

Regulations, rights media conference kicks off at Wits



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The press is powerful, and as judges we are aware of the power of the press, and when you are in a position of power, self-reflection is very important, former Constitutional Court judge Kate O'Regan said today, Wednesday, 9 March 2011, at the Regulations and Rights media conference currently taking place at Wits University in Johannesburg. [[view twitterfall](#)]



"No discussion of media can start without mentioning the overreaching importance of freedom of expression, which is essential to seeking the truth," O'Regan said, adding that freedom of expression is critical to developing a fundamental right to strengthen the culture of democracy.

"Without a free speech, free discussion will be a futile exercise, and it is an obligation for mass-media to act with vigour and courage to create a platform to foster the culture of democracy.



"Democracy is a noisy space"

"Democracy is a noisy space, because freedom of expression is noisy, and unless you live in an authoritarian society you won't know the importance of free speech, which must not be suppressed by the state or anyone else," she said.

However, O'Regan warned the media that freedom of expression also comes with special duties and responsibilities, as the issues of national security and order, right to privacy and human dignity and reputation must be taken into account.

"The press needs to be honest, and recognise that it wields power, at least in part, because that power can be exercised in a harmful way. It is good to protect the individual rights of others."

The two-day media conference, which focuses on the roles and responsibilities of media in Africa, is hosted by the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), in partnership with Wits Professional Development Hub (PDH) and with the funding and logistics of the British High Commission in Pretoria and the Canadian government through the High Commission of Canada in South Africa.

'Press has duties in a free society'

SANEF chairman Mondli Makhanya, who arrived late at the conference, said: "Truly, as the press we have duties in a free society. The duty to invigorate democracy, be noisy and to ensure that conflict resolutions take place in an open manner. This conference is not a talk-shop, but I assure you that all discussions here will be centred around duties and responsibilities, and as activists we aim to equip ourselves with knowledge as the battle to foster freedom of expression and free media in Africa will be a long one.

Delegates from various countries in Africa - a nest of autocratic, corrupt and long-serving political leaders - are also attending the conference, as the continent continues to battle scourges of dictatorship, financial mismanagement, lack of freedom of expression and election-rigging.

Wits Journalism Prof Anton Harber said the gathering needs to create a wider perspective, which is well beyond SA, meaning a continental perspective, as Africa faces the same threat - threat to media freedom, and act in greater concert in the battle to establish a free society.

Similarities between the media and universities

Wits University vice-chancellor Prof Loyiso Nongxa said there are some similarities between the media and universities because both institutions are critical for a well-functioning society and are vital to educate, inform and create space for debate.

Nongxa urged the media 'to do something' about the marginalisation of rural populations, which he said, do not have access to vital information urban populations have.

See tweets from and about the conference through the Bizcommunity [#zamediafreedom Twitterfall](#) or via Twitter Search ([#AfricaMedia](#)). For the "Wits Declaration on Media Freedom and Responsibilities" and presentations, references, audio, photographs and other news articles from the conference, go to [Wits Journalism](#).

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ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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