

# Sanef expresses concern over media freedom

Following a spate of incidents that have the potential to erode media freedom in South Africa, the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) has expressed its concern.



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The Sunday Times reported that investigative journalist, Mzilikazi Wa Afrika recently received death threats. This comes in the wake of his hard-hitting reports on controversial developments in public office, including at state power utility Eskom.

AmaBhungane, an investigative news agency, has filed papers in the High Court in Pretoria that raise the flag about the interception of its phone conversations, which is illegal in a democracy like ours. The SABC's offices in Parliament were broken into in what is a suspicious incident, where senior journalists' computers were stolen.

In another disturbing event, Times Media Group journalist, Katherine Child was manhandled, and had her cellphone confiscated and all its contents, including contact numbers and photos, deleted by bullying police officials part of the presidential VIP security.

We have raised our disappointment in the past with the police's conduct at public events, especially their regular interference with the work of journalists – in their process flouting their own Standing Order 156, which regulates their conduct at public and crime scenes.

We have witnessed a number of incidents where police officials block journalists from freely gathering information at public events and newsworthy scenes, such as public protests and car accidents.

## **Pepper-sprayed and bullied**

Only last week SABC Journalist, Tshepiso Moche was pepper-sprayed and bullied by metro police officials off a crime scene in Pretoria.

We strongly condemn these events as they contribute to the increasingly hostile environment journalists operate under.

We will once again raise these incidents with Acting Police Commissioner, Khomotso Pahlane (and ask for the reported cases to be investigated and perpetrators brought to book).

Sanef will also be writing to National Assembly speaker, Baleka Mbete, as a follow-up to the shoddy treatment of journalists during the State of the Nation Address where we experienced unprecedented levels of security encroachment in the operation and movement of journalists in the parliamentary precinct.

We honoured Mbete's request for evidence of the events where police bullied journalists and hindered their movement or access to public spaces during the opening of parliament. Regrettably, there has been no response from her. It is our intention that the hostile environment experienced by journalists covering the state of the nation is nipped in the bud so it never occurs at future events.

South Africans need to be concerned about these developments, which are part of a broader trend of threats against media freedom. It is society and not just the media fraternity that suffers when journalistic work is hindered.

Media freedom is a public good that needs to be protected from the actions of people who want to suppress the truth, so that the media can be guaranteed of the kind of environment that will allow it to gather and impart information freely.

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