



Media Freedom, Accountability and Online Misinformation in Papua New Guinea

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The Papua New Guinea (PNG) government has a new draft National Media Development Policy (Government of PNG 2023) aimed at utilising the media for development purposes. Priority issues include strengthening accountability in journalistic reporting and enhancing civic awareness about misinformation on social media. The media community has condemned the draft policy as an attempt by government to control media freedom in PNG. The arguments on both sides tend to revolve around the role of the Media Council of Papua New Guinea (MCPNG) in holding journalism accountable. Increasing levels of misinformation in social media are also important to discussions around the new draft policy. This In Brief highlights some of the issues raised by the policy, focusing on issues of accountability and the impact of misinformation, especially online misinformation, on citizens.

While the draft policy is not detailed, its stated purpose is clear. It 'sets out the enabling framework to establish guidelines and standards for media conduct and practice and seeks to promote transparency, [and] accountability for a responsible profession within the media sector' (Government of PNG 2023:9). Its objectives are also clear: they include 'ensuring the media provide accurate, impartial, and balanced reporting'; '[e]ncouraging media diversity'; '[e]nsuring media organisations adhere to ethical and professional standards'; '[e]stablishing regulatory mechanisms to promote compliance with media policies and standards'; and '[p]romoting civic engagements and participation in media issues' (ibid.:9).

The policy seeks to introduce guidelines and standards for the conduct of media practices, including initiating changes in the role of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) as a corporate body. The PNG government's Department of Information and Communications Technology would work in collaboration with NBC to disseminate government information, promoting PNG culture and tradition, as well as diversity and inclusivity.

Background

In December 2022, the PNG government expressed concern about the level of 'fake news' and poor quality news reporting in the print and social media, and announced its intention to establish a working committee to look at these issues. Communications Minister Timothy Masiu highlighted government concerns about the quality of journalistic output that included lack of investigative journalism, substandard

reports around the government's development agenda and concerns over the industry's code of ethics. These issues were paramount in shaping the new draft policy. However, when the draft National Media Development Policy appeared in February 2023, it was immediately met with criticism and suspicion about the role of government in controlling media freedom, from both the media community and, in particular, the MCPNG.

The backdrop to this is instances in the past in which the government pressured the state-owned broadcaster EMTV to silence journalists who ran stories about corruption and the breakdown of institutional processes in government; for example, EMTV journalist Scott Waide's suspension over reporting on the misapplication of funds over the purchase of 40 Maserati used at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in 2019. Similarly, 19 journalists walked off their jobs at EMTV in support of the suspended head of news and current affairs over allegations of insubordination in relation to critical reporting concerning police and criminal procedures.

The Media Council of PNG and accountability

In February 2023, the government released the draft National Media Development Policy and announced that there would be two weeks for consultation with stakeholders, an amount of time many considered as insufficient to allow all stakeholders to have input.

Further, journalist Scott Waide labelled the draft policy as an attempt by government to control press freedom in PNG. This assessment was supported by the president of the MCPNG, Neville Choi, who said that the MCPNG would not support the government's move as the policy lacked clarity. The backlash was directed against the draft policy's stated intention to reform the MCPNG and create an accreditation system for journalistic practice in the country. This intention was viewed as inconsistent with the existing structure and rationale of the MCPNG established in 1989. In its current form, the MCPNG is a self-regulating entity in which media professionals set up voluntary editorial guidelines for news agencies and journalists to abide by. The media community argued that the current structure is adequate for ensuring the protection of freedom of press and the government should invest more into schools of journalism at the universities.

The draft policy highlighted that there should be cooperation between the government and media organisations to support development initiatives.

Poor reporting was viewed as affecting the government's efforts to encourage citizen participation in development. This sentiment was echoed by the prime minister when responding in parliament to the member for Karimui-Nomane, Francis Alua, about graphic images of beheadings on the front pages of local newspapers.

The prime minister added that freedom of expression is a qualified right and not absolute, referring to the need for media organisations and journalists to be aware of their responsibilities when reporting, and stating that there are consequences for abuses involving misleading media reporting. This is not the first time a Papua New Guinean politician has called for responsibility and accountability in reporting. For example, Garry Juffa, governor of Oro Province, previously called out media outlets over reports about the abduction of schoolgirls in Oro Province which, according to him, were sensationalised and factually incorrect. This criticism was directed at the journalists and media outlet that printed the story.

Misinformation

The draft National Media Development Policy also acknowledges the important role of digital platforms in contributing towards greater citizen participation. While an important tool for the dissemination of information, digital platforms have also increased misinformation and disinformation, a potentially serious threat to stability and development in PNG. The draft policy aims to strengthen media literacy to promote informed decision making and engagement by citizens. The importance of an informed citizenry is paramount, and the consequences of its absence can be devastating. For example, misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected the government's efforts in delivering vaccines and awareness throughout the country. Vaccine hesitancy in citizens due to misinformation was common among Facebook users in PNG (Newland et al. 2022).

According to the report 'The Openness and Transparency of Election Data in Papua New Guinea' (NDI 2022), one of the key findings on election data is the high demand for information by the people. The report stated that 'low levels of education, access to information and demand for election data have put pressure on key bodies to make election data available to the public' (NDI 2022:5). The report highlights the importance of addressing misinformation under the draft policy.

Next steps for the policy

The draft policy underwent changes following reviews and these revised versions (versions 2 and 2.1) are now available to the public on the department's website.

On 2 March 2023, a consultation workshop was held between the government and major stakeholders to try and resolve key issues raised by both parties. It was noted during this workshop that the media community, the Community Coalition against Corruption and other stakeholders, such as the United Nations representative in PNG, were satisfied with the existing structure, notably the present practice for administering complaints, and further called for the government to abandon the policy. However, the Department of Information and Communications Technology reiterated that the draft policy is in no way a threat to press freedom. On 3 May 2023, Communications Minister Timothy Masiu announced that there would be a national survey accompanied by the third draft.

Outlook

While there is a call to abandon the draft National Media Development Policy by elements of the media community and other stakeholders, the government is adamant about proceeding with it through its intention to seek a nationwide survey and release a third version of the draft policy. The social media 'infodemic' is becoming pervasive, and its spread via social media platforms was prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic in PNG. At this critical juncture, collaborative efforts by both the government and the media community are important to increase media literacy in PNG and improve the role of the MCPNG in efforts to support media literacy and improve journalistic standards.

Author note

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