

New Press Council system includes online publications

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The Press Council's adoption of a new system that will accommodate complaints against online publications is likely to boost the argument against the proposed media appeals tribunal, says an analyst.



Until now, the Press Council - which is part of SA's media selfregulation process - has adjudicated only complaints against the editorial content of newspapers and magazines and their online versions.

The council, the ombudsman and the appeals panel are an independent co-regulatory mechanism set up by the print media to provide "impartial, expeditious and cost-effective adjudication to settle disputes between newspapers and magazines" and members of the public over the editorial content of publications.

Earlier this year, South African Communist Party (SACP) general secretary Blade Nzimande criticised South African newspapers for failing to regulate their online versions. He questioned newspapers' positions on racism, arguing that there was no action taken to censor racist comments.

"Leave alone Twitter and Facebook. What we are concerned about as the SACP is all those media houses who have got internet platforms. They must take responsibility for people who comment on stories," Mr Nzimande said.

Last week, the Press Council adopted a new constitution, a code of ethics and conduct for the country's print and online media and complaints procedures. This followed lengthy negotiations with the Interactive Advertising Bureau of SA and the South African National Editors' Forum.

The African National Congress (ANC) has been pushing for the establishment of a media appeals tribunal, arguing that self-regulation is not enough to hold the media accountable. At its national general council earlier this year, the party resuscitated the idea of forming a media appeals tribunal - a decision initially taken at the party's Polokwane conference in

2007.

Media Monitoring Africa director William Bird said the adoption of the new code was a step in the right direction and would boost the fight against the proposed media appeals tribunal.

"This shows that the industry and media professionals are serious about self-regulation.... The ultimate goal should be to create a system which deals with any complaint," Bird said.

Executive director of the Press Council Joe Thlooe last week said: "We have had to reimagine the Press Council, following the winding down of Print and Digital Media SA at the end of this year and also because of dramatic changes in technology in the media industry. News cuts across platforms..."

This is the second makeover of the Press Council since 2013, when it was revamped following its own review of its systems and effectiveness and that of the Press Freedom Commission under the late Chief Justice Pius Langa.

Anton Harber, Caxton professor of journalism at the University of Witwatersrand, said the Press Council was closing a gap in coverage of online publications as part of continuing moves to improve self-regulation.

Previously, he said, only the sites of member publications could sign up to the Press Council and its Code of Conduct.

"Now any site can, and this will give those who want the credibility of a Press Council stamp of approval a chance to join the selfregulatory system.

This is a new and significant development, and I expect there will be teething troubles, but it is a healthy and progressive move," Harber said.

"It shows that the Press Council is reviewing its workings and is prepared to be flexible and open to new ways of promoting media accountability.

"It now depends on readers and advertisers to encourage their favourite sites to join the system," Harber said.

Source: Business Day

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