



# Regional Overview

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**T**raditional media on the continent, indeed, the world, is in a state of flux as it is under both political and economic siege. Direction is being desperately sought in a world reeling from disruption. Media houses

across the region are having to contend with low performing economies, shrinking newsrooms, poor working conditions against increasing costs, reduced advertising revenue, drastically reduced print runs, stiffer competition, hostile governments, constricting media legislation and to top it all, increasing corruption and unethical behaviour within the sector itself.

Audiences are being captured by news downloaded off social media platforms that offer content at a dizzying pace packaged in a format that appeals to diverse audiences and can be consumed in seconds. The media is having to find relevance in a world mesmerised by technology and more engaged with news on social media platforms, be it real or fake. News is being shared at lightning speed and by the time it is refuted, it has crossed borders and even continents.

Building, and in some cases reviving, good solid investigative journalism to ensure sustainability and relevance is both a solution and an obstacle. Often the investigative stories highlight corruption in the public sector, or the finger points at public officials, which brings the media into direct confrontation with governing elites. The media then are under direct threat from people willing to abuse their power.

The contestation between States and the media sector has intensified on the legislative front with governments in countries through the SADC region finding insidious ways to curtail the influence and reach of the media.

Through the guise of ensuring protection of citizens from computer related crimes, governments across the region

have either enacted legislation or are tabling it, to regulate online content and curb freedom of expression.

The onslaught against the media has expanded and extended to include citizens who have exercised their freedom of expression rights in different ways and through a variety of actions in a number of countries. This increase in citizen agency has been met with harsh and brutal reprisals by Governments.

A disconcerting development is the shift by journalists on what used to be agreed positions in the region. In both Angola and Tanzania, journalists have welcomed content in legislation that requires journalists to be licensed - a form of authorisation to practice journalism based on specific educational specifications. Sections of the media sector in the two countries welcome this on the basis that it will raise journalistic professional standards. Is the idea catching on, in a region where media freedom organisations use to pride themselves on fighting to remove all obstacles to freedom of expression and freedom of the press?

Not all is lost, though.

A cause for celebration is the sustained and vigorous 12 year campaign, spear-headed by MISA Malawi which finally gave birth to an Access to Information Act being passed by Parliament at the end of 2016.

In Botswana, the 16th of March was a historical day for the Lesbians, Gays & Bisexuals of Botswana - LEGABIBO after the organisation won a court case in which the State was instructed to register and officially recognize the sexual minorities' body.

The thawing of relations between the Swazi government and the media was another welcome change. This was in part, due to the engagement by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, Pansy Tlakula with government on issues relating to freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information.