



Country Report

Journalists in South Africa

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Introduction

This brief introduction presents some of the findings of the South African leg of the Worlds of Journalism Study (www.worldsofjournalism.org). For further information, see www.imasa.org as well as <http://asdebeer.wixsite.com/southafricanjournos>.

Backgrounds of Journalists

A total of 62.1 percent of the 371 journalists interviewed for the South African leg of the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) were women. On average, South African journalists in the sample were 39.92 years old ($s=11.98$); half of the journalists were younger than 37 years. Journalists tend to be well educated: 62.9 percent of the respondents held a Bachelor's degree from a university, and 19.5 percent held a master's degree. Another three of the journalists had obtained a doctoral degree, and 8.7 percent had undertaken some university studies but did not complete their studies. Of those respondents who held a university degree, exactly half (50.0%) had specialized in journalism; 16.1 percent specialized in communication and journalism and 8.8 per cent specialized in another communication field.

Journalists in the Newsroom

The majority of the journalists held a full-time position (79.7%), whereas 4.9 percent of the respondents indicated that they had part-time employments, and 13.8 percent worked as freelance journalists. Of those with full or part-time employment, 90.3 percent said they held permanent positions, and 9.7 percent worked on a temporary contract. Despite complaints since the early 2000s about the "juniorisation" of the newsroom, respondents had worked as journalists for 13.65 years ($s=10.78$), and about half of them had more than ten years of journalism experience.

Just over three-quarters (76.0%) of journalists worked as general reporters dealing with news on various topics, such as politics, entertainment or sports. The remaining 24.0 percent of the respondents indicated that they worked on a specific beat. On the whole, South African journalists worked for 1.58 newsrooms ($s=1.56$); 29.6 percent of them had additional jobs outside the area of journalism. Less than half of the interviewed journalists were members of a professional association (43.5%).

The majority of South African journalists in the sample worked for print media: 31.0 percent contributed to daily newspapers, 32.6 percent to weekly newspapers, and 14.3 percent to magazines. Another 6.7 percent of the journalists worked for private or public service television, and 16.4 percent for private or public radio. A small number of journalists in the sample reported they worked for news agencies (5.1%), for stand-alone online news sites (4.9%), and for online newsrooms of traditional media (1.9%).

Journalistic Roles

With regard to professional role orientations, South African journalists found it most important to report things as they are (92.5%), to educate the audience (86.8%), and to let people express their views (84.6%). The relevance of these roles was fairly undisputed among the interviewed journalists as the relatively low standard deviations indicate (see Table 1).

A majority of journalists in South Africa found it important to provide analysis of current affairs, to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, to tell stories about the world and to be detached observers. In this process, the majority of the journalists supported the idea of watchdog-journalism, namely to monitor and scrutinize political leaders, as well as to monitor and scrutinize business.

In a world awash in media entertainment, less than half of the journalists (43.6%) thought providing entertainment and relaxation were part of their work. On the whole, the impression was gained that the journalists took their work seriously, however they did not think that they should support government policy (9.6%) or convey a positive image of political leadership (9.0%). On the other hand, only less than a third (29.6%) thought they should motivate people to participate in political activity, and less than 20 percent thought that they should set the political agenda (17.4%) or be an adversary of government (13.3%).

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying "extremely" and "very important"	Mean	Standard Deviation
Report things as they are	371	92.5	4.62	.73
Educate the audience	371	86.8	4.42	.83
Let people express their views	371	84.6	4.28	.91
Provide analysis of current affairs	367	73.0	3.97	1.22
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	370	73.0	4.05	1.11
Tell stories about the world	368	70.4	3.98	1.05
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	366	63.4	3.62	1.40
Be a detached observer	365	62.5	3.78	1.24
Monitor and scrutinize business	367	61.3	3.63	1.28
Provide information people need to make political decisions	362	60.8	3.63	1.35
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	371	58.8	3.68	1.19
Advocate for social change	367	55.9	3.62	1.19
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	368	53.5	3.49	1.24
Support national development	362	52.2	3.46	1.25
Influence public opinion	353	43.6	3.27	1.23
Provide entertainment and relaxation	367	43.6	3.27	1.27
Motivate people to participate in political activity	358	29.6	2.68	1.36
Set the political agenda	344	17.4	2.24	1.24
Be an adversary of the government	339	13.3	2.05	1.21
Support government policy	343	9.6	1.95	1.07
Convey a positive image of political leadership	344	9.0	1.77	1.11

Question: Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work. 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance, and 1 means unimportant.

Professional Ethics

South African journalists demonstrated a strong commitment to professional standards of ethics. The respondents almost unanimously agreed that journalists should always adhere to the codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context (see Table 2). Seven out of ten journalists disagreed with the view that ethical decisions are purely a matter of personal judgment and said that sometimes it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it. However, slightly less than half of the interviewees (45.1%) subscribed to the idea that journalists' ethical decisions depend on the specific situation.

The picture was mixed concerning a selected number of potentially controversial reporting techniques. A large majority of journalists in South Africa found the use of confidential business or government documents without authorization, as well as undercover research to gain inside information, justifiable on occasion (see Table 3). Still, most journalists thought it was acceptable to use hidden microphones or cameras, and to use recreations or dramatizations of news by actors. Only a minority of journalists found it acceptable to practice "brown envelope journalism" that is, journalists taking money from sources, presumably in return for positive coverage and altering or fabricating quotes from sources.

Table 2: Ethical orientations of journalists

	N	Percentage saying "strongly" and "somewhat agree"	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	371	92.2	4.54	.85
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	364	45.1	2.77	1.51
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	366	33.1	2.49	1.49
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	367	30.5	2.36	1.39

Question: The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.

Table 3: Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists

	N	Percentage saying "always justified"	Percentage saying "justified on occasion"
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	364	8.8	66.5
Using hidden microphones or cameras	364	4.4	73.1
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	347	2.9	45.0
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	358	2.2	44.7
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	359	1.9	45.4
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	325	1.2	52.0
Accepting money from sources	355	.8	.3
Claiming to be somebody else	360	.8	38.9
Paying people for confidential information	347	.6	20.7
Altering photographs	354	.6	14.1
Publishing stories with unverified content	359	.0	10.9
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	356	.0	3.1

Question: Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?

Professional Autonomy and Influences

Journalists in South Africa reported a fairly high degree of professional autonomy. Almost three out of four respondents (71.5%) said that they had total or a great deal of freedom in their selection of stories, and 70.0 percent indicated they had total or a great deal of freedom in deciding over what aspects to emphasise in a news story. However, just more than half of the journalists (56.4%) reported that they “always” or “very often” participated in editorial coordination activities.

News production is influenced by a variety of factors. Among the potential sources of influences mentioned in the survey, “Journalism ethics” was highest on the list among South African journalists (91.9%) (see Table 4). A majority of journalists found their work substantively constrained by information access (or lack thereof) (77.0%), by time limits (76.0%), by the availability (or non-availability) of news-gathering resources (79.9%), and editorial policy (76.6%).

South African journalists felt little influenced by: pressure groups (10.9%), the military and police (14.8%). They also reported only minor influence from friends, acquaintances and family (12.2%).

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalism ethics	370	91.9	4.57	.68
Availability of news-gathering resources	364	79.9	4.12	.87
Information access	370	77.0	4.10	1.02
Editorial policy	367	76.6	4.08	.96
Time limits	366	76.0	4.12	.92
Media laws and regulation	370	73.0	4.02	1.01
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	365	64.1	3.85	.92
Relationships with news sources	370	64.1	3.82	1.13
Feedback from the audience	371	61.2	3.70	1.09
Audience research and data	358	53.9	3.55	1.07
Your personal values and beliefs	361	53.7	3.51	1.25
Managers of the news organization	356	47.8	3.40	1.10
Competing news organizations	371	40.2	3.17	1.14
Owners of the news organization	350	31.4	2.89	1.30
Your peers on the staff	360	31.1	3.05	1.03
Public relations	367	28.1	2.85	1.23
Profit expectations	331	23.9	2.59	1.26
Colleagues in other media	370	22.4	2.68	1.12
Business people	368	21.2	2.63	1.20
Advertising considerations	341	20.2	2.53	1.21
Censorship	361	20.2	2.37	1.29
Government officials	367	18.3	2.37	1.23
Religious considerations	335	17.9	2.31	1.23
Politicians	369	16.5	2.28	1.23
The military, police and state security	365	14.8	2.23	1.21
Friends, acquaintances and family	369	12.2	2.23	1.11
Pressure groups	367	10.9	2.28	1.08

Question: Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work. 5 means it is extremely influential, 4 means very influential, 3 means somewhat influential, 2 means little influential, and 1 means not influential.

Journalism in Transition

Journalism is currently in a state of change. According to South African journalists, the importance of the use of search engines and technical skills had most profoundly changed over the last five years (see Table 5). Overall, the journalists' responses point to a substantive deterioration of working conditions in the profession. A large majority of respondents reported an increase in their average working hours. Furthermore, most interviewed journalists felt that credibility of journalism and the time available for researching stories had dropped.

Influences on journalism and news production have changed as well. The influence of social media, user-generated content, and profit making pressures had strengthened the most during the past five years. A majority of South African journalists reported an increase for market-related influences – such as profit making pressures, advertising considerations, audience research, pressure toward sensational news, as well as for audience feedback. The journalists opined that ethical standards and journalism education were the only sources of influence that had substantively weakened over the years.

The questions about changes in journalism were only presented to journalists who had five years or more professional experience.

Table 5: Changes in journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "increased"	Percentage saying has "decreased"
The use of search engines	275	96.4	.7
Technical skills	272	84.2	9.2
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	267	81.6	9.0
Average working hours of journalists	266	72.9	6.8
The relevance of journalism for society	271	63.5	15.9
Having a university degree	257	48.6	19.8
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	255	47.8	16.1
Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions	263	36.5	28.1
The credibility of journalism	267	28.8	52.4
Time available for researching stories	271	18.5	62.0

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in South Africa. 5 means they have increased a lot, 4 means they have somewhat increased, 3 means there has been no change, 2 means they have somewhat decreased, and 1 means they have decreased a lot.

Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "strengthened"	Percentage saying has "weakened"
Social media	272	99.3	.0
User-generated contents, such as blogs	266	91.4	1.5
Profit making pressures	263	85.2	3.0
Audience involvement in news production	260	84.2	1.2
Audience feedback	263	81.7	3.4
Competition	269	81.4	6.3
Pressure toward sensational news	264	72.0	4.2
Audience research	260	68.1	6.9
Advertising considerations	257	67.3	5.8
Public relations	263	54.0	12.5
Western ways of practicing journalism	241	48.5	11.6
Journalism education	261	45.2	28.0
Ethical standards	267	37.8	33.3

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in South Africa. 5 means they have strengthened a lot, 4 means they have somewhat strengthened, 3 means they did not change, 2 means they have somewhat weakened, and 1 means they have weakened a lot.

Journalistic Trust

When it comes to trust in public institutions South African journalists displayed very low levels of trust. South African journalists had the most trust in two institutions: the judicial system and their own institution – the news media (see Table 7). Journalists had very little trust in politicians, political parties and the government. Remarkably, South African journalists seem to have more trust in religious leaders than in parliament. Overall, there was fairly high agreement among the respondents over the question of institutional trust, as indicated by low standard deviation values. Disagreement was most pronounced for religious leaders.

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

	N	Percentage saying "complete" and "a great deal of trust"	Mean	Standard Deviation
The judiciary/the courts	368	45.1	3.30	.95
The news media	368	44.3	3.38	.79
Religious leaders	364	16.2	2.59	1.00
The Parliament	363	12.1	2.50	.95
The military	356	8.1	2.28	.96
The police	367	6.0	2.22	.91
Trade unions	364	5.5	2.34	.83
The Government	366	4.4	2.06	.87
Political parties	365	1.6	1.93	.73
Politicians in general	365	1.4	1.82	.76

Question: Please tell me on a scale of 5 to 1 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 5 means you have complete trust, 4 means you have a great deal of trust, 3 means you have some trust, 2 means you have little trust, and 1 means you have no trust at all.

Methodological Information

<i>Size of the population:</i>	2,500 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	-
<i>Sample size:</i>	371 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	online
<i>Response rate:</i>	16.9%
<i>Period of field research:</i>	01/2014-02/2014