

Free press speech spirit

The Forum

The Freedom Forum is a non-partisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people. Its mission is to help the public and the news media understand one another better. The foundation's world headquarters are located in Arlington, Virginia in the US. It pursues its priorities through conferences, educational activities, publishing, broadcasting, online services, fellowships, partnerships, training and research.

Its establishment

The Freedom Forum was established in 1991 under the direction of founder Allen Neuharth who is the successor to the Gannet Foundation. That foundation had been established by Frank E Gannett in 1935. It is supported by income from an endowment worth more than \$900 million in diversified assets. The Freedom Forum funds only its own programmes and related partnerships. Unsolicited requests are not accepted.

About the office in Johannesburg

The Freedom Forum opened its African centre in Rosebank, Johannesburg on 11 November 1997. The centre's mission is to serve as a resource for African journalists by supporting training and development and providing a forum for discussion of issues of relevance to the media and press freedom. The African centre includes conference space and a media library which is open to journalists. The centre in

Johannesburg is the forum's fourth international office; others are located in London, Hong Kong and Buenos Aires. In the United States, outside the world centre, the forum has centres in New York, San Francisco and at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

About the Africa director

Jerelyn Eddings was named director of the Freedom Forum Africa Centre in October last year. Eddings is a veteran journalist with vast experience covering US national and international affairs. She began her career as a reporter with United Press International and went on to work for the Baltimore Sun as an editorial writer and columnist, and finally as a foreign correspondent covering Africa. She was the Sun's Johannesburg bureau chief from 1990 to 1993. She later worked as a political correspondent for US News & World Report magazine and returned to South Africa to cover the 1994 elections.

Her work

"I see my work at the Africa centre as a chance to use all the skills I have acquired through my years as a journalist and, in some cases, to pass them on to another generation of journalists. The job requires people skills to work with journalists and journalism organisations. It requires the ability to gather information about the journalistic climate around the continent. It requires writing skills and organisational skills. All those are needed to be a good journalist. Much of my work here is defining what type of programmes are needed and what kinds of existing programmes we should support to be of use to the journalistic community."

The challenges in SA journalism today

"The media in South Africa are at an important moment of transition – from the old days of a divided news media serving different segments of a country split apart by apartheid, to a new, transformed news industry in which the media strive to serve a diverse and democratic society.

"It's a massive challenge. Newsrooms are being integrated, ownership is being transformed, and the job itself is changing. In the old days, a news organisation either represented apartheid or opposed it. Now, those organisations must learn to do a more traditional job of covering a society and being a watchdog rather than an opponent of government. It will take a lot of effort and a lot of time to complete such a transition, and organisations such as the Freedom Forum can help, partly by virtue of experience and partly because we have the resources that can be used for these purposes.

"The good part of the challenge is that South Africa now is a country where press freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution and is seen as an essential part of democracy. The rest of the continent is in various stages of progress, some with a lively press and others with a media under terrible threat and with journalists risking their lives and freedom to deliver the news. But today, South Africa has one of the most democratic constitutions in the world and the challenge is figuring out how best to use the new freedoms as journalists and how to protect them for the future."

The Freedom Forum opened an Africa office in Johannesburg last year as a support to journalists on this continent. What is the Freedom Forum and how does it work?



Jerelyn Eddings