

Social media piles pressure on mainstream press

The growth of social media has brought with it challenges that have forced media organisations to change their operations.

By [Catherine Karongo](#) 8 Mar 2012

Local and international media houses have now rushed to come up with written guidelines to manage use of social media in their newsrooms.

"They help in exactly the same way as other media guidelines like the code of ethics where journalists know the limitations collecting the information... what you might say that may cause libel; we have just extended the same thing as way of guidelines into the social media," Nation Media Group's (NMG) chief executive officer Linus Gitahi told Capital News in an interview.

NMG recently introduced social media guidelines, which according to Gitahi, will avoid abuse of the social media platform, which has become a crucial source of news by its employees.

He says it will also ensure authentication of information before it goes out to the public.

"As an NMG journalist, it makes little difference whether you identify yourself on social media as such or not since your actions will almost always be linked back to the company," the group's guidelines on social media use state in part.

"The overall principle is that journalists using social networking sites as a source of news should apply the same journalistic tests as they would to any other method of newsgathering. A tweet is no more reliable as a source of news than a phone ti off to the newsroom; a blog is no more reliable than an overheard conversation," the guidelines further state.

According to Al Kags, a leading entrepreneur in Information Communication Technology, coming up with social media guidelines is crucial to maintaining a media house's reputation.

"It is necessary for these guidelines to exist because a media house's standard of proof is much higher than that of an individual," he said in an interview with Capital News.

The British Broadcasting Corporation World Service also has similar guidelines for their Journalists.

Managing editor David Okwembah who spoke to Capital News said their policy is such that a Journalist should not make a post on social media that cannot be verified or quoted elsewhere.

"If we have sent you there (at an event) as a BBC employee, we expect to get the information first and then anybody else can get it after," Okwembah emphasised.

However, Capital News has taken a liberal approach where their journalists are allowed to tweet from the field and copy to Capital FM Twitter handle, according to editorial director Michael Mumo.

"We have trained our reporters to have the capacity to recognise a breaking news item and how to handle it. That way, I think we will stay ahead of the rest because by the time they send it to the office (of another media house) and it is approved, we (Capital FM) will already have put the information out there," Mumo said.

Social media has grown in such a way that the public is the one driving the news agenda while journalists pick it up at time to verify the information.

"Social media has made it very competitive for mainstream media because if a story breaks now, it's already out there. Hc

do you then tell me that same story in the evening bulletin or tomorrow morning? But for us (at Capital News) we are part of that transformation," Mumo added.

However, he says, accuracy of the stories is key to maintaining the station's reputation.

"There are instances where people have killed Nelson Mandela. You know of instances relating to the Kenyan scenario itself (in relation to Njenga Karume and John Michuki). For us, we are active in social media but we have to put information that is accurate," he says.

Capital News has also allowed its journalists to enjoy personal freedom by engaging friends on social media networks while at the same time relaying news as it breaks.

"You can freely engage your personal friends on your Facebook profile but we encourage our reporters to retain a more 'professional' outlook on Twitter since it's a requirement that they identify themselves as Capital FM news staff on this platform," Mumo says.

Critics view social media guidelines for journalists as a way of muzzling them.

"It is not a limitation, it is an empowering tool," NMG CEO said

"We have policies just like in broadcast you should never say anything on a microphone that cannot be quoted elsewhere. The same thing should apply to you as a reporter whether you are on leave or not, you should not post anything that cannot be verified and can be traced back to you and therefore your relationship with the BBC or your employer," the BBC's Nairobi bureau Managing Editor added.

With the growth of Social media, it has become clear that traditional media needs to re-strategise and embrace the technological advancements.

"Traditional media has to incorporate any type of media that comes or they will die or become irrelevant," says Simon Gichia, communications and documentation officer at Media Focus on Africa.

He also recommends that social media should be incorporated in the schools of journalism to prepare journalists.

"I don't even think that the schools of journalism that exist in Kenya anticipated things like this would come up so nobody would think of incorporating it in the syllabus but we cannot shy away from that now," Gichia said.

Source: allAfrica.com