

R2K reflect on issues affecting the media on World Press Freedom Day

Celebrating World Press Freedom Day, 3 May 2018, the Right2Know Campaign reflects on happenings and issues affecting the media in South Africa and in Africa as a whole, over the past year.



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This year's theme is, 'Keeping Power in Check: Media, Justice and The Rule of Law'. The theme highlights the importance of an enabling legal environment for press freedom and gives special attention to the role of an independent judiciary in ensuring legal guarantees and protections for press freedom and the prosecution of crimes against journalists.

Spying on journalists

The past year has seen continued evidence that spying on journalists continues to be a major threat in South Africa. Most recently it emerged that a *Mail & Guardian* journalist was spied on illegally after investigating corruption allegations at the Railway Safety Regulator.

South Africa's surveillance law, Rica, now faces a legal challenge brought by amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism after a previous case of surveillance against journalist Sam Sole. R2K is seeking to join that case as a friend of the court.

The issue of surveillance concerns at the SABC is equally pressing. It is in this view that we have decided to picket against the vetting of staff members at the SABC offices in Durban and Johannesburg, an event that took place at 10:00 today (3 May). The SABC has requested many of their journalists to submit their ID copies for the vetting process in terms of section 2A (1)(b)(ii) of the National Strategic Intelligence Act. Following resistance and opposition from a number of organisations, the SABC has decided to put the process on hold whilst seeking legal advice.

We believe this is extremely intrusive and a blatant abuse of the National Key Points Act, which continues to be applied to SABC buildings. Media workers play an important role in keeping those in power in check and should not be treated like potential criminals or spies. This form of surveillance is constitutionally questionable as it violates several rights connected to privacy, media freedom (of expression) and access to information. (The need to protect SABC workers against intrusive vetting is also a pressing concern in the debate around the Critical Infrastructure Protection Bill which is proposed to replace the National Key Points Act.)

As R2K we reiterate that free and diverse media is critical to promoting transparency, accountability and the freedom of expression. Media is a public good – a constitutional right that is the key to the realisation and defence of other rights.

Love your community media

A strong and independent community media sector continues to be vital to the overall media freedom landscape. We, therefore, welcome the return to air of various community radio stations who have been switched off air by Sentech when they were not able to afford the high fees for signal distribution.

However, more public support is needed to ensure that our community stations are better able to serve as the voices and sounding board for grassroots communities. Most people at community stations and newspapers are doing the best job they can under very difficult conditions but with our support they can be able to meet their objectives. Through this campaign we are encouraging community members to be actively involved in shaping programming and governance of their community media.

Media freedom in the continent

In December 2017, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that 66 journalists are detained across the continent. As R2K we continue to give solidarity to media workers across the African continent. Thus, we join the call for the release of DRC journalist Eliezer Ntambwe who was detained without charge last month.

It is reported that Ntambwe was detained after the governor of DRC's central Kasai Oriental province, Ngoyi Kasanji, accused him of defamation and extortion relating to an interview the journalist conducted. In Angola, journalist and campaigner Rafael Marques de Morais is still facing charges for allegedly insulting a government official when he reported on the former attorney general's role in a questionable land deal.

We are also concerned by a new law in the [Tanzanian](#) government that regulates online content. Through this law, bloggers, social media influencers and online platforms will have to apply for a licence and pay a fee of about R11,000 to keep their sites up. It is alarming how that country is so hellbent at tightening laws that govern press freedom.

Though we have come a long way to obtain media freedom in this country, on this day we celebrate the continued success in getting news to citizens and the integral role the media plays in keeping citizens informed. We must continue to protect media freedom by taking stalk and holding those who are in power accountable. No one must stifle the freedom to engage, participate and produce media. Continuous opposition to this freedom poses a severe threat to our constitutional democracy which protects the independence of our media.

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