

We, the undersigned educators in journalism, media studies and related subjects, condemn in the strongest terms the arbitrary suspension and firing of some of the leading journalists at the SABC.

The journalists were suspended after making legitimate editorial inquiries about edicts from management that proposed censoring visuals of particular protests.

Any editorial conference or discussion should be a forum where journalists can make their views known and ask questions. In this case the question went to the heart of the mandate of the public broadcaster which is created by, and subject to, statute. One of the objects of the Broadcasting Act, which is among the laws governing the SABC, is to: "ensure plurality of news, views and information and provide a wide range of entertainment and education programmes." Section 9 (d) of the Act calls on the broadcaster to "provide significant news and public affairs programming which meets the highest standards of journalism, as well as fair and unbiased coverage, impartiality, balance and independence from government, commercial and other interests".

The SABC is a public broadcaster belonging to the country. It is the primary source of news for millions of people. It is a place where many of our young graduates should be able to practise their profession and adhere to the highest ethical standards possible.

Unfortunately, this is no longer the case at the broadcaster. The SABC has turned into a place where those who try to maintain a sense of ethics and professionalism are harassed, suspended and dismissed. It has turned into a place where the very basics of the law – complying with the regulatory authority, ICASA – are flouted.

As educators that strive towards instilling values of democratic debate, independent thinking, ethics and accountability in our students, we are shocked by the disregard shown to the independent regulator in an attempt to silence critical questions.

The SABC is a national resource. It does not belong to one person or even a small group of people. This was evident as far back as 1993 when the ANC and civil society groups, which opposed censorship, insisted at the constitutional negotiations in Kempton Park that the legislation governing the broadcaster be the first to change so that a free and fair election in 1994 could be guaranteed.

The SABC is not only flouting the law, but has violated the entire vision of democracy and constitutionalism that brought it into being. This is not the media environment that we want to see our graduates working in.

We call on the SABC to reinstate the fired journalists with immediate effect, and for the Portfolio committee on communications to urgently convene a public hearing into the matter. The SABC is a public resource and must operate in a lawful manner, consistent with the Broadcasting Act and the Constitution. The very principles of democratic debate, public participation and rule of law are at stake.

Signed:

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