week leading up to the election, on the day of the election and after the elections.

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# 3. Beyond Media Poverty: Addressing Media Unaccountability

By

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***Abstract***

*This article analyses the concepts of 'media poverty' and 'media accountability' and examines how they influence media development, sustainability, and profitability. Regarding media poverty, it has been argued that historically, the victims (the media in Sierra Leone) have been blamed for their predicament, the argument being that the state's poverty leads to the media's poverty. However, a contrasting argument highlights that, beyond media poverty, there is a significant issue of 'media unaccountability'—the lack of financial prudence and governance in most media institutions in Sierra Leone. The research question is: to what extent do media unaccountability and media poverty affect media development regarding sustainability and profitability? The study employed unobtrusive research, including analysing existing statistics and documentary evidence. It relied on data from a survey of media institutions for Sowa's (2019) doctoral thesis. The findings indicate that most media institutions are neither sustainable nor profitable, resulting from media poverty and unaccountability. The study recommends that media institutions establish and adhere to robust financial accountability mechanisms and adopt innovative revenue generation and management methods.*

***Keywords:*** *Media Development, Media Poverty, Media Accountability, Unaccountability, Sustainability, Profitability*

## Introduction

In the last three decades, civil society organisations, local and international NGOs, and even the state have made quality media performance a hot button issue. After years of goodwill from external and local benefactors and the actions of a few self-motivated journalists, there has been some improvement, mostly quantitatively, as the increasing number of media outlets suggests. But much remains to be desired qualitatively. Media poverty allows people to look at the problems of the media from another perspective (M'Bayo, 2015).

The point in the last sentence above is precisely the sphere of this article. The analyses are informed by a quest to examine media poverty from another perspective—the

extent to which a variable—media accountability—affects the already penurious media industry. They do so by focusing on the impacts of media poverty and accountability and situating them within the media's performance, zooming in on their sustainability and profitability.

Sustainability can be viewed from the perspective of the media institutions' ability to survive over the years. They have the resources they need to produce high-quality, independent journalism and the capacity to operate effectively under sound political, legal, and economic conditions. Profitability focuses on the operating efficiency of media institutions, including the return on the capital invested in the business, either by making direct financial gains or meeting/satisfying some established interests of the owners. Accountability deals with media institutions' adherence to financial probity (the emphasis of this article), ethical standards, and codes of ethics/practice that serve the public interest (Sowa, 2019).

Therefore, this study examines how media accountability and media poverty affect operations and performance in Sierra Leone.

## Theoretical framework
## Media Poverty
In his celebrated work on 'Media Poverty: The Bane of Journalism in Sierra Leone', Sierra Leonean-born Professor Ritchard M'Bayo

arguably appeared to defend the media regarding their culpability regarding the country's poor media management systems and performances. He stated that the past society blamed the victims (the media) for their own predicament - the lack of professionalism and unethical behaviour among media practitioners. The author's argument shifted the conversation to "cover new ground, one that sees the challenges of the media as part of the state's challenges." Essentially, he argues that "it is because the state is poor that the media also are poor with all the attendant factors associated with poverty." It is this malaise of the press he called "media poverty."

M'Bayo (2015) noted that Sierra Leone is a developing nation. This has huge implications for all societal institutions, including the media. As a developing nation, the socio-political and economic problems of the state are also reflected in the institutions of the society. In almost every aspect of life, economic and financial constraints are not only pervasive; they have become entrenched in the body politic and culture of the nation.

According to M'Bayo (2015), this environment defines media operations, ownership, management, and professional practice. Hence, some of the intractable problems of the media in Sierra Leone may be attributed to this condition, media poverty - the lack of access to resources, the lack of

quality training and, hence, the knowledge deficit or knowledge gap associated with what media practitioners do in reconstructing the narratives of how we relate to each other. The scope of this condition extends to the dearth of essential information, limited access to technology, limited research skills, poor remunerations for media workers, and corruption in the media as an outgrowth of business practices and culture in the country in general. Where the state is poor, the media will also be poor. Still, they will also take the form and colouration of the environment in which they operate, as media sociologists have long ago observed. As a developing nation, the socio-political and economic problems of the state are also reflected in the institutions of the society. In almost every aspect of life, economic and financial constraints are not only pervasive, but they have become entrenched in the body politic and culture of the nation (M'Bayo, 2015).

**Media Accountability**

One issue that distinguishes the media sector is the expectation that media organisations, irrespective of their commercial goals, act in a socially responsible way and promote specific social values. So the media must not only seek to maximise profits and returns to shareholders (financial accountability), but must also act in the public interest and promote social values such as social interaction, engagement, democratic participation, collective knowledge and cultural identities (Cottle, in Cottle, 2003;

Picard, 2006, quoted in Küng, 2008). Küng made a case for media accountability. Accountability is used in this context to deal with the media institutions adherence to ethical standards and codes and serving the public interest and financial probity.

Accountability is a broad concept that is not limited to formal regulation but also embraces the wider obligations media have to their stakeholders and how they account for their performance in a dynamic interaction between the parties involved (McQuail, 2005; Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000). The key difference between the main concepts of responsibility and accountability is, notes McQuail, quoting Hodges (1986:14), that 'responsibility has to do with defining proper conduct; accountability with compelling it'.

McQuail (1977, p.515) pointed out that the terms 'responsibility' and 'accountability' are often used interchangeably, but it is useful to distinguish them. Here, responsibility refers essentially to obligations that are attributed to the media and relate to the issues just outlined. Accountability refers to the process by which the media are called to account for meeting their obligations.

In the case of Sierra Leone, the society called on journalists to account for their performance of responsibility through the establishment of the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the development of the Media Code of

Practice, which contains ethical standards and principles that media institutions should abide by. There is also the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) Code of Ethics which is also used to regulate association members. Some media institutions also have their Codes/Editorial guidelines that they use to regulate their work. Tettey (2006, p.244) noted that while some African media and journalists are doing a good job of maintaining ethical standards and ensuring accountability in their operations, others leave a lot to be desired, as they taint professionalism with unbridled partisanship and/or pecuniary considerations.

White (2009) said "Our industry, our ways of working, our relations with the people we serve are in a state of tumult." He cited the number of issues in different parts of the world and stated in particular that "In Africa, the twin threats of poverty and social dislocation add to the mix of problems that face journalism and independent media." Thus, accountability deals with both the media institutions' adherence to ethical standards and codes of ethics/practice and serving the public interest and their financial probity.

As pointed out earlier, media poverty and unaccountability have diverse impacts on the media industry. This article examines them.

**Sustainability**

From the review of the available literature, it emerged that sustainability means different things to different people and has entered the vernacular in varying (and sometimes conflicting) ways. It can be approached in many different and equally legitimate ways. For example, it can be used to suggest that something is financially viable, 'environmentally friendly', takes a long-term view, or can be continued indefinitely (Long 2013, p.1) and (Prugh &Assadourian, 2003). Costanza, Bernard and Patten (1995) added that there is much discussion about how one "defines" sustainability.

However, Costanza, Bernard and Patten (1995, p.193) noted that the basic idea of sustainability is quite straightforward: "A sustainable system is one which survives or persists."

Long (2013, p.1) pointed out that at its most general level, sustainability refers to the capacity to continue an activity or process indefinitely. It can be related to any economic, social, or environmental activities and have varied meanings within different disciplines. There is no simple definition of 'sustainability'. It can be an idea, a property of living systems, a manufacturing method or a way of life. There are as many definitions of sustainability as there are people trying to define it. Notwithstanding differences in interpretation, there is general agreement that sustainability is related to the objective of maintaining the well-being of society over time.

In more general terms, sustainability is the endurance of systems and processes. 'Sustainable' means able to last or continue for a long time. Crowther and Aras (2008) stated that sustainability is concerned with the effect of action taken in the present on the options available in the future. In order for a business corporation to be sustainable, that is, to be successful over a long period, it must satisfy all of its economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities (Wheelen & Hunger 2012, p.75). This is why the study also examined issues of profitability and accountability of media institutions.

Various frameworks exist for considering sustainability. A widely used approach is to represent sustainability in the context of three pillars: ecological, social, and economic. Within economic frameworks, sustainability is often thought to be achieved if society's well-being is maintained over time (Arrow et al. 2004; Pezzey 1992; Solow 1993; Toman 1998, quoted in Long 2013, p.2).

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), for example, points out that sustainability is the media's capacity to operate effectively under sound political, legal, and economic conditions. In a sustainable environment, journalists operate without interference or fear of violence, and media organisations enjoy stable legal and business conditions that pay decent salaries, discourage media corruption, and promote sector-wide integrity. Ownership structures in the media sector reflect a diversity of views, and citizens trust that the media represent the full range of society's interests, including the information needs of minority or repressed groups.

On the issue of media outlets and markets' sustainability, financial sustainability and media independence were identified as the greatest challenges. Global trends related to the collapse of traditional journalistic business models are aggravated in the region by weak advertising markets and political elites' undue influence on media outlets (Wasserman & Benequista, 2017).

Dagron (2001) quoted by Lush and Urgoiti (2012) broke the concept of sustainability into three components:

Social sustainability refers to community ownership of the station and participation in producing and airing programmes at both the decision and editorial levels (Dagron, 2001, p.10).

Institutional sustainability: This refers to the ways in which broadcasters function, such as station policies, democratic processes, management styles, internal relationships and practices, and partnerships with external agencies. Institutional sustainability is influenced by the external environment, in particular the presence or absence of enabling laws, policies and regulations ((Dagron, 2001, pp.10-11).

Financial sustainability is about a broadcaster's finances, income-generating potential, and how money is used and accounted for. This has much to do with social and institutional environment (Dagron, 2001, p.11).

Dagron's expositions on social sustainability, institutional sustainability and financial accountability hold true for all media institutions.

**Profitability**

Profitability refers to the operating efficiency of the media institutions, including the return they make on the capital invested in the business either by making direct financial gains or meeting/satisfying some established interests of the owners. Profitability is the mainstay goal of a business organisation. A firm's growth is tied inextricably to its survival and profitability (Pearce and Robinson 2005, p. 29). Profitability is the primary goal of all business ventures. Without profitability, the business will not survive in the long run (Hofstrand 2009).

Sometimes, 'Profit' and 'Profitability' are used interchangeably. Profit is the primary objective of a business (Nimalathasan, 2009). Profit in the accounting sense tends to become a long term objective which measures not only the success of the product, but also of the development of the market for it. It is determined by matching revenue against the cost associated with it. An enterprise should earn profits to survive and grow over a long period. It provides evidence concerning the earnings potential of a company and how effectively a firm is being managed. Profit means an absolute measure of earning capacity, while profitability is a relative measure of earning capacity (Nishanthini and Nimalathasan, 2013, p.002).

Profitability is measured with income and expenses. Income is money generated from the activities of the business. Expenses are the cost of resources used up or consumed by the activities of the business. Profitability is measured with an income statement. This is essentially a listing of income and expenses during a period of time (usually a year) for the entire business. An Income Statement is traditionally used to measure the profitability of the business for the past accounting period (Hofstrand, 2009).

A company's profitability can be measured by its return on the capital invested in the enterprise. The return on invested capital that a company earns is defined as its profit over the capital invested in the firm (profit/capital invested). By profit, we mean after-tax earnings. By capital, we mean the sum of money invested in the company—that is, stockholders' equity plus debt owed to creditors. This capital is used to buy the company's resources to produce and sell goods and services. A company that uses its

resources efficiently makes a positive return on invested capital. The more efficient a company is, the higher its profitability and return on invested capital (Hill & Jones 2009, p.2).

A company's profitability—its return on invested capital—is determined by the strategies its managers adopt. For example, Wal-Mart's strategy of focusing on the realisation of cost savings from efficient logistics and information systems, and then passing on the bulk of these cost savings to customers in the form of lower prices has enabled the company to gain ever more market share, reap significant economies of scale, and further lower its cost structure, thereby boosting profitability (Hill & Jones, 2009, p.2).

All firms that own electronic media facilities operate with a common financial goal—to earn a profit on the products and services they offer. Even non-commercial entities, such as public broadcasting stations, must keep revenues ahead of expenses. Commercial radio and television stations, cable systems, telecommunications, and multimedia companies are businesses. In business, success is measured primarily by the bottom line—the amount of profit or loss that remains after expenses are deducted from revenues (Albarran, 2006). However, Thomas (2009) argued that cash-flow, not profitability, is essential to survival. It is perfectly possible for a company to be unprofitable but still able to pay its debts, as long as its cash flow is positive. On the other hand, a company which is profitable in three years' time on paper can still go bankrupt if it has not the ready cash to pay its bills next week.

**Method of study**

The study used quantitative (unobtrusive research, in this case Analysing Existing Statistics) and qualitative (analysis and documentary evidence) methods for data analyses and presentation. It relied on a survey of seventy-seven (77) media houses from a population of one hundred and fifty-five (155) media institutions for a doctoral thesis (Sowa 2019). It analysed some of the data obtained for that study and contextualised them for an explanation of the concepts of media poverty and media accountability. The analysis and documentary evidence also reviewed some key concepts in the thesis and the existing literature.

**Results**

**Media poverty, sustainability and profitability**

The results on the extent of media poverty resonate with many factors. Generally, the data showed that the media institutions are not sustainable and profitable owing mainly to the economic situation in the country. Only 7.7 per cent of the media institutions stated that there was a favourable media market in the country. Majority of them (about 70%)

indicated that they were 'Never' or 'Rarely' profitable. It is important to note that various respondents saw profitability differently. Some of them stated that they are profitable because they are meeting/satisfying the interests of their owners. For instance, some religious radio stations stated that they are profitable because they are satisfying the aspiration of their missions, which is evangelism and winning people to their religions. For them, profitability is not the return the radio stations make on the capital invested in the business by making direct financial gains. Others stated their institutions are 'self-funded' by their proprietors/owners. They said if the aspect of 'self-funding' is taken off, it will be seen that the institutions are not profitable. What this means in essence is that most of those media institutions in such category are not run as professional businesses. They do not follow any financial procedures that are laid down.

The data further showed why media institutions are not profit-generating businesses. This is because they are not generating revenue. While there is an overreliance on raising revenue from adverts/commercials, almost all of them complained that the payments for those adverts were not forthcoming.

**Table 1: Management raises revenue by adverts/commercials**

| Media institutions | Always | Often | Some-times | Rarely | Never | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Radio | 23.4 | 6.5 | 14.3 | 2.6 | 7.8 | 54.5 |
| Television | 2.6 | 1.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3.9 |
| Newspaper | 41.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 41.6 |
| % of Total | 67.5 | 7.8 | 14.3 | 2.6 | 7.8 | 100 |

*Source: Field data, August 2018*

Only 13.0 per cent of media institutions 'Always' got revenue from sponsorship. This is an area that media institutions can enhance for revenue generation. Raising revenue through donations/grants appears to be a grey area within the country's media landscape. Close to 50 per cent of the respondents of the media institutions (for 'Never') stated that they had raised revenue from donations/grants. An insignificant number (about 3.0%) of all the media institutions said they 'Always' raised revenue from projects.

There are growing concerns that media institutions cannot survive only on the revenue they generate. Most media institutions now have other businesses supporting their work and for instance, owing to the decline in the newspaper industry, the Washington Post company diversified by acquiring Celtic Healthcare, a provider of hospice and home health care facilities in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Treating patients at home instead of paying for hospital stays is a much faster-growing industry than selling newspapers. The Washington Post Company also owns Kaplan,

a well-known source of test preparation materials, and six TV stations (David & David, 2005).

The data above conforms to M'Bayo's argument that if the economic condition of the State improves, media performance will improve, and it was no coincidence that the most developed media systems in the world are found in the most developed countries where media institutions flourish so well not only as agents of social change and development but also as big businesses (M'Bayo, 2015).

In several fora and discussions in 2016, the comments and statements of most Editors and managers pointed to one conclusion: media institutions in the country face an "existential threat." The key factors as agreed by most media managers and practitioners were the triple issues of sustainability, profitability and poverty. Media institutions can only be sustainable if they are profitable. Hypothetically, sustainability depends to a large extent on profitability. However, that profitability is hampered principally by poverty in the country, which invariably affects the operations of media institutions (Sowa, 2016, p.9). For M'Bayo, only a more economically viable state can provide an enabling environment for the media to flourish. Only such a state will engage in infrastructural development, promote nation-wide adoption of technological innovations and promote universal access policy that will extend communications infrastructure and basic social services to all regions of the country.

**Media Accountability**

Like media poverty, media accountability is indicative of several factors. For instance, there are worrying data on the status of the media institutions on the question of whether have 'Annual Budgets'. More than half of the respondents (about 55% for 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree') stated their media institutions did not have 'Annual Budgets'.

The data above are worrisome for any move towards making media institutions in the country sustainable, profitable and accountable. They show that most media institutions survive from what they get daily, that is, adverts or other payments they receive and disburse without proper documentation. It is difficult to comprehend how the media institutions operate without budgets. This is the breeding ground for unaccountability. It also makes it difficult to ascertain if the media institutions are profitable. The data show that the media institutions operate without planning and control as the budget is supposed to list the detailed cost of each programme (Wheelen & Hunger, 2012). It also means that there is no means of allocating resources for the operations of the media organisations based on their annual objectives and goals.

The next table, when examined closely, shows more problems with the media institutions' compliance with indicators on strategy formulation.

**Table 2: The institutions have Financial Plan, Policies and Procedures**

| Media institutions | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Dis-agree | Strongly Disagree | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Radio | 7.8 | 6.5 | 5.2 | 33.8 | 1.3 | 54.5 |
| Television | 2.6 | 0 | 0 | 1.3 | 0 | 3.9 |
| Newspaper | 5.2 | 13.0 | 2.6 | 20.8 | 0 | 41.6 |
| **% of Total** | **15.6** | **19.5** | **7.8** | **55.8** | **1.3** | **100** |

*Source: Field data, August 2018*

Again, more than half of the respondents (57.1% for 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree') did not have a Financial Plan, Policies, or Procedures. That figure applies to all respondents for radio, television, and newspaper stations. The data confirmed an earlier assertion that "financial management: keeping proper financial management records is a huge challenge for most media houses" (Sowa, 2016).

The major issue is the performance of the media institutions on the indicator of whether they are audited.

**Table 3: The institutions are Audited**

| Responses | Frequency | Per cent |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 5 | 6.5 |
| Agree | 9 | 11.7 |
| Not Sure | 4 | 5.2 |
| Disagree | 58 | 75.3 |
| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 1.3 |
| **Total** | **77** | **100** |

*Source: Field data, August 2018*

Most of the institutions (about 77% for 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree') were not audited. The poor performance of the media institutions in this area is shared by all the media institutions. This has direct implications on sustainability and accountability of media institutions. This is arguably one of the reasons why most of the media institutions are not profitable. They do not have analyses of their entire financial operations. It is also the breeding ground for corruption in the management of media institutions.

Spencer (2019) notes that economic viability and sustainability of any business depends largely on the ability of that business to maintain sound business and financial practices and to be profitable. Media houses being business enterprises therefore need to ensure they abide by this principle if they are to be sustainable. In other words, they must be profitable businesses while operating in line with the ethical principles of journalism and media practice.

The documentary evidence analysed in the qualitative data review corroborated the narrative that the majority of media institutions lacked financial accountability systems and processes that should ensure prudent resource management.

One interviewee remarked that:

> The industry is profitable; the owners do not harness their profit. The editors claim they are not

making money, yet they still have bought cars, constructed houses etc. If it were not profitable, why would they be jumping into it? Why newspapers would be springing up every day. It is because there is livelihood there. It is the aspect of greed. They (editors and managers) want everything for themselves; therefore, they operate 'briefcase' newspapers, and they do not have offices. There is not much accountability in the media landscape.

The interviewees pointed out that there was no transparent system of accountability in media houses' especially when dealing with adverts. Most of the media houses were operating as a 'one man business or one man show' wherein only one person controlled the proceeds of the institution. The individual will in most instances live a lifestyle that is outside the generality of members of staff, and everything revolves around him/her thereby failing to put in place effective management principles and corporate institutional governance. This is lacking in the media and people are not accountable.

The interviewees recommended that if media institutions were to be sustainable and profitable, it was important that accountability be at the centre of the strategy. That should include effective bookkeeping and stocktaking, and by extension, transparency

which can guarantee accountability in management as well as editorial decisions. Rational financial management should include expenditure and investment tracking and control. It also ensures effective audits.

Sowa's 'media unaccountability model' is premised on an assertion that media institutions are not as poor as media owners and managers want people to believe. The fundamental problem is the fact there are little or no accountability mechanisms in the majority of the media institutions. There are corrupt practices in handling and dealing with adverts and other financial resources, mostly from communication and public relations officers, advertising agencies, government officials, and various institutions. Majority of the media institutions cannot adequately account for what they collect and utilise. They have not taken on board professional accounting practices in their daily operations. It is simply a lack of prudent financial management systems and instances of corrupt practices in some media institutions.

**Conclusion**

This study has reviewed M'Bayo's (2015) concept of media poverty which is premised on the assertion that the media are poor because the State in which they operate is poor. While that assertion cannot be denied, Sowa (2019) argues that beyond the media poverty, there is the bigger problem of media

unaccountability, which is more than the bane of journalism.

Therefore, in response to M'Bayo's 'Media Poverty', Sowa proposed the 'Media Accountability model', as the solution to the problem of 'media unaccountability' and argued that the media institutions' failure to be accountable both in terms of financial probity and professional standards are the major reasons that have caused most of them to be unsustainable and unprofitable. The article takes further Professor M'Bayo's concept of media poverty. Epistemologically, M'Bayo's work was based on the construction of social reality, while Sowa largely embraces postpositivism using an empirical approach

The research recommends that media institutions must develop and adhere to solid financial accountability mechanisms and should adopt new ways of revenue generation like utilisation of technological platforms and establishing businesses that support their work.

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## 4. Media as a Catalyst for Sustainable Development: Reporting, Monitoring, and Implementation of SDGs in Sierra Leone

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## Abstract

*Media is pivotal in driving sustainable development, particularly in post-conflict nations like Sierra Leone. This study explores the nexus between media and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Sierra Leone's context. Despite the acknowledged importance of media in shaping public opinion and fostering transparency, there is a notable gap in understanding its specific contributions to SDG attainment. Through a comprehensive literature review and narrative synthesis, this research delineates the multifaceted role of media in societal development, emphasising its potential to raise awareness, promote good governance, and drive economic progress. Furthermore, it highlights the critical need for empirical research to elucidate the nuanced mechanisms through which media can effectively contribute to SDG realisation in Sierra Leone. By bridging this gap, scholars can inform policy and practice, ultimately fostering more effective strategies for sustainable development in Sierra Leone and beyond.*

***Keywords****: SDGs, Media, Development, Communication, Awareness, Governance*

## 1. Introduction

Sierra Leone, a nation that has demonstrated remarkable resilience, has traversed a tumultuous path marked by numerous development challenges, particularly in the aftermath of a devastating civil war. Emerging from this period of strife(1991-2002), Sierra Leone has embarked on a journey towards sustainable growth, aligning its aspirations with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[1]. These global objectives encompass a broad spectrum of development concerns, ranging from poverty alleviation and hunger eradication to ensuring access to healthcare and education, culminating in pursuing environmental sustainability and establishing robust institutions [2].

In this landscape of rebuilding and progress, the role of the media emerges as a critical catalyst for societal development. Beyond merely conveying information, the media serves as a conduit for shaping public opinion and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability[3]. Through its multifaceted

functions encompassing education, information dissemination, and entertainment, the media possesses the potential to mobilise society towards collective action in pursuit of national development objectives. It serves as a mirror reflecting reality and as an architect of perceptions, guiding the trajectory of societal progress [4].

However, despite the acknowledged significance of the media in the development discourse, a gap exists in the literature concerning its precise role in facilitating the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs, particularly within the context of Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone's pursuit of sustainable development, aligned with the United Nations' SDGs, faces challenges exacerbated by a lack of comprehensive understanding of the media's role in advancing these objectives. Despite recognising the media's significance in shaping public opinion and fostering transparency, there remains a dearth of research elucidating its precise contributions to SDG implementation and monitoring within Sierra Leone.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

The media's role in sustainable development is often acknowledged but inadequately explored within the specific context of Sierra Leone. Despite the media's potential to act as a catalyst for the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding how the media's influence is harnessed in post-conflict settings like Sierra Leone. This gap extends to understanding the precise mechanisms through which the media can contribute to sustainable development, particularly in a country grappling with various socio-economic challenges. This research seeks to address this gap by examining the media's role in reporting, monitoring, and driving the implementation of SDGs in Sierra Leone, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of its impact on national development.

## 1.2 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it aims to provide empirical evidence on the role of the media in advancing sustainable development goals in Sierra Leone, a country with unique post-conflict challenges. By exploring the media's contributions to the reporting, monitoring, and implementation of SDGs, this research will inform policymakers, media practitioners, and development agencies on effective strategies for leveraging media in the pursuit of sustainable development. Furthermore, the study's findings will contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of media and development, offering insights that could be applicable in other developing nations with similar contexts.

## 1.3 Research Objectives

This study sets out to achieve the following key objectives related to the media's role in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals in Sierra Leone:

1. To evaluate the role of media in raising awareness about the Sustainable Development Goals in Sierra Leone.
2. To analyse the media's effectiveness in monitoring the progress of SDG implementation in Sierra Leone.
3. To identify specific mechanisms through which the media can enhance its contribution to sustainable development in Sierra Leone.

## 1.4 Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions, which seek to explore the specific ways in which the media contributes to the SDGs in Sierra Leone:

1. How does media coverage influence public awareness and understanding of the SDGs in Sierra Leone?
2. In what ways does the media serve as a tool for monitoring and reporting on the progress of SDG implementation in Sierra Leone?
3. What mechanisms can the media employ to maximise its effectiveness in promoting the SDGs in Sierra Leone?

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on narrative synthesis and systematic literature review methods [5], to explore the role of media in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Sierra Leone. The research design is structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of the media's impact by analysing various academic sources, policy documents, and empirical studies.

## 2.1 Research Design

The research design is qualitative and exploratory, utilising narrative synthesis and a systematic literature review to evaluate the role of media in promoting and monitoring SDG implementation in Sierra Leone. This design is chosen to capture the complexities of media's role in a post-conflict setting and to identify the key mechanisms through which media can contribute to sustainable development.

## 2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected from reputable databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. The systematic search process involved using predefined keywords related to media, sustainable development, and Sierra Leone. The inclusion criteria were set to select studies published in English, peer-reviewed articles, and those that explicitly address the role of media in sustainable development or related fields.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

The data extracted from the selected studies were systematically organised and analysed using narrative synthesis. This approach allowed for the identification of patterns, themes, and trends related to the media's contribution to the SDGs. The synthesis

process involved thoroughly reviewing each study's methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and findings to understand the topic comprehensively [6].

## 2.4 Quality Assessment

A quality assessment of the selected literature was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Studies were evaluated based on their methodological rigour, relevance to the research objectives, and the robustness of their findings. This assessment was crucial in ensuring that the conclusions drawn from the literature review were well-founded and applicable to the context of Sierra Leone.

## 2.5 Interpretation of Findings

The findings from the literature review were interpreted in light of the research objectives and questions, providing insights into the specific contributions of media to SDG implementation in Sierra Leone. The study's conclusions are drawn from a critical analysis of the literature, offering a nuanced perspective on the role of media in driving sustainable development in a post-conflict setting.

## 3. Literature Review

The literature review delves into the pivotal role of media development in fostering social, economic, and political progress, drawing upon solid sources to enrich the research profoundly.

## 3.1 Media's Role in Development

Access to information remains a fundamental freedom essential for societal development [7]. According to the World Bank (2020), nearly 40% of the world's population still lacks adequate access to reliable and relevant information, particularly in low-income and rural areas. Beyond securing this fundamental right, media plays a multifaceted role in driving education, social progress, and economic advancement.

Kevin (2010) posits that the media is a powerful tool for facilitating awareness and connectivity, particularly in regions with isolated communities [8]. Media bridges geographical and cultural divides by disseminating information about different parts of the country, their people, arts, customs, and politics, fostering a sense of national unity and understanding [9].

## 3.2 Positive Effects of Media on Societies

The media serves as a powerful catalyst in modern societies, extending well beyond its traditional role as a mere conduit of information. By fostering education, promoting good governance, and driving economic progress, the media plays a pivotal role in communities' social, political, and economic development. This section of the literature review examines the diverse positive

effects of media, emphasising its contributions to societal advancement through education, accountability, and empowerment.

*Education and Awareness*: The media is a potent instrument for education and raising awareness. Al Zou'bi (2022) highlights that the media can disseminate crucial information that empowers citizens through various formats, such as print, broadcast, and digital platforms [11]. In Sierra Leone, where literacy rates are a concern, radio and community outreach programs have been instrumental in educating the masses about health, agriculture, and civic rights.

*Good Governance and Accountability*: Independent media is crucial in promoting good governance by serving as a watchdog over institutional actions and decisions. Mary Myers (2012) asserts that citizens, empowered by the media, demand transparency, responsiveness, and accountability from their governing institutions. Through investigative journalism and critical analysis, media outlets hold public officials and institutions accountable for their actions, ensuring integrity in governance processes [12]. Furthermore, media empowers individuals to participate in debates and decisions that shape their lives actively. By providing access to diverse perspectives and information, media fosters an informed citizenry capable of engaging in meaningful discourse on societal issues.

*Economic Progress*: The media's role in driving economic progress is underscored by its capacity to empower individuals through access to information. A pluralistic and independent media landscape provides citizens with the necessary knowledge and resources to be agents of change in their communities [13]. By disseminating information about best practices, innovative ideas, and economic opportunities, the media enables individuals to make informed decisions and take proactive steps towards sustainable development [14].

## 3.3 Sierra Leone's Development Challenges and SDGs

Sierra Leone has confronted a myriad of development challenges, spanning health crises, adverse effects of climate change, transnational organised crime, illicit financial flows, and governance deficiencies. Against this backdrop, adopting the Sustainable Development Goals presents a timely opportunity for the country to address these multifaceted challenges concertedly. Through integrating the SDGs into its national policy framework via successive development plans, Sierra Leone aims to foster a sense of national ownership and institute a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism to track progress towards these objectives [15].

## 3.4 The Role of Media in Societal Development

In contemporary society, the media is pivotal in shaping meaning-making processes, influencing public opinion, and moulding societal perceptions. With the advent of digital technology, the media has evolved into a potent and pervasive social institution, wielding significant influence over the collective consciousness. Grounded in a complex interplay of interests, norms, and values, the media serves as both a reflection of societal dynamics and a driver of societal change [16].

However, while existing literature acknowledges the media's transformative potential in fostering societal development, a gap exists in understanding its specific role in advancing the SDGs within the Sierra Leonean context. Despite anecdotal evidence of media engagement with development issues, a lack of comprehensive scholarly analysis delineates the strategies and mechanisms through which the media can effectively contribute to realising the SDGs in Sierra Leone.

## 3.5 Media and the SDGs

The role of the media in promoting the SDGs, established by the United Nations in 2015, has been increasingly recognised as a critical component of global development efforts. The SDGs are a set of 17 goals to address a wide range of global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, and peace and justice. The media, with its vast reach and ability to influence public opinion, is uniquely positioned to support the achievement of these goals by raising awareness, facilitating dialogue, and holding stakeholders accountable [17].

## 3.5.1 Global Perspectives on Media and the SDGs

Globally, the media has been identified as a key player in advancing the SDGs through various mechanisms. For example, media outlets have been instrumental in increasing public awareness of the SDGs, educating audiences about the significance of these goals, and encouraging civic engagement [18]. Research has shown that the media can be a powerful tool for advocacy, influencing policy decisions by bringing attention to critical issues related to the SDGs. For instance, investigative journalism has effectively exposed corruption, environmental degradation, and social injustices, thereby prompting government action and policy reforms [19]. The media's watchdog role is essential for ensuring that governments and other stakeholders remain committed to the SDGs and are held accountable for their progress or lack thereof [20].

Moreover, the media can facilitate cross-sector collaboration by acting as a bridge between governments, civil society, and the private sector. By providing a platform for dialogue, the media helps build partnerships essential for

the successful implementation of the SDGs. This collaborative role is vital in addressing complex issues such as climate change and inequality, where coordinated efforts from multiple stakeholders are required.

### 3.5.2 Media's Role in Promoting Specific SDGs

Different SDGs present unique opportunities and challenges for media engagement. For instance:

- o *SDG 1 (No Poverty):* Media campaigns have effectively raised awareness about poverty and mobilised support for anti-poverty initiatives. Documentaries, news reports, and social media campaigns have highlighted marginalised communities' plight, spurring public and private sector interventions [21].
  .

- o *SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being):* The media has played a vital role in disseminating health information, particularly during public health crises such as the Ebola crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Accurate and timely reporting has been crucial in educating the public about preventive measures, vaccination, and healthcare access, thus contributing to better health outcomes [22].

- o *SDG 13 (Climate Action):* Environmental journalism has brought global attention to the impacts of climate change, influencing public opinion and policy. Investigative reports on deforestation, pollution, and climate-induced disasters have driven international efforts to address environmental challenges [23].

### 3.5.3 Media and the SDGs in the African Context

In the African context, the media's role in promoting the SDGs is influenced by various factors, including the level of media freedom, the state of press infrastructure, and socio-political dynamics [24]. While the media in many African countries has the potential to drive SDG-related progress, it often faces challenges such as censorship, limited resources, and political pressure. In countries such as Kenya and South Africa, relatively free and vibrant media landscapes have allowed for robust coverage of SDG issues, particularly in areas such as health, education, and environmental sustainability. However, in other parts of the continent, media outlets are often constrained by government control or economic hardships, which limit their ability to act as effective agents of change.

### 3.5.4 Media and the SDGs in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's media landscape presents a unique case study for understanding the role of media in promoting the SDGs. As a post-conflict nation, Sierra Leone has grappled with numerous development challenges, including poverty, poor healthcare, and weak governance [25].

One key challenge for the media in Sierra Leone is press freedom. While the country has made progress since the end of the civil war, with a growing number of media outlets and a more open environment for journalism, especially with the repeal of part 5 of the Criminal libel in the 1965 Public Order Act, there are still instances of harassment and intimidation of journalists[27]. This environment can limit the media's ability to report freely on issues related to the SDGs, particularly when such reporting may be critical of the government or powerful interests [28].

There is also the challenge of limited reach of traditional media in the rural areas. This limits the media's ability to raise awareness about the SDGs among large population segments. However, the rise of digital media and mobile technology offers new opportunities for reaching these underserved communities [30]. Social media platforms, in particular, have become essential tools for disseminating information and engaging with the public on development issues [31].

Despite these challenges, Sierra Leone's media has significant opportunities to contribute to the SDGs. For example, radio remains one of the most accessible forms of media in the country and has been used effectively to promote public health campaigns, such as those related to the Ebola outbreak and, more recently, COVID-19. By leveraging the trust many Sierra Leoneans place in radio, media organisations can play a crucial role in educating the public about the SDGs and encouraging community participation in development initiatives [32].

## 5. Results

The results of this study align with the research questions, focusing on the media's role in promoting, monitoring, and enhancing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Sierra Leone. The analysis draws upon insights from the systematic literature review and narrative synthesis conducted as part of this research.

### 5.1 How does media coverage influence public awareness and understanding of the SDGs in Sierra Leone?

The media plays a significant role in shaping public awareness and understanding of the SDGs in Sierra Leone. The literature reveals that while traditional media platforms such as radio, television, and newspapers are widely used, their impact on public awareness of the SDGs has been mixed. Radio, in particular, remains a powerful tool due to its accessibility, especially in rural areas where literacy levels are low[33]. Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and educational programs broadcast via radio have effectively raised awareness about specific SDGs, such as

health-related goals during the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks.

However, the study also found that traditional media alone cannot fully engage the population with the SDGs. The rise of social media has introduced new dynamics, particularly among younger demographics. Platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp have been instrumental in spreading information and fostering discussions about sustainable development. Social media campaigns, often supported by NGOs and government initiatives, have successfully raised awareness about SDGs, especially in urban areas where internet penetration is higher. These platforms allow real-time interaction and feedback, enhancing public engagement and understanding of the SDGs.

The evidence suggests that while traditional media remains crucial for reaching a broad audience, particularly in rural areas, social media is increasingly essential for engaging younger and more urbanised populations. Together, these platforms contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the SDGs across different segments of the Sierra Leonean population.

### 5.2 In what ways does the media serve as a tool for monitoring and reporting on the progress of SDG implementation in Sierra Leone?

The media's role in monitoring and reporting SDG implementation in Sierra Leone is multifaceted. The study found that investigative journalism has effectively uncovered corruption and malfeasance in high public places related to implementing the SDGs. Reports highlighting corruption, inefficiencies in government projects, and disparities in service delivery have contributed to greater accountability and transparency.

For example, media coverage of health crises, such as the Ebola outbreak, played a critical role in monitoring the government's response and ensuring that information about disease prevention and control was disseminated to the public [34]. This reporting not only informed the public but also held authorities accountable for their actions, thereby supporting the goals related to health and well-being (SDG 3).

The study also noted that media outlets, particularly radio stations, regularly provide updates on the progress of various SDG-related projects. These updates are often based on government reports, NGO findings, and independent investigations, which are then communicated to the public in accessible formats. This continuous flow of information helps to maintain public interest in the SDGs and ensures that the progress (or lack thereof) is visible to all stakeholders.

Furthermore, collaborations with international organisations have enhanced the media's role in reporting on SDGs. These partnerships provide local journalists with the resources and training to cover complex topics, such as climate change (SDG 13) and economic inequality (SDG 10), in-depth. As a result, the

media is better equipped to monitor and report on the multifaceted aspects of SDG implementation in Sierra Leone.

## 5.3 What mechanisms can the media employ to maximise its effectiveness in promoting the SDGs in Sierra Leone?

The study identified several key mechanisms through which the media can significantly enhance its effectiveness in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Sierra Leone. These mechanisms include awareness campaigns, storytelling, collaboration with stakeholders, strategic use of social media, educational programming, monitoring and reporting progress, capacity building for journalists, and advocacy through influencers. Each of these mechanisms is discussed in detail below:

a) **Awareness Campaigns**: Comprehensive awareness campaigns are essential for educating the public about the SDGs. The study found that PSAs, combined with community outreach programs, have been particularly effective in rural areas where access to other forms of media is limited. These campaigns are most successful when tailored to local contexts and involve partnerships with community leaders and NGOs.

b) **Storytelling and Local Narratives**: Storytelling emerged as a powerful tool for making the SDGs more relatable to the Sierra Leonean populace. Feature stories and documentaries that highlight local initiatives and heroes have inspired community action and provided tangible examples of how the SDGs can be achieved [35]. By connecting the goals to real-life stories, the media can foster a deeper emotional connection with the audience, increasing engagement.

c) **Collaboration with Local Stakeholders**: The study emphasised the importance of collaboration between media outlets and local stakeholders, including NGOs, government agencies, and international organisations. Such collaborations ensure that media campaigns are well-informed and resonate with the target audience. Additionally, these partnerships provide the media with the resources and expertise needed to cover complex issues related to sustainable development [36].

d) **Use of Social Media Platforms**: Social media is an increasingly vital platform for promoting the SDGs, particularly among younger audiences. The study found that interactive campaigns, such as those involving hashtags or challenges, have successfully generated widespread participation and raised awareness about the SDGs (World Bank, 2020). These platforms also facilitate real-time discussions, allowing for immediate feedback and engagement with the audience.

e) **Educational Programming**: Integrating discussions about the SDGs into educational programming is crucial for

fostering a culture of sustainability from a young age. The media's role in this area includes collaborating with academic institutions to develop curricula that emphasise the importance of the SDGs and encourage students to engage in projects that address local sustainability issues.

f) *Monitoring and Reporting Progress*: The media's role in monitoring and reporting SDG progress cannot be overstated. The study highlighted the importance of regular updates and investigative journalism in informing the public about the status of SDG initiatives. By holding stakeholders accountable and shedding light on areas where progress is lagging, the media can ensure that the SDGs remain a priority for both the government and the public.

g) *Capacity Building for Journalists*: The effectiveness of media in promoting the SDGs is closely tied to the capacity of journalists to cover these issues. The study found that training programs focused on sustainable development reporting have been instrumental in improving the quality of coverage. Additionally, creating platforms where journalists can access research materials and expert opinions has enhanced their ability to report on SDGs effectively.

h) *Advocacy Through Influencers*: Leveraging influencers, including local celebrities and respected community leaders, has proven to be an effective strategy for amplifying the media's impact. The study found that influencers can reach broader audiences and lend credibility to media campaigns, notably when they advocate for specific SDGs (UNESCO, 2020). Social media influencers, in particular, have successfully engaged younger demographics and promoted sustainability efforts.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study's findings underscore the critical role that the media plays in promoting, monitoring, and enhancing the implementation of the SDGs in Sierra Leone. By systematically analysing the media's contributions through the lens of the research questions, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how the media can be leveraged to drive sustainable development in a post-conflict setting.

The study highlights the need for a multi-platform approach that combines traditional media with social media to reach diverse audiences. It also emphasises the importance of collaborations between media outlets and local stakeholders to ensure that SDG-related content is relevant and impactful. Additionally, the findings point to the necessity of building journalists' capacity to improve the quality of SDG reporting and the strategic use of influencers to amplify media campaigns.

## 6.1 Limitation

While providing valuable insights into the role of media in promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Sierra Leone, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and the lack of primary data collection. The findings are drawn from existing literature, which may not fully capture the current dynamics and challenges the media faces in a post-conflict setting. Additionally, the study does not account for regional variations within Sierra Leone, which could influence media effectiveness in different contexts. Future research should consider conducting field studies and interviews with key stakeholders to gather primary data, providing a more nuanced understanding of the media's impact on SDG implementation. Moreover, longitudinal studies could offer insights into how media influence evolves over time in relation to sustainable development.

## 6.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the media in Sierra Leone has the potential to significantly advance the SDGs by raising awareness, holding stakeholders accountable, and fostering community involvement. By employing the mechanisms identified in this study, media outlets can enhance their effectiveness in promoting sustainable development and contribute to realising the SDGs in Sierra Leone.

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