

**Press Union of Liberia**

**National Media Council**



**Project: Liberia Media Development**

**Partners: USAID, Internews, & Press Union of Liberia**

**Quarterly Report:**

**(October, November, & December, 2017)**

## ***I. Summary of Activities:***

The report that follows is a reflection of three months (October, November and December 2017) of planned and executed activities of the National Media Council (NMC). As part of the USAID/Internews-Funded Liberia Media Development Project, the NMC implemented the activities consonant to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees people's freedom of thoughts, conscience and speech, and considering Article 15 of the Liberian Constitution, as well as realizing that the Council is under obligation to investigate all reported violations of the guidelines and to mediate where necessary in line with the Press Union of Liberia's 2016 Revised Code of Ethics.

The period under review - October, November and December 2017, witnessed the final hearing and adjudication of three alleged ethical transgression complaints filed to the Council by some journalists/media institutions or against journalists/media institutions.

Additionally, during the period of consideration, the Council attempted hearing into two complaints filed by some members of the public, through citation to parties concerned, but these were withdrawn by complainants themselves. Also, in Quarter I, Year III, the Council invited parties to two complaints for hearing discussions, but complainants of both complaints failed to turn out for discussions with their accused.

Other activities of the Council include creating awareness through the media, about the activities, achievements, challenges and the forward movement of the NMC, as well as the monitoring/observation, and analysis of the media's interpretation of Liberia's political/electoral trend.

## ***II. Achievements:***

### ***A. NMC Adjudicates three Complaints of Ethical Transgression***

In keeping with its mandate, the National Media Council fast tracked and adjudicated three complaints on its docket during the period under review. The first was the complaint of Mrs. Lakshmi Moore-an employee of Actionaid/Liberia, against Journalist Boakai Fofana of Capitol FM. The accuser had alleged that Journalist Boakai Fofana defamed/slandered her character/repetition via social media (Facebook) and at the Donut Coffee Shop in Sinkor, Monrovia. The complaint was heard during the last quarter of Year II, and finally adjudicated on October 5, 2017. The adjudication was characterized by mediation between both parties.

The next complaint involved Freelance Journalist, Joe K.S. Fineboy, versus Liberty Party's Vice Chairman for Political Affairs, Mr. Darius Dallon. Journalist Fineboy had accused Mr. Dallon alongside his security guards, of physically attacking and smashing his (Fineboy) tape recorder and mobile phone to the floor on April 13, 2017, at Liberty Party's Headquarters, when he tried to inquire about the source of the fleet of cars paraded by the party for election purposes.

Interestingly, at the concluding hearing session of the complaint on October 19, 2017, while the Council was investigating, analyzing and reaching at a decision into the matter, Journalist Fineboy halted the process; saying that he was wrong. Subsequently, he requested the Council's intervention between him and Mr. Dallon. Acting on the request of Journalist Joe Fineboy, the Council mediated between both parties.

The third and last complaint in which the Council rendered decision involved Mr. Caesar Morris-Founder/Proprietor of ICafe, against the Daily Observer and Concord Times Newspapers. Mr. Morris alleged that both Daily Observer and Concord Times Newspapers caused injuries to his hard eared reputation by publishing false articles about him that he was imprisoned at the Monrovia Central Prison at Center Street, Monrovia.



Parties to the complaint quiz each other during the hearing.

Above, Presiding Chair, Ruth Caesar welcome parties, as cross section of Council members (below) look on.

Following the hearing and having analyzed the pieces of evidence submitted by the Complainant, the Council handed down its decision in favor of complainant Caesar Morris; and therefore, requested the Daily Observer Newspaper to do an erratum (retraction) of the previous information published. The Concord Times was however, not included because it was clear that although the paper published about

Mr. Morris' appearance at the Temple of Justice for said case, it did not report about Mr. Morris' imprisonment at the Monrovia Central Prison.

### **B. Complainants Withdraw complaints**

On September 22, 2017, Journalist Danesius Marteh of the Fabric Radio, complained to the Council that Mr. James Salinsa Debbah, head Coach of Lone Star Team, brutally and physically assaulted him while he (Journalist Marteh) was on air in studio. Even the Council had exerted frantic efforts to have a discussion with both parties by citing them for a hearing conference the complainant quickly withdrew the complaint, because according to him, the matter had been resolved at the Liberia Football Association, with Mr. Debbah extending apology to journalist Marteh.

Another complaint withdrawn by complainants is the one involving Journalists Patrick Eastman and Sekou Sheriff, Co and Lead Presenters, Freedom Hub, Freedom Communications, Inc., (87.9 FM) against the institution's Founder and Chief executive Officer, Mr. Sam Siryon.

Both journalists alleged that Mr. Siryon coerced them to carry out unethical practices during the discharge of their professional duties, by instructing them to "Propagate messages in favor of the Coalition for Democratic Change and to badmouth the Governing Unity Party," on Freedom Hub, a two-hour radio program hosted and presented by them (journalists).

Interestingly, as the Council invited both parties for hearing into the matter, the complainants requested the Council to withdraw such matter to allow in-house resolution on the matter.. Accordingly, the council was informed that the matter has been amicably resolved.

### **C. Complainants fail to turn out for hearing**

In Quarter I, Year III, the Council invited parties to two complaints for hearing discussions, but complainants of both complaints failed to turn out for discussions with their accused.

The first complaint of such involved Atty. Lamii Kpargoi, Coordinator of the deepening Democracy Coalition (DDC). Atty. Kpargoi accused Press Union of Liberia's President, Charles B. Coffey of making defamatory statements against the DDC at one of his press conferences.

Based on the complaint and its attending nature, the Council invited both parties for hearing into the matter, but the lead complainant, Atty. Kpargoi failed to turn out for the discussion on grounds that he was travelling out of the country.

The next complaint, which accuser failed to turn out is the complaint of Mrs. Victoria W. Zaway against the Management of the Freedom Hub, Freedom Communications, Inc., (87.9 FM). According to Madam Zaway, the management disgraced, defamed and tarnished her hard earned reputation via the station.

On receipt of the complaint, the Council, through its Secretariat invited both parties for hearing. Unfortunately, on the day of the hearing session, Madam Zaway failed to appear, but said she had other pressing engagements, and therefore could not attend.

#### ***D. NMC Creates Awareness on Activities***

In order to increase awareness on the activities of the National Media Council, in December 2017, the Council was represented at the United Nations Mission in Liberia Radio via its Saturday Radio Program, "Front Page". Mr. Raymond Zarbaye, host and presenter of Front page hosted the Council's representatives. The Co-Chairman, Madam Ruth Caesar and the Secretariat's Coordinator, Mr. Robert Karpheh Reeves appeared. Both discussed the activities, challenges and the way forward.

Other activities during the period in review were the monitoring, reviewing and analyzing of the contents of the media in respect of ethical compliance during the elections.

### **III. Challenges**

During the period in retrospect, there were a number of challenges that one way or the other, impeded the activities of the National Media Council. They include the following:

- ✓ Complainants' failure to turn out for hearing of their complaints
- ✓ Shortfall in acquiring communication by the secretariat to contact and share daily information with NMC members
- ✓ Delay in stipend and transportation payment to NMC members and Coordinator

### **IV. Next Steps**

The next steps are: firstly, fast track hearing of complaints on the database, secondly, re-invite complainants who failed to turn out for their hearing, and thirdly increase awareness of the activities of the National Media Council so that the public can have a clearer understanding of the role of the Council.

### **V. Lessons Learned**

During the period under review, there were lots of lessons learned that will help to enhance the forward movement of the Council. They include:

- ✓ The secretariat's resilient posture in getting information to parties and Council members as well as carrying out follow ups
- ✓ Teamwork by members of the Council in unanimously hearing complaints and handing down decisions
- ✓ Persuasiveness in convincing parties to appear before the Council for hearing

### **VI. Recommendation**

In order to properly enhance the activities of the Council, the following are recommended:

- ✓ That transportation allowance for Council members be regular to encourage them to apply more time especially when there is a scheduled hearing session
- ✓ Communication for the Secretariat be regular