



Mapping Threats to the Media in South Africa

Zoom seminar synopsis

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE WEBINAR

The webinar formed part of Intelwatch's broader regional initiative examining the state of media freedom and the evolving threats confronting journalists across Southern Africa. Building on previous seminars focusing on Botswana and Mozambique, the discussion centred on the findings of the report *Mapping Threats to the Media in South Africa*, authored by journalists and researchers Magnificent Mndebele and Naledi Sikhakhane. The report examined the legal, political, economic and societal challenges affecting journalism in South Africa, while placing these developments within the broader context of democratic governance, accountability and the protection of freedom of expression.

Although South Africa continues to enjoy one of the continent's strongest constitutional frameworks protecting freedom of expression and an internationally respected tradition of investigative journalism, the researchers emphasised that these achievements should not obscure the growing structural pressures facing the media. Rather than focusing exclusively on overt censorship or attacks against journalists, the report examined how legislation, surveillance, strategic litigation, financial instability, political hostility and online harassment increasingly interact to constrain independent journalism. Speakers argued that these threats are often subtle and cumulative, gradually weakening the conditions necessary for investigative reporting and democratic accountability.

Throughout the discussion, the researchers stressed that journalism remains an essential pillar of South Africa's constitutional democracy. Independent reporting enables citizens to hold public institutions accountable, exposes corruption and abuse of power, and ensures that the public remains informed on matters of national importance. Protecting journalists, therefore, is not solely a professional concern but one that directly affects the health of democratic institutions. Against this backdrop, the webinar sought to identify the principal threats facing South African journalism while exploring practical reforms capable of strengthening media freedom and safeguarding investigative reporting.

Panellists of the discussion included:

1. **Naledi Sikhakhane & Magnificent Mndebele** - co-authors of the report
2. **Phathiswa Magopeni** - Executive Director of the Press Council of South Africa & Vice chair of the African Women in Media

3. **Caroline James** - Advocacy Coordinator at AmaBhungane & Lawyer (*with an interest in freedom of expression, access to information & state accountability*)
4. **Dr Meli Ncube** - Media lecturer and Researcher at Stellenbosch University

REPORT FINDINGS PRESENTATION

Presenting the report, Magnificent and Naledi argued that the challenges confronting journalism in South Africa are increasingly structural rather than episodic. While many of the country's laws were enacted for legitimate public purposes, the researchers noted that their implementation, interpretation and misuse have created significant obstacles for journalists. The report identified four interconnected categories of threats affecting the media:

1. Legal and regulatory challenges
2. Political threats
3. Economic and ownership pressures
4. Extrajudicial and societal threats.

Rather than operating independently, these factors reinforce one another, creating an environment in which journalists face growing legal uncertainty, financial vulnerability and increasing pressure to avoid reporting on powerful political and corporate actors. The researchers emphasised that although South Africa remains comparatively freer than many countries on the African continent, significant and growing threats still undermine media freedom.

Legal and Regulatory Challenges

One of the report's central findings was that South Africa's legal framework presents an increasingly complex environment for journalists. The researchers emphasised that the principal concern is not that existing legislation was enacted with the intention of restricting media freedom. On the contrary, many of the laws examined were introduced to protect citizens, combat cybercrime, safeguard personal information and promote lawful conduct. However, the report argued that the broad wording of certain provisions, together with inconsistent implementation and selective interpretation, has produced unintended consequences for investigative journalism.

Particular attention was devoted to the **Cybercrimes Act**, which the researchers acknowledged serves an important public purpose by addressing criminal activity committed through digital technologies. Nevertheless, the report identified significant concerns regarding provisions that may compel journalists to explain how they obtained leaked or confidential digital information. Investigative journalists frequently depend upon confidential sources who disclose information in the public interest. Where authorities require journalists to reveal their sources or methods of obtaining information, reporters may face criminal penalties, imprisonment or financial sanctions if they refuse to comply. The researchers argued that these provisions create a direct conflict between the legal obligation to cooperate with investigations and the ethical responsibility to protect confidential sources. In practice, this has the potential to criminalise standard investigative journalism and discourage whistleblowers from coming forward with information exposing corruption or maladministration.

The discussion also examined the **Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA)** and the **Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA)**. While POPIA was recognised as an important mechanism for protecting sensitive personal information and promoting responsible data governance, the researchers argued that some government departments increasingly invoke the legislation to avoid transparency rather than protect legitimate privacy interests. Journalists investigating corruption, procurement irregularities or governance failures frequently encounter refusals to disclose information on the basis of POPIA, even where disclosure would clearly serve the public interest. The report therefore concluded that the principal challenge lies not with the legislation itself but with its selective interpretation and use as an administrative barrier to accountability journalism.

Closely linked to these concerns were the practical difficulties associated with PAIA requests. The researchers explained that access-to-information legislation remains one of the most important tools available to investigative journalists seeking official records and government documentation. However, the report found that public institutions routinely delay responses, ignore requests until statutory deadlines expire or create unnecessary procedural obstacles that prolong investigations. Such delays can extend investigations over several months, increasing costs for media organisations while slowing the publication of stories concerning corruption, governance failures or public misconduct. Rather than viewing these delays as isolated administrative inefficiencies, the report characterised them as a form of institutional obstruction capable of weakening investigative journalism by frustrating timely public access to information.

Surveillance and Digital Threats

The webinar devoted significant attention to the growing role of surveillance in shaping South Africa's media environment. The researchers argued that modern surveillance technologies present one of the most significant emerging threats to investigative journalism because they undermine journalists' ability to protect confidential sources and conduct sensitive investigations securely.

Central to this discussion was the **Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-related Information Act (RICA)**. The report revisited the landmark constitutional challenge brought by *amaBhungane* following the unlawful surveillance of investigative journalist Sam Sole. The Constitutional Court subsequently declared several aspects of RICA unconstitutional and directed Parliament to introduce stronger safeguards protecting journalists, lawyers and other individuals whose communications may be intercepted. These reforms were intended to strengthen judicial oversight, enhance procedural protections and recognise the particular importance of safeguarding confidential journalistic sources. However, the researchers noted that the legislative reform process remains incomplete, leaving considerable legal uncertainty regarding surveillance practices and the extent to which journalists' communications continue to be protected.

The discussion also introduced a less visible but equally important form of surveillance arising within media organisations themselves. Phathiswa Magopeni highlighted that many employment contracts require journalists to consent to the monitoring of communications conducted through company-issued devices, including mobile phones, laptops and email systems. Although such provisions are often justified as necessary for protecting organisational information technology systems, they also create significant risks for source protection and investigative reporting. The researchers observed that these clauses may expose confidential communications between journalists and whistleblowers while simultaneously normalising workplace surveillance. Magopeni reflected on successfully challenging similar contractual provisions within her own newsroom, arguing that journalists should carefully scrutinise employment contracts before agreeing to terms that effectively authorise the interception of their communications. The discussion therefore expanded the concept of surveillance beyond state intelligence activities to include institutional practices capable of undermining journalistic confidentiality from within media organisations themselves.

Political Threats, Strategic Litigation and the Chilling Effect on Journalism

Beyond legislative challenges, the report identified the political environment as an increasingly important factor shaping the conditions under which journalists operate. The researchers observed that while South Africa continues to maintain constitutional protections for media freedom, journalists investigating corruption, organised crime and political misconduct are increasingly confronted with intimidation, hostile political rhetoric and legal action designed to discourage further reporting. Rather than relying upon direct censorship, powerful political and economic actors have increasingly turned to litigation and public attacks as mechanisms for limiting investigative journalism.

One of the most significant developments discussed during the webinar was the growing use of **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**. These lawsuits are not necessarily intended to succeed in court but instead impose significant financial and psychological burdens upon journalists and media organisations. The researchers explained that lengthy litigation consumes newsroom resources, requires substantial legal representation and may discourage journalists from pursuing investigations into politically or commercially influential individuals. Even where journalists ultimately prevail, the process itself often imposes considerable financial costs while delaying publication and creating uncertainty for investigative reporters.

The report highlighted several high-profile cases illustrating this trend. Among the most notable was the prolonged litigation involving investigative journalist Karyn Maughan, whose reporting on matters of significant public interest resulted in sustained legal action that many observers viewed as an attempt to intimidate rather than genuinely protect legal rights. The researchers also discussed litigation involving the Moti Group and *amaBhungane*, where extensive legal proceedings raised broader questions regarding the balance between protecting reputational interests and safeguarding investigative journalism conducted in the public interest. These cases demonstrated that even unsuccessful lawsuits can discourage critical reporting by increasing financial risks for journalists and media organisations.

The researchers further observed that hostile political rhetoric increasingly contributes to an environment in which journalists are portrayed as politically motivated actors rather than independent watchdogs serving the public interest. Public accusations that journalists deliberately undermine political leaders or advance partisan agendas weaken public confidence in independent reporting while increasing hostility towards media practitioners. Although

criticism of journalism remains a legitimate component of democratic debate, speakers cautioned that persistent efforts to delegitimise the media as an institution risk eroding one of democracy's most important mechanisms for public accountability.

The report therefore concluded that legal intimidation, political hostility and reputational attacks increasingly operate together to discourage investigative journalism. Rather than prohibiting reporting outright, these pressures gradually increase the personal, financial and professional risks associated with scrutinising powerful institutions, contributing to an environment in which self-censorship becomes an increasingly rational response for journalists seeking to protect themselves and their organisations.

Economic Sustainability and Media Ownership

The report also identified the economic sustainability of South Africa's media industry as one of the most significant structural challenges affecting press freedom. The researchers noted that the financial difficulties confronting news organisations extend well beyond commercial concerns, directly influencing editorial independence, investigative capacity and the long-term resilience of independent journalism. Declining advertising revenue, changing patterns of news consumption and increased competition from digital platforms have significantly reduced newsroom resources, limiting the ability of media organisations to undertake lengthy investigations or retain experienced journalists.

Speakers observed that financial pressures increasingly affect newsroom staffing, investigative budgets and editorial decision-making. Media organisations operating under constrained financial conditions may struggle to defend costly litigation, invest in digital security or dedicate reporters to long-term investigations. The researchers argued that these economic realities have significant democratic implications because investigative journalism frequently requires considerable financial investment before stories can be published.

The discussion also explored the concentration of media ownership and its implications for editorial diversity. While acknowledging that South Africa continues to possess a comparatively pluralistic media environment, the researchers noted that ownership structures inevitably influence editorial priorities and the allocation of newsroom resources. Independent and community media organisations frequently face the greatest financial pressures despite serving important public-interest functions and reaching audiences often overlooked by larger commercial media outlets. Strengthening media plurality therefore requires recognising the

importance of sustaining diverse forms of journalism alongside major national news organisations.

Another important concern raised during the webinar related to the migration of experienced journalists into corporate communications, government and public relations sectors. The researchers explained that financial instability within the media industry has contributed to the loss of experienced investigative reporters and editors, weakening institutional memory and reducing opportunities for mentoring younger journalists entering the profession. This gradual erosion of professional capacity has long-term implications for the quality and sustainability of investigative journalism in South Africa.

The report therefore argued that economic sustainability should be understood as a fundamental component of media freedom. Independent journalism cannot effectively perform its democratic watchdog role without sufficient institutional capacity, financial resilience and investment in skilled journalists capable of conducting rigorous investigations into matters of public interest.

Extrajudicial and Societal Threats

Alongside legal and economic challenges, the report examined a range of extrajudicial threats that increasingly shape the daily experiences of journalists. The researchers observed that intimidation now frequently occurs outside formal legal processes through online harassment, physical threats, coordinated disinformation campaigns and gender-based abuse directed at journalists investigating politically sensitive issues. These pressures often operate simultaneously with legal and economic challenges, further increasing the risks associated with independent reporting.

One of the most significant themes concerned the rapid growth of online harassment directed at journalists. Social media platforms have become important spaces for public engagement and information sharing but have simultaneously enabled coordinated campaigns designed to intimidate reporters and undermine public confidence in investigative journalism. The researchers noted that journalists are increasingly subjected to abusive messages, coordinated trolling, misinformation and efforts to discredit their reporting through online attacks rather than substantive engagement with the issues they investigate.

The webinar devoted particular attention to the experiences of women journalists, who frequently encounter forms of harassment distinct from those experienced by their male

colleagues. The researchers observed that female reporters are disproportionately subjected to misogynistic abuse, sexualised threats, attacks on their personal lives and coordinated online campaigns questioning their credibility. Such harassment extends beyond ordinary criticism of journalistic work and instead seeks to silence women through intimidation, humiliation and sustained psychological pressure. Speakers emphasised that these gendered forms of abuse often contribute to self-censorship while discouraging women from pursuing investigative reporting on politically contentious subjects.

The discussion also highlighted threats confronting journalists reporting on organised crime, corruption and environmental disputes. The researchers referred to investigations involving mining operations, environmental activism and community protests where journalists have encountered intimidation from private actors as well as politically connected individuals. These examples demonstrated that threats to journalism increasingly originate from a diverse range of actors rather than solely from government institutions.

Collectively, these developments reinforce the report's broader conclusion that contemporary threats to journalism are multidimensional. Physical intimidation, digital harassment, surveillance, legal pressure and economic insecurity increasingly intersect to create an environment in which journalists face sustained professional and personal risks while performing their democratic responsibilities.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Following the presentation of the report, panellists reflected on its findings and examined how the documented threats manifest within South Africa's rapidly evolving media environment. While acknowledging that South Africa continues to benefit from one of the continent's strongest constitutional protections for freedom of expression, the researchers agreed that formal legal guarantees alone are insufficient to safeguard independent journalism. Instead, the discussion focused on how structural pressures - including surveillance, strategic litigation, declining newsroom resources, online harassment and institutional practices - collectively shape the ability of journalists to investigate and publish stories in the public interest.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was that contemporary threats to journalism have become increasingly subtle. Unlike periods characterised by overt censorship or direct state repression, today's pressures often emerge through administrative processes, financial burdens,

technological developments and sustained campaigns aimed at discrediting journalists. The researchers argued that these developments make threats more difficult to identify because they frequently occur within legal or institutional frameworks while nevertheless producing significant chilling effects on investigative reporting.

Another important observation concerned the growing normalisation of self-censorship. Several speakers noted that journalists increasingly weigh not only the public interest value of an investigation but also the potential legal costs, digital risks, personal safety concerns and psychological consequences associated with publication. Over time, this environment encourages caution, reducing the willingness of journalists to pursue investigations involving politically or economically influential actors. The researchers warned that this gradual narrowing of public debate may ultimately prove more damaging than overt censorship because it occurs largely without public visibility.

A significant portion of the panel discussion focused on the practical realities facing journalists working in South Africa's increasingly complex media environment. Building upon the report's findings, panellists reflected on how surveillance, legal intimidation, financial pressures and changing newsroom practices are reshaping investigative journalism. Rather than viewing these developments as isolated concerns, speakers argued that they collectively contribute to an environment in which journalists must continuously navigate legal uncertainty, technological risks and growing political hostility while fulfilling their democratic responsibilities.

The researchers and participants repeatedly stressed that South Africa's constitutional protections remain among the strongest on the African continent. However, they cautioned that constitutional rights alone cannot guarantee media freedom if the practical conditions necessary for independent journalism continue to deteriorate. Protecting journalists therefore requires more than favourable legislation; it also depends upon institutional culture, judicial independence, newsroom resilience and public recognition of journalism's democratic value.

Surveillance, Newsroom Practices and Source Protection

One of the most substantial discussions centred on surveillance and its implications for investigative journalism. Expanding upon the report's findings, panellists emphasised that surveillance should not be understood solely as a function of intelligence agencies or law enforcement. Modern surveillance increasingly occurs through digital technologies, workplace

policies and contractual arrangements that may unintentionally compromise journalistic confidentiality.

Phathiswa Magopeni drew particular attention to employment contracts that authorise employers to monitor communications conducted using organisational devices and networks. While such provisions are often justified as necessary for protecting organisational assets or information technology infrastructure, they also create significant ethical concerns where journalists communicate with confidential sources using employer-issued devices. The researchers argued that these contractual clauses frequently receive insufficient scrutiny despite their potential implications for investigative reporting and source protection.

The discussion highlighted the importance of distinguishing between legitimate organisational cybersecurity measures and practices that unnecessarily undermine journalistic confidentiality. Several speakers encouraged journalists to familiarise themselves with employment contracts, newsroom policies and digital communication practices before undertaking sensitive investigations. Understanding these institutional frameworks, they argued, forms an essential component of protecting confidential sources in an increasingly digital media environment.

The researchers further observed that technological developments have fundamentally altered the relationship between journalists and confidential sources. Whereas traditional investigative reporting often relied upon face-to-face meetings and physical documents, contemporary journalism depends heavily upon electronic communication, cloud-based storage and encrypted messaging platforms. While these technologies provide significant opportunities for collaboration and information sharing, they also increase the risks associated with surveillance, unauthorised access and cyber intrusion. The panel therefore emphasised that digital security training should become a routine aspect of professional journalism rather than a specialised skill reserved solely for investigative reporters.

Strategic Litigation and the Chilling Effect

The discussion returned repeatedly to the growing use of strategic litigation as a mechanism for discouraging investigative reporting. The researchers agreed that SLAPP lawsuits represent one of the most significant contemporary threats to journalism because they impose financial and psychological burdens regardless of their ultimate legal outcome.

Drawing upon examples discussed in the report, panelists noted that journalists increasingly spend considerable time defending litigation rather than conducting investigations. Even where

courts ultimately dismiss claims brought against journalists or media organisations, the associated legal costs, reputational pressures and uncertainty may discourage future reporting on controversial subjects. Smaller independent media organisations are particularly vulnerable because they frequently lack the financial resources necessary to sustain prolonged legal proceedings.

The researchers argued that the broader significance of SLAPP litigation extends beyond individual cases. When journalists observe colleagues subjected to lengthy legal disputes following investigations into politically or economically influential individuals, many inevitably begin assessing the personal and organisational risks associated with similar reporting. This indirect chilling effect, speakers observed, may reduce investigative journalism without requiring governments to impose direct censorship or restrictive legislation.

Several panellists therefore welcomed recent judicial recognition of SLAPP litigation within South African jurisprudence while emphasising the need for continued legal reform capable of discouraging abusive litigation intended primarily to suppress public participation and investigative reporting.

Gender, Online Harassment and Journalist Wellbeing

Another important theme emerging from the panel discussion concerned the increasingly hostile online environment confronting journalists, particularly women working in investigative reporting. The researchers observed that digital platforms have become indispensable tools for journalism while simultaneously exposing reporters to coordinated harassment campaigns, abuse and intimidation.

The discussion emphasised that women journalists frequently experience harassment that differs substantially from that directed at their male colleagues. Rather than engaging with the substance of their reporting, online attacks often focus upon appearance, gender, personal relationships or perceived morality. Such abuse commonly includes misogynistic language, threats of violence, coordinated trolling and efforts to undermine professional credibility through gendered stereotypes.

Panellists argued that these forms of harassment should not be dismissed as merely unpleasant features of social media. Sustained online abuse has significant professional and psychological consequences, contributing to anxiety, stress and, in some cases, decisions to avoid reporting on controversial issues altogether. The researchers therefore encouraged media organisations

to recognise online harassment as an occupational safety issue requiring institutional responses rather than leaving individual journalists to manage these risks independently.

The discussion also broadened the concept of journalist safety beyond physical protection. Psychological wellbeing, digital security, legal support and organisational solidarity were all identified as essential components of creating working environments in which journalists can undertake public-interest reporting without unnecessary fear or intimidation.

Investigative Journalism and Democratic Accountability

Throughout the webinar, the researchers reaffirmed the central role of investigative journalism within South Africa's constitutional democracy. Despite the growing pressures documented throughout the report, speakers emphasised that investigative reporting remains one of the country's most effective mechanisms for exposing corruption, promoting transparency and strengthening public accountability.

Panelists reflected on the significant contribution made by investigative media organisations such as *amaBhungane*, whose reporting has exposed major corruption scandals and governance failures despite sustained legal, political and financial pressures. These examples illustrated both the importance of investigative journalism and the considerable challenges confronting journalists engaged in public-interest reporting.

The researchers also noted that investigative journalism depends fundamentally upon public confidence, confidential sources and editorial independence. Weakening any one of these elements has broader implications for democratic governance because it limits the public's access to reliable information concerning the exercise of political and economic power. Protecting investigative journalism therefore requires sustained investment not only in legal protections but also in institutional capacity, newsroom sustainability and professional development.

The panel concluded that South Africa possesses many of the institutional foundations necessary to maintain a vibrant independent media sector. However, preserving these strengths will require continued vigilance as surveillance technologies evolve, financial pressures intensify and new forms of legal and digital intimidation emerge.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR REFORM

Although the report documented a wide range of challenges confronting South African journalism, the webinar remained strongly focused on identifying practical measures capable of strengthening media freedom and improving protections for journalists. The researchers agreed that meaningful reform requires coordinated action involving government institutions, the judiciary, media organisations, civil society and journalists themselves.

A primary recommendation concerned continued legislative reform to ensure that laws affecting journalism are implemented in ways consistent with constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and media freedom. The researchers emphasised that legislation such as the Cybercrimes Act, POPIA and future surveillance reforms should incorporate explicit safeguards protecting investigative journalism, confidential sources and reporting conducted in the public interest.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of completing reforms to surveillance legislation following the Constitutional Court's judgment on RICA. The researchers argued that stronger judicial oversight, clearer accountability mechanisms and enhanced protections for journalists' communications remain essential for safeguarding confidential sources and maintaining public confidence in investigative reporting.

Addressing the growing use of SLAPP litigation was identified as another priority. The researchers encouraged continued judicial recognition of abusive litigation intended to silence public participation while supporting broader legal reforms capable of discouraging frivolous lawsuits targeting journalists and media organisations. Strengthening access to legal assistance for independent journalists was likewise viewed as essential for ensuring that financial disparities do not prevent robust public-interest reporting.

Economic sustainability emerged as a recurring recommendation throughout the webinar. Speakers encouraged greater investment in investigative journalism, diversified funding models and stronger institutional support for independent media organisations. Financial resilience, they argued, directly enhances editorial independence while enabling journalists to undertake lengthy and resource-intensive investigations.

The panel also called for expanded digital security training across the journalism profession. Cybersecurity awareness, encrypted communications, secure data storage and risk assessment should become standard components of newsroom practice as journalists increasingly rely

upon digital technologies to conduct investigations and communicate with confidential sources.

Finally, the researchers emphasised the importance of strengthening professional solidarity throughout the media sector. Collaboration between journalists, editors, legal practitioners, academic institutions and civil society organisations was identified as essential for responding effectively to legal intimidation, online harassment and emerging threats affecting the broader media landscape.

Broader Significance of the Report

Throughout the webinar, the researchers consistently emphasised that the *Mapping Threats to the Media in South Africa* report should be understood as more than an assessment of the challenges facing journalists. Rather, it provides a comprehensive examination of the broader democratic environment within which journalism operates and the structural conditions that either strengthen or weaken public accountability. While South Africa continues to possess one of Africa's most progressive constitutional frameworks protecting freedom of expression, the discussion demonstrated that constitutional guarantees alone are insufficient if journalists increasingly encounter legal uncertainty, surveillance, financial instability, political hostility and digital intimidation in the course of their work.

One of the report's central conclusions is that threats to media freedom have become increasingly interconnected. The researchers observed that journalism is rarely undermined through a single mechanism. Instead, restrictive interpretations of legislation, surveillance technologies, strategic litigation, economic pressures and coordinated online harassment reinforce one another to create an environment in which investigative journalism becomes progressively more difficult to sustain. Even where individual pressures appear manageable in isolation, their cumulative effect can discourage journalists from pursuing sensitive investigations, limit editorial ambition and weaken the public's access to information on matters of significant public interest.

The discussion further highlighted the importance of distinguishing between formal legal protections and the practical realities confronting journalists. South Africa's Constitution provides robust guarantees for freedom of expression, access to information and media freedom, while the judiciary has repeatedly affirmed the importance of protecting investigative journalism. Nevertheless, the researchers argued that journalists continue to encounter institutional practices capable of undermining these protections in practice. Delays in

responding to access-to-information requests, broad interpretations of privacy legislation, expanding surveillance capabilities and costly legal proceedings collectively illustrate the gap that can emerge between constitutional rights and their implementation.

The researchers also reflected on the evolving nature of journalism in an increasingly digital society. Technological developments have transformed the ways in which journalists gather information, communicate with sources and publish investigations. At the same time, however, these developments have introduced new forms of vulnerability associated with digital surveillance, cybersecurity risks, online harassment and the misuse of personal information. Protecting media freedom therefore requires recognising that contemporary journalism depends not only upon legal protections but also upon technological resilience, digital literacy and effective institutional safeguards capable of protecting confidential communications and sensitive information.

Another significant theme emerging from the discussion concerned public trust in journalism. The researchers argued that independent media derives much of its democratic legitimacy from public confidence in its professionalism, accuracy and ethical standards. Consequently, maintaining public trust requires continued commitment to responsible journalism, rigorous verification and editorial accountability. At the same time, speakers cautioned that legitimate criticism of journalism should not evolve into broader political narratives seeking to delegitimise the media as an institution. Efforts to portray journalists as political opponents rather than independent watchdogs ultimately weaken democratic accountability by discouraging public engagement with credible sources of information.

The report also situated South Africa within a broader regional context. The researchers observed that although South Africa benefits from comparatively strong constitutional institutions, many of the pressures affecting its media landscape - including surveillance, strategic litigation, financial instability and digital threats - are increasingly evident throughout Southern Africa. Intelwatch's comparative research project therefore provides an important opportunity to identify common regional trends, facilitate the exchange of experiences and strengthen collaboration among journalists, researchers and civil society organisations confronting similar challenges across different national contexts.

Ultimately, the report concludes that South Africa's media remains resilient but faces a rapidly evolving threat landscape requiring continuous vigilance. Preserving media freedom will depend upon sustained legal reform, institutional accountability, economic resilience and

continued investment in investigative journalism. By documenting these challenges comprehensively, the report provides an evidence-based foundation for future advocacy, policy reform and collaborative efforts aimed at strengthening democratic accountability through independent journalism.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The webinar concluded by reaffirming that South Africa's constitutional democracy remains fundamentally dependent upon the continued strength and independence of its media. The researchers agreed that journalism performs an indispensable public function by exposing corruption, scrutinising political and economic power and enabling citizens to make informed democratic choices. Protecting journalists, therefore, extends beyond safeguarding an individual profession; it represents an investment in transparency, accountability and the long-term health of democratic institutions.

Throughout the discussion, speakers emphasised that contemporary threats to journalism are increasingly complex and cannot be addressed through isolated reforms alone. Legislative protections must be accompanied by effective implementation, judicial independence, safeguards against unlawful surveillance, stronger mechanisms to deter abusive litigation and sustained efforts to improve the financial sustainability of independent media organisations. Equally important is the need to strengthen newsroom practices, enhance digital security, support journalist wellbeing and foster greater collaboration across the media sector.

The researchers also highlighted the importance of professional solidarity. Journalists, editors, legal practitioners, academic institutions and civil society organisations all possess important roles in defending media freedom and responding collectively to emerging threats. Collaborative approaches - including legal support networks, digital security training, advocacy initiatives and regional partnerships - were identified as essential for ensuring that journalists are not left to confront increasingly sophisticated forms of intimidation in isolation.

The discussion concluded on a cautiously optimistic note. Despite the numerous pressures documented throughout the report, the researchers observed that South Africa continues to possess an active investigative journalism sector, an independent judiciary, vibrant civil society organisations and constitutional institutions capable of supporting meaningful reform. These strengths provide an important foundation upon which further protections for media freedom can be built, provided that government institutions, media organisations and the broader public

remain committed to defending the principles of openness, accountability and freedom of expression.

The *Mapping Threats to the Media in South Africa* report therefore serves as both a detailed assessment of the country's contemporary media landscape and a call to action. By documenting the legal, political, economic, technological and societal pressures confronting journalism while facilitating informed dialogue among practitioners, researchers and policymakers, the report contributes to a broader regional effort to strengthen democratic resilience through the protection of independent media. Like the Botswana, Mozambique and Eswatini reports within Intelwatch's Southern African series, it demonstrates that safeguarding journalism ultimately means safeguarding the public's right to seek, receive and impart information without fear, intimidation or undue interference.