



**REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR.  
JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE  
MEDIA VIABILITY AND INVESTMENT  
CONFERENCE. FREETOWN,  
21<sup>ST</sup> APRIL 2022**

Mr. Chief Minister  
Ministers of Government,  
Honourable Members of Parliament,  
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,  
Development Partners,  
The BBC Media Action Team,  
Media Practitioners and Partners in the Media Industry,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon:

1. Everybody knows and everybody expects me to make a keynote statement at this first-ever National Media Investment Conference. I will.
2. But as a nation, let me start off by saying that we have shown great resilience even in the long shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic and the very difficult and challenging global economic crisis. I have held very frank conversations with private sector players and other key stakeholders. Together, we have dialogued and taken actions that have helped us get over the worst. Fuel is now available at fuel stations; rice is now available on the markets and for those who wish for doomsday because of politics and would rather disinform and misinform Sierra Leoneans, doomsday is not here.
3. We have gone through a lot as a nation. But we are a tough people. We are a good people and we shall overcome the circumstances that we face today.
4. So, when I speak today at this two-day interactive dialogue conference among industry leaders in the media, the private sector, government, and international development partners, I do so mindful of where we have come from as a nation.
5. I could quip that wherever two or more journalists are gathered, there is always the possibility of being misquoted. Some newspaper headlines have even misquoted my silence. But even at the risk of being misquoted in tomorrow's headlines by some of our friends, I wish to speak from the heart today about the gains we have made as a nation in the last four years and why those gains matter for the future of this great nation of ours.

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6. The Independent Media Commission reports that we have over 500 registered media entities in the country, including newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and Direct to Home services. There is a budding entertainment and film industry with great talent and prospects.
7. We have one of the most liberalised, diversified, and decentralised media and communications sectors in the sub-region and in Africa as a whole, I must say.
8. I made a manifesto pledge to this nation in 2018 to repeal the criminal libel law. The law had criminalised free speech, suppressed journalism, wrecked many lives, stunted democratic governance, and stifled the promotion and protection of the guaranteed rights of citizens to speak freely about governance.
9. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, nearly twenty years ago, we recognised, as a nation, the costs of a repressive autocracy that had shrunken off or closed free speech in this country. The painful and violent civil war years taught us that citizens must be able to speak freely and openly about governance.
10. We all know the costs of those very painful years. So, my commitment to remove that obnoxious law was not just about doing something; it was about doing what our democracy requires to thrive.
11. For the first time in the history of our great nation, no journalist is in prison for the practice of journalism. No journalist is in fear of death or imprisonment for the practice of journalism.
12. We have increased the right to access information, access to redress and due process and access to justice.
13. For the first time in the history of this nation also, my government has actively worked with the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists to enhance professionalism among media practitioners, promote gender inclusion and participation, and provide safeguards for the safe practice of journalism.

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14. Through the revised Independent Media Commission Act, media practitioners are guaranteed a safe space for redress and fair hearings on perceived professional lapses. For the first time ever, media professionals are listening to media professionals and working with them to make the media industry ecosystem even better.
15. Our successes over the last four years have been supported by a confident and more professional media. If the Centre for Disease Control assesses us as a site of low threat for COVID-19, it is partly because our media has worked its heart out in risk communications and social mobilisation just as they did during Ebola. Let me again publicly thank SLAJ [Sierra Leone Association of Journalists] and the media industry for this remarkable show of patriotism.
16. If we are assessed by the United Nations and the Millennium Challenge Corporation as a less fragile and more resilient nation and open society, it is partly because of a thriving media industry that supports good governance, protects and promotes democratic freedoms, and speaks freely to how we can all work together to make this country better in spite of the challenges.
17. In that respect, I share Bob Woodward's (the American journalist) proposal that we should measure journalism by the quality of information it presents, not the drama or the pyrotechnics associated with it. And indeed, there is plenty of drama and pyrotechnics in our media landscape, especially with the announcement of dates for democratic elections. Rabidly, partisan headlines have already pronounced the end of the world for Sierra Leone. Ironically, some media practitioners misinform and disinform the public freely in one of the most liberalised media ecosystems in Africa where they do not fear persecution, imprisonment, or death.
18. They do so in a nation, where for the first time ever, my Government has guaranteed a minimum wage for journalists and access to social security benefits. Our human capital development gains and liberalised media ecosystem support the development of budding talents in the media industry.
19. For the first time in the history of this nation, we have signed up to the principles of the International Coalition for Media Freedom.

20. Also, in less than two weeks, the world will mark International Press Freedom Day to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom. Because of our nation's commitment to those principles, my Minister of Information and Communications has been invited to this year's UNESCO International Press Freedom Day in Uruguay to share with the world our media transformation initiatives.
21. Over the last four years, we have promoted, protected, and supported the media because we believe it is essential for the growth and buoyancy of our democracy.
22. We see partisans deliberately and increasingly spreading misinformation and disinformation in order to widen social and political tensions. Fewer opposition politicians make a good-faith effort to discuss policies and views on how we can develop this nation. There is anecdotal evidence of their association with groups or persons who spread untruths even about what is good for this country. Unfortunately, even a few mainstream media practitioners embrace the worst of these unethical practices.
23. These acts subvert the integrity of our democracy, civic polity, electoral practices, and our credibility and resilience as a nation.
24. I personally believe that professional journalism is the best and the only antidote to the increasing spread of malicious information on social media. We need a credible and independent media to keep the government honest and accountable, devoid of partisan rhetoric.
25. With a professional and ethical media, our civic spaces are open to more participation. Citizens can understand and are able to freely express themselves in an open society where transparency and democratic norms burgeon.
26. So, let me thank SLAJ for partnering with my Government to host this all important conference. The financial and technical support of the FCDO [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office], BBC Media Action's PRIMED project has

been invaluable. Thank you. To the many media houses represented here, civil society members, citizens and others who have worked tirelessly with the Minister of Information and Communication, I say "thank you and well done."

27. Previous speakers have bemoaned poor media infrastructure and poor investments in media in general. Even more challenging is that our resource-constrained environment has been complicated by global economic downturns due to recent events in Europe and the COVID pandemic. Fewer investment Dollars and Pounds or Euros are chasing up even fewer investment opportunities, especially in Africa. All over Africa, and especially in Sierra Leone, operational costs are high and revenues are much reduced.
28. I get all of that. But I want us to make an optimistic case, hence at this national investment dialogue. I want us to focus not on what we cannot do but on what we can do together to change the narrative. I want us to talk about challenges as opportunities that we should think about together and talk about from various entry points and viewpoints.
29. I want us first to focus on the product – the media industry as a whole. It is not just about publishing and selling a few newspapers at road intersections. Like food, water, and energy, citizens also want and are willing to pay for information, education, advertising, and entertainment. In this age of technology, digital media has also expanded the possibilities of traditional media. Beyond radio and television, there are films, audio recordings, book and magazine publishing, streaming music and video, and more. With Sierra Leone as a sub-regional hub for content creation and distribution, there is new money to be made. Investors simply need to develop a clear understanding of existing and emerging media channels and how they can develop and leverage those.
30. Next, the general overarching investment ecosystem for media investments in Sierra Leone. Over the last four years, my Government has streamlined processes for registering and establishing businesses. We assure potential investors of flexible and attractive investment incentives and excellent after-care. Our commitment is not only to facilitate investments but to also retain and support businesses to grow.

31. Additionally, our investments in the telecommunications sector make potential investments in the media industry profitable. We have significantly expanded telephone coverage and internet penetration. More Sierra Leoneans are willing to pay for content and are familiar with media content delivered mobile-first and through other devices.
32. Sierra Leone has invested in higher education and worked with SLAJ and Women in the Media (WIMSAL) in the last four years to professionalise and diversify the media workforce. There is a raw talent pool available for investors to work with and develop.
33. But media practitioners also need to re-imagine and adapt their business models in order to flourish. Newspaper editors should think beyond a few advertisements and sensational or partisan front page headlines. TV producers should think beyond hosting talk sessions and reading the news. Film producers should think beyond local romantic or copycat Nollywood or gangster films. There is content that is authentically Sierra Leonean that is at once exciting, empowering, refreshing, and powerful. Audience behaviour is open to change; brand awareness and lifestyle changes are available for targeting.
34. Think about new market possibilities that create new revenue streams. Take advantage of digital technologies and innovation to deliver new content in new ways. In essence, produce, promote, market, distribute, and deliver content in new ways to national, subregional, and international audiences. We may be a small country but I want to inspire us as a nation to think big and consistently punch above our weight. That is the New Direction attitude.
35. Successful entrepreneurs see opportunity in change and make a profit by providing products and services that cater towards that change. Diversify and innovate continuously.
36. So, I want to both encourage and challenge you to embrace new business models that have worked in peer nations and comparative media ecosystems. Owners, editors, publishers, producers, boards must embrace an innovation and diversification mindset.

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37. But I hear the niggling question – “from where will the seed money come from to fund these innovation and diversification initiatives?”
38. As I have indicated, we have a Government that is fully committed to supporting and facilitating investments in the media. We have an ecosystem that nurtures and protects investments and especially investments in the media. Some critical infrastructure and networks are in place that will support new investments. We will continue to invest more. Investors can make a profit by serving an integrated sub-regional market. Better still, they can feel safe to reinvest or repatriate their profits. So, private capital should feel comfortable investing in the media industry in Sierra Leone using new business models that are both profitable and sustainable.
39. I also see a lot of prospects in media cooperatives and media alliances with big regional media houses or international news conglomerates. We may have a smaller market share, but we are a good hub for developing and expanding new business models.
40. Earlier, I drew a nexus among independent and professional media, public interest, and building a strong participatory democracy. The independent media is getting less revenue from its traditional sources as a consequence of the recent global economic crunch and other technological factors.
41. We need independent media practitioners to advocate for and protect the public interest. We should assure the long-term future of the independent media. Concrete international action is needed to guarantee a common funding source that will support independent media as other sources of funding shrink.
42. I, therefore, make a public commitment to fully associate with and support the International Fund for Public Interest Media. Whereas my Government has provided SLAJ with annual subventions, we believe that international cooperation in supporting the fund will ensure the independence and operations of the independent media in Sierra Leone.

43. There is also scope for greater cooperation and joint action among the local private sector, civil society, and various agencies of government.

44. But this is why we are here over these two days to talk about how to make the media profitable with new funding sources and innovative business models. The government also wants to hear what more it can do to facilitate such investments. It is good to talk, but it also makes a lot of sense to plan the future together.

I thank you for your attention.