

Embracing a Good Social Media Culture

It is an undeniable fact that social media has evolved into an integral part of today's global culture. This global trend also stands true in Zambia where the substantial shift towards mobile technology has been spearheaded by an increased interest in social media. As outlined in the 2018 National ICT Survey Report, an estimated 53.5 percent of Zambia's total population were active users of mobile cellular telephones, while the proportion of individuals who had used the internet before stood at 14.3 percent. This finding represents a 5.5 percent increment in the proportion of individuals that were reported to have used the internet in 2015.

The internet has become synonymous with social media, to a point where most internet users primarily use it for social media networking. Therefore, as consumers increasingly transition towards digital channels such as social media, businesses are being awakened to the fact that social media is not simply a platform to build personal connections but a consumer channel of choice where they connect with everyday brands and businesses. Many businesses have recognised the power of social media and are now using it for marketing, customer service and as a tool of gathering real time feedback on their customer's experiences. In fact, social media platforms have numerous benefits which businesses and consumers can leverage on for both business and/personal development and networking.

Despite the immense benefits created by the upswing in the access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) and social media, the platforms have unfortunately become a catalyst for the relentless growth of cybercrime and nuisance use of social media. We have witnessed an increase in negative vices and incidents of cyberbullying carried out through notorious social media pages, the production and circulation of pornographic videos and obscene material, defamation and blackmail (extortion or sextortion) resulting from the carelessness of internet users. People recklessly give out their personal information which ends up in the custody of perpetrators and is then used against the owners to solicit for money and other favours failure to which this material gets published on various social media platforms.

Other vices are identity theft where perpetrators 'masquerade' as very important persons (VIPs) to mislead and steal from unsuspecting consumers, online impersonation of government officials, hate speech, digital financial crimes as well as fake news. These have evolved to become more prevalent, with their risks becoming exponentially severe. These vices that have characterised social media abuse of late have the potential to erode the much needed digital culture as well as the many benefits that come with social media and the 'online' era in general.

In light of the increase in such cases and their potential risks, and the fear that such vices have the potential of creating a negative social media culture in Zambia, the Authority embarked on sensitising the youth on these vices.

The Authority has also conducted other numerous talks to over twelve (12) secondary schools in Western province and a number of secondary schools in Lusaka, Copperbelt, Eastern and Muchinga Provinces. The reason behind targeting institutions of learning is simple - the Authority is trying to build a digital culture in our younger generation so that they grow with it particularly that they are the biggest users of ICTs. We are cognisant of the fact that the youth today will be the future leaders, and by targeting them, ZICTA is trying to build a reservoir of responsible future citizens.

Additionally, the Authority embarked on an initiative to incorporate government institutions in the sensitisation programme, and so far, a sensitisation talk with members of staff of the National Assembly of Zambia has been held to discuss responsible use of social media, identity theft, online fraud and cybersecurity in general.

Further, in collaboration with key institutions such as Zambia Police Service, ZICTA is providing technical support to curb criminal activities committed using social media platforms as well as promoting a safe and secure cyberspace generally. This concerted effort has resulted in a number of arrests of cyber criminals and perpetrators online vices, with some cases still act.

Most importantly, ZICTA has been part of the committee reviewing legislation governing issues relating to Cyber Security. New draft bills have been presented to parliament with a focus on cyber security and includes aspects of cyberbullying, child pornography, identity theft, hate speech and fake news which are not adequately covered in the current legislation.

The Authority has supported the introduction of technical tools and techniques that help reinforce our ability to support Government initiatives aimed at establishing a safe and secure cyberspace in Zambia. In this regard, ZICTA in collaboration with Facebook took down over 2,000 fraudulent pages which were defrauding consumers. It has also deactivated over 6,000 SIM cards for violating Acceptable Use Policy through online scams.

As a regulator, we always advise consumers to be responsible enough to avoid the infringement of the rights of other internet users. If we are to enjoy the benefits that come with social media, it is vital that people exercise maximum self-regulation when using these platforms. Members of the public are also advised to desist from carelessly giving out their personal information which ends up in the custody of cybercriminals.

ZICTA wishes to reiterate that social media is not meant to perpetrate hate speech, cyberbullying and circulation of pornography among other vices. Rather, it is meant to be a social good where people converge to engage in social and/or economic development. This is the social media culture we expect and encourage Zambians to embrace.

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