

## WAN-IFRA concerned by proposed POI Bill, MAT

The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) has expressed concern over the implications of a proposed Protection of Information Bill currently before the South African parliament. The world media body, along with the World Editors Forum, recently issued an [open letter to SA President Jacob Zuma](#) highlighting their joint concerns.



"The proposed legislation would shield the government from press scrutiny and effectively criminalise activities essential to investigative journalism," WAN-IFRA said in the letter.

### Empowering officials

In its current format the bill empowers officials to classify any public or commercial data as confidential on vaguely defined "national interest" grounds without having to give an explanation. Such powers could be used to outlaw coverage of issues including public law enforcement and judicial matters.

One of the most alarming aspects of the bill is its lack of a "public interest" defence for use by journalists to support the disclosure of classified information, an omission that means anyone found guilty of unauthorised disclosure of official or classified information could face severe penalties.

### MAT instrument of political censorship

A separate proposal to replace the country's independent Press Ombudsman and Appeals Panel with a government-appointed Media Appeals Tribunal risks turning the current self-regulatory system into an instrument of political censorship. Members would inevitably face an inherent conflict of interest, whereas the present system has repeatedly acted with neutrality.

In line with the Declaration of Table Mountain, WAN-IFRA's call for African states to promote the highest standards of press freedom that was recently endorsed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the organisation urged President Zuma to amend the Protection of Information Bill to uphold constitutional safeguards for freedom of the press "and to ensure that any future media reform in South Africa fully respects international standards of press freedom."

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