

Safrea: 'Low pay is killing journalism'

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Safrea, the Southern African Freelancers Association, has slammed the collapse in freelance editorial rates in South Africa as "threatening to kill journalism".

"The rates being paid for editorial journalism in this country are not enough to sustain a career as a freelance journalist," says Safrea exco member Hagen Engler.

"Our members are increasingly being forced to find work in public relations, corporate work and television, with journalism taking a back seat. While these are perfectly respectable fields, the point is journalism is no longer a viable career option."

Engler points out that the crucial social role that journalism performs – holding private and public institutions to account with thorough, ethically researched investigation and reportage – is dying out.

"The rates being paid by the established media houses are threatening to kill journalism," he said. "A journalist with 20 years' experience and a family to support cannot subsist on R2,50 a word for a thousand-word investigative article, which some titles are paying."

He noted that media companies were increasingly laying off senior staff, who soon found they could not make a go of things as freelance journalists. Paying low, unsustainable rates that do not even increase with annual inflation made freelance journalism a perilous venture.

"Media freelancers are resourceful and we find ways to use our skills in the changing media landscape. We support each other and network about skills and opportunities. But journalism is close to our hearts and these trends are ringing alarm bells."

"Journalists are being forced out of the industry into related fields like content marketing, corporate communication and public relations, or pursuits like screenwriting, ghostwriting books and social media strategy."

"The competition for the handful of permanent journalism jobs is intense," says Engler. "Interns are regularly expected to work for free and annual bonuses are rare. Journalists in full-time employ are under massive pressure as headcounts fall and fewer journos cover more stories."

"Media companies are focusing on the bottom line. They are diversifying into digital platforms and entertainment," says Engler. "This is all very well, but investigative journalism is the lifeblood of civil society."

Freelance journalists, who are not beholden to media companies, advertisers, capital, state institutions or NGOs are an independent voice that society needs, he said.

"When the last journalist turns off her Voice Memos app and goes to find a job as a social media manager, the corrupt and the exploitive elements in our society will run riot."

"The role of social media in facilitating popular movements cannot be overstated. However, fundamental, in-depth understanding of trends in society and balanced, diligent probes of these trends are undertaken by journalists. We need them, and it seems that as a society we are becoming unable to pay them."

Engler warned of a race to the bottom, with media houses running celebrity content or recycling the day before's Twitter debates and becoming unable to offer any deeper analysis.

“Online and even on print platforms, opinion has taken the place of journalism. But thought leader articles and think pieces are not investigative reportage,” said Engler. For instance during the #FeesMustFall campaign, it is the pioneering independent journalism of The Daily Vox that helps us gain the most in-depth understanding.”

"Social movements, corporate malfeasance, government corruption, environmental and labour exploitation... all of these are brought to public attention and interpreted by journalists," said Engler. "Without them, we are poorer as a country."

Engler called for a fundamental re-evaluation of social values by media houses. "We must insist on good journalism and pay what it is worth. It is important for us as a society."

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