

Freedom of media under threat even in top democracies

 By [Anton Harber](#)

20 Jun 2014

Significant threats to media freedom are coming from unexpected places, the World Editors' Forum heard in Turin, Italy, last week. Some of the model open societies - those that press the rest of the world to choose this path to democracy, such as the US and the UK - have been tightening up since the events of 9/11.

"When *The Guardian* is forced to destroy computer hard drives and the editor is subjected to a political grilling over a story, arguably the most important global public interest story in a decade, when people who should be receiving medals are being put on trial by their governments ... it is a trend that should be unsettling for all of us," Aidan White, long-time media freedom campaigner and now a director of the Ethical Journalism Network, said. He was referring to the UK authorities forcing *The Guardian* to destroy hard drives containing the material leaked by former US security consultant Edward Snowden, the appearance of *Guardian* editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger before a hostile parliamentary committee to account for running Snowden's revelations, and the US's increasingly ardent pursuit of whistle-blowers who expose wrongdoing and bad governance.

Obama's 'controlled-freak' administration

A recent report by former *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie accused US President Barack Obama - who came to power promising greater transparency - of running one of the most closed and threatening US administrations for many years. The aggressive prosecution of leakers of information deters government sources from speaking to journalists, even when it is in the public interest, he argued. Six US government employees have been prosecuted under the 1917 Espionage Act, accused of leaking information to the press, compared to three such prosecutions in all previous US administrations. Reporters' phone logs and e-mails have been secretly seized in two investigations, exposing all their contacts.

"This is the most closed, control-freak administration I've ever covered," Downie quoted veteran Washington correspondent David Sanger of the *New York Times* as saying.

To keep this in perspective, the Golden Pen of Freedom this year went to Ethiopian Eskinder Nega, who, after losing his licence to practise journalism, continued to write about the appalling conditions under which many of his fellow writers were being held in prison. He was given the opportunity to get first-hand experience of these conditions for the next 17 years, his seventh stint behind bars.

Why so much interest in us?

But what is happening in the US and UK is part of a global battle for control of information, both public and private. The power of governments to watch people and intrude into their lives is much greater than ever, but their ability to hide this and other dangerous activity is weaker. In SA, we know the authorities are using more electronic surveillance than even their apartheid security police predecessors, partly because digitalisation has made this possible. Just last week, the president's trusted security minister was moved to head telecommunications. What is his interest in that area, one might ask?

The Turin meeting also highlighted a global trend familiar to South Africans: the use of "soft power" by governments to threaten independent media. They cited 30 countries - including this one - where governments are using or threatening to use their advertising clout and biased subsidisation of media to undermine press freedom.

Soft censorship

This soft censorship was less noticed, but is "pervasive, not yet recognised for its grave and growing threat to media independence and freedom", World Association of Newspapers secretary-general Larry Kilman said. They recommended greater transparency and impartiality in all government payments to and funding of media, be it for advertising, content or straightforward subsidies.

In SA, favouring friendly newspapers with advertising and sponsorship from government entities, and withholding it from critical publications, is clearly against public finance laws. But this does not stop government ministers, such as Blade Nzimande now and Essop Pahad before him, threatening to do it.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

- Find bright new ways to connect to readers - 31 Jul 2015
- Publish and be damned in name of patriotism - 24 Apr 2015
- Criminal libel has no place in law books - 20 Mar 2015
- One step forwards, one back for democracy - 2 Mar 2015
- Investment in people keeps news groups afloat - 13 Feb 2015

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>