

REMARKS BY MR SAMMY ITEMERE, PRINCIPAL SECRETARY STATE DEPARTMENT ON BROADCASTING AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS, MINISTRY OF ICT DURING THE LAUNCH OF THE ELECTION REPORTING GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALISTS AT INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL NAIROBI, TUESDAY 7TH MARCH 2017

Members of the Media fraternity,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since time immemorial, it is acknowledged that the media plays a powerful watchdog role in the society. As the presumptive fourth estate, it has the unenviable role of keeping the other arms of government in check on behalf of the citizenry.

According to an online report by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the media plays a major role in keeping the public abreast of current events and raising awareness of various issues in society. It also has an extremely significant impact on the public's views and way of thinking. The media is the primary means through which public opinion is shaped and at times manipulated.

Numerous studies affirm that the media can play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy particularly in the context of their watchdog role. It helps to strengthen and deepen democracy by setting the right agenda and tone in national discourses and in the process empowers the citizen to make informed electoral choices.

In a representative system of government such as Kenya's, policy outcomes are affected by the political preferences and the beliefs of the voters. The media plays a key role in shaping these preferences and beliefs. It collects, summarizes, and frames the information that voters use in their voting decisions. As a result, political beliefs may sometimes be systematically manipulated by the media through slants that may bias voters, and hence bias policy decisions.

The media's effectiveness in the performance of their role is predicated on the assumption that it occupies a high moral ground that cannot be compromised to the detriment of the very society in whose good interest it is expected to be acting. But is this always the reality? Examples abound of how media has fanned hatred with disastrous consequences, and here the example of a local radio station in Rwanda that contributed to the escalation of the 1994 genocide best illustrates how rogue media can lead to the annihilation of hitherto peaceful communities.

The basic role of the media during the electioneering period is to enlighten and educate the public and act as a neutral and objective platform for the free debate of all points of view. Yet elections still constitute a basic challenge to the media, putting its impartiality and objectivity on the spot. As we approach the next elections in August this year, that role of the media will certainly be put to test.

Today's launch of the Election Reporting Guidelines for Journalists is therefore timely and opportune as it provides a clear framework in which the media will be expected to play their role in order to achieve a free and fair electoral process. Indeed as a government that is committed to deliver a free and fair general election, we have, through the Media Council of Kenya and Communication Authority of Kenya, put together a mechanism of monitoring media performance that will enable the media to report election issues more professionally and responsibly.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Kenya remains the leader in the region as far as freedom of media and freedom of expression is concerned. Our commitment to uphold Press freedom and the freedom of expression as the foundation of a democratic society is not in doubt. The enactment of the Access to Information Law 2016 amongst a myriad of other laws attests to this commitment.

I assure you that the Government will continue to improve its communication effectiveness and further demystify government by sharing information and other government services to the public through the e-government platform among other technologically driven communication platforms.

I call upon the media to follow the guidelines to the letter. You have a responsibility to be objective and professional if you have to win public trust and confidence. Indeed the media carries a huge responsibility to ensure this country goes through the general elections peacefully and comes out of the process more united and cohesive by exercising responsible journalism.

It is now my honour and privilege to declare the 2017 Election Reporting Guidelines for Journalists officially launched.

Thank you and may God bless you all.