

# Remembering SA World Media Freedom Day



By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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The attempted criminalisation of *News24* legal journalist Karyn Maughan this week is the first-time case in South Africa's democratic age. Ironically, nine days later, the country remembers Black Wednesday.



Source: © Weerapat Kiatdumrong [123rf](#) Black Wednesday in 1977 is remembered as SA Media Freedom Day

Appearing in the Pietermaritzburg High Court on Monday, 10 October Maughan is being trialled for requesting information already in the public domain about former president Jacob Zuma's health.

19 October marks what is known as Black Wednesday in the country's history. This is when the Apartheid government, in 1977, banned *The World*, *Weekend World* and *The Voice* newspapers, arrested editor Percy Qoboza, and outlawed several Black Consciousness organisations.



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## Free media integral to democracy

Commenting on Black Wednesday and the South African media in an open letter to the country, President Ramaphosa states: "We are fortunate to have come a long way since Black Wednesday."

In a statement on the government site, the Minister in the Presidency, Mondli Gungubele says: “A free media is an integral part of our democracy and government is committed to press freedom.

He adds that government recognises the media as partners in strengthening the country’s democracy and promoting its rights, which many have fought and died for during the years of struggle.

“We embrace any platform that allows us to strengthen relationships with the media, while also allowing us to speak about the work of government and to share our successes and challenges,” says Gungubele.

South Africa is currently ranked 35th in the world on the Reporters without Borders Index. This is out of 180 countries. What should be noted here is that in 2021 the country was in the 32nd position, so it has fallen three places.

So while Ramaphosa calls the media freedom in South Africa “a cause for optimism and pride, he is right to add that it is of concern that “we are seeing a resurgence of online and other forms of abuse directed against journalists in our national life”.



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Danette Breitenbach 4 May 2022



## Different threats

Today the threats to journalism are very different to 45 years ago writes Glenda Daniels in the *Daily Maverick*.

She says today the threats to media freedom, independence and diversity are different from 1977. “But the attacks on journalists are real, hectic and from everywhere.”

These threats range from job losses. The *State of the Newsroom* (Wits Journalism) reports from 2013 to 2022 show about half of all jobs were lost in journalism over the past decade and community media has in particular been decimated.

Other concerns include cyberbullying and misogyny, information disorder, police and court bullying, and community harassment.

## Difficult trading conditions

For Press Council executive director Latiefa Mobarra, South Africa’s media can be “immensely proud of what they have achieved, in the most difficult trading conditions, to reinforce, extend and defend hard-won, responsible media freedom in our country.”

Quoted in *City Press* Mobarra says since 2013 the Press Council has received more than 5,000 complaints against its members of which most were in favour of the media.

In 2021, the Council received 845 complaints of which 32 were referred to the Press Ombud for adjudication, and three were taken on appeal to the Press Council’s appeals panel.

“As a result, South Africa’s media – particularly those who subscribe to the Press Council – is trusted in a world where fake

news and untested allegations and rumours abound,” says Mobara in *City Press*.



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Danette Breitenbach 28 Jun 2022



### Taking stock

*amaBhungane*, managing partner, Sam Sole, says on their website it is appropriate to take stock of where we as media are today. Sole cites examples where despite the current environment that journalists operate in, they continue to do “exceptional, priceless work”.

His examples include:

- *News24*’s exposés of the background to the murder of health department whistleblower Babita Deokaran.
- *Daily Maverick*’s evisceration of Zweli Mkhize.
- Arena Holdings’ exploration of the political and criminal links of zama zama mining gangs.
- *GroundUp*’s matchless, dogged pursuit of corruption at the National Lotteries Commission.

But he also cites examples of abuse, especially to female journalists and refers to the attempted criminalisation of Maughan as “a glaring example of abuse”, especially towards female journalists.

“It is no coincidence that it is a continuation of a campaign against media critics launched under State Capture or that its beneficiary is capturer-in-chief Jacob Zuma,” states Sole.

### A new threat

A new threat comes from the government itself: the new draft Anti-Terrorism Bill that Parliament is trying to rush through.

*amaBhungane*, has delivered a last-minute submission to Parliament raising concerns about the draft new anti-terrorism Bill.

“In our view, the Bill in its present form would have a chilling effect on free speech, political debate and negatively affect the work of journalists and other forms of publication,” Sole says.

He adds: “Our media ecosystem is fragile. Iqbal Survé has shown how once proud publications can be captured and dismembered.”

Looking forward Sole endorses the President’s statement that: “The only counter to the proliferation of disinformation is the growth and expansion of credible news media outlets. The only counter to bad journalism... is credible, well-trained journalists whose only interest is educating and informing the public.”

### ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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