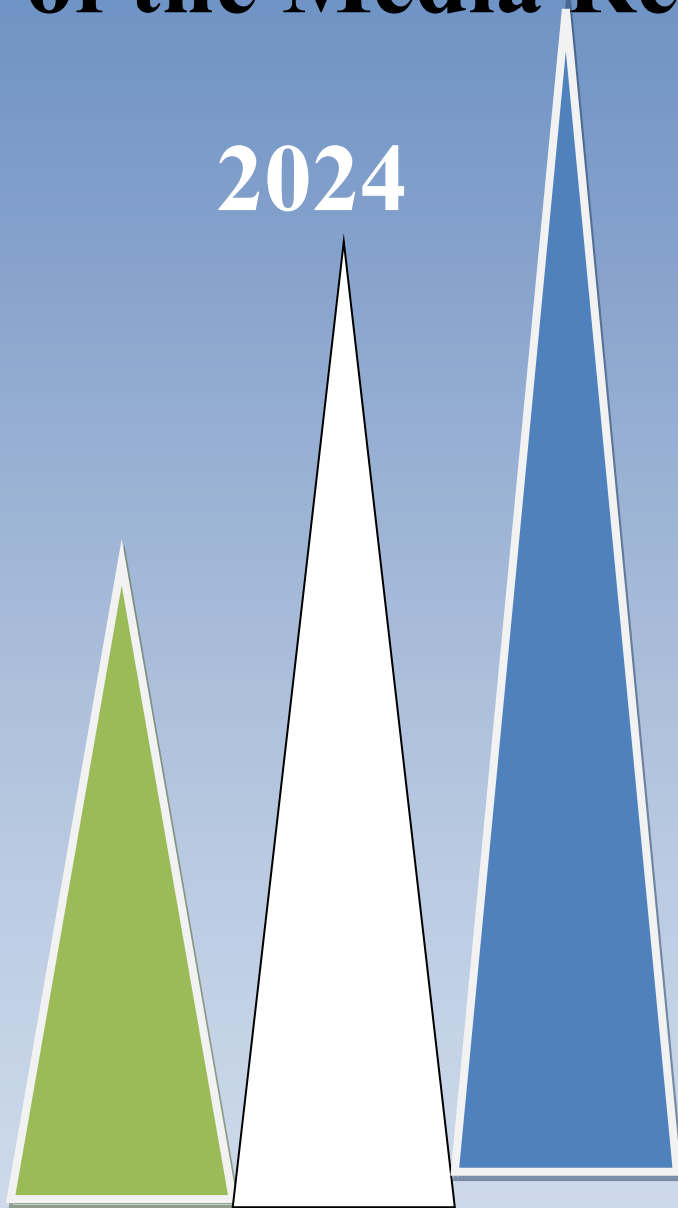


Sierra Leone

State of the Media Report

2024



Sierra Leone

State of the Media Report

2024

IBRAHIM SEAGA SHAW (PhD)

Editor

FRANCIS SOWA (PhD)

Assistant Editor

**A PUBLICATION OF THE MEDIA REFORM
COORDINATING GROUP OF SIERRA LEONE
(MRCG-SL)**

Led by

**The Faculty of Communication, Media and Information
Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone**

With Support From

National Endowment for Democracy (NED)

State of the Media Report 2024

Copyright © 2024 Media Reform Coordinating Group-Sierra Leone
(MRCG-SL) No. 145 Circular Road, Freetown, Sierra Leone

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

Authors: Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (PhD), Francis Sowa (PhD., Esq.), Khalil
Kallon, Augustine S. James and Hindolo Tonya Musa (PhD).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
FOREWORD	5
INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES OF NEGOTIATING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND REGULATION IN SIERRA LEONE.....	7
PART ONE: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND MEDIA FREEDOM	10
1. MEDIA ECOSYSTEM IN SIERRA LEONE: PRACTICES, OPERATIONS, REGULATIONS, FREEDOM AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN 2024.	10
ABSTRACT.....	10
1.1 INTRODUCTION	10
1.2 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MEDIA	10
1.2 THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE – THE NUMBERS	11
1.4 MEDIA LAWS, REGULATIONS AND FREEDOM	12
1.5 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE PRESS: CASES AND ACTIONS TAKEN.....	13
1.6 INTERNET FREEDOM AND DIGITAL RIGHTS	18
1.7 OWNERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT	19
1.8 POST NATIONAL MEDIA INVESTMENT CONFERENCE	19
1.9 NATIONAL FUND FOR PUBLIC INTEREST MEDIA (NAFPIM).....	20
1.10 KEY ACTIVITIES OF NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND MEDIA ORGANISATIONS	20
1.10 CONCLUSION.....	33
PART TWO: MEDIA, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT	34
2. 10 YEARS OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN SIERRA LEONE.	34
3. CYBERSECURITY LAW AND THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE MEDIA IN SIERRA LEONE.....	42
4. A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF BLOGGING IN SIERRA LEONE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES	54

Foreword

Theorising for Epistemic Construction & Policy Action

In today's world, no one can escape the arguably frightening effects of the media (whether traditional or new). Academic works continue to suggest that, on average, we are exposed (and mind-set altered, in most cases) to a minimum of 1000 media messages (depending on frequency and volume of consumption) on a daily basis. Media Messages are found in diverse social, electronic and print media.

Post Second World War, subscribing to media and communication scholarships proposed by leading scholars and theorists like Shannon & Weaver, Everett Rogers, Wilbur Schramm and more, Melkote & Steeves (2001) argue that because we see, read, hear and touch hundreds of media messages every day, on average, these information commodities therefore exercise massive influence and power in our social behaviours – and the need to intermittently study and share findings is fitting, principally, as the world becomes more socially complex.

One of the most appealing concepts in Political Theory is Normative Theorising – the ability to prescribe how social operations should be conducted (or how things should be), rather than how they are now. In contrast to empiricism or descriptive research, Normative Theorising assesses, suggests and rationalises norms and standards; thus, the academic articles in this Report intend to critique findings of critical media issues, thoroughly analyse and recommend ideas and models for media reform, regulation and media and society interaction across Sierra Leone and by extension the sub-region.

In the last 20 years, I have been fortunate to participate in a reasonable number of sophisticated and intellectually rigorous debates, academic discourses, or theoretical monologues in Sierra Leone and abroad, related to media reform, regulation, challenges, and the overall contribution to state-building and social progress. The quality of the content of the articles herein can be relatively easily measured up to that of those I have read in other academic publications.

The conceptual organisation of this 2024 State of the Media Report publication addresses critical media issues that affect human behaviour and social development, both positively and negatively. It ranges from examining the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone in 2024, diving deeply into operations, regulations, freedom, and capacity building, and contributions to national development, to analysing the right to access information, and to exploring bloggers' performance in the current new media space in Sierra Leone, and to a critical examination of the new cybersecurity law and its effect on freedom of expression.

Let me hasten to note that, because of the rigour of the studies, the findings are illuminating, the methodological approaches are apt, and the research questions are in line with the informative and epistemic intent of the articles and their policy implications.

Please note that the MRCG would continue to work to fortify journalistic practice, initiate and coordinate media development, and monitor the dynamics between the media, state and non-state actors, particularly with our newly found relatively positive relationship with the security forces. The MRCG takes media freedom, media development, and media safety and protection very seriously, and their criticality is exceptional.

This published Report would strive for excellence and serve as a nationally and internationally relevant publication for collegiate teaching and research, as well as for policy design; it is open to

adoption or adaptation to respond to the emerging global problems of safety, protection, and misinformation.

As usual, my deepest thanks and appreciation go to our media practitioners, contributors, partners, and the Government of Sierra Leone for the many strides toward creating a free media space and providing support to guarantee freedom of expression and safety for media practitioners.

I wish you all a productive New Year!

Victor Massaquoi, PhD

Chairman, MRCG-SL Advisory Board

INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES OF NEGOTIATING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND REGULATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (PhD)

Chair and Coordinator, Graduate Programme, Faculty of Communication, Media, and Information Studies, FBC/USL and Chairman/Information Commissioner, RAIC

Ibrahim.shaw@raic.gov.sl website www.ibrahimseagashaw.com

Drawing on the key findings of almost all the articles assembled in this 2024 State of the Media Report, it is apparent that there are very serious challenges standing in the way of negotiating the divide between freedom of expression and the regimes established by law to regulate it. Like any human right, the right to freedom of expression, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is not absolute but has limitations such as public order, public safety, privacy, etc., all of which are as key to the public interest as the right to free expression itself. It is therefore not surprising that in Sierra Leone, as in many democracies, the legislative or policy environment provides for both the promotion and protection of the right to free speech, as captured specifically in Section 25 of the 1991 Constitution and the 2020 Repeal of Part 5 of the 1965 Public Order Act, and the regulation of this free speech space, as captured specifically in the IMC Act of 2020 and the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021.

In terms of the policy context, Sierra Leone can largely be said to have got it right, especially with the 2020 Repeal of Part 5 of

the Public Order Act, which relates to the criminalisation of libel and defamation. What makes this even more spot-on is that the public engagements and consultations accompanying this reform were far more thorough and inclusive. However, this was far from the case with the conception and development of the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021, which, on the other hand, witnessed very limited and far less inclusive public engagements and consultations before its passage in Parliament. Little wonder, therefore, that the latter has attracted far more criticism from civil society and the media for its potential to limit freedom of expression and seriously undermine the very government media reform agenda which culminated in the Repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act itself.

Moreover, the critics' fears appear to have been, to some extent, borne out by the relatively high number of cases of police harassment and arrests of people, including journalists, for alleged cyberbullying and stalking under the Cyber Security and Cyber Crime Act of 2021, as reported in the first article on the state of press freedom, authored by Dr Sowa and others, and in the third article,

also authored by Dr Sowa. Although the true spirit of the Cyber Security and Cyber Crime law is to fight cybercrime and enhance security in online spaces, in line with the Budapest Convention, its implementation in the Sierra Leone context has, unfortunately, left much to be desired. This has led civil society and journalists to describe the cybersecurity and crime law as a direct replacement for the criminal and seditious libel law. Sowa affirms in the third article in this report that “although the objects of the two laws are specific and distinct, it is argued that they share similar effects in restricting freedom of expression and the media”.

What is more, one would have expected the safeguards provided for in the cybersecurity and crime law in accordance with Article 15 of the Budapest Convention to have provided adequate protection of human rights and liberties, but unfortunately, going by what we are seeing at the moment in this report, it is looking more like that not much has changed in the free media landscape. To the extent that Sierra Leone’s cybersecurity law is reportedly aligned with the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime and the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data, two clear gold standards, it was expected that safeguards protecting free speech would be embedded in it. If this were the case, why are we seeing some cases of cyberbullying and cyber stalking being increasingly treated by the Sierra Leone Police as criminal matters?

Are the police overacting or just being overzealous in their enforcement of the cybersecurity and crime law? Or are they just enforcing the law to the letter? If the latter is the case, there is strong justification for the ongoing advocacy championed by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) to review the cybersecurity and crime legislation to make it more civil than criminal. If the former is the case, there would be an urgent need to roll out a massive capacity-building campaign targeting police officers charged with the responsibility to enforce the cybersecurity law.

Be that as it may, Sowa rightly argued in the third article of this report that ‘the cybersecurity law, particularly the provisions on cyberbullying and cyberstalking, contains provisions that limit freedom of expression, similar to the now-repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965. Although most cases involving cyberbullying and cyberstalking have not proceeded to full-blown trials and judgments regarding the application of the provisions of the Cyber Security and Crimes Act, 2022, the complaints clearly indicate that these provisions limit freedom of expression. One of the remedies provided in Section 44(3) of the Act, 2021, is a defence for cyberbullying and cyberstalking for acts that are in “the interest of the public”. However, this public interest defence is yet to be tested, as the cases end before full trial and judgment.’ It is also important to note that

most cases of seditious criminal libel rarely reached a judicial conclusion before the repeal of Part V, which could well be another resonance between the new and old laws.

Yet the other two articles in this edition, authored by Dr Tonya Musa and I on the prospects and challenges of blogging and on the progress made in access to information in Sierra Leone 10 years on, respectively, show that there is at least some good news worth noting. Musa argues that bloggers not only serve as influencers and agenda-setters for the

media and public but also promote democratic participation and civic empowerment, while recognising their potential to spread misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech. For my part, I concluded my article by recognising the encouraging increase in the overall rate of compliance with access to information in the country, with information requests rising from a mere 112 recorded in 2019 to over 19,000 in 2023, despite challenges related to limited funding, staffing, and logistics.

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 2024.

By

Francis Sowa (Ph.D. Esq.), 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 S. James, Head of Programs, Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG)

Abstract

This section of the report examines the media ecosystem in Sierra Leone in 2024. The key issues discussed include operations, regulation, freedom, capacity building, and the media's contributions to national development during the review period. The article draws on theoretical frameworks from the political economy of the media. Data collection methods included documentary and archival research, as well as observation. The review highlights changes in the country's media operations and the regulation of media institutions.

1.1 Introduction

Significant steps were taken in 2024 to enhance Sierra Leone's media ecosystem. A major highlight was the presentation of the draft National Media and Information Policy to the Ministry of Information and Civic Education (MoICE) for further consultation and validation. The document, drafted and reviewed by the MRCG in partnership with

the MoICE and with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), formed part of the MRCG's reform agenda. Steps were also taken to implement the recommendations from the first Media Viability and Investment Conference. With support from BBC Media Action, a one-day follow-up engagement on the Action Plan's implementation was held on 20 March 2024. Working groups were established during the meeting, with clear Terms of Reference (TORs), to address various recommendations. Additionally, with support from BBC Media Action, MRCG held a two-day retreat at the Companero Resort in Western Rural on 25 and 26 March 2024 to review the implementation of the National Action Plan and develop activities for each recommendation from the Media Viability and Investment Conference.

1.2 Political economy of the media

The political economy of the media concentrates on 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 example, the Political Economy Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) has grown substantially over the past decade, attracting numerous scholars worldwide (Wasko, 2014). The political economy of the media (PEM) investigates issues related to media ownership, survival, organisation, and the production of media content. As new scholars engage with PEM, a broader range of issues and themes has emerged. Wasko (2014) highlighted themes such as: Commodification/commercialisation, Diversification/synergy, Horizontal/vertical integration, and concentration. These themes illustrate media and communication resources as commodities traded for profit and reflect levels of market competition.

The issues discussed in this article fall within the theoretical frameworks of media political economy. This includes the survival and organisation of the media ecosystem, which, in Sierra Leone, is regulated by the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and influenced by other market forces. The IMC issues licences for radio, television, and Direct-to-Home services, and registers newspapers and magazines.

By 31 December 2024, Sierra Leone had **336** registered and licensed media institutions.

They included various categories: newspapers and magazines, radio, television, and Direct-to-Home (DTH) services. Of these, **182** radio stations were active or operational, while **3** were inactive or non-operational; **15** television stations were active, with **1** inactive; **7** DTH stations were active, with **1** inactive; **122** newspapers were active, with none inactive, and **5** magazines were active, with none inactive. Radio and television stations are further classified as public, commercial, community, or religious. Newspapers and magazines are not categorised into specific types. In January 2024, the IMC began re-registration and renewal processes, and by year-end, **91** newspapers, **2** magazines, **97** radio stations, **6** DTH/Satellite/Online TV stations, and **5** local television stations had re-registered.

1.2 The media landscape – the numbers

The following table shows that from January to December 2024, the Commission registered and licensed **18** media houses: **5** Radio Stations, **10** Newspapers, **2** Terrestrial Television Stations, and **1** online TV channel.

Table 1: Registered media institutions in 2024.

Category	Year	Number registered or licensed
Radio		
Public Service	2024	0
Community	2024	0
Commercial	2024	4
Religious	2024	1
Relay/rebroadcast	2024	0
Teaching	2024	0
Total	2024	5
Television (Terrestrial)		
Public Service	2024	0
Community	2024	0
Commercial	2024	2
Religious	2024	0
Relay/rebroadcast	2024	0
Teaching	2024	0
Total	2024	2
Direct-to-Home (DTH)		
Television	2024	0
Online TV	2024	1
Print media		
Newspaper	2024	10
Magazine	2024	0

Source: IMC Data 2024

1.4 Media laws, regulations and freedom

Various laws regulate Sierra Leone's media ecosystem. These laws are established in the constitutions, statutes, and codes of the

institutions responsible for implementing them. As a country, Sierra Leone has specific statutes (Acts), regulations, policies, and institutions that govern its media landscape. The primary laws include the Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991 (Sections 11 and 25(1)), 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 parliament enacted 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). The Independent Media Commission (IMC) serves as the regulatory body responsible for registering newspapers and licensing radio and television stations. The National Communications Authority (NatCA), formerly known as the National Telecommunication Commission (NATCOM), allocates spectra and frequencies based on recommendations from the IMC.

The National Communications Authority Act of 2022 provides for the licensing and regulation of electronic communications operators, as well as other developments in the ICT/telecommunications sector, to align with the contemporary telecommunications 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 behaviour.

No major media-related laws were enacted in 2024; the National Media and Information Policy was still being developed.

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 twelfth and thirteenth editions of 'Press Freedom, Information, Internet and Digital Rights in Sierra Leone'. These editions build on previous editions, and extensive follow-ups were conducted on unresolved cases involving the police, judiciary, and victims.

From the first to the 13th editions, the MRCG had monitored **87** cases, **61** of which were concluded, settled, resolved, or dropped for lack of progress; **6** were in court, **20** were under police investigation, and 9 were abandoned for various reasons.

In 2024, the MRCG monitored **12** cases involving arrest, detention, intimidation, physical and verbal assault, attack, and cyberattack.

The case of Alie Bai Kamara, the Station Manager of *Citizen Radio 103.7 FM*.

On 8 February 2024, Alie Bai Kamara, the Station Manager of *Citizen Radio 103.7 FM*, was invited by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) in Freetown for questioning and later detained at the CID. The Deputy Station Manager, Ibrahim Kalokoh (DJ Kalux), told MRCG that the invitation and detention were linked to a broadcast the radio made about the 26 November 2023 'attempted coup.' According to him, on 26 November 2023, a group of soldiers stormed the radio station and ordered the security guard to switch on the transmitter so they could make announcements, but the guard failed to do so. He explained that the Independent Media Commission (IMC) had invited them, investigated the matter, and cautioned them, noting that they were surprised by the CID's invitation, almost 70 days after the IMC had investigated and warned the station not to be involved in such an incident. After spending a night in detention at the CID, Alie Bai Kamara was released the following day. Police confirmed the invitation and detention and stated that the matter was still under investigation. In subsequent follow-ups, the police and the journalist confirmed that the matter was resolved at the CID in the same month.

The case of Emmanuel C Thorli, Managing Editor of *Night Watch Newspaper*,

On 21 February 2024, Emmanuel C Thorli, Managing Editor of *Night Watch Newspaper*, was arrested and detained at the CID in Freetown, allegedly for publishing a news article titled ‘We Cannot Wait For Bio To Continue In Power Until 2028’ on the same day. Mr. Thorli told MRCG that police detained him because of the article, which they claimed was ‘inciting.’ He added that after three days in detention, he was released on the condition that he report to the CID daily until further notice from the police. Police confirmed the journalist's arrest and detention and informed MRCG that the matter was under investigation. In follow-up discussions, Mr. Thorli stated that he continued to report to the CID daily while the investigation was ongoing.

The case of Amadu Lamrana Bah, formerly of the *Africa Young Voices Television (AYV)*

On various dates in March 2024, Amadu Lamrana Bah, a journalist with *Africa Young Voices Television (AYV)* and President of the Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), faced a series of online threats, abuse, and harassment following a Facebook and X post titled ‘Guess who has added to his fleet of brand-new SUVs...’, in which he also asked about the asset-declaration categories the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has for government officials. The threats, abuse, and harassment primarily came from individuals claiming to be supporters of the ruling SLPP government. In an interview, Mr Bah told the

MRCG that he did not intend to report the incident to the police for investigation. The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) expressed deep concern over the insults, intimidation, attacks, and threats, and stood in solidarity with Bah, who was named ‘Journalist of the Year 2023’ by SLAJ, and with all journalists across Sierra Leone facing threats, intimidation, harassment, and attacks for their dedication to truth and transparency. The MRCG regarded such acts as a serious setback to press freedom, which should not be tolerated in a country committed to ensuring media freedom. During a press briefing hosted by the Ministry of Information and Civic Education (MoICE), the Minister, Hon. Chernor Bah, joined SLAJ in condemning the attack on the journalist by individuals believed to be supporters of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP). [Facebook](#): “I strongly condemn attacks on the Fourth Estate, and I sympathise with Amadu Lamrana Bah of *AYV*, who faced attacks for performing his duties, but I must emphasise the need for factual reporting and professionalism among journalists,” said the Minister. [Twitter](#).

The case of Patrick Kai, reporter at *Calabash Newspaper*.

On 16 April 2024, Patrick Kai, a journalist with *Calabash Newspaper*, was invited to be questioned at the Kenema Police Division regarding an alleged cybercrime against Eastern Technical University (ETU) Sierra Leone. The journalist denied the allegations

and told MRCG that ETU accused him of being an administrator and informant for a Facebook page called “Kenema Kotuku,” which had been critical of the institution. He was detained for four hours and released on bail while the investigation continued. ASP Detective Tamba David Alpha informed MRCG that the journalist was summoned to the Police Division’s cyber unit over an alleged cybercrime reported by the Registrar of ETU, and confirmed that Patrick was released the same day, with the case still under police investigation.

The case of Justice Boima, CEO of *Justice FM and TV*

On 23 May 2024, CID issued a warrant of arrest for journalist Justice Boima, CEO of *Justice FM and TV*, for alleged offences of cyberstalking and bullying. The journalist told MRCG that the warrant was linked to his [online publication](#) alleging land grabbing by the Deputy Minister of Mines and Mineral Resources, Napoleon Koroma, and the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) Richard P.G. Robert, Head of the Criminal Investigations Department. According to him, the Deputy Minister and the Head of CID conspired to seize the property of Honourable Hawa Rosaline Saffa, a Member of the Sixth Parliament of Sierra Leone. In an interview, the Deputy Minister denied all allegations made by the journalist, including several audio recordings in which he accused the journalist of land grabbing. He told MRCG that he was

taking legal action against the journalist. ASP Amos Lansana, an officer attached to the Cybercrime Unit at the CID Headquarters and in charge of the matter, confirmed the issuance of a warrant of arrest for the journalist and stated that they were still searching for him to initiate a proper investigation.

The case of Alie Badara, a freelance journalist in Bo

On 28 May 2024, Alie Badara, a freelance journalist in Bo, allegedly received verbal abuse and threats by phone from an unknown caller after he posted on Facebook about police excesses in their fight against the drug known as “Kush” and other illegal substances in Bo, Southern Sierra Leone. The journalist told MRCG that he had been investigating allegations that drugs seized by police officers during raids, marked as exhibits, are being sold by some of those officers. He stated that his Facebook posts ([post one](#) and [post two](#)) on this issue irritated certain individuals, who then planned to attack him physically and set his house on fire. Inspector Moses Tommy Ganda, a police officer attached to the Cyber Unit at the Bo East Police Division, told MRCG that they had received the journalist’s complaint and had begun investigations.

The case of Thomas Dixon, Managing Editor for New Age Newspaper.

On 5 June 2024, Thomas Dixon, the Managing Editor of the *New Age newspaper*, was attacked, harassed, and intimidated [online](#) by

Anthony Vandy in response to his comments on the First Lady, Fatima Maada Bio's speech. The online attacks and threats stemmed from the journalist's [Twitter post](#) titled 'The Height of Arrogance...', in which he described the First Lady's speech as 'sheer arrogance.' The journalist told MRCG that he did not report the online attacks to the police because such incidents were not new to him. SLAJ, in a press release, condemned the online intimidation and called on authorities to ensure the safety of journalists both online and offline.

The case of Munya Bawoh, a reporter for All Out Radio.

On 7 June 2024, Munya Bawoh, a journalist with *All Out Radio 90.1 FM* in Kenema, was allegedly assaulted by police officers in Kenema while investigating a story at the Kenema East Police Station. According to the journalist, he had gone to the station to follow up on a story involving aggrieved visually impaired persons whose colleague had been arrested and detained by the police. Upon arrival, he called a colleague to meet him at the station, but the call reportedly offended the officers, who forcibly took his mobile phone and dragged him to the office of the Divisional Crime Officer. The Divisional Crime Officer and other officers reportedly slapped and molested him for allegedly recording a video of the visually impaired persons. He added that, with the intervention of [SLAJ](#), he was later released on bail. The Regional

Coordinator of the Complaint Discipline Internal Investigations Department (CDIID) of the Kenema East Police Division, Osman Sesay, told MRCG that they had received Bawoh's complaint, along with reports from his two witnesses and his medical report, and had begun investigating the matter. In July 2024, the journalist told MRCG that he had been called to a meeting with the SLAJ Regional and National Executives, the Local Unit Commander (LUC) of Kenema, Edison Vandy, and the Mayor of Kenema, Thomas Baio, to resolve the issue. He stated that they agreed that the journalist would be under medical observation for ninety days, with his health care managed by the police, and that the police in Kenema must apologise for their misconduct and compensate him for all property lost or destroyed during the incident. The police officer in charge of the case, Regional Coordinator of CDIID Osman Sesay, told MRCG that they were still handling the matter and that it might be concluded soon after the journalist made a withdrawal statement. In August 2024, the journalist informed MRCG that he had made the withdrawal statement and that the matter had been resolved. Osman Sesay, the Regional Coordinator for CDIID in Kenema, confirmed that the issue had been settled.

The case of Joy Bayoh Esq

On 18 June 2024, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) arrested and detained lawyer Joy Bayoh Esq. at the CID in Freetown for allegedly

cyberstalking the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone. Following a [Facebook post](#), she told MRCG that she had been arrested and detained by the CID for her tweet on the rule of law and democratic principles. The police stated that the lawyer was arrested for cyberstalking, released on bail, and that the matter was dismissed.

The defamation matter between former Leone Stars players and the Sierra Leone Football Association

In June 2024, MRCG monitored the defamation case between former Leone Stars players Ibrahim Koroma and Samuel Barley and the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA). The High Court of Sierra Leone ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, Ibrahim Koroma and Samuel Barley, and ordered the defendant, SLFA, to pay 3 million dollars in damages (1.5 million dollars each). Hassan Kamara Esq., a lawyer for the plaintiffs, told MRCG that his clients took SLFA to court for defamation of character and damage to their reputations.

The case of Umu Thoronka, a journalist at the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation in Makeni

In August 2024, Umu Thoronka, a journalist with the *Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC)* in Makeni, was dismissed and allegedly attacked and harassed on social media over a [TikTok video](#) she posted about a lady's contribution at the

Presidential Town Hall Meeting in Freetown on 23 July 2024. The journalist told MRCG that she received a phone call from her Station Manager, Sinneh Thoronka, informing her that she had been dismissed due to her social media post about the Presidential Town Hall. In a [press release](#) dated 12 August 2024, Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL) condemned the summary dismissal of the journalist and the subsequent threats to her life. The release further stated that the dismissal occurred without any prior warning letter, discussion or written explanation, contrary to the provisions of the Employee Act of 2023, which mandates a fair and transparent termination process. The *SLBC*, in a press release dated 20 August 2024, responded that the journalist was not a reporter for *SLBC* Makeni, noting that she initially worked as a freelance contractor for *SLBC* in 2015 for three months, followed by a subsequent contract that extended until 2018, when she ceased serving the Corporation. The release further stated that Ms Thoronka flouted the *SLBC's* policies by taking *SLBC's* footage without permission, unduly utilising *SLBC*-branded content on her personal social media platforms, and running commentary on it, bringing the institution's name into disrepute. In September 2024, the journalist told MRCG that, since she had reported the matter to SLAJ, she had not yet received a response from SLAJ. SLAJ told MRCG that investigations into the matter were ongoing. The matter was also extensively discussed at

SLAJ's Annual General Meeting in Bo, with suggestions for possible solutions. In October and November 2024, there were no new developments on the matter. However, SLAJ's National Secretary General, Alhaji Manika Kamara, told MRCG that investigations were ongoing.

The case of Thomas Dixon, Editor at Salone Times Newspaper

On 28 December 2024, the Editor of *Salone Times Newspaper*, Thomas Dickson, allegedly received a threat of arrest from the Inspector General (IG) of Police, William Fayia Sellu, following a Facebook post criticising the IG for allegedly revoking a court bail that the journalist described as an unnecessary use of "orders from above" to keep people in detention. In an interview, the IG denied all social media reports that the police were seeking or harassing journalist Dickson. He stated he had not given any officer instructions to invite, arrest, or harass Thomas Dixon, adding that he had been advised by some senior journalists to file a formal complaint with the IMC if he felt offended by the post. SLAJ issued a [press statement](#) on the matter, explaining its role as an intermediary in easing tensions at the time. In several press releases, SLAJ, MRCG, and the Guild of Editors condemned the alleged threat and called on the SLP to address the issue amicably and ensure the safety of the journalist and his family. To resolve the matter, SLAJ met with the IG on 31 December 2024. During the meeting, they

reviewed the alleged threats involving the IG and Dixon, and the issue was amicably resolved. The Inspector General assured SLAJ that there had never been any threat to Thomas Dixon's safety and security, and that he had since returned home with his family after they had gone into hiding over safety concerns. Dixon, in turn, agreed to voluntarily remove his Facebook post referring to the IG as "arrogant."

1.6 Internet Freedom and Digital Rights

Since the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 came into force, arrests have been made for breaches of its provisions. The Act, among other things, prohibits, prevents, detects, prosecutes, and punishes cybercrimes while safeguarding privacy rights. Sierra Leoneans who use social media and mobile phones to communicate may face criminal prosecution under Section 44 of the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 for cyberstalking and cyberbullying if they share information or opinions perceived as abusive, harassing, insulting, or harmful to others. [Click here to read](#). According to the 'State of Internet Freedom in Sierra Leone' report by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) in 2020, the situation in Sierra Leone is assessed based on the practices and measures adopted by state actors to either restrict or promote internet access and usage. The [report](#) highlights critical policies, measures, and actions that influence internet rights.

1.7 Ownership, governance and management

Ownership, governance, and management of media institutions have been major concerns. The year under review saw some changes in the governance and management of these institutions. Under the IMC Act 2020, the types of ownership largely remained unchanged. They include 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.

The 2024 data suggest that most media organisations, especially radio and television stations, are companies. Many newspapers are registered as sole proprietors, but a few are incorporated.

1.8 Post National Media Investment Conference

The National Action Plan developed at the end of the National Media Viability and Investment Conference in 2022 contains seven key recommendations:

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 Leone 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 MRCG, which is overseeing the implementation of the recommendations from the first Media Viability and Investment Conference, held a one-day follow-up event on 20 March 2024, with support from BBC Media Action, to review progress on the Action Plan developed at the Post-Media-Viability-and-Investment-Conference. The event brought together all heads and technical staff of national media organisations and associations across the country. Working groups were formed during the meeting, with clear Terms of Reference (TORs), to address the recommendations.

With support from BBC Media Action, MRCG organised a two-day retreat at the Companero Resort, Western Rural, on 25 and 26 March 2024 to review the implementation of the National Action Plan, develop activities for each recommendation from the Media Viability and Investment Conference, and identify other relevant institutions and individuals to collaborate with in implementing the National Action Plan.

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, agreed upon with key stakeholders following the Sierra Leone National Media Viability and Investment Conference in April 2022. The conference generated the following recommendation: “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 significant economic challenges that constrain their ability to produce content in the public interest. Stakeholders have called for a funding mechanism that combines government subsidies with contributions from international donors and disburses funds through a transparent and inclusive process.

On 24 April 2024, the MRCG and NaFPIM, with support from the International Fund for

Public Interest Media (IFPIM), held an engagement with key institutions, including diplomatic missions in Sierra Leone, to discuss [NaFPIM's operations](#) since its launch in June 2023.

On 18 November 2024, the Fund ([NaFPIM](#)), led by its Chairman, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, briefed the Minister of MoICE, Chernor Bah, on the completion of the first phase and the potential for a second phase. The Minister assured the Government’s support for the Fund as part of its commitment to strengthening Sierra Leone’s media. The Chairman of the Fund expressed appreciation to the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM), BBC Media Action SL, and the MRCG, as well as to the member organisations that form the Board and the Technical Working Group, for their support and dedication to promoting public interest media in the country.

1.10 Key Activities of national institutions and media organisations

On 25 January 2024, MRCG presented the draft National Media and Information Policy to the Ministry of Information and Civic Education (MoICE) for further consultation, validation, and submission to the Cabinet. The document, drafted and reviewed by MRCG in partnership with MoICE and with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), forms part of MRCG’s reform agenda to address key national issues related to media

and information within the ministry's mandate. The presentation took place at a sector meeting attended by the Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC), the Independent Media Commission (IMC), Postal Services, the Government Printing Department, Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA), and others. The draft National Policy on Media and Information seeks to strengthen commitment to media freedom and freedom of expression in the country, establish a platform for a comprehensive review and development of a well-researched national document, facilitate the coordinated dissemination of government information through the Directorate of Information at MoICE, and create forums for discussion on national issues that citizens can engage with and utilise.

On 8 and 9 February 2024, the MRCG held [public lectures](#) on Media Freedom, Reforms, and Capacity Building in Sierra Leone for media and journalism students at Central University in Mile 91, Njala University, and the Every Nation Polytechnic in Bo. These engagements were part of MRCG's outreach to students and institutions, aimed at sharing and discussing its reports and publications on media and journalism in Sierra Leone.

On 22 May 2024, to mark its 10th anniversary of continuous advocacy for press freedom, the safety of journalists, media reforms, capacity building, and media developments in Sierra Leone, the MRCG launched two major

reports, one on [Journalists' Welfare](#) and the other, a [Compendium](#) of Media and Communication Laws and Regulations in [Sierra Leone](#). The event was attended by representatives from MRCG's local partners, media stakeholders, and government representatives. It culminated in a [documentary](#) video on MRCG's journey to transform the country's media landscape.

On 27 and 28 May 2024, the Media Foundation for West Africa, in partnership with the MRCG, engaged 50 female journalists and activists in Bo on [digital literacy and skills](#). The training covered women's rights online, as well as fact-checking and verification. The digital literacy training for women aimed to reduce incidents of online harassment against women, increase women's use of digital tools, and boost their participation in online engagement.

2 July 2024, MRCG and the Minority Rights Group (MRG) organised the second edition of the Inclusive and Anti-Conflict Journalism Awards 2024, with funding support from the European Union. Three winners were selected from six finalists. The Chief Evaluator, Joshua Nicol, emphasised the importance of journalists reporting on minority rights issues in the country, as this area is often overlooked in daily reporting.

On various dates in September 2024, the MRCG, with funding support from the Africa Transitional Justice Legacy Fund (ATJLF)

under the project ‘Engaging Media and Communities to Change the Narrative on Transitional Justice Issues in Sierra Leone’, trained sixty-six (66) journalists across the country in transitional justice reporting: [E. Makeni training](#), and [Kenema training](#).

The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ)

Amid ongoing progress, the President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Ahmed Sahid Nasrallah, highlighted a few challenges in advocating for greater press freedom and the protection of journalists’ rights. He pointed to difficulties in promoting ethical standards and professional development among members, emphasising that raising public awareness and civic education about the importance of journalism in society, as well as creating a conducive environment for journalists to work without hindrance, remain challenging. Since the repeal of the Criminal Libel law, he noted that there have been no major arrests or detentions of journalists related to their work. SLAJ’s greatest current challenge concerns journalists’ safety and welfare, and the online threats and intimidation they face in the line of duty. The MRCG press freedom data indicated a new trend of online attacks from political supporters and traditional leaders in local communities.

While we have made some progress in addressing salaries and social security contributions for journalists through the IMC

Act of 2020, we continue to push for the consolidation and re-engineering of the industry in light of the global economic crisis and our pursuit of media viability and investment in the sector. We strongly believe that, just as we expect our journalists to be highly professional, their welfare and conditions of service must also be prioritised.

We continue to appeal to the Government, politicians, and law enforcement agencies to ensure the safety and security of journalists at all times and to stop the rising online attacks on journalists. The Association is deeply concerned about recent insults, intimidation, attacks, and threats against some of its members in the line of duty. We have seen the Minister of Information and Civic Education, Chernor Bah, condemn the online attacks and call for professionalism. The recent online threats and attacks followed their consistent efforts to hold leaders to account amid the country’s economic challenges. As a result, they now fear for their lives. Freedom of the press is a fundamental tenet of democracy, and any attempt to silence journalists through insults, threats, intimidation, and harassment undermines the essence of human rights and their significance to our emerging democracy. SLAJ stands in solidarity with all affected journalists, and the Association is committed to always defending press freedom,” the SLAJ President noted.

SLAJ has continued to make remarkable progress, but much more remains to be done. Following the repeal of the criminal libel law, SLAJ signed an MoU with the security sector under the Office of National Security (ONS). The MoU aims to promote mutual understanding, respect, collaboration, and support between the media and the security sector to reduce incidents of physical assault against journalists in the line of duty. Additionally, SLAJ and the MRCG have conducted several training sessions and workshops on journalists' safety and security in the country. These efforts have led to the development of a national framework and policy, and to the establishment of a National Coordination Committee for the Safety and Security of Journalists in Sierra Leone, comprising representatives from media stakeholders, civil society organisations, the security sector, religious and traditional leaders, and the Judiciary of Sierra Leone.

On World Press Freedom Day in May 2024, in line with the global theme “A Press for the Planet: Journalism in the face of the Environmental Crisis”, SLAJ urged journalists to continue raising awareness and educating the public about protecting and preserving the environment, tracking the Government of Sierra Leone’s efforts to achieve UNSDG 13, and highlighting the gaps and challenges.

SLAJ also trained journalists in fact-checking and conflict-sensitive reporting from 4 to 16 December 2023, equipping them with essential

skills for Sierra Leone’s post-election environment. The training, held in Kenema (Eastern region), Bo (Southern region), Port Loko (Northwest region), and Makeni (Northern region), covered all regions of the country and benefited about 120 journalists, bloggers, influencers, and civil society activists. The programme covered key aspects, including responsible journalism, ethical reporting, fact-checking methodologies, and the vital role of the media in maintaining national cohesion, unity, inclusivity, and peace. The President of SLAJ emphasised the importance of the training and its potential to strengthen democratic values and rebuild trust within Sierra Leonean society. Journalism remains the cornerstone of Sierra Leone’s democracy, and ethical reporting and rigorous fact-checking enable journalists to navigate the complexities of the post-election period and promote unity, transparency, and healthy dialogue.

As part of its partnership and collaboration efforts, SLAJ and its affiliated bodies hosted a meeting with the New UNPD Resident Representative, Frederick Hans Ampiah, and his team to discuss SLAJ's work and the media industry in Sierra Leone. During the meeting, the SLAJ President highlighted advances in media pluralism, outlining its benefits and challenges, and addressed issues such as media ownership, poverty among media outlets, reporters’ welfare, and the sustainability of the media sector. He

emphasised the importance of media freedom and responsibility, as well as efforts to counter disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and hate speech. He also outlined progress made by SLAJ and its local and international partners — including the Government of Sierra Leone — towards media development. He mentioned the creation of the National Fund for Public Interest Media (NaFPIM), aimed at promoting public interest and accountability journalism, alongside the SLAJ Media Manifesto (The Media We Want), which he described as the association’s strategic development plan and a guiding framework for media development initiatives in the country.

SLAJ has made progress in many areas. At its Annual General Meeting in Bo in September 2024, the Association celebrated steadfast dedication, integrity, and excellence in journalism, and the SLAJ President highlighted significant advances over the years in promoting and safeguarding freedom of expression and media development in Sierra Leone. SLAJ’s contributions to democracy, good governance, and national unity during challenging times are highly significant. ‘As we reflect on our journey, we recognise the importance of looking inward to assess our progress and envision our future. At 53, we honour the remarkable impact SLAJ has had on Sierra Leone’s media landscape and broader development. We pay tribute to our founding members, past and current leaders,

and committed members, while remembering our fallen colleagues who have shaped our path,” said the SLAJ President. Looking ahead, SLAJ continues to flourish and inspire future generations of journalists to pursue their profession with courage, integrity, and professionalism.

The arrest of female lawyer Joy Precious Bayoh by the CID of the Sierra Leone Police in June 2024 for voicing her opinions on social media highlighted a concerning trend in the protection of free expression in Sierra Leone. After questioning the legitimacy of His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio following a contentious election, Joy was detained overnight before being released on bail. Her case raised serious fears about the misuse of the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021, which threatens civic space. That incident underscored longstanding concerns about the Cyber Security and Crime Law, which we previously outlined in the SLAJ position paper. SLAJ has warned that law enforcement might misuse this legislation to silence critical and dissenting voices, especially after the substantial repeal of the criminal libel law just a year earlier. Additionally, the online harassment and intimidation of Thomas Dixon, Amadu Lamrana Bah, and others raised further issues regarding journalists’ safety while performing their duties. While the Association recognises the need to combat online crimes, we remain deeply concerned about provisions in the law

that could infringe upon fundamental human rights, particularly freedom of expression, press freedom, and privacy. These fears are being validated as the police employ the cyber law in ways reminiscent of the abuses seen with the criminal libel law for decades.

Since 2021, through the MRCG platform, SLAJ has highlighted numerous cases of alleged cyber-related offences, including the arrest of musicians, journalists, and ordinary citizens for expressing their views online. This ongoing trend has a chilling effect on civic space, hindering free expression and critical discourse. “As journalists, our responsibility is to protect this right, as our profession depends on it. While we recognise the Government’s efforts to support media development, such as repealing the criminal libel law and fostering greater collaboration with the media sector, these achievements risk becoming hollow if we cannot safeguard the fundamental right to free expression. SLAJ, therefore, urges all stakeholders to unite to protect civic space and uphold individuals’ rights to express themselves without fear of retribution,” said the SLAJ president.

During the reporting period, SLAJ received the annual government subventions for 2023 and 2024, totalling SLE 1,500 million (One Million Five Hundred Thousand Leones), with SLE 750,000 (Seven Hundred and Fifty Thousand Leones) allocated to each year. This annual subvention was established by His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio in

2018 as part of his commitment to supporting press freedom in Sierra Leone. The initial subvention in 2018 was SLE 150,000 (One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Leones), which has increased in subsequent years to further enhance the Association's operational capacity. SLAJ is responsible for administering this annual subvention, which supports the activities of its national and regional offices, established committees, affiliate bodies, and subsidiary organisations. It is important to note that the elected officials managing SLAJ’s affairs are volunteers and do not receive salaries or stipends from these funds. The subvention is requested each year through the MoICE and is subject to auditing by the Audit Service Sierra Leone. SLAJ extends its gratitude to the government for its continued support, which plays a vital role in promoting press freedom and enhancing the media's capacity in Sierra Leone. The Association remains committed to using these resources effectively and accounting for them to advance the interests of its members and contribute to a vibrant and informed society.

In August 2024, SLAJ, with funding from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), successfully concluded a workshop on Cyber Law reform in Sierra Leone. The training involved discussing, critiquing, and developing advocacy campaigns on the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021, focusing on provisions that could infringe media freedom, free expression, and data rights. Participants

included journalists, bloggers, civil society activists, and legal practitioners, reflecting IFJ's commitment to promoting press freedom and free speech in Sierra Leone. The SLAJ President addressed specific media concerns about the law and assured that it would not suppress press freedom or free speech, referencing the association's position paper and concerns raised during its formulation. While acknowledging that the Cyber Security and Crime Act is not inherently flawed, he warned that certain provisions, such as those in Section 44, could threaten freedom of expression and the press.

Once again, SLAJ submitted a position paper to the SLAJ Constitutional Review Committee to modernise and strengthen the Association's governance framework. Key proposals in the paper include monthly stipends for elected officials, recognising the time and effort they dedicate to their roles, the establishment of an electoral court to ensure fair and transparent electoral processes; disclosure of campaign financing for candidates seeking elected positions, such as the presidency, asset declarations, Integrity Management Committees (IMCs) at both national and regional levels to ensure robust financial and administrative controls within the organisation, and a Logistics and Procurement Committee to oversee all procurement activities and manage the Association's assets, ensuring accountability and transparency. To promote gender equality, the national

executive also proposed forming a Gender Advisory Panel comprising SLAJ members and civil society representatives to advise on gender-related issues, support women's empowerment, and oversee the implementation of the SLAJ Gender Equality Policy for the Media in Sierra Leone.

The draft Constitution was a central topic at SLAJ's 2024 AGM. SLAJ encouraged constructive discussions to shape the Association's future and to strengthen its commitment to democracy, transparency, and accountability in the media sector.

On 27 August 2024, SLAJ held a significant courtesy call with the IMC, marking its first engagement since Joseph Kapuwa Esq became the new IMC Chairman. The meeting focused on the urgent need for collaboration between the two institutions to reengineer the media industry. As the IMC prepares to take action against media houses that have failed to comply with registration requirements under the IMC Act of 2020, SLAJ expressed concern about potential suspensions and stressed the need to balance press freedom with legal compliance. SLAJ emphasised that it would not support media outlets that violate the IMC Act, but sought a collaborative approach to address compliance issues. The need for clear guidelines and oversight of journalist registration was emphasised, with concerns about unqualified individuals claiming journalistic credentials.

SLAJ inducted new members following a thorough vetting process conducted by the SLAJ Credentials Committee. The induction ceremonies were held in Freetown, Makeni, Bo, and Kenema between 9 and 12 September 2024. From a pool of 216 candidates interviewed in person and virtually, the Committee approved 159 candidates; 54 applications remain under review, and three candidates were deemed unqualified. During the induction, SLAJ President Ahmed Sahid Nasralla emphasised the Association's longstanding commitment to defending free speech and press freedom, and to enhancing members' welfare and professional development. He provided an overview of SLAJ's history, governance, democratic principles, the ethical standards outlined in the SLAJ Code of Ethics, and the IMC regulations governing both print and electronic media. The induction culminated with the new members taking an oath of commitment. They also received official membership acceptance letters, marking their formal entry into the Association.

At the Annual General Meeting, SLAJ expressed concern about the difficulties of keeping up with a rapidly changing media landscape. The Association has achieved notable progress in advocating for media freedom and defending journalists' rights. However, as it moves forward, it needs to do more to ensure SLAJ remains relevant, inclusive and resilient. The media environment

is evolving at an unprecedented speed. New technologies, social media, and the emergence of young, diverse voices mean we must adapt our structures and constitution to these changes. The growth of SLAJ membership, especially among young people, requires internal systems that promote transparency, democracy, and accountability and that reflect the diversity of the media industry. SLAJ must become a model of inclusivity. This involves ensuring equal representation for women journalists, journalists with disabilities, those in rural areas, and those working in emerging media sectors. The organisation must embrace the full spectrum of the profession to stay strong and united.

The President emphasised that the digital revolution has transformed the media landscape permanently. To remain at the forefront, SLAJ must equip its members with the tools, training, and resources necessary to succeed in this new environment. We need to prioritise digital literacy and empower journalists with the skills required to uphold high ethical reporting standards, even as new media platforms challenge traditional practices. SLAJ's strength has always been its unity. "Together, we have achieved notable victories, such as advocating for the repeal of the criminal libel law. As we encounter escalating threats to press freedom and increasing online attacks on journalists, our solidarity remains our greatest asset. We must continue to support one another, recognising

that an attack on one is an attack on all. Invest in training programmes that prepare young and emerging journalists for a digital-first world. Advocate for media freedom by fighting for a free and conducive environment where journalists can operate without fear of harassment or repression. Ensure that all voices—regardless of gender, physical ability, region, or media type—are heard and valued within SLAJ. Strengthen SLAJ’s financial base through innovative funding models, securing long-term sustainability and independence. The road ahead is laden with challenges, but we can overcome them together. SLAJ will continue to be a formidable force for responsible journalism in Sierra Leone by embracing change, championing inclusivity, and reinforcing our unity. Let us persist in building an association that stands as a beacon of press freedom and democratic governance, both now and for future generations,” said the SLAJ president.

SLAJ encouraged all journalists and media practitioners in Sierra Leone to participate in the SLAJ Media Awards 2024/25, as their work is vital to educating the public, promoting accountability, and contributing to the nation’s sustainable development. The UNDP Outstanding Journalist of the Year Award is a new initiative that complements the UNDP’s ongoing efforts to support the media’s role in advancing human rights, social justice, and sustainable development in Sierra Leone.

Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL)

Menstrual Hygiene Day 2024: WIMSAL North raised local funds to continue its annual donation of menstrual hygiene pads, water, and other hygiene products to secondary school girls in Makeni and Port Loko. In celebration of International Women’s Day, WIMSAL South hosted a special talk show that addressed issues affecting women and highlighted their achievements in the region.

New membership drive: WIMSAL regional and national executives interviewed and approved more than 50 new members across the Western Area, North, and South districts. 25 from the Western Area, 15 from the North, and 10 from the South.

Training/Capacity Building: In January 2024, WIMSAL, in collaboration with Purposeful, held a Gender-Based Violence (GBV) training session at the Freetown City Council Hall. The session, attended by more than 50 female journalists from across the country, focused on the complexities of GBV reporting, the use of feminist language in the media, and data utilisation for effective GBV reporting.

Scholarships: The Chief Minister’s Office provided Le 27,000.00 to cover WASSCE fees for more than 14 WIMSAL members nationwide. In February 2024, the Office of the First Lady awarded scholarships totalling

Le 102,000.00 to 17 WIMSAL members across the country, including 5 in the Western Area, 4 in the North, 4 in the East, and 4 in the South.

New Office Space: WIMSAL rented its first office space, which is situated at 49 Victoria Street, Freetown, in April 2024. A housewarming event for the board and members was held in August 2024. A few individuals, including Kandeh Sesay, President Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, Alhaji Manika Kamara, and Vice President Sahr James Bangah, participated in this event.

UNDP Repositioning Women-Focused CSOs for Peace and Sustainable Development Project: UNDP provided a second tranche to complete the remaining activities of the elections project, which ran from May 2023 to January 2024. The funds were designated to support coalition members in documenting and disseminating the project outcomes.

Employment Issues and Organisational Support: In August 2024, WIMSAL received a formal complaint from a member based in the Northern region and employed by SLBC Makeni. She was wrongfully dismissed by phone following a personal TikTok post about the presidential town hall meeting.

WIMSAL strongly condemned this arbitrary dismissal and promptly called on the Government of Sierra Leone, via the Ministry

of Information and Civic Education, to reinstate her or provide appropriate severance compensation.

During the SLAJ 2024 Annual General Meeting (AGM), representatives of the Independent Media Commission (IMC) pledged to investigate the matter. As a result, two hearings were held—one in Makeni and another in Freetown on 10 December 2024. However, six months later, the IMC has yet to reach a conclusive decision. As an organisation, WIMSAL has stood firmly by our member, Umu Thoronka, and has worked tirelessly with Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights in the United States to build a strong case for submission to the ECOWAS Court in pursuit of justice.

Secretariat Recruitment: In October 2024, WIMSAL advertised four positions at its national secretariat: Accountant, Project Officer, Secretary, and Office Assistant. Over 1,000 applications were received. Fifteen candidates were shortlisted for each role, and by December four finalists had been selected. Duties officially commenced on 6th January 2025.

Comic Relief Gender Justice Project: WIMSAL has been awarded £150,000 over six years to implement a core gender justice project, which is currently in the budgeting stage.

On 10th December 2024, WIMSAL officially launched its new Comic Relief-funded project

to champion gender justice in the media industry. Stakeholders across the media landscape were invited to attend the event, which also featured the first training session on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) reporting. The project aims to address critical challenges facing female journalists and to strengthen WIMSAL's nationwide institutional capacity-building.

Key Barriers and Challenges in 2024:

Gender-based discrimination in the media industry, limited access to leadership opportunities for women journalists; financial and logistical constraints in implementing national programmes, social and cultural norms; ensuring the long-term sustainability of initiatives beyond project timelines is difficult, persistent discriminatory attitudes and resistance to gender equality initiatives continue to hinder progress. Engagement and collaboration: Maintaining consistent engagement with stakeholders and target communities can be challenging due to varying commitments and priorities. Accurately assessing the impact of campaigns and initiatives is complex because of a lack of effective methodologies.

WIMSAL has achieved notable milestones in advancing gender equality and empowering women in Sierra Leone's media landscape. Despite challenges, including social norms and sustainability issues, the organisation has successfully delivered a range of internal and external activities, formed strategic

partnerships, and secured funding for future initiatives. Moving forward, WIMSAL remains committed to fostering an inclusive environment where women can thrive in media and leadership roles.

The Independent Media Commission (IMC)

The Independent Media Commission, established by an Act of Parliament in 2000 (as amended), was repealed and replaced by the IMC Act of 2020 (Act No. 5 of 2020). This Act aims to ensure the continuation of the Independent Media Commission, regulate the registration of mass media institutions in Sierra Leone, and oversee the licensing of institutions engaged in radio, television, or direct-to-home digital satellite broadcasting. It also covers the registration of persons and institutions involved in publishing newspapers and magazines in Sierra Leone, as well as other related matters. The Commission remains dedicated to its mandate to promote a free, pluralistic, and responsible media landscape in Sierra Leone, while ensuring that media institutions comply with professional standards under the IMC Act 2020 and the Media Regulations 2022.

In 2024, the IMC focused on promoting a free, pluralistic, and professionally responsible media in Sierra Leone. Key interventions included a strategic retreat in Kenema to review institutional reforms and propose legal amendments; regional consultations on community radio governance; and the

successful reconstitution of the boards of Radio Bintumani and VOPAD Radio through stakeholder collaboration.

The Commission identified gaps in the IMC Act No. 5 of 2020 and launched a review to align it with current media trends. During a retreat in Kenema in April 2024, Commissioners and senior management agreed to consult media stakeholders nationwide. In line with the Ministry of Information and Civic Education's legal reforms, the IMC held a consultative meeting on 30 May 2024 to discuss updates to the Act. Key recommendations included recognising online media, updating terminology, adjusting the composition of the Commission, establishing a quorum for board meetings, regulating online platforms, formalising editor qualifications, and setting fixed terms for IMC members. These proposals were approved, with further consultations scheduled on unresolved issues.

The Commission strengthened accountability through regular complaint hearings and rulings with sanctions, notably addressing an ethics breach at Radio Democracy 98.1 FM.

Key successes included community engagement, policy reform, capacity-building, public accountability, and laying the groundwork for digital media monitoring. However, challenges remain in funding, logistics, staffing, monitoring infrastructure, and office space.

Recommendations:

- To enhance timely and adequate funding to ensure consistent programme delivery and implementation.
- Improving logistical support, particularly by providing additional functional vehicles, is crucial to enabling efficient fieldwork and timely public hearings regarding complaints.
- Staff welfare must also be addressed by increasing salaries to boost motivation and improve retention.
- Acquiring modern monitoring tools to ensure effective oversight and regulation of media content.
- To address the critical shortage of office space, particularly for the Freetown office, and to create a more conducive and productive working environment.

The Guild of Editors (GoE)

In 2024, the organisation undertook a range of activities focused on institutional strengthening and media advocacy. Key initiatives included capacity-building sessions and efforts to secure dedicated office space, during which the organisation temporarily operated from the MRCG office. It also organised a democratic process that culminated in the election of a new executive body after more than ten years, with

preparatory consultative meetings beginning in 2024 and elections held in early 2025.

Additionally, the organisation issued public statements and press releases addressing issues within the criminal justice system and supporting journalists facing intimidation. Awards were presented to institutions such as Africell, Mercury, and a local commercial bank in recognition of their contributions. Furthermore, the organisation participated in media freedom advocacy and became a member of the West African Editors Guild.

The organisation's major successes in 2024 included the execution of a democratic electoral process, which led to the election of a new executive leadership after more than a decade. It also secured partial funding for office space. It continued its advocacy work by issuing strong press statements in defence of press freedom, particularly in cases involving police threats and harassment of journalists. Another notable success was the organisation's admission to the West African Editors Guild, with one of its members appointed to the core committee, marking a step forward in regional recognition and collaboration.

One of the main challenges in 2024 was low member participation, especially among editors, despite their active presence in online forums. This lack of engagement at in-person meetings disrupted the smooth running of organisational activities, including the

democratic process. Another ongoing issue was the lack of permanent office space, which initially limited operations until temporary arrangements were made. These internal and logistical problems hampered the full implementation of planned programmes and activities.

Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU)

In July 2024, the new SLRU executive established its office and began by creating a database for its members. The team travelled across the country, visiting Bo, Makeni, and Kenema to conduct online registration. Despite funding challenges, they successfully launched an online portal for journalists to register, with over 700 members registered to date.

Additionally, a constitutional review committee was established in 2024 to review the organisation's constitution, a process that has since been completed. In the same year, the organisation organised training in data reporting, benefiting 25 reporters in the Western Area. They also visited several embassies and organisations, including the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), and the Ministry of Information and Civic Education, to explore potential partnerships.

A significant achievement highlighted was the completion of the constitutional review,

resulting in a new constitution for the organisation. Another notable accomplishment was the establishment of the membership database.

Another challenge identified was securing funding and gaining recognition for the SLRU, which has operated for 21 years. Welfare concerns were also highlighted as a major issue, with reporters emphasising the organisation's need to prioritise them since taking office.

Sport Writers Association of Sierra (SWASAL)

In July 2024, SWASAL celebrated World Sports Journalists Day. It launched the official logo for its 50th-anniversary celebrations and announced updates to the line-up of events, including recognition of past members and sponsors. With ongoing engagement, the long-awaited Diploma in Sports Journalism was accepted by LICCSAL Business College for the 2024/25 academic year.

1.10 Conclusion

The year under review saw several developments in Sierra Leone's media

landscape. Successes in creating an enabling legal environment for the media and in media development initiatives were noted. However, other challenges to media development remain. These include inadequate media infrastructure and equipment, as well as a lack of financial, technical, and logistical support for media institutions.

Sources

Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) Reports, 2024

Independent Media Commission (IMC) Data 2024

Reports on the National Media Viability and Investment Conference.

Wasko, J. (2014). International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics Volume 10 Number 3 © 2014 Intellect Ltd Article. English language.

2. 10 Years of Access to Information in Sierra Leone.

By

Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (PhD)

Chairman/Information Commissioner, RAIC

Introduction

October 2024 marked the 10th anniversary of the effective implementation of Sierra Leone's Right to Access Information (RAI) law. The RAI law was enacted by the Parliament of Sierra Leone in 2013, but it was not until October 2014 that the Right to Access Information Commission was fully constituted, following the appointment and parliamentary confirmation of its first Chairman and Information Commissioner, veteran journalist Mr Unisa Sesay, and four regional Commissioners. The Commission was reconstituted in October 2018, with my appointment as Chairman and Information Commissioner and four other regional Commissioners.

Consistent with the provisions of the RAI Act 2013, the Right to Access Information Commission is mandated to ensure the effective implementation of the Law, a fundamental right aligned with Target 16.10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This target calls for ensuring public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international regimes, including Article 19 of the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The RAI Act was derived from section 25 of the 1991 Sierra Leone Constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression. It serves as an institutional check on every aspect of government. It was developed for the purpose of widening the opportunities to claim access to crucial information and to require public authorities to proactively publish information; mainstreaming transparency and accountability in public institutions; giving citizens the right to be informed about policy decisions, actions of government and the conduct of state functionaries; protecting fundamental freedoms; providing a democratic space for monitoring of government affairs at all levels; opening up space for political participation; graduating from a culture of secrecy to a culture of openness in public management; curbing corruption; building citizens' trust; guarantying a vertical and horizontal flow of information; and above all joining the global information rights society. The RAI Act 2013 was ranked, until 2019, as the fifth most robust Access to Information Law in the world.

Under my leadership, the Commission commemorated 10 years of the implementation of the right to access information law in Sierra Leone by organising a symposium on Tuesday, 15th October at the Foreign Service Academy on the theme: ‘Access to Information in Sierra Leone, 10 years on’, bringing together about 200 state and non-state actors. The 10-year commemoration was climaxed by a dinner and awards night hosted by the Commission at the Family Kingdom Resort Royal Hall on Friday, 22nd November 2024. The Commemoration was a moment of reflection on how far the Commission had come in implementing access to information in Sierra Leone, and on its key achievements, challenges, opportunities, and priorities.

The Commission experienced a slow start in 2014, partly due to the Ebola epidemic. However, few achievements were made between 2014 and 2018. With funding from the World Bank, the Open Data Readiness Assessment (ODRA) Report was completed and validated; the Open Data Council was established; the Open Data Portal was created and launched; and ultimately, the Right to Access Information Regulations that give effect to the RAI Law were developed and reviewed by some consultants.

Following the reconstitution of the Commission with my appointment as Chairman and Information Commission in October, 2018, my first priority was to build the institutions of the Commission as a way of laying a solid foundation for the implementation of the right to

access information law in the country. I would reflect on what we have achieved to date in carrying out our mandate since 2018 across four broad categories: Institutional and Infrastructural Development; Projects and Programmes; Compliance and Enforcement; and National and International Partnerships.

1. INSTITUTIONAL AND INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Commission embarked on a rigorous institutional and infrastructural development. First, it moved its main national secretariat from the out-of-reach Hill Station to the City Centre on Krootown Road. It invited behavioural change institutions such as Internal Auditors at the Ministry of Finance and Audit Service Sierra Leone to review its operations and internal financial, as well as the Public Sector Reform Unit(PSRU) in the Office of the President to conduct a Management and Functional Review of the Commission. The findings and recommendations of these reviews went a long way to build relevant institutions in the Commission, institutions such as its first fully functional web site launched in May 2019; Staff Manual validated and adopted in October 2021; a staff appraisal scheme introduced for the first time in 2019; a five-year strategic plan validated and launched in December 2022; annual report published for the first time since 2019; Proactive Disclosure of Information Publication Templates; two Access to Information Training Manuals; Records Management Code of Practice Manual;

upgraded the RAIC web site in 2024 to include four digital ATI platforms -forms A,B,C, and D; we invited the PSRU in January 2024 to conduct another round of management and functional review of the Commission etc.

2. PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

It is important to note that some of the Commission's achievements under projects and programmes also relate to institutional and infrastructure developments discussed in the previous section, particularly its operational and regulatory frameworks, which involve other key stakeholders in implementing the RAI law. With support from the World Bank, Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), and the government of Sierra Leone, the Commission, under my leadership, rolled out several projects and programmes in areas such as popularisation and capacity building on access to information broadly speaking, including but not limited to Freedom of Information requests, proactive disclosure of information, and records management

The Commission's Proactive Disclosure of Information project was officially launched by Vice President Dr Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh on 6th December 2018, with about 200 participants, including MDAs and CSOs. The Commission validated the RAI Regulations in October 2019 to give effect to the RAI Act. The Regulations were enacted in August 2022 following their 21-day maturity in Parliament.

The Commission validated the Records

Management Code of Practice in December 2019 to provide guidance to public authorities in the keeping and management of public records. In December, 2019, the Commission established data resource centres in the four regional offices to create an enabling environment for public access to information in the regions. With the support of a World Bank funded consultancy, the Open Data Portal, which was developed in 2017, was upgraded to have new features aligned to the SDGs. With the support of a World Bank funded consultancy, the Commission in 2021 embarked on establishing an inventory of high-priority sustainable development Goals (SDGs) aligned datasets in Sierra Leone. Since 2019, the Commission has commemorated the International Day for the Universal Access to Information (IDUA) on 28 September every year. The Commission in March 2023 held a workshop on Access to Information among State and Non-State Actors Monitoring Electoral Practices and Processes in Sierra Leone as part of the preparations for the June 24, 2023 General Elections. With support from UNESCO and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, the Commission contributed a report on SDG 16.10.2 which relates to public access to information and the protection of fundamental freedoms to the Voluntary National Review at the UN High Level Political Forum in New York in 2021 and 2024.

3. COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT

The Commission employs a two-pronged approach to compliance with and enforcement of the RAI law—the carrot-and-stick approach. The former includes the popularisation of the law and capacity building for suppliers and requesters of information, while the latter involves issuing orders and imposing fines to enforce compliance.

Between 2019 and 2021, the Commission developed three approaches of monitoring and reporting on compliance as follows:

1. Freedom of Information Requests with the intervention, or involvement, of the Commission
2. Freedom of Information Requests, and other ATI requirements such as PIOs, Record Officers, and ICT, are captured in the Annual Compliance Report Templates completed at the end of Every Year and submitted to the Commission as required by Section 41 of the RAI Act 2013.
3. Proactive Publication Schemes completed by MDAs and submitted to the Commission for assessment.

Since 2019 to date, the Commission has achieved the following in Compliance and Enforcement: Over the years, the Commission was able to successfully process hundreds of information requests from individuals, corporate institutions, including banks, the media, civil society and academia. In 2019, the Commission recorded 112 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests/complaints, out of

which 64 were successful; in 2020, the Commission recorded 144 FOI requests/complaints, out of which 132 were successful; in 2021, the Commission recorded 369 FOI requests/complaints, out of which 345 were successful. In 2022, 13,117 FOI requests were made to Public Authorities nation-wide of which 10,237 were provided to the requesters. In 2023, 19,496 FOI requests were recorded nationally, out of which over 90% were successful; this represents a giant leap from the 13,117 recorded nationally in the 2022 financial year.

Significant progress has also so far been recorded in the Proactive Disclosure of Information (PDI) Compliance with 32 MDAs submitting their PDI Publication Schemes for 2023 with 30 approved and 2 rejected in addition to the 47 which submitted by 2022; this means a total of 79 MDAs have now submitted their PDI Publication Schemes to the Commission since the scheme was launched in December 2019

A FEW STAND-OUT CASES

There are, of course, a few stand-out cases of Freedom of Information Requests recorded. One of such cases was the one between freelance journalist Martha Kargbo and the Bank of Sierra Leone (BSL) in 2020. The information requested in this case was the history of the currency exchange rate, which the Bank is not obliged to provide access to if such information is already in the public

domain. However, the journalist said that she did not find the said information on the BSL website site rate of the local currency, the Leone to the US dollar, which the Bank of Sierra Leone claimed was available on their website, thus invoking exempt information section 14, which says that a public authority is not obliged to provide access to information it holds if such information is already in the public domain. The intervention of the Commission ultimately led to the visit of its investigation team together with the requester to the BSL where a computer of the Bank was made available to this team to look for the requested information. However, the Commission team, the requester of the said information and BSL official looked for the said information on the BSL computer monitor but did not still find the requested information. The Commission imposed a fine of 70,000,000 old Leones for non-compliance; BSL reacted by appealing against the Commission's decision. This case dragged on in the Court of Appeal for almost four years and was finally in favour of the Commission in October, 2025, thus dismissing the appeal but reducing the fine to Le 40,000 (new leones), which was paid by the Bank of Sierra Leone two weeks later.

Another standout case was the one between freelance journalist Mohamed Kabba of Media Leaks and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MOPED). The journalist requested information about what

happened to funds allocated to MOPED for a trip by some of their officials in 2021 to neighbouring Guinea, which did not take place because it was called off. MOPED responded to the information requested, saying that the said funds were eventually returned to the funder.

Perhaps the most recent standout case was the one between Lawyer Augustine Sengbhe Marrah and the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) just after the June 2023 General Elections. The lawyer requested the summary results of the elections, but when the ECSL refused to respond before the mandatory 15 working days deadline, the requester took the matter to the RAIC, applying for a review of ECSL's non-compliance. The Commission issued a 7-day ultimatum for ECSL to respond to the information request and the ECSL responded with a letter to the requester before the expiry of the 7 working days deadline saying that the summary results were already available on their website and that he the requester should go and get it there citing exempt provision Section 14 which provides that a public authority is not obliged to provide access to information if such information is available in the public domain. The requester wrote back, thanking the Commission for its intervention. However, the requester then requested access to the full election results, but the ECSL replied, citing section 92 of the Elections Act, which prevents them from showing all the results. The requester wrote to the

Commission thanking it for its intervention, but said he would go to the Supreme Court for interpretation of ECSL's reply. This case was perhaps the most mediatised FOI case since the Commission was set up, given its sensitive nature, and the Commission received many positive reviews on how it fairly and professionally handled it.

4. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Since the constitution of the second set of Commissioners in November 2018 under my leadership, the Commission has continued to strengthen its collaboration with key partners including the World Bank, Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), UNESCO, Public Financial Management Improvement and Consolidation Project (PFMICP), of the Ministry of Finance, the National Commission for Democracy (NCD), National Council For Civic Education and Development (NACCED), Audit Service Sierra Leone, CSOs etc.in the process of executing its mandate and finding ways to address the challenges confronting the Commission.

On the national front, the Commission has signed an MOU with the Audit Service of Sierra Leone and is working on MOUs with the Anti-Corruption Commission, the National Monitoring and Evaluation Agency, and the National Commission for Democracy. The

Commission collaborated with the Initiative for Media Development (IMDEV) to hold a meeting with SDG officers and the media in Monitoring and Reporting of ATI Law in Sierra Leone on 6th March 2024.

On the international front, a lot more has happened. In collaboration with the Sierra Leone Mission at the UN, Sierra Leone was among six countries that co-sponsored the UN Resolution that proclaimed September 28 as the International Day for the Universal Access to Information (IDUA), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on the 15th October, 2019. Accordingly, the Commission has commemorated the International Day for the Universal Access to Information (IDUA) every year since 2019.

The Commission became an accredited member of the International Conference of Information Commissioners (ICIC) on 24 September, 2019. RAIC contributed to the report on the status of SDG 16.10.2, which relates to Public Access to Information and the Protection of Fundamental Freedoms, to the Voluntary National Review (VNR) Report, which was presented by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development at the UN High-Level Political Forum in July 2024 in New York, USA. The Commission also contributed to a similar report in 2021. The Commission in collaboration with UNESCO, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, and Sierra Leone Mission at the

UN organized a side event on the margins of the High Level Political Forum on the SDGs at the UN HQs on the 16th July, 2024 where I had the honour to participate as a panel speaker sharing the Sierra Leone experience of digital access to information. Sierra Leone was among few countries that founded the Africa Network of Information Commissioners at the ICIC conference in Johannesburg in March 2019.

Moreover, with its huge success story of developing a Records Management Code of Practice Manual in Sierra Leone, the African Network of Information Commissions (ANIC) selected the RAIC Sierra Leone to lead in the development of a standard records management code of practice for Africa and a capacity-building strategy for the Commission on the 3rd November 2023, at a resolution of the second executive committee meeting of ANIC. The RAIC won the bid for Sierra Leone to host the 17th ed. of the International Conference of Information Commissioners (ICIC) 2026 on the 5th June 2024 in Albania. As Chairman and Information Commissioner of RAIC. I am honoured to sit on the Executive Committee of both ANIC and ICIC .

CHALLENGES

Notwithstanding the notable progress that the Commission had made over the years, the Commission continues to face significant challenges including the following:

1. Inadequate funding to support its core programmes.
2. Low staff salaries in comparison to similar governance institutions in the country.
3. Very limited official vehicles.
4. inefficient compliance rate as the public not providing the required support and cooperation to aid the work of the Commission.
5. Inadequate staff to carry out its core functions.
6. Inadequate training opportunities
7. Information technology and communication inadequacies.
8. Culture of secrecy in the public and civil service ecosystem.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. More liberal environment for ATI with the repeal of Part 5 of the Public Order Act of 1965
2. Enactment of the Cyber Security law
3. Political will to allow governance institutions such as ours to operate independently.
4. Reform of the Public Sector

PRIORITIES

1. Awaiting approval of the proposed amendment to the RAI Act, the Records and Archives Bill, and the review of the Data Protection Bill.

2. Popularisation of the Digital ATI, focusing on the RAI Regulations platforms and working with pilot MDAs to ensure public authorities understand its detailed contents for information requests.
3. Monitoring the Annual Compliance Report (ACR) and Proactive Disclosure of Information (PDI) templates to ensure that all MDAs are mandated to present a report to the Commission of their annual compliance in keeping with Section 41 of the RAIC Act.
4. Engaging development partners for funding on the capacity-building program activities of the Commission.
5. Collaborate with other stakeholders on open data

CONCLUSION

Overall, the RAIC has made steady progress ten years on in the rate of compliance with Freedom of Information requests and proactive disclosure of information nationwide, owing largely to the intensive popularisation of the RAI law and building the capacity of both suppliers and requesters of information to increase the supply and demand of information in the country. Its visibility on both the national and global stages, as well as its institutional and infrastructural developments, have also immensely contributed to the remarkable progress the Commission has made in implementing the 2013 Right to Access Information Law in Sierra Leone. The Commission, however, continues to be bogged down by very little funding and staffing, as well as logistics such as vehicles to carry out its mandate throughout the country.

3. Cybersecurity Law and the Right to Freedom of Expression and the Media in Sierra Leone

By

Francis Sowa, Ph.D., Esq.

Senior Lecturer and Dean, Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies,

Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone

Email: francis.sowa@usl.edu.sl, fsowa2007@yahoo.com

Abstract

The article examines the extent to which provisions in Sierra Leone's cybersecurity law impinge on the right to freedom of expression. The main research questions are: 'Does the cybersecurity law contain provisions that serve to limit freedom of expression and the press in the same or similar manner as the now-repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965 and what remedies exist within it to protect freedom of expression?' The theoretical anchorage is the international human rights law discourse on freedom of expression. The research method is doctrinal analysis, which provides diverse viewpoints and scrutiny of pertinent legislation or case law; in this instance, the cybersecurity statute in the context of the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression. The law seeks, among other things, to provide for the prosecution of cybercrime. Prior to the enactment of that bill, human rights organisations and media freedom advocates campaigned against provisions in the law that could restrict the right to freedom of expression guaranteed in the country's constitution and in international human rights instruments.

Keywords: Freedom of expression; media freedom; cybersecurity; human rights instruments

Introduction

The right to freedom of expression in Sierra Leone is guaranteed under international and national law and human rights instruments, notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the European Convention on Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights (1969), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1987), the Constitution of Sierra Leone (1991), and the Human Rights Commission Act (2004).

On 23 July 2020, Parliament repealed Part V of the Public Order Act 1965. The repeal followed fifty years of advocacy by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and organisations such as the Society for Democratic Initiatives and the Media Reform Coordinating Group. It was hailed as a significant victory for freedom of expression.

Nearly a year later, on 23 June 2021, Parliament passed the ‘Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021’. The Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, opened for signature on 23 November 2001, and the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data, adopted on 27 June 2014, were frequently cited during the development of the country’s cyber law.

At the formal signing of the Cybersecurity and Crime Bill into law on 17th November 2021, President Julius Maada Bio stated, “The European Union representative also acknowledges that the bill I am about to sign into law is consistent with the Budapest Convention on cybercrime, the African Union’s Malabo Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection, and the ECOWAS directive on fighting cybercrime. So, our law is therefore not a standalone contrivance for shoddy political ends. As the EU representative has noted, this is consistent with the international gold standard, the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (State House, 2021). Article 15 of the Budapest Convention requires each Party to ensure that the establishment, implementation and application of powers and procedures are subject to conditions and safeguards provided for under its domestic law, which shall provide for the adequate protection of human rights and liberties.”

Some provisions of the Act have been regarded as replacing sections that restricted freedom of expression in the now-repealed Part V of the Public Order Act. In fact, some journalists have argued that cybersecurity laws are a direct replacement for the repealed criminal and false publication laws. Although the objects of the two laws are specific and distinct, it is argued that they share similar effects in restricting freedom of expression and the media.

This article, therefore, examines whether the cybersecurity law contains provisions that limit freedom of expression and the press in the same or similar manner to the now-repealed Part V of the Public Order Act 1965, and whether it provides remedies to protect freedom of expression.

Review of literature

The theoretical anchorage is the international human rights law discourse on freedom of expression and the libertarian theory.

Freedom of Expression and International Human Rights Instruments

At the global level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) sets the stage for the recognition and protection of Freedom of Expression. Article 19 (2) of the UDHR is instructive on this: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart

information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aligns with Article 19 of the UDHR, which states: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”

Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) provides that: “Every individual shall have the right to receive information. Every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law.”

A close examination of these provisions shows that they guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The difference, however, is that whereas the UDHR is merely a declaration, the ICCPR — a treaty with binding force — is now part of Sierra Leone's law. The provision on freedom of expression is included in most countries' constitutions, including Sierra Leone's 1991 Constitution. “Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression, and for the purpose of this section the said freedom includes the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, freedom from interference with his correspondence, freedom to own, establish and operate any

medium for the dissemination of information, ideas, and academic freedom in institutions of learning...” (Section 25 (1) of the Constitution of Sierra Leone)

Limitations to Freedom of Expression and of the Press

The UDHR places no limitation on the enjoyment of the right of freedom of expression. Similarly, the ACHPR has no direct limitations on freedom of expression. However, the ACHPR, in Article 27(2), states that “The rights and freedoms of each individual shall be exercised with due regard to the rights of others, collective security, morality and common interest.”

Some international human rights instruments and Sierra Leone's Constitution contain provisions with specific limitations. Article 19 (Sub-Article 3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that: “The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 (Article 19 (2) of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: For respect of the rights or reputations of others; For the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.” Subsection (2) of Section 25 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone Act No. 6 of 1991) provides that “Nothing contained in or done under the authority of any law shall be

held to be inconsistent with or in contravention of this section to the extent that the law in question makes provision:- which is reasonably required- in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality, public health; or for the purpose of protecting the reputation, rights and freedom of other persons preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, maintaining the authority and independence of the court, or regulating the telephony, telegraphy, telecommunication, posts, wireless, broadcasting, television, public exhibition or entertainments”

As Binneh-Kamara (2007, p. 6) puts it, the right to freedom of expression is not absolute. It is limited. In fact, there is no such thing as an absolute right. The rights of every citizen are subject to the rights of others. Baran (2006) opines that “The Media are not necessarily fully free and government control is sometimes allowed.” Cole (1995) addresses the limitation of press freedom as follows: “...Nowhere in the world is there a totally free press. Even Britain, which is widely regarded as a model of Western democracy, has laid down restrictions on freedom of expression to protect the rights of individuals and for reasons of ‘state security’.”

Libertarian Theory

The clamour for press freedom is very old. It has its roots in libertarian theory. The theory was developed out of the writings of Milton, Locke, Mill and the general philosophy of

rationalisation and natural rights. It was adopted in England after 1866 and later in the United States. The chief purpose was to inform, entertain, sell but chiefly to help discover truth and to check on government (Dominick, 2002; McQuail, 2005; Siebert et al, 1956).

The theory notes that anyone with economic means has the right to use the media, but that the media should be controlled by the self-writing process of the truth in the free marketplace of ideas. It advocates freedom of the media to enable it to serve as an instrument for checking on the government and meeting other needs of society (ibid).

This theory was the direct opposite of authoritarianism. If authoritarianism puts the press into total subjection, libertarianism seeks to remove that subjection, in other words, to free the press. However, libertarianism has evolved over time from its inception to its current form. Even the degree of freedom to be exercised by the press varies among libertarians. The 18th Century libertarians sometimes differed on minor points but agreed on fundamentals (Ibid).

For example, the Libertarian theory was somewhat narrowed by Justice Wendell Holmes of the United States Supreme Court (1902 to 1932). He opined that some limits must be set on the free expression guaranteed in the American Bill of Rights, the name by which the first ten amendments to the United

States Constitution are known, introduced by James Madison to the First United States Congress in 1789. Determining where those limits should be drawn, Holmes thought, involves a fine balancing of the individual's right and the protection of society.

For John Stuart Mill, an English scholar, in his work *'On Liberty'* (1859), free expression should not be justified on the basis of natural rights, but on the grounds of utility. He emphasised that the government, the traditional enemy of liberty, was not the sole threat to individual liberty; that the majority might tyrannise the minority, the majority might stifle the minority's thought. For Mill, liberty is the right of the matured individual to think and act as he pleases so long as he harms no one in doing so. In other words, people's freedom to swing their fists ends where the face of others begins.

The Libertarian theory advocates a free press, free from all forms of control. The school of thought that supports this theory holds that the media should be free from government or other powerful interests, allowing them to report and express themselves freely and independently, and to meet the needs of their audiences. The libertarian system allows editorial autonomy within an open, competitive environment.

Cybersecurity law in Sierra Leone

Proponents of cyber laws rely on limitations and restrictions on freedom of expression and information to develop statutes and policies

that regulate the internet and digital platforms. The United Nations in 2016 affirmed that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular, freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice, in accordance with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Sierra Leone passed the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021. It provides "for the effective, unified and comprehensive legal, regulatory and institutional framework for the prohibition, prevention, detection, prosecution and punishment of cybercrimes; prevention of the abusive use of computer systems; to provide for the establishment of structures to promote cybersecurity and capacity building; to provide for the timely and effective collection of electronic evidence for the purpose of investigation and prosecution of cybercrime; to provide for the protection of Critical National Information Infrastructure and the protection of computer systems and networks, electronic communications, data and computer programs, intellectual property and privacy rights to provide for facilitation of international cooperation in dealing with cybercrime matters and to provide for other related matters."

The country's cybersecurity legislation is reportedly aligned with the Budapest

Convention on Cybercrime and the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data. Both documents encourage States to take national-level measures to address cybersecurity issues while emphasising the protection of human rights.

Sierra Leone signed the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection on 29 January 2016. The Convention, in Chapter III, addresses 'Promoting Cyber Security and Combating Cybercrime.' In 2021, the Parliament of Sierra Leone passed the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021. On 17 November 2021, President Dr Julius Maada Bio signed the Cyber Security and Crime Bill 2021 into law.

Methods

The research method is doctrinal analysis, which offers diverse viewpoints and scrutinises relevant legislation or case law; in this instance, the cybersecurity statute in relation to the right to freedom of expression. Doctrinal research is "systematic examination of problems relating to law within an appropriate methodological framework" (Amrit, 2018). It is well-suited to this study because it has been widely used by lawyers, judges, and jurists as a systematic approach to legal reasoning. It is a fundamental type of research in the legal field. It systematically examines current laws, cases, and authoritative legal documents on a particular issue. "Doctrinal legal research is 'research in law'

rather than 'research about law'." This article is an attempt to engage in 'research in law', that is, the laws on freedom of expression and cybersecurity.

Findings

The first research question is: 'Does the cybersecurity law contain provisions that serve to limit freedom of expression and the press in the same or similar manner as the now-repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965?'

The repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965 contained three separate offences: defamatory libel, false publication and seditious libel.

Section 26 of the Public Order Act No. 46 of 1965 provides that "Any person who maliciously publishes any defamatory matter knowing the same to be false shall be guilty of an offence called libel and liable on conviction to imprisonment for any term not exceeding three years or to a fine not exceeding one thousand leones or both." Section 32 (subsection 2) of the said Act provides that: "Any person who maliciously publishes any false statement, rumour or report which is calculated to bring into disrepute any person who holds an office under the Constitution, in the discharge of his duties shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding five hundred leones or to imprisonment not exceeding two years or both."

Section 32 (sub-section 3) provides that: "Any person who maliciously publishes any false statement, rumour or report which is likely to injure the credit or reputation of Sierra Leone or the government shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding three hundred leones or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding twelve months or both."

Section 44 (1) of the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021 provides that "A person, including a corporation, partnership, or association, who individually or with another person, willfully and repeatedly communicates, either directly or indirectly, with another person, if he knows or ought to have known his conduct- (a) is likely to cause that person apprehension or fear of violence to him or damage or loss on his property; or (b) detrimentally affects that person; commits an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not less than Le 30,000,000 and not more than Le 50,000,000 or to a term of imprisonment not less than 2 years and not exceeding 5 years or to both such fine and imprisonment and in the case of a corporation, partnership, or association, to a fine not less than Le 100,000,000 and not exceeding Le 250,000,000. Sub-section (2) provides that "A person, including a corporation, partnership, or association, who recklessly or intentionally sends a message or other matter by means of a computer system or network that- (a) is grossly offensive, pornographic or of an

indecent, obscene or menacing character or cause any such message or matter to be so disseminated without consent; or (b) he knows to be false, for the purpose of causing danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent, commits an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not less than Le 30,000,000 and not more than Le 50,000,000 or to a term of imprisonment not less than 2 years and not exceeding 5 years or to both such fine and imprisonment and in the case of a corporation, partnership, or association, to a fine not less than Le 100,000,000 and not exceeding Le 250,000,000."

The provisions in question (now repealed Part V of the Public Order Act, 1965) restricted freedom of expression and the media, particularly with respect to the publication of defamatory statements and false statements.

The wording in section 44(1) of the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021, is similar to that in the now-repealed sections 26 (Knowingly publishing a false defamatory libel), 27 (Defamatory libel), and 32 (Publication of false news). These include expressions such as "willfully and repeatedly communicates, either directly or indirectly, with another person" as publication, and "if he knows or ought to have known" "he knows to be false." Part 1 of the Act 2021, under 'Interpretation', defines "False news" as

“incorrect deceptive information or propaganda, misinformation or hoaxes deliberately spread under the guise of being authentic news via traditional print and broadcast news media or online social media written and published with the intent to mislead for gains.”

Although wrongs deemed ‘defamatory’ and ‘false’ are now treated as civil wrongs pursuant to the repeal of Part V of the Public Order Act 1965, similar wrongs are criminalised under the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 and contain expressions that limit freedom of expression. Whether those limitations align with democratic standards is addressed later in this article.

Sierra Leone signed the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection on 29 January 2016. The Convention in Chapter III deals with ‘Promoting Cyber Security and Combating Cybercrime.’ Section I outlines the Cybersecurity Measures to be implemented at the National Level. Article 25 of the Convention provides that each State Party shall adopt such legislative and/or regulatory measures as it deems effective by considering as substantive criminal offences acts which affect the confidentiality, integrity, availability and survival of information and communication technology systems, the data they process and the underlying network infrastructure, as well as effective procedural

measures to pursue and prosecute offenders. State Parties shall take into consideration the choice of language that is used in international best practices. Article 25 (3) ‘Rights of citizens’ notes that in adopting legal measures in the area of cyber security and establishing the framework for implementation thereof, each State Party shall ensure that the measures so adopted will not infringe on the rights of citizens guaranteed under the national constitution and internal laws, and protected by international conventions, particularly the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and other basic rights such as freedom of expression, the right to privacy and the right to a fair hearing, among others.

The cases on cyberbullying and cyberstalking have not proceeded to full-blown trials and judgments regarding the application of the provisions of the Cyber Security and Crimes Act, 2022. The complaints clearly show that, under the Act, it is considered a limitation on freedom of expression, while human rights advocates believe it is consistent with democratic standards.

The first case under the cybersecurity law’s provision on cyberbullying and cyberstalking concerned Ahmed Doyle Kamara, popularly known as Tazmo Sliz, an entertainer in Makeni, Northern Sierra Leone. On 18 December 2021, the Sierra Leone Police arrested and detained Ahmed Doyle Kamara for allegedly insulting and attacking the Fullah

ethnic group in a Facebook Live video. In January 2022, the matter was brought to court. Tazmo Sliz was charged with two counts of cyberbullying and cyberstalking contrary to Section 44(2)(a) and (b) of the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021, and misuse of a device contrary to Section 38(1) of the Cyber Security and Crime Act of 2021. On 21 February 2022, Tazmo apologised to the Fullah ethnic group in a Facebook Live video for his actions, stating: “To the Fullah community in Freetown, in Bombali, and in the diaspora, please, forgive me. I promise never to put on such behaviour again, as I have realised that I stooped so low.” On Monday, 28 February 2022, Magistrate Sahr Kekura of Pademba Road Magistrate Court No. 1 in Freetown discharged the matter after the complainant, Mohamed Salieu Jalloh, on behalf of the Fullah Community, accepted Tazmo’s apology (MRCG, 2022).

Another was the alleged cyberstalking and bullying of President Julius Maada Bio by former APC Minister of Trade and Industry, Kemoh Sesay. He was alleged to have ‘willfully and repeatedly’ communicated directly with President Bio in a manner he knew to be false, for the purpose of causing danger, insult, injury, hatred, criminal intimidation or needless anxiety to the president. He was charged with one count of Cyber Stalking and Bullying contrary to Section 44 (2) (b) of the Cyber Security and

Crime Act 2021. He was acquitted and discharged.

In May 2024, the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) issued an arrest warrant for Justice Boima, the CEO of Justice FM and TV, on charges of cyberstalking and bullying. ASP Amos Lansana, an officer attached to the Cybercrime Unit at the CID Headquarters and in charge of the matter, confirmed the issuance of the warrant and said they were still searching for him to begin a proper investigation (MRCG, 2024).

In June 2024, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) arrested and detained lawyer Joy Bayoh Esq. at the CID in Freetown for allegedly cyberstalking the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone on Facebook. She was released on bail, and the matter was dismissed (MRCG, 2024).

As seen in the cases above, most had not reached a logical conclusion, necessitating submissions and rulings to determine whether the provisions of the cybersecurity law (particularly those on cyberstalking and cyberbullying) were inconsistent with limitations on freedom of expression and democratic standards. The second research question is: “What remedies exist within it [cyber security law] to protect freedom of expression”? Section 44(3) of the Cyber Security and Crimes Act, 2021 provides that “Notwithstanding subsection (1) a person shall not be deemed to have acted in contravention

of this Act if he does an act -(a) for the purpose of preventing or detecting crime; (b) in compliance of and in accordance with the terms of a judicial order issued or in exercise of any power under this Act or any law; or (c) which is in the interest of the public.”

The most common justification journalists offer for their work is that it is “in the public interest.” It is this notion that underpins journalism's moral authority to ask hard questions of those in power, to invade others' privacy, and to test the limits of ethical practice in order to discover the truth (Wendy, 2012).

The public interest refers to anything relevant to the lives and well-being of all of us, to society and our communities. It concerns the “common good”, meaning matters that affect our health, livelihoods, quality of life, security, and our governance. The public interest does not mean what the public might find interesting. Broadly speaking, the difference is between what is relevant to members of the public and what might merely entertain, fascinate or titillate some of them. The public interest is about having a safe, healthy and functional society. In a democracy, journalism plays a central role in that. It provides people with the information they need to participate in the democratic process. If journalists are good at their job, they hold governments and other institutions to account (Eggington, n.d.). However, this public interest defence has yet

to be tested, as cases end before full trial and judgment.

Conclusion

The article has examined the application of Sierra Leone's cybersecurity law, with reference to the extent to which it impinges on the right to freedom of expression. The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed under international and national human rights instruments. Those laws also restrict the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression. Proponents of cyber laws rely on limitations and restrictions on freedom of expression and information to develop statutes and policies that regulate the internet and digital platforms. In Sierra Leone, certain provisions of the cybersecurity law have been regarded as replacing sections that restricted freedom of expression in the now-repealed Part V of the Public Order Act. The cybersecurity law, particularly the provisions on cyberbullying and cyberstalking, contains provisions that limit freedom of expression, similar to the now-repealed Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965. Although most cases involving cyberbullying and cyberstalking have not proceeded to full-blown trials and judgments regarding the application of the provisions of the Cyber Security and Crimes Act, 2022, the complaints clearly indicate that these provisions limit freedom of expression. One of the remedies provided in Section 44(3) of the Act, 2021, is a defence for cyberbullying and cyberstalking

for acts that are in “the interest of the public”. However, this public interest defence is yet to be tested, as the cases end before full trial and judgment.

List of References

American Convention on Human Rights (1969). American Convention on Human Rights (Pact of San José). San José, Costa Rica: Organization of American States. Available at: https://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_b-32_american_convention_on_human_rights.htm (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

African Union (2014) African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention). Malabo: African Union. Available at: <https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/29560-sl-AFRICAN%20UNION%20CONVENTION%20ON%20CYBER%20SECURITY%20AND%20PERSONAL%20DATA%20PROTECTION.pdf> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

American Convention on Human Rights (1969). San José: Organization of American States.

Baran, S.J. (2006). Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Binneh-Kamara, A. (2007). The Legislative and Regulatory Context of the Media in Sierra Leone. Free-town: Unpublished.

Cole, B. (1995). Mass Media, Freedom and Democracy in Sierra Leone. Freetown: Premier Publishing House.

Council of Europe (2001) Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention). Budapest: Council of Europe.

Dominick, J.R. (2002). The Dynamics of Mass Communication: Media in the Digital Age. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Eggington, B. (n.d.) ‘Journalism and the public interest’, Media Helping Media. Available at: <https://mediahelpingmedia.org/basics/applying-the-public-interest-test-to-journalism/> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

European Court of Human Rights (1950) European Convention on Human Rights. Rome: Council of Europe.

Government of Sierra Leone (1965) Public Order Act 1965. Freetown: Government Printing Press.

Government of Sierra Leone (1991). The Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act No. 6 of 1991. Freetown: Government Printing Press.

Government of Sierra Leone (2004) Human Rights Commission Act 2004. Freetown: Government Printing Press.

Government of Sierra Leone (2021) Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021. Freetown: Government Printing Press.

Human Rights Council (2016) The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet. Thirty-second session, UN General Assembly. Available at: https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights. New York: United Nations.

Kharel, A. (2018) 'Doctrinal legal research', SSRN Electronic Journal. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3130525> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

Ling, L. (n.d.) 'Is the Internet a right or a privilege?', Seeker. Available at: <https://www.seeker.com/is-the-internet-a-right-or-a-privilege-1998185329.html> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

McQuail, D. (2005) *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. 5th edn. London: Sage Publications.

Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) (2022) Report on Press Freedom, Information, Internet and Digital Rights in Sierra Leone: Eighth Edition. Freetown: MRCG.) <https://mrcgonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/EIGHT-EDITION-PFR-2022.pdf>

Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) (2023) Report on Press Freedom, Information, Internet and Digital Rights in Sierra Leone: Eleventh Edition (June–November 2023). Freetown: MRCG.) <https://mrcgonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/ELEVENTH-EDITION-PFR-2023.pdf>

Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) (2024a) Report on Press Freedom, Information, Internet and Digital Rights in Sierra Leone: Twelfth Edition (December 2023–May 2024). Freetown: MRCG. <https://mrcgonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/TWELFTH-EDITION-PRESS-FREEDOM-REPORT-2024-1.pdf>

Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) (2024b) Report on Press Freedom, Information, Internet and Digital Rights in Sierra Leone: Thirteenth Edition (June–November 2024). Freetown: MRCG. <https://mrcgonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/THIRTEENTH-EDITION-PRESS-FREEDOM-REPORT-2024.pdf>

Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T. and Schramm, W. (1956) *Four Theories of the Press*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

State House, Sierra Leone (2021) Statement by His Excellency Dr Julius Maada Bio at the Formal Signing of the Cybersecurity and Crime Bill into Law, 17 November 2021. Available at: <https://statehouse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Statement-by-His-Excellency-Dr-Julius-Maada-Bio-President-of-the-Republic-of-Sierra-Leone-at-the-formal-Signing-of-the-Cybersecurity-and-Crime-Bill-Into-Law-17-November-2021-1.pdf> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

UNESCO (n.d.) Access to information laws. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/access-information-laws> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

United Nations (1948) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Paris: United Nations.

Iberdrola (n.d.) 'Digital rights: essential in the Internet age'. Available at: <https://www.iberdrola.com/innovation/what-are-digital-rights> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

Wendy Collinson (2012) 'The public interest', *The Public Interest*, 7 Jul

4. A Systematic Review of Blogging in Sierra Leone: Opportunities and Challenges

By

Hindolo Tonya Musa (PhD), Lecturer in Development Communication, Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies, FBC, USL

Abstract

This article explores how bloggers are activating civic space in Sierra Leone by providing information on matters of public interest and helping the public respond to events and activities directly through new communication technologies. The

proliferation of social networking sites, aided by opportunities for user-generated content, has significantly contributed to the growth of blogging in Sierra Leone. These bloggers discuss several issues, including politics, entertainment, commerce, national security, disaster response, drug abuse, and other matters of public interest. They also gossip about celebrities, politicians, public officials, and local authorities, to name but a few.

There are prospects and challenges relating to how blogging is done in Sierra Leone. These prospects include engaging duty bearers to account to the public for the powers vested in them and the resources utilised. Another prospect is mass participation in public discourse relating to state governance, democracy, and national security. The downside of these prospects includes information pollution: fake news,

misinformation, disinformation, and hate messages. There are also concerns about

protecting or respecting intellectual property rights.

Given these prospects and barriers, this article collected data on bloggers' use and misuse of digital media platforms and offered strategic measures to coordinate, train, and regulate bloggers in Sierra Leone to enhance professionalism and accountability. The data will be collected through interviews, content analysis, and direct observations.

Keywords: bloggers, social media, privacy, civic activism, information pollution

Introduction

One peculiarity of today's digital revolution is blogging. The blog can be used for anything which involves communicating or building information on the World Wide Web (Jones and Alony, 2008). Common blogs in Sierra Leone are content created for social networking sites that discuss or comment on social and political events. Blogging technology has increased the number of citizen journalists and, significantly, in Sierra Leone, most newsmakers prefer the coverage or

reporting of bloggers to that of mainstream journalists. Citizen journalists are people using Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to capture events, generate content and report events and activities without having formal journalistic training or having gained newsroom training by media organisations (McCullagh, 2008). In this light, Ahmed

Nasralla, the President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), observed that blogging in Sierra Leone had grown rapidly over the past decade, driven by digital penetration, youth innovation, and increased access to mobile internet.

Nasralla further noted that the quality and accountability of blogging practices vary widely, with primary concerns about misinformation, unethical content, and legal vulnerability. This article, therefore, reviewed the role of bloggers in promoting civic dialogue and offered strategic measures to promote professionalism and accountability. A series of interviews has been conducted with key stakeholders in journalism, academia, and regulatory bodies to assess their perspectives on raising blogging standards.

One of the article's arguments concerns the significance of blogging in a democratic society. The primary advantage of blogging is the democratisation of communication. Blogging provides a platform for individuals to share their thoughts online with little or no

gatekeeping. In addition, it can improve creativity and critical thinking. Currently, with the help of data science, blogging is used to collect data on how individuals think about certain topics, and this data is then utilised across several social media platforms for community mining (Alsamadani, 2017). From a creative perspective, user-generated content on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp encourages content creation.

Another argument put forward in this article is the antisocial effect of blogging, it includes spreading hate messages, misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and malicious political propaganda. In addition, it invades people's privacy and, to some extent, undermines state security.

The major issues reviewed in 2024 include: *Hawa Hunt alleged defamation of the first family in Sierra Leone, the controversy between Dr. Sylvia Blyden and Dr. Monina David Sengeh, the tragic death of the popular artist, Lansana Sheriff aka Steady Bongo, the leaked audio conversation of former President Ernest Bai Koroma, videos of the alleged perpetrators of the November 2023 coup attempt in Sierra Leone, Hon Paran Tarawally and his wife alleged corruption by the Anti-Corruption Commission, the demand for electoral justice by the opposition All Peoples Congress, the audio series done by Dr. Sylvia Blyden on the alleged inciting activities of*

former President Bai Koroma and the purported resurrection of Kadiatu whom they claimed have died five years ago with her grave in Lungi, the viral nude videos and photos and local celebrities (Hawanatu Konneh and Sia Savage).

Literature Review

In recent years, weblogs, or blogs for short, have become an important form of online content. The personal nature of blogs, online interactions between bloggers, and the temporal nature of blog entries, differentiate blogs from other kinds of Web content. Bloggers interact with one another by linking to each other's posts, thereby forming online communities.

The term “blog” is a combined and shortened form of the word “web blog”. Blogs contain a chronological series of posts, many of which include comments from readers and links to other sites. Together, the communities of blogs form the blogosphere, which Godwin – Jones (2003) describes as a large, loosely woven net of information, as bloggers post new entries, debate issues, and reference and link to other blogs.

In recent times, there is a debate as whether bloggers set the agenda for mainstream journalists or otherwise. Most people, especially in Sierra Leone, are of the view that bloggers are far ahead of journalists. This implies that journalists and most mainstream

media collect information from posts by bloggers which they use for their reporting or help to identify the angles of their stories. This is unlike Johnson and Kaye’s (2004) report that bloggers are not independent news gatherers, but they rely heavily on traditional media for their content. Many blogs are platforms for political activism, and many bloggers, especially those identified as politically conservative, tend to be critical of traditional media.

The development of REELS on Facebook and TikTok has increased the number of bloggers in Sierra Leone who are largely interested in commenting on politics and the lives of celebrities. These content creators are also intruding on people’s privacy with impunity. In other parts of the world, bloggers are promoting marketing, advertisement and commerce. Some are even enhancing education, especially through YouTube and other platforms. Another interesting point is evangelism.

List of the selected bloggers in Sierra Leone in 2024

Weblog 232	Salone Gossip
Fine TV Sierra Leone	Hawnatu Konneh Blog
I.B. Blog online TV	Lelemu TV
Unity House Sierra Leone	Borkutok TV
Wise Blog SL	Liberty online TV
Makoni Times	Gbla TV

Born 2 Blog	KP Armani Online TV
Salone Blog	24HOURS Blog
Swit salone	Sierra Leone Gospel Bloggers

Methodology

This article used qualitative techniques through interviews as the best approach of collecting data. Interviews were conducted with academics, civil society organisations, journalists, and some popular bloggers in Sierra Leone. The main questions were:

1. *How are bloggers promoting civic dialogue in Sierra Leone?*
2. *How to regulate bloggers to enhance professionalism and accountability?*
3. *In which ways are bloggers promoting misinformation, fake news and disinformation?*
4. *How are bloggers intruding on people’s privacy?*

In addition to the interviews, a brief review of postings on the controversies between Dr. Moinina David Senge and Dr. Sylvia Blyden was done to highlight the tone of conversation and the frames and priming by bloggers.

Findings

There had been serious attacks between the Chief Minister, Dr. David Monina Senge and Dr. Sylvia Blyden that have been attracting several bloggers. Some politicians and media

analysts have described it as unfortunate and uncalled for.

“I’m back from an inspirational church service today. Now, Audio 29 by the Chief Minister and my critique of his views, which criticisms led to the egregious abuse of my late Mother in her grave, have not been heard by some people”, said Dr Blyden. After posting her reactions to Dr David Sengeh, most bloggers shared them on several platforms, and some even sent them on X.

It has been used here as a case study of political attacks, hate messages, and defamatory content. Additionally, some bloggers are fueling community tensions, especially along political, regional, and tribal lines. During election periods or political disagreements, you’ll find blog posts that are clearly meant to provoke anger, spread fear, or incite violence. In a post-conflict country like Sierra Leone, that is reckless. The civil society interviewee states that, “At CYPaD, we work with young people on peacebuilding, and it’s clear that such divisive content undermines all those efforts. Bloggers have influence, and they must be held to a higher standard, especially when it comes to issues of peace and national cohesion”.

Another issue is defamation. Defamation is now becoming a norm in the blogging space, and it’s a big problem. Some bloggers post unverified information just to get likes and shares, knowing fully well the damage it may cause to someone’s reputation. We have seen

youth leaders, women activists, and even ordinary citizens dragged through the mud online without any evidence. The sad part is, once it's out there, the damage is already done.

As a country, we must push for more responsible blogging and teach content creators about the legal and human consequences of misinformation. A case in point is the defamatory content by Hawa Hunt against the First Family, which was widely circulated by bloggers. However, only Hawa Hunt was arrested and indicted for defaming the First Lady and the President.

Interviewees stated that several cases have been observed in which bloggers cross the line and violate people's privacy; sometimes out of ignorance, other times for clout. Publishing private messages, family details, or sensitive personal information without consent is not just unethical; it's dangerous. In some cases, it has led to public humiliation, mental health breakdowns, or even threats to people's lives. This is especially concerning in communities where people already feel unsafe or marginalised. There must be a balance between informing the public and protecting individual dignity.

In terms of improving blogging standards, educational institutions are regarded as crucial incubators of professional blogging practices, though the extent of responsibility attributed to them varies.

Joshua Nicol, the Head of Journalism and Media Studies at FBC, expresses doubt about

communication schools' ability to elevate bloggers to professional status. He believes that society doesn't yet accept bloggers as credible professionals, so educational investment might be wasted.

Joseph Sannoh, the Senior Citizen, however, strongly believes in curriculum reform, especially the integration of AI journalism, digital communication ethics, and content creation strategies. He sees future journalists as self-employed digital entrepreneurs who must be equipped with modern tools and thinking.

The Reporters Union President Yeanor Kabia echoes this, stressing the need for new media modules within existing journalism programs. He suggests adding digital ethics, audience engagement, and

Joseph Sannoh offers a more regulatory and structured outlook. He argues for an urgent need to define bloggers legally and ethically. Sannoh advocates for a specific policy framework, including a code of conduct for bloggers, accountability mechanisms, and legislative recognition. According to him, many bloggers face incarceration due to a lack of knowledge about legal boundaries and professional responsibilities. Sannoh's viewpoint reveals a belief in institutional reform and the importance of formal education, training, and policy intervention to elevate blogging.

These interviewees agreed that blogging has activated civic space in Sierra Leone, where most conversations about parliament, the executive, and court rulings are now in the public domain.

Citizens have become more active and are now participating in decision-making. Some are even critical of the democratic standards of some professionals, including lawyers. This was based on the 2024 BAR Elections in Kenema and on how bloggers reported the conduct of the elections.

Conclusion

This article has examined how bloggers are activating civic space in Sierra Leone by providing information on matters of public interest and helping the public respond to events and activities directly through new communication technologies. The growth of social networking sites, enabled by opportunities for user-generated content, has greatly contributed to the rise in the number of bloggers in Sierra Leone. These bloggers address a variety of issues, including politics, entertainment, commerce, national security, disaster responses, drug abuse, and other public matters. There are both opportunities and challenges associated with blogging in Sierra Leone. Several cases have been observed where bloggers cross boundaries and invade people's privacy; sometimes out of ignorance, other times for attention. Publishing private messages, family details, or

sensitive personal information without consent is not only unethical but also dangerous. Blogging in Sierra Leone requires review and improvement, especially given the country's fragile democratic state. People need greater media literacy to reduce their vulnerability to bloggers. There have also been recommendations to review the academic curriculum in media and journalism studies to include modules on blogging.

References

Alsamadani, H.A. (2017) 'The effectiveness of using online blogging for students' individual and group writing', *International Education Studies*, 11(1), p. 44.

Child, J.T., Haridakis, P.M. and Petronio, S. (2012) 'Blogging privacy rule orientations, privacy management, and content deletion practices: The variability of online privacy management activity at different stages of social media use', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(5), pp. 1859–1872.

Godwin-Jones, R. (2003) 'Emerging technologies: Blogs and wikis, environments for online collaboration', *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2), pp. 12–16.

Hans, S., Maqsad, S., Swami, A.N. and Kumar, A. (2021) 'A systematic review of blogging: Opportunities and challenges', *International Journal of Scientific Engineering Research in Computer Science and*

Information Technology, 7(3), pp. 123–129.

Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.32628/CSEIT2172133>.

Johnson, T.J. and Kaye, B.K. (2004) ‘Wag the blog: How reliance on traditional media and the Internet influence credibility perceptions of weblogs among blog users’, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81(3), pp. 622–642.

Jones, M. and Alony, I. (2008) ‘Blogs – The new source of data analysis’, in *Proceedings of the 2008 InSITE Conference*. pp. [pages not specified].

McCullagh, K. (2008) ‘Blogging: Self-presentation and privacy’, *Information & Communications Technology Law*, 17(1), pp. 3–23.

Thevenot, G. (2007) ‘Blogging as a social media’, *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 7(4), pp. 287–289.

Zhang, C., Sun, J., Zhu, X. and Fang, Y. (2010) ‘Privacy and security for online social networks: Challenges and opportunities’, *IEEE Network*, 24(4), pp. 13–18.

Zhang, J., Qu, Y., Cody, J. and Wu, Y. (2010) ‘A case study of micro-blogging in the enterprise: Use, value, and related issues’, in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. pp. 123–132