

At the outset, we pay tribute to the Late Chief Justice Pius Langa, for his efforts in leading the Press Freedom Commission and for the outcome that has transformed governance, and strengthened the regulation in our press codes.

The shift from self-regulation to co-regulation was indeed ground breaking, and we extend gratitude for his exemplary leadership of the commission during this period.

Our thoughts and prayers remain with the Langa family, and we thank them for being with us this evening.

The Awards tonight takes place at a truly historic moment in South Africa, as the country celebrates 2 decades of freedom.

A few weeks ago the IPI hosted its annual conference in Cape Town celebrating the anniversary of the same event that took place in Cape Town 20 years ago that marked the start of our freedom as media practitioners in this country.

The conference reminded us of the sense of euphoria we experienced back then.

It is almost impossible to forget just how much South Africa ignited in an unprecedented sense of optimism across the globe when it gained its freedom. The world's press gathered in the country during this time and made this remarkable political transition, one of the great stories of the last century.

However, given the great expectation that came along with this transition, disappointment was always likely. Just as the press reported vigorously on the joy of freedom, so too it must now report on the dashed hopes, the broken dreams wherever it encounters them.

Even if those in power often wish the press ignores the negative stories, we in the press know that we would be shirking our responsibility if we followed this path.

So one must acknowledge the role of the press and role that all of you finalists and winners have played in the deepening of South Africa's constitutional democracy.

We've seen over the past few weeks that while institutions like the IEC are directly charged with the mandate to manage regular, free and fair elections, the press is the press that asks the difficult questions of elected officials and makes them accountable to citizens.

Media freedom is always going to be contested, and members of the press have to accept that they are going to have to assert and reassert their rights in perpetuity.

But journalists are in jail in other countries and still others have been killed or threatened. So we have much to reflect on and our awards here this evening, serves to recognize all our efforts in the ongoing commitment to protect press freedom in this country.

This reminds us that even as we celebrate 20 Years of Media Freedom in SA we should remember our colleagues who are unable to practice their craft freely.

On that note, we wish to thank Standard Bank for being the lead sponsors of these awards for the third year running. We hope that this partnership continues to inject further enthusiasm for journalists and support staff to work even harder and to innovate further in order to deliver excellence in their field.

I also wish to recognise the key role played by Ingrid Louw the Chief Executive of PDMSA and her team for making this all work so well.

I must thank Paula Fray and the judging panel for their tireless efforts in adjudicating the process.

It is fascinating just how much our world has changed since 1994, and perhaps one of the most powerful changes to note, is the way in which technology has become a pervasive part of our everyday lives. In 1994 the mobile phone was only just appearing in South Africa and across the African continent.

Today it is impossible to imagine an environment without smartphones, tablets or social media. These developments have huge practical implications for how the press operates and also harnesses the ever-growing power of 'citizen journalism'.

With a good smartphone nowadays, and some decent bandwidth, one can perform quite a few of the functions that would have required a sizable media team in the 90's.

And it is good to note the increase in awards for digital publishing this evening – it will be interesting to see how this all transforms over the next 20 years.

Perhaps the most urgent challenge facing SA print media right now is to find and train the next generation of newsroom talent. In the past two decades many complained about the 'juniorisation' of newsrooms, and perhaps with good reason.

But I think the time has come for us in the media to re-assert our faith in our own sector by joining the war for talent and train or hire the best we can find. This will be a tangible way of ensuring that we have journalists with the skills to harness the media freedom they enjoy.

The first 20 years have shown just how far a society can transform on the basis of freedom. I think we should all build on this and ensure that future generations continue to find our media environment free, fair, dynamic and vibrant.