

# **MEDIA COUNCIL OF MALAWI (MCM)**

**Promoting a Vibrant Media that is professional and  
Accountable to the Public**

# **MEDIA SELF REGULATION: THE MERITS**

**Balancing Freedom and Responsibility**

**A PRESENTATION AT THE ORIENTATION  
OF MCM MEMBERS OF BOARD OF  
TRUSTEES  
HIPPO VIEW LODGE LIWONDE**

**By Baldwin Chiyamwaka, Executive Director Media Council of Malawi (MCM)**

# Introduction

- *Media Self-Regulation lies at the heart of Media Council of Malawi's (MCM) mandate to defend and support media freedom in the country.*
- MCM supports journalists who wish to unite in their efforts to raise professional standards and thus strengthen the social standing of journalism.
- The co-operation between journalists in the field of ethics is also a great training ground for their co-operation in demanding their legitimate rights from the government.
- However, quality should never be a pre-requisite for freedom. Only a fully free media can be fully responsible.
- Self-regulation and the promotion of quality journalism are among important safeguards of media freedom and even of media power.
- It is in this spirit that this presentation aims to offer information to journalists, editors, publishers, and media students, as well as to politicians, government officials, religious groups, civil society organisations and the general public.

# Defining Media Self- Regulation



- Media self-regulation is a joint effort by media professionals in the media industry to set professional standards, a code of ethics and editorial guidelines and abide by them in a learning process open to the public.
- By doing so, the independent media accept their share of responsibility and accountability for the quality of media products and public discourse in Malawi,
- while fully preserving their editorial autonomy.

# The Nature of Media Self-Regulation



## Self-regulation is not about Censorship

- Self-regulation is not censorship and not even self-censorship.
- It is about establishing minimum principles on ethics i.e. accuracy, truth, balance, objectivity, personal rights etc
- while fully preserving editorial freedom on what to report and what opinions to express.

# The Nature of Media Self-Regulation



*Self-regulation is not about a failure-free press?*

- Nobody's perfect. The media also makes mistakes. But mistakes does not mean the media has failed or fails.
- Besides, publicly expressed criticism will always be perceived as incorrect by those scrutinized.
- Self-regulation helps the media respond to legitimate complaints, and correct mistakes

# Who are the Players in Media Self-Regulation?

- Self-regulation is a pledge by quality-conscious media professionals through a self regulatory body to maintain a dialogue with the public.
- Mechanisms are set up to run a credible self- regulatory system such as:
  - A complaint mechanism to deal with justified concerns in a rational and autonomous way.
  - An accreditation policy and press card scheme that upholds professionalism
- In the media, obviously only those outlets whose journalists, editors and owners seek to produce a responsible media would engage in this dialogue.
- Self-regulation can be set up both industry-wide and in-house.

# Who are the Players in Media Self-Regulation?

- Outside the media, political institutions and public figures are usually the main providers of complaints, as reporting and commenting on their activities is an important job for the serious media.
- But equally interested partners could be civil society's protagonists such as business, religious and minority organizations, traditional and newly established interest groups,
- and, of course, individual members of the public

# MERITS OF MEDIA SELF-REGULATION

## *Good for the press?*

- By promoting standards, self-regulation helps maintain the media's credibility with the public. This is particularly welcome in new democracies like Malawi, most of which are also new to an independent media.
- Media self-regulation helps convince the public that the free media are not irresponsible.
- At the same time, self-regulation protects the right of journalists to be independent, and to be judged for professional mistakes not by those in power but by their colleagues.
- When it comes to correcting factual errors or violations of personal rights by the press, satisfaction over the judgments of self-regulatory bodies lessens pressure on the judiciary system to sanction journalists.

# MERITS OF MEDIA SELF-REGULATION

## Good for the public?

- It is quite natural for media consumers to seek guarantees about the value of journalists' information.
- Codes of ethics provide guidance on editorial standards,
- while complaint mechanisms offer a kind of “quality insurance”. Accreditation helps protect the public from impersonators
- Complaints launched with self-regulatory bodies come at no cost, unlike court proceedings. This is a considerable advantage for the average citizen.
- There are benefits for complaining politicians, such as the speedy resolution of disputes, and the satisfaction of seeing mistakes acknowledged publicly and voluntarily by the press.

# MERITS OF MEDIA SELF-REGULATION

## *Good for democracy?*

- Democracy is not only about disputes. It is also about a shared culture of disputing in a rational and fair manner.
- Governments, even if freely elected, are participants in the political contest and therefore are not best-suited to enforce rationality and fairness.
- Besides, democracy is incompatible with state custody of the press.
- Media self-regulation is an effort to impose democracy's political culture, independent of political forces.
- It also advances the transition from a government-owned, state-controlled media to one owned and controlled by civil society.

# CONCLUSION



Five reasons for the media to develop media self regulation

- It preserves editorial freedom;
- It helps to minimize state interference;
- It promotes media quality;
- It is evidence of media accountability;
- It helps readers access the media.