

Tanzania tightens noose on social media

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania — The government has drafted sweeping regulations to tighten its grip on online content producers and users across popular social media platforms.



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The Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) will have unfettered powers to police the web. It will also licence all content providers, including bloggers. According to the draft regulations, TCRA will deregister any provider and block users deemed to have broken the rules.

A hefty fine of Sh5 million and a minimum of 12 months in jail, or both penalties, is recommended as punishment for those convicted.

The Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations, 2017 (as they are known) will come into force once signed by the Minister for Information, Culture, Arts and Sports Doctor Harrison Mwakyembe.

TCRA director general James Kilaba yesterday told *The Citizen* that the regulations have been circulated to organisations and members of the public to import their views.

"We will hold public forums in the coming week to share the draft document with stakeholders before the final set of rules are sent to the minister for signing and gazettelement," said Kilaba by telephone.

The rules are a result of the Electronic and Postal Communications Act that was approved recently in Parliament as the government sought to clip growing public influence on online and social media platforms.

‘Moral decay’

Authorities say unchecked use of the cyberspace will lead to moral decadence and endanger national security and cohesion among the various social and political groups in the country.

But the Electronic and Postal Communications Act and the Media Services Act have been heavily criticised by rights activists who feel the government was out to curtail the people's right of free speech and expression. A number of people have since been charged in court for incitement over posts on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp and online.

In the proposed regulations, online content providers shall not publish material described either as indecent, obscene, hate speech, extreme violence or material that will offend others or incite them.

They will also be held liable for material that "causes annoyance, threatens harm or evil, encourages or incites crime, or leads to public disorder."

Content providers will be required to ensure their broadcasts do not advocate what is broadly described as hate propaganda, threaten national security or spark a health crisis.

Information reportedly portraying racial tension or violence, touching on possible terror attacks will attract punishment.

Publishing of "content that uses bad language including... use of disparaging or abusive words which is calculated to offend an individual or a group of persons" will be outlawed. One will not publish false content likely to mislead or deceive the public except when it is clearly stated as satire or fiction.

TCRA defines indecent content as "information which is offensive, morally improper and against current standards of accepted behaviour, including nudity and sex". For obscene content it means "content which gives rise to a feeling of disgust by reason of its lewd portrayal and is essentially offensive to one's prevailing notion of decency and modesty, with a possibility of having a negative influence and corrupting the mind of those easily influenced".

As for hate speech, it means "speech that refers to any portrayal (words, speech or pictures, etc), which denigrates, defames, or otherwise devalues a person or group on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or disability and is prohibited."

Individual social media users will also be solely responsible for the content which they share and will also be required to secure their own sites and tools against infiltration. Both the content providers and users will admin roles of their space.

Service providers such as those running internet cafes will be required to install user manuals and record proceedings of their business around the clock. They will be required to install CCTV cameras to archive all activities of those walking in and out of the premises.

The regulations will apply to all Tanzanian nationals in and out of the country as well as foreigners living in the country and publishing content meant for local consumption.

The mushrooming online radios, TVs and any digital platforms, bloggers and websites or forum managers will need to apply for registration from TCRA once the regulations officially come into force. They will also ensure no anonymous users in their platforms and will be required to fully cooperate with law enforcers as required.

Source: The Citizen

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