



HIGHWAY AFRICA AND WHY SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES SHOULD CHALLENGE THE INFORMATION BILL

Dr. Saleem Badat, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University

“South Africa has a sorry history of abuse of state security apparatuses, and universities have a key role to play to ensure that such abuses are not repeated. Researchers need access to documents that expose the inner workings of the security cluster, and its interface with society. Otherwise, research that is of considerable public importance will be extremely difficult to undertake. Academic freedom is constitutionally protected in South Africa, and this freedom would be impossible to achieve without freedom of information. This freedom is necessary for academics to generate knowledge, which in turn helps in developing good public policy. If the government decides what constitutes a genuine research interest, this conflicts with a fundamental tenet of academic freedom, namely the freedom to decide what to research and how.”

Universities have a duty to secure the necessary conditions for their own intellectual work in society, but they also have a broader duty to secure conditions for the practice of democratic citizenship in society. Badat believes that the current bill limits the right of access to information in a manner that is not reasonable and justifiable in a democracy based on openness and transparency. Failure to include public interest and public domain clauses will mean that academic research on matters relating to the organs of state security could be criminalized.

Since its launch in 1997, the annual Highway Africa Conference at Rhodes has developed a reputation as a venue that engages with the most important issues facing New Media practitioners in Africa. Among these are the critical issues of protection of, and access to, information, which is also being challenged in depth by Steven Friedmann, the director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Rhodes and the University of Johannesburg.

The Highway Africa conference is the largest annual gathering of African journalists on the continent. This well-established conference concentrates on new media issues relevant for journalists, encompassing the policy, economics, development and technology questions around Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). It aims to help facilitate African media's integration into the Global Information Society.

The theme for *Highway Africa 2012* is *Africa Rising* and will explore how the media frame the continent's geopolitics, economic growth and trade. What role can public intellectuals and academics play in shaping the discourses on Africa?

Conference dates are 9 - 11 September 2012.