

Media freedom is a cornerstone of democracy



By Louise Marsland

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Anti-media rhetoric is fuelling violence against journalists across South Africa, The Gathering 2017 Media Edition, presented by The Daily Maverick, heard today from Press Council director, Joe Thlooe.



Joe Thlooe

Thlooe was on stage at the media edition of The Gathering series of events, held at the CTICC in Cape Town today, 3 August, to discuss critical issues facing the South African media. The event was sponsored by Nando's and EWN.

Thlooe, who spoke on press freedom and regulation, said it was his ugly memories of Apartheid which stokes his passion for press freedom. He said we should never again be able to say "I didn't know," as so many Apartheid perpetrators did. A free press was essential in making sure we understand what is happening in our country.

Freedom of expression

Thlooe also lamented the fact that we were still discussing these issues of press freedom, 21 years after it was enshrined in our new constitution. The Gathering, he said, should have been able to discuss "new issues" facing the media, instead of having to revisit this topic – such as the technology revolution, fake news and improving the quality of our journalism.

“The constitution enshrines freedom of expression as a cornerstone of democracy. It is valued because of its intrinsic importance and its functionality in informing citizens and encouraging debate... If society represses views it considers unacceptable, they may never be exposed as wrong. Open debate enhances truth finding and enhances values.”

He warned about chasing after red herrings (like fake news), while ignoring the things that are doing real damage in our society

Thloloe said it was not just threats from the likes of the BLF, but also the harassment of journalists by protestors in Coligny in the North West and harsh treatment of media workers by the police.

“There is a more ominous threat – that of the statutory media appeals tribunal that has been hanging over our heads since 2007. It is not just the threat of this that bothers the media. It is the anti-media rhetoric that accompanies this threat that could be fuelling the violence against journalists.

“The truth is that the ANC is inadvertently encouraging the BLF in its anti-democratic posture and protestors in Coligny. Very soon journalists will not be free to do their work in the country, in spite of a constitution that protects them.”

Media appeals tribunal

The reasons the ANC was advancing for a media appeals tribunal, was that insufficient punitive measures were taken against publications that transgressed; and that the Press Council was not an independent organisation.

“The logic of this eludes me,” said Thloloe. “It is an unsubstantiated argument that regulation has failed.”

He also reiterated that the structure of the Press Council, with retired judges and jurors in place to handle arbitration, ensured its independence.

“So many people have lost their lives for us to get this freedom. Media freedom is not just for journalists, but for every individual in our society, for democracy,” Thloloe concluded.

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMOG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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