

Media Ethics and Credibility Report handed over to SANEF

A panel led by retired judge Kathleen Satchwell recently released the report of the commission of inquiry into ethical challenges facing South African journalism and officially handed it over to the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF).



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The report by Satchwell and fellow panel members - veteran journalist and author Rich Mkhondo and award-winning journalist and former Fulbright Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow Nikiwe Bikitsha was commissioned by SANEF in June 2019.

The Inquiry was proactively set up following the events surrounding the publication and subsequent retraction of a series of stories by the *Sunday Times* between 2011 and 2016, and public debates about reporting and processes followed in newsrooms across the country. The terms of reference of the inquiry were to look at possibilities of ethical lapses within the industry and to find solutions to enhance quality, ethical journalism.

While South African journalism has been lauded for courageous, investigative work that has helped advance our democracy, as SANEF believes that the media must continuously introspect to strengthen the relationship of trust with the public they serve and ensure accountability. The terms of reference included a review of the systemic problems that could be impeding ethical conduct across the media landscape.

The panel sought clarity on, “those challenges confronting the media industry generally and journalists in particular which hinder the appropriate, honest, accountable and effective reporting necessary for advancing and strengthening Constitutional democracy in South Africa.”

The *Sunday Times* was thanked for their full cooperation with the Inquiry, showing their commitment to ethical journalism.

Panel methods and processes

Between July 2019 and March 2020 the three-person panel engaged in various ways with 167 individuals and entities, perused close to 200 documents and sought ad hoc research inputs including a comprehensive longitudinal study of the work of the South African Press Council. Consultations occurred with newsroom practitioners, owners, academics, consumers and concerned individuals and institutions. Members of the public were encouraged to participate in the process.

From April to December 2020, Satchwell, Mkhondo and Bikitsha drafted the report including 69 recommendations.

The panel, unlike national commissions of inquiry, functioned without a secretariat, investigators or evidence leader. It relied on limited financial resources and had no statutory powers. SANEF, as the commissioning organisation, provided the terms of reference, the funding and ad hoc administrative support. Further, SANEF made an initial and detailed formal written submission to the panel outlining its views on the issues, followed up with further detailed clarifications and expansions as requested by the panel. The final report is the independent product of the panel’s deliberations.

SANEF’S initial response

SANEF notes that the inquiry made no official findings but extensively details some of the challenges to news gathering and reporting as raised by those who contributed to the inquiry. They include constrained financial models, digital disruption, smaller newsrooms with growing demand for journalists to do more. SANEF notes the detailed 69 recommendations put forward, arranged into the following eight categories: media freedom, media diversity, ethics and standards, financial resources, safety and security of journalists, continuing professional development, the *Sunday Times* and regulatory bodies.

SANEF will rigorously debate these recommendations to assess them and to see how they can be implemented in the advancement of ethical journalism that is at the heart of strengthening our democracy.

As an initial response SANEF welcomes the report’s endorsement of the critical role of self and co-regulatory bodies such as the Press Council and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) and the importance of all print and online publications seeking membership of the Press Council and adhering to its ethics code.

SANEF welcomes the suggestions around ensuring the strengthening of these bodies and ensuring their accessibility to the public to ensure accountability.

The recommendations that call for government, the private sector, civil society and other bodies’ endorsement of media freedom and, safety of journalists were also welcomed.

SANEF also welcomed the recommendations on media sustainability including the establishment of a media sustainability fund supported by government, corporates, private and international donors that could support media regulatory bodies, media freedom organisations and ongoing projects to build the long-term sustainability of the media industry including vulnerable sectors such as community media.

SANEF notes that this is even more critical as they confront the dire state of the industry as it sheds jobs and is forced to

find new funding models as advertising revenue dwindles.

Way forward

SANEF commits to consulting as widely as possible with both its own members and all other media stakeholders to draft a SANEF and industry 5-year ethics action plan. The plan will be debated and adopted at an ethics and credibility conference to be held later this year.

The full report is available [here](#).

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