

# New constraints create ‘profound crisis’ for independent media

By *Bruce Kadalie*

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*A public forum on “The Future of the Independent Media in South Africa” was hosted by IFAA, with the support of the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation. The gathering was chaired by Professor Ben Turok, Director of IFAA, and addressed by a panel of media experts who discussed the relationship between media, governance and human rights, especially given recent incidents of harassment and intimidation of journalists in South Africa.*

**T**he previous restrictions that journalists worked under during Apartheid and the years of struggle against it have been replaced by an entirely new, usually high tech, array of challenges which now constrain

today’s media. Instead of draconian legislation, journalists now come up against corporate media ownership that places the drive for profit above the responsibility of providing public access to information. There is also the upsurge of digital communication, which is increasingly squeezing out professional journalism and often replacing it with fake news created by bots instead of trained journalists. Additionally, there are multiple threats against journalists who expose corruption in corporates and at all levels of government, which are easily disseminated by social media.

There has also been a spate of recent incidents of harassment and intimidation against journalists in South Africa.

The gathering was chaired by Professor Ben Turok, Director of IFAA, and addressed by a panel of media experts comprising high profile journalist and political analyst Karima Brown, Associate Professor Wallace Chuma from the Department of Media Studies at the University of Cape Town and Micah Reddy, a journalist with Amabhungane. The speakers focused on the question of whether media freedom as prescribed in our Constitution – is under threat.

The speakers collectively sketched the structural crisis, both global and national, currently facing independent journalism.

Reddy described the dystopian

spectre of managers cosyng up to political elites – just as they did under Apartheid.

He gave as an example the Independent Media group under the leadership of Iqbal Survé, and highlighted the online harassment and regular threat of physical attacks faced by sources and whistleblowers, especially investigative journalists who in the past few years have uncovered and exposed serious, even criminal, wrongdoing by those in power, not only nationally but also among the authorities in local communities.

Wallace Chuma, echoing the view that the traditional media is facing unprecedented structural challenges, nevertheless pointed to the relative strength and vibrancy of South African media institutions compared to other African countries, given our solid liberal regulatory framework. However, citing research that shows that the traditional media tends to give voice to elites, he cautioned that this social gap creates the space for populist forces to mobilise. Corporate pressures on the media, he remarked, are the modern incarnation of the previous restrictions journalists faced under Apartheid.

Karima Brown, recently the subject of public harassment and intimidation, offered microscopic views on the daily hazards faced by journalists who confront controversial public issues and corruption in the public sector, especially women journalists. >>