



An Analysis of Factors Affecting Media Freedom At The South African Broadcasting Corporation

Tumelo Modiba¹ , Charity Lufuno Manwadu²

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Corresponding Author(s):

Charity Lufuno Manwadu

Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa. Email: Manwadul@gmail.com

Abstract: This study analyses the factors influencing media freedom at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), despite constitutional guarantees of press freedom in South Africa. Persistent challenges such as media ownership concentration, restrictions on news production and distribution, and political interference continue to threaten the broadcaster's independence. Using purposive sampling, the study interviewed four directors, four editors, and four journalists, adopting a qualitative approach with in-depth, semi-structured interviews analysed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that SABC faces multiple constraints, including an inadequate legislative framework, insufficient governmental support for protective policies, and political pressures that seek to shape editorial content. These conditions undermine journalistic autonomy and weaken the organisation's ability to operate as an independent public broadcaster. The study contributes to scholarship on African media freedom by highlighting how legal, political, and institutional environments intersect to restrict autonomy within state-owned broadcasters. The findings offer practical implications for management and policymakers in developing strategies to strengthen SABC's independence, enhance safeguards for journalists, and reinforce the integrity of public service broadcasting in South Africa.

Keywords: Media Freedom, Freedom of expression, Freedom House Model, Political environment, Economic environment

1. Introduction

The Constitution of South Africa explicitly guarantees freedom of the media. Section 16 of the Bill of Rights (1996) affirms every individual's right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and other media, the right to receive and impart information, artistic creativity, academic freedom, and scientific research. Despite these constitutional protections, media freedom in South Africa remains contested. Reporters Without Borders and other watchdog organisations have documented growing threats to press autonomy, including surveillance of journalists, harassment, and intimidation when reporting on politically sensitive issues such as government corruption, party finances, and land reform (Wasserman, 2020; Thamm, 2021).

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the national public broadcaster, reflects these tensions. As one of the country's largest state-owned enterprises, managing 19 radio stations and five television channels, the SABC plays a central role in informing and educating the public (Roper, Newman, & Schulz, 2019). Yet, scholars argue that the broadcaster has increasingly faced political interference, institutional instability, and declining independence (Bronstein & Katzew, 2018; Loliwe, 2023). Such pressures undermine its capacity to fulfil its democratic mandate.

Recent global rankings illustrate this decline. In 2019, South Africa fell from 28th to 31st place in the World Press Freedom Index, with limited explanations offered for this drop. Populist political pressures, coupled with structural and economic constraints, have created an environment where journalists' independence is threatened, compromising the broader democratic process (Reid et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the factors affecting media freedom at the SABC. Specifically, it examines four dimensions drawn from the Freedom House Model: (1) the legal environment, (2) the political environment, (3) the economic environment, and (4) infrastructural conditions. By focusing on these interrelated domains, the study seeks to clarify how external pressures and institutional weaknesses interact to shape media freedom within South Africa's primary public broadcaster.

2. Literature Review

The 1996 Constitution of South Africa guarantees media freedom, affirming the rights of both press and electronic media to report truthfully, independently, and responsibly (Roper, Newman, & Schulz, 2019). These principles—accuracy, independence, impartiality, and accountability—form the foundation of journalism in South Africa. However, they remain fragile, as apartheid-era legislation and more recent laws, such as the 2004 terrorism Act, continue to be used to restrict coverage of government institutions. Scholars note that although legal protections exist, the political environment, economic pressures, and ownership structures still constrain media independence, with the SABC particularly vulnerable (Roper, Newman, & Schulz, 2019).

¹ Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa, South Africa

² Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa, South Africa

Several studies highlight ongoing attempts to influence or control the SABC for partisan purposes, creating a crisis in media autonomy (Blurt, 2018; Loliwe, 2023). The South African case reflects broader trends in Sub-Saharan Africa, where governments often restrict media freedom to control narratives and shield themselves from accountability (Conroy-Krutz, 2020). Comparative research further shows that media freedom varies across countries and serves as an important indicator of democratic development (Roper, Newman, & Schulz, 2019).

The SABC's evolution illustrates this tension. Historically, the broadcaster functioned as a propaganda apparatus for the apartheid state, with its programming tightly aligned to government interests (Tomaselli, 2021). Independent and foreign-funded anti-apartheid publications emerged in the 1980s to challenge this dominance, laying the groundwork for alternative voices (Duffield, 2021). Despite constitutional reforms after 1996, the SABC has continued to face accusations of political capture, biased reporting, and compromised editorial independence (Wasserman, 2020).

Scholars argue that these challenges at the SABC mirror broader democratic struggles in South Africa. Media institutions are expected to function as watchdogs but often encounter resistance from political elites (Conroy-Krutz, 2020; Wasserman, 2020). Debates have also emerged around whether the SABC adequately serves the public interest or primarily caters to political and economic power structures. For instance, the judiciary has occasionally been called upon to balance press freedom with competing constitutional rights, particularly in cases where the SABC sought to broadcast court proceedings (Conroy-Krutz, 2020; Wasserman, 2020).

The transition to democracy promised a broadcasting environment free from political and economic manipulation. The SABC's founding statutes emphasised its role as a public service broadcaster mandated to operate independently in the public interest. South Africa's constitution further reinforces this independence by requiring diversity of views in broadcasting (Cachalia & Klaaren, 2021). Yet, in practice, persistent political interference, financial instability, and bureaucratic inefficiencies continue to erode this mandate (Morrison, Birks, & Berry, 2021; Duncan, 2021).

In sum, the literature indicates a persistent gap between constitutional guarantees of press freedom and the lived realities of South African journalists. The SABC, as the country's primary public broadcaster, remains central to this debate. Existing scholarship underscores the importance of examining not only legal protections but also the political, economic, and infrastructural factors that collectively shape media freedom. This study builds on these insights by applying the Freedom House Model to assess the interplay of these domains at the SABC.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study employed the Freedom House Model, which assesses media freedom across four key domains: the legal, political, infrastructural, and economic environments (Freedom House, 2017). These domains capture how regulatory frameworks, political dynamics, resource availability, and financial pressures collectively shape the degree of independence enjoyed by media institutions.

The Freedom House Model has undergone several revisions, reflecting the dynamic nature of media freedom. While refinements have expanded its language and scope, the model has maintained sufficient continuity to enable credible comparisons across countries and over time. This adaptability makes it especially suitable for analysing complex cases such as South Africa, where constitutional guarantees coexist with persistent political and economic constraints.

The model was selected for this study over alternatives such as Hallin and Mancini's typology of media systems or McQuail's Media Performance Framework. Hallin and Mancini's approach, while influential, is grounded primarily in Western democratic contexts, limiting its applicability to African settings. McQuail's framework, meanwhile, emphasises media performance in serving democratic functions but does not adequately address structural constraints on press freedom. By contrast, the Freedom House Model offers a more comprehensive and comparative perspective, directly assessing the restrictions and influences that impact journalistic autonomy (Adeeko, 2023).

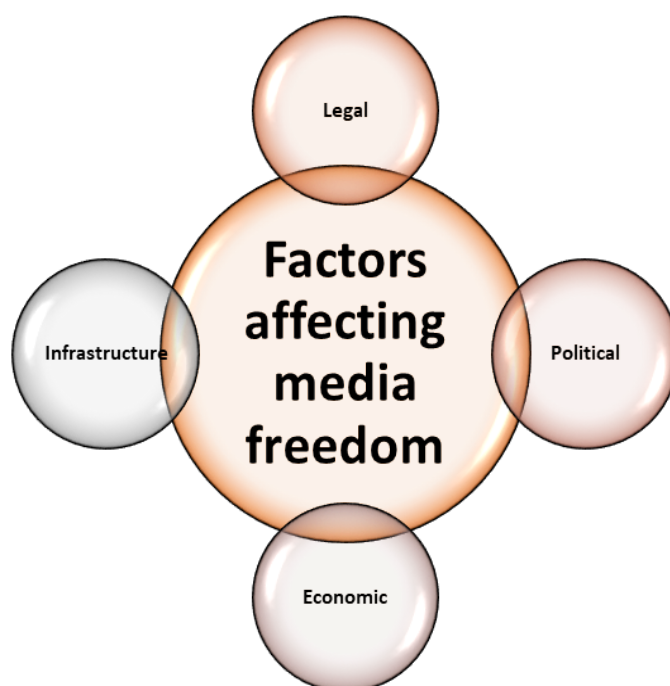


Figure 1: The Freedom House Model

In the context of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the model provides a valuable analytical lens. The legal domain highlights how laws and regulations both enable and restrict press activity; the political domain captures the influence of government and ruling parties; the economic domain addresses funding structures, ownership concentration, and advertising pressures; and the infrastructural domain examines the organisational and technological conditions shaping media operations. By applying this model, the study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of the factors that constrain or enable media freedom at the SABC.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals on the factors influencing media freedom at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Qualitative methods were considered most appropriate, as they allow for in-depth exploration of complex social and institutional dynamics that cannot be easily quantified.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve participants, comprising four directors, four editors, and four journalists employed at the SABC headquarters in Johannesburg. Participants were purposively selected to ensure that they possessed relevant knowledge and professional experience, with a minimum of four years of employment at the broadcaster. This criterion helped to ensure that the study benefited from the insights of individuals familiar with the organisation's operational and editorial environment.

Interviews were conducted by phone due to logistical and health constraints, each lasting up to 20 minutes. Although concise, this method provided flexibility while maintaining consistency in the questioning process. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow a set of guiding questions while giving participants the freedom to elaborate on their experiences and viewpoints. This ensured both comparability across interviews and the capture of nuanced, context-rich data.

The study employed an exploratory research design, which is particularly suitable for examining under-researched issues and generating insights into emerging problems (Olawale et al., 2023). Given the limited prior research focusing specifically on SABC's media freedom challenges, an exploratory strategy allowed the researcher to probe new dimensions of the issue.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used. Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling deliberately targets individuals with specific expertise, making it especially useful when the research seeks to gain insights from key informants. While the sample size of twelve is relatively small, it is consistent with qualitative research standards, where the goal is depth rather than breadth. Data saturation was reached when recurring themes emerged across participants, indicating that further interviews would likely yield limited new information.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved coding transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, and organising these into broader themes. This approach ensured that participants' voices were preserved while enabling the researcher to synthesise findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework and research questions.

4. Findings And Discussions

4.1. The Legal Environment Affects Media Freedom

The findings indicate that the SABC possesses internal regulations and rules designed to mitigate employee dissatisfaction, while also outlining agreements and protocols for managing the broadcaster and its personnel, as well as resolving issues with minimal friction. These internal regulations and procedures facilitate equitable treatment of employees, and when employees feel valued for their contributions, they are more inclined to exercise their media freedom. This conclusion is corroborated by Wolfsfeld (2022: 245–246), who argues that laws and policies are crucial for maintaining order, safeguarding rights and liberties, establishing standards, and resolving disputes in the context of media enterprises and their interactions with employees, individuals, government entities, and other organisations. The research further revealed that the government governs the media industry according to its own established goals, which may not align with the interests of media organisations or society at large, since the legislative framework is often constructed to serve the government's benefit.

A participant stated:

"We have supportive laws that help us to practise our freedom of expression. For example, we have some form of broadcasting laws that serve as a way to maintain order among SABC businesses, brands, and the company. The laws help to protect the rights of the broadcaster, and we people who work here, as well as help to establish a certain standard for how things are run here" (Journalist 1).

In agreement, another employee said:

"The SABC has its own field of law to protect itself. The SABC laws clearly dictate and define what is acceptable, and what is not in our place of work as journalists. To me, this is good in the sense that it provides a sense of stability that helps us to maintain our scheduled broadcast order, as well as giving us protection to easily settle any media disputes that might occur as we work" (Director 1).

Another participant expressed a different view:

"We do not have laws that protect us when carrying out our work in the field as journalists. Sometimes we are asked to cover stories on violent protests and our safety and security as journalists is not guaranteed. I would put in place certain measures or policies, for example, to contract a security company to provide security personnel to accompany journalists assigned to cover protests or violent action" (Editor 1).

Another participant stated:

"State laws in South Africa restrict our media freedom. We are not allowed to report on every event or on everyone without consent, or we might get arrested. Sometimes it is the state protecting itself by harassing journalists" (Editor 3).

In agreement, another participant said:

“According to my understanding of how this works, laws hinder media freedom because people can now stop us from investigating stories on grounds of defamation of character and other reasons. Most lawmakers, including the government, make laws to protect themselves from us as they see us as a threat. This has now moved to the public, as the public now sees us as a threat. We are the mouthpiece of the community. The government creates laws to protect themselves from us; therefore, hindering and interfering with how we work and our media freedom” (Editor 4).

The study revealed that some regulations impede SABC staff from executing their duties, as individuals increasingly pursue legal action to halt investigations or prevent broadcasts. Consistent with this perspective, Salih (2023: 1–2) asserts that each new policy in the media regulatory framework often contains stipulations that diminish media freedom. While the state occasionally safeguards its interests, many of these narratives serve the public good, yet the media refrain from reporting on them due to concerns over defamation lawsuits. Unlike other media companies with resources to defend their stories in court, the SABC lacks sufficient funds, resulting in further restrictions on its media freedom.

Mazumdar and Richard Riffle (2021: 56) similarly argue that inadequately planned and enforced regulations or procedures can hinder journalists’ content development. The research also indicated that the inadequate safety of SABC personnel during fieldwork constrains their media freedom. This is due to the SABC’s lack of protective policies for journalists reporting in hazardous environments. Consequently, South African journalists and media professionals face increasing exposure to violence, as reflected in the rising number of journalists injured nationwide. Carey and Gohdes (2021: 3–4) confirm that journalists are targeted for numerous reasons by various actors. This is further corroborated by Makwakwa (2021), who highlights that the intimidation and harassment of journalists in South Africa constitute severe forms of censorship and infringe upon Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises the freedom to seek, receive, and disseminate information and ideas of all kinds, across borders.

4.2. Effects of The Political Environment On Media Freedom

The results indicate that the political environment at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) plays a crucial role in shaping media freedom within the country. One of the primary ways this occurs is through government influence. The SABC, as a public broadcaster, is funded by both the government and licence fees collected from viewers. This financial dependency often leads to governmental pressure on the corporation to reflect state narratives, especially during election periods or times of political instability. For example, during the tenure of former President Jacob Zuma, there were numerous allegations of political interference in SABC reporting (Culloty & Suiter, 2021: 366–367). Journalists reported facing pressure to avoid critical coverage of the government, which undermined editorial independence and hampered investigative journalism.

A participant said:

“In terms of the political environment, we have to be careful about certain things, especially around politics. I cannot play into people’s factional battles. Sometimes people will send you their stories only to find out that they have their own personal agendas to push” (Journalist 1).

Another participant said:

“No, there is no political control. The South African Broadcasting Corporation is controlled by democracy in the sense that the board reports to parliament. The parliament consists of different parties. It is controlled in terms of regulations” (Director 1).

In agreement with this, one participant stated:

“There has never been a threat of political interference. It may have happened in the past, but not since my time with the SABC” (Editor 1).

In disagreement, another participant noted:

“The SABC is a national broadcaster, so there is bound to be interference from the ruling party, especially during election time. During the elections, the ruling party wants to shape our content, but the editorial policy of the SABC does not allow them to do so, and it always leaves a bad taste between the broadcaster’s news management and the ruling party leadership” (Journalist 2).

Another participant explained:

“There is political interference. For example, during national elections, some political parties approach our colleagues, asking for their stories and campaign content to be covered more than others” (Editor 3).

Another participant added:

“There are guidelines which safeguard policies. The public has contributions to them, and stakeholders can contribute too. The public comes first, but external forces will always be there. There are forces that can influence independence and media freedom. For example, the board of SABC is approved by stakeholders. The lawmakers are political representatives of the majority party; therefore, they can influence decisions. As an editor, if a boss calls me and says I should remove something, I will do it to safeguard my job” (Editor 2).

Another participant agreed, stating:

“There will always be politics, particularly regarding how information is disseminated. Whether private or public, there will always be political influence. We have had some journalists or workers suspended because of the influence of politicians. Many shareholders who were running the SABC were once threatened in the past; therefore, political interference will always be there because information is important to the public. Sometimes there is freedom, but at a certain expense—being told not to report negatively about Person X and instead to focus on other matters. There is a specific minister of media and communications who had that particular influence” (Editor 4).

Another participant added:

“There is no media freedom in any media company in South Africa. Take the SABC, for instance. Its main sponsor is the government, which always bails out the SABC whenever it has financial troubles. When covering events of the same institution that funds us, to avoid stepping on their toes, we need to take a certain angle. For the SABC to be totally free, it needs to be independent. In the past, people in high positions were usually politically connected; it was never about qualifications or knowledge” (Journalist 4).

A participant also noted:

“There is no censorship at the SABC, but there is self-censorship. This happens when you become too close to a person; therefore, when you cover news related to that person, there will be boundaries. For example, being too close to a mayor means you will not cover a story about him” (Editor 2).

Another participant stated:

“Protests were prohibited in the past, but now there is no censorship” (Director 3).

Another participant said:

“There is media freedom at the SABC” (Director 2).

Another participant reflected:

“Censorship was there back in the days, but I would not call it censorship. What people report and why depends on the newsroom meetings held daily” (Editor 3).

A participant also explained:

“No, as a journalist, it depends on what you do. If you write columns, you can express your views freely. As a journalist, you cannot censor your expression because we have the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, an independent regulatory body established in 2000 by the ICASA Act to regulate both the telecommunications and broadcasting sectors in the public interest. Therefore, editors have the right to question any content. Certainly, there are rules; you cannot publish anything” (Journalist 3).

Moreover, the leadership of the SABC has often been a focal point for political influence. Appointments of executives have sometimes been aligned with political loyalties rather than merit. Instances of political appointments resulting in biased reporting and censorship have been observed. When senior management is perceived to be aligned with the ruling party, the broadcaster’s ability to function as an impartial public service is compromised. This undermines the media’s role as a watchdog and erodes public trust in the institution (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022: 225).

Additionally, political protests and public sentiment can create a hostile environment for media professionals at the SABC. Concerns about journalists’ safety and freedom of expression have increased, particularly as media workers have faced intimidation and violence when reporting on controversial political matters. Such conditions discourage thorough reporting and can lead to self-censorship among journalists who fear repercussions from both the government and the public (Flavin & Montgomery, 2020: 12–13).

4.3. Effects of Infrastructure On Media Freedom

The results indicate that the SABC’s infrastructure influences media freedom. The research revealed that insufficient technological development and inadequate newsroom infrastructure impede media independence. Tsui and Lee (2021: 1319) concur that the absence of emerging technologies in the media sector complicates the operations of journalists and media organisations, thereby limiting media freedom. Himma and Ivask (2024: 15) similarly argue that when media organisations fail to equip employees with technologies that could generate substantial social or economic impact, media freedom is undermined. Such limitations prevent employees from fully realising their potential as innovative journalists, even as the convergence of digital technologies opens new avenues for media freedom. Duffield (2021: 177) adds that the rise of new digital communication technologies has also created unprecedented challenges, particularly concerning the reproduction and dissemination of copyrighted works, further complicating the media landscape.

The study also identified that the SABC faces internal structural management issues, leading to excessive or redundant bureaucratic procedures that restrict media freedom. The findings indicate that SABC bureaucracy often obstructs or delays decision-making, resulting in the neglect of stories of public interest. Ekwunife et al. (2021: 15) note that such formal procedures can constrain a media house’s operations by imposing multiple stages of approval, which prevent journalists from responding effectively to rapidly evolving issues. Similarly, Afrika (2021: 55–56) contends that excessive rules in media settings undermine media freedom by impeding essential decisions and actions necessary for addressing operational challenges.

A participant explained:

“Like any news organisation, resources are scarce. Not every story will get resources allocated to it. The news-making process involves a diverse value chain of people, equipment, and others” (Editor 1).

Another participant stated:

“Processes are slow. You need to wait, then the stories die while you are waiting for approval. We need to speed up the process so that journalists can do their jobs. Sometimes, as a journalist, you cannot hurry a story. You need to investigate and make sure it passes all the guidelines, but on the other hand, it is important for a story to be hurried so that it will not die. In most cases, you find that the stories that die because of slow processes or red tape are important, but there is nothing you can do” (Editor 2).

A participant indicated:

“There are a lot of grey areas. ICASA needs to ensure that they do not give SABC a mandate without funding” (Director 1).

Another participant agreed:

"Infrastructure is the biggest problem. Technology develops, and two years after you buy equipment, it becomes irrelevant. Let us say a journalist goes to another area to report a story, and there is no signal, so the journalist needs to go to the studio to report it; by then, it may be too late. Television news in the past meant a bulletin at 19:00 hours; now we have a station that runs 24/7. SABC needs to ensure that news is terrestrially available on SABC 1, 2, and 3, because currently it is only available on DSTV, and we are depriving poor people" (Editor 2).

Another participant noted:

"There are gatekeepers. When reporting a story, your story needs to be double-checked. If they want to keep up with what is being reported, they will need to have enough resources" (Journalist 4).

In disagreement, one participant stated:

"I would say infrastructure and resources have enhanced the way things are done in the newsroom; production is quicker, and news gets disseminated faster. I do not think it affects media freedom. That, I would say, lies with the editorial team—how the story is presented to the public, and whether they want to omit, fabricate, or add to what the reporter on the ground has submitted. Also, when outside politics enters the newsroom, media freedom goes out the window and gets compromised in the process. Such has always been the case with the SABC. Being a state organ, it was bound to happen, I always believed. Politics always finds its way into the newsroom" (Editor 4).

The study also revealed that the SABC is encountering financial challenges that hinder staff's ability to perform their duties, thereby restricting media freedom. According to Plantin and Punathambekar (2019: 5–6), policy-making concerning communication infrastructure is both perplexing and intangible: perplexing because of its extensive scope, interconnections, and complexity, and intangible because it requires constant adaptation to technological advancements. The research further found that sluggish processes within the organisation result in stories being abandoned. Some participants reported that narratives requiring exposure are first deliberated and then selected based on their perceived significance and other criteria. This practice undermines media independence, as journalists are often excluded from daily editorial meetings; consequently, their stories are modified to align with editorial objectives rather than being authentically conveyed (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019: 6).

4.4. Effects of The Economic Environment On Media Freedom

The study found that the economic climate significantly impacts media freedom, particularly at the SABC. South Africa's economy has faced persistent challenges, marked by slow growth and high unemployment rates. These fiscal constraints have directly affected the SABC's funding structure, leading to budget cuts and financial instability. In 2020, the corporation reported a budget shortfall of approximately 1.3 billion South African Rand (Winkler, 2022). Such financial difficulties limit the organisation's capacity to invest in quality journalism, forcing reliance on government subsidies and advertising revenue. This reliance creates a conflict of interest, as economic pressures from public entities may compromise editorial independence.

A participant acknowledged:

"The SABC has just emerged from a Section 189 process where costs had to be curtailed in a massive way for us to remain financially afloat. We were all impacted. The newsroom was also immensely affected. We now have fewer people doing more work for the same money. So, yes, the SABC is a huge organisation with a large, mostly unfunded public mandate" (Editor 1).

Another participant stated:

"Funding does not give the government control because they receive 3 per cent of the funding from the government. Twelve per cent comes from the licences; the rest is from advertising; therefore, it is not controlled. Maybe in the past the ruling party had more influence; hence, the ruling party contested to say that the SABC is biased" (Director 1).

Another participant said:

"The SABC needs funding. As a result, if there is no adequate funding and if people are not paying their TV licences, that affects the whole production. It is affecting production because we need that money to operate. Money is needed so that journalists can be paid" (Journalist 3).

A participant indicated:

"The SABC is not financially okay, but that does not mean that it is biased" (Director 2).

Another participant suggested:

"Financially, in 2021, SABC was in a bad state. A lot of people got retrenched, including myself. I was then forced to reapply for positions advertised on a lower salary scale because I needed the money. So the retrenchment affected me emotionally and financially" (Journalist 2).

4.6.2. Income

Journalists, editors, and directors at the SABC were asked how the economic environment affects media freedom in relation to their income.

A participant stated:

"Most of our colleagues have been retrenched; our salaries have been put on hold for like three years. Your salary being the same for three years while the cost of living is rising is frustrating" (Journalist 1).

Another participant explained:

“They need funding, and as a result, if there is no adequate funding that the SABC is receiving and if there are people not paying their TV licences, for example, that affects the whole production and the quality of what is being produced. Money is needed so that journalists can be paid. I need money to come to work and to perform my duties. In order for me to bring those stories to the viewers, I need the salary. How do I go out and tell stories of holding the powerful accountable if I am not being paid, or how do I tell your story about academic finances or poverty stories? The SABC needs money for us to run the operations” (Journalist 3).

A participant agreed:

“When the economy is weaker, companies are affected and have less money to spend on advertising, marketing, and collaborating with the corporation. When these big names that bring in revenue pull back due to financial constraints, it is salaries that suffer and the running of day-to-day business in the newsroom and production. We end up with the corporation taking whatever comes its way to boost revenue, compromising the brand. You cannot bite the hand that feeds you. If it is the government bailing the SABC all the time, then it is the government that might end up pulling the strings inside the SABC, further having the upper hand and influencing how its image is presented and how stories about them are written. That is limiting media freedom, according to me; hence, the rumour that some stories pass by Luthuli House for a thumbs-up before being broadcast” (Editor 4).

Furthermore, changes in the advertising landscape have intensified the SABC’s operational challenges. As marketers focus increasingly on digital channels, traditional media outlets face declining advertising revenue. The SABC has had to adapt to these shifts, often with diminished capacity to cover critical issues comprehensively. The lack of financial resources may result in a reduced workforce, fewer investigative efforts, and an overall decline in media quality, thereby undermining the SABC’s function as a public broadcaster.

The study also found that the economic environment influences governmental perspectives on the SABC’s editorial decisions. Media organisations reliant on state funding face an increased risk of censorship or self-censorship. This circumstance pressures journalists to align their narratives with government viewpoints, potentially stifling essential critical reporting vital for a healthy democracy. For instance, the SABC has faced criticism for its political event coverage, with allegations that management made editorial decisions under governmental pressure (Zulu, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The research revealed that government-imposed regulations in South Africa represent a principal obstacle to media freedom. Since the legal framework is established by the government, it often reflects state priorities rather than those of media organisations or society at large. Consequently, government-imposed restrictions on media activities limit journalists’ ability to operate freely. Consistent with this finding, Lawa (2020) argues that legislative and regulatory frameworks significantly shape media practices, reflecting the state’s authority to impose such laws. The study also indicated that the SABC has internal regulations and protocols designed to reduce employee dissatisfaction, alongside agreements and standards for managing the broadcaster and its personnel in ways that address conflicts efficiently and with minimal disruption.

The political environment further impacts media freedom at the SABC, as certain political factions or influential individuals attempt to manipulate the broadcaster’s operations for their own benefit. Findings suggest that SABC struggles to operate autonomously, with its independence constrained by reliance on government funding. Staff members are often unable to exercise their media freedom fully for fear of jeopardising financial support. While direct censorship was not widely reported, broadcast content is often indirectly constrained by external influences. Reid et al. (2020: 8–9) similarly argue that liberation from governmental oversight is essential, though it must not compromise the professional autonomy of journalists.

Culloty and Suiter (2021: 17) note that unfavourable economic conditions at SABC have compelled the broadcaster to seek government bailouts, thereby facilitating further state influence. Since advertising constitutes the principal revenue stream for news organisations, financial pressures push outlets to maximise audiences and appease advertisers rather than risk alienating them. Lawa (2020: 47) emphasises that economic autonomy strengthens media freedom.

The study also found that infrastructural limitations affect SABC’s media freedom. Excessive bureaucracy delays decision-making, leading to stories of public interest being neglected. Insufficient investment in emerging technologies and inadequate newsroom infrastructure hinder effective operations and reduce journalists’ capacity to innovate. In some cases, investigative journalists are excluded from editorial meetings, which restricts media independence and results in narratives being reshaped to align with editorial or external agendas. Reid et al. (2020: 9) similarly contend that the state of infrastructure demonstrates how essential facilities and organisational processes can impede media freedom when inadequately maintained or overly restrictive.

Overall, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the institutional, political, economic, and infrastructural factors shaping media freedom at the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Key contributions include insights into political interference in editorial decisions, financial challenges affecting independence, and the influence of institutional culture on journalistic integrity. To address these challenges, several reforms are recommended: strengthening legislative protections to guarantee editorial independence, implementing financial restructuring to reduce reliance on government bailouts, and establishing a transparent and accountable governance framework. Additionally, fostering self-regulation within the organisation and encouraging civil society participation in media oversight could help safeguard journalistic integrity and rebuild public trust. By addressing these structural barriers, the SABC can move closer to fulfilling its mandate as a genuinely independent public broadcaster.

6. Limitations of The Study

The main limitation of this study is that the researcher was unable to conduct face-to-face interviews due to COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures. Instead, phone calls and Zoom were used to conduct the interviews. Another limitation was that some interviewees were not entirely comfortable answering certain questions, as they feared potential repercussions. However, they were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy.

These limitations had a significant impact on the quality and representativeness of the data. The inability to conduct in-person interviews meant that researchers could not observe participants' body language or build rapport as effectively, which may have affected the depth of engagement. Face-to-face interactions often generate richer responses, while the shift to virtual methods sometimes results in shorter or less detailed answers. Some participants may also have felt less comfortable speaking openly in a digital setting.

7. Future Research Recommendations

There is a need for future studies to employ quantitative research methods to measure the factors that affect media freedom at the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Further audience research is also recommended so that findings can be used to expand advertising revenue at the SABC, thereby strengthening its financial independence and improving media freedom.

The theoretical model employed in this study should be applied in future research to assess factors influencing media freedom in different contexts. Researchers are encouraged to replicate this study in the private sector to better understand variations in the determinants of media freedom across broadcasting organisations. Additionally, future research could adopt comparative approaches (e.g., SABC vs. private broadcasters) or mixed-method designs to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the challenges and opportunities for media freedom in South Africa.

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About the Author (s)

Tumelo Matome Modiba is a lecturer in the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa. His research interests focus on social media, commentary on rape culture and youth, new media, and skill education, among others.

Charity Lufuno Manwandu is a PhD Candidate at the University of Zululand. The research focus was on the factors impacting media freedom at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) using a qualitative descriptive design. Despite its mandate to inform, educate, and entertain South Africans, the SABC struggles with various challenges undermining media freedom.