



The state of JOURNALISM TRAINING today

While depressed conditions have adversely affected newsroom conditions over the past few years, in 2013 an enormous amount, about R70-million, was invested in training journalists'. And, in some cases, even more will be invested in 2014. But many trainers observe that newsrooms are under-staffed and under-resourced, the lack of formal mentorships these days is a worrying trend, and there are no 'train the trainer' programmes anymore.

By Glenda Daniels

Training and skills development for journalists has received enormous attention in the public domain in recent years, especially in the light of the continuing criticism of the print media.¹ In recent reports, it has been stated that there should be a more proactive approach to raising standards while investment in training – irrespective of the global recession and scaling down of staff numbers – must take place.²

This article, through interviews with trainers and media companies, examines what kind of training took place in the newsroom between 2012 and 2013, and what journalists want.

Some media companies provided comprehensive details for the research: Media24, Times Media Group (TMG), Independent Newspapers and SABC. Caxton and the *Mail & Guardian (M&G)* did not respond to requests for information on their spending on training.³ Wide-ranging discussions were also held with trainers, both past and present, from the above-mentioned companies, but also the *M&G* and Eyewitness News. Finally, Wits Journalism undertook a survey into journalists' training needs. It must also be noted that other media and journalism training exists beyond what is outlined in this research. For instance, *The New Age* newspaper provides training, universities and other institutions such as the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) offer degrees and short courses, as do technical colleges.

Ten years ago: Sanef's 2002 skills audit and what journalists want today

One of the key findings of the Sanef 2002 Skills Audit was that if reporters were trainers, they would focus on newsgathering, writing and accuracy.⁴ The audit noted that limited resources prevented media institutions from taking junior reporters through a (traditional) process of mentoring, guidance through which they could learn the "tricks of the trade" from their senior counterparts. It listed a variety of skills that were inadequate or lacking: conceptual skills; analytical skills; creativity; critical thinking skills; enquiry skills;

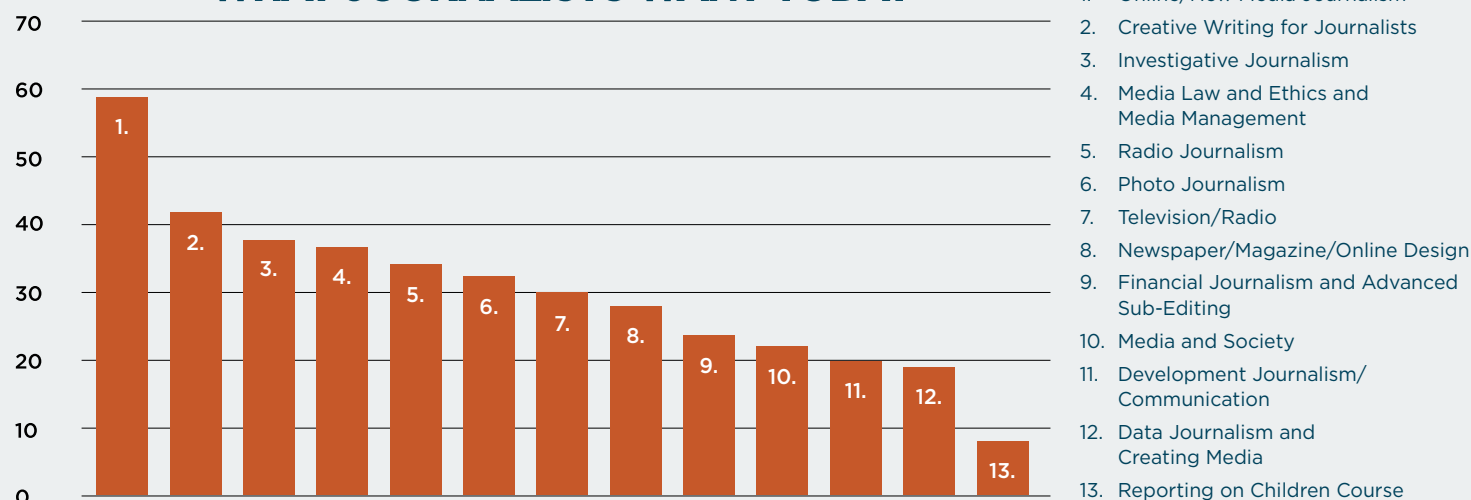
general knowledge; narrative skills; knowledge of media systems; critical reading skills; social awareness; social responsibility; and language skills. The audit also noted that strong leadership in newsrooms was needed, budgets for training were insufficient and there was a lack of general knowledge among reporters. Journalists needed skills to cultivate their own story ideas, and stories needed to be seen in a broader context. Lastly, there was not much interaction between juniors and seniors in newsrooms.

Wits Journalism recently conducted research about what kinds of training journalists wanted: the Survey of Working Journalists, 2012. From the responses there were major differences from the 2002 audit but also some similarities. The survey by Eleanor Momberg was 'dipstick' research in that it was a test of temperature, was suggestive rather than an exhaustive study. A total of 131 journalists from Gauteng and the Western Cape participated. The majority, over 70% of the respondents, had more than 10 years of experience; most had a tertiary qualification, and some with post graduate qualifications. The journalists came from a wide range of South Africa's media organisations: Media24, Sapa, Jacaranda FM, Independent Newspapers, *The Citizen*, *Sunday Times*, *The Times*, Eyewitness News/Primedia, *Business Day*, BDLive, YFM, eNews/eNCA and the Southern African Freelancers' Association. The biggest finding was that most journalists interviewed were interested in online/new media journalism training. Other big interests were creative writing, investigative reporting and then media law and ethics. The graph below captures the training interests of journalists today.

There is a clear desire for new media skills. Many of those interviewed offered suggestions to help with skills development in the industry: students should be encouraged to freelance while still studying, and something should be done to close the gap between university programmes and real newsrooms. Also vital, they noted, was that journalists needed to be taught more extensive writing skills. This echoed the findings of the 2002 skills audit. Bearing these findings in mind,

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WHAT JOURNALISTS WANT TODAY



we see in the following section whether the training on offer today tallies with and encompasses these needs.

Training investment, programmes and teaching methods

Four of the major media groups spent a total of R69.65 million on training in 2012 (to April 2013). Media24 spent R35.75 million, SABC R23 million, TMG R7.4 million and Independent between R3-m and R4-m. If one takes into account amounts spent at Caxton, Primedia, Kagiso, eNCA, M&G and *The New Age* and other institutions such as universities, technikons and training institutions such as the IAJ, this figure would increase substantially.

1. Media24

Media24 spent a total of R35.75-million on training for the year ending March 2013, according to head of talent, Jasmine Adam, who oversees training for the media house. The company trains about 40 journalists a year. Twenty are bursary holders who attend university courses and then spend their holiday periods getting work experience under mentors in the company's different divisions, and the other 20 are graduates (interns) who attend the Media24 Academy. They spend three months' training and at the end of this period, a select few are offered a further opportunity to receive on-the-job experience in various publications.

Media24 also runs internships independently of the Media24 Academy. At 24.com, for example, the company may take on an extra 10 students. Some of the training funds went towards bursary schemes for journalists and towards a graduate programme for a range of degrees, not just in journalism.

The main Media24 training project in the past year was called the "Army of 200". This was the company's drive to equip everyone from sub-editors and photographers to reporters and editors with multi-media skills. This was a Seta-approved programme, run by the IAJ in consultation with the Poynter Institute. The training was specifically geared towards repurposing and managing newspaper content for online and mobile platforms.

The Media24 Academy ran a month-by-month programme. Applicants to the Media24 training programme had to submit a curriculum vitae and an essay. Between 20 and 25 people were shortlisted from these applications. This group was then brought to Media24 headquarters in Johannesburg for a day of further testing. The company paid for their transport so that people from distant places were not disadvantaged. The short-listed group was then given a range of tests: multiple choice, general knowledge, news sense, logic and grammar tests. The company recruited interns in two areas: journalists who were offered a post graduate bursary for fulltime study at university, and graduates who got the opportunity to study at the Media24 Academy.⁵ The then head of training Latoya Mokotto noted that journalism interns were, on the successful completion of their course, awarded a one-year internship on a Media24 publication. They did six weeks of intensive training and, from 20 interns, the best 10

were chosen to stay on for a year. A fair bit of on-the-job training takes place but newsrooms often face capacity constraints in this regard: the senior people who have the skills to train are either on the job themselves and snowed under, or absorbed in news management and put on the desk, according to Waldimar Pelser, an editor in the group. "Throwing journos in the deep end still has merit though. With proper briefing and debriefing, even a junior reporter can swim – and will learn fast," he said.

2. Times Media Group

While the company spent about R4.6-million on training under its training programme during 2012-2013, the company's HR department also made available an extra R2.8-million for staff editorial development, said head of training Paddi Clay. And future training spend, from July 2013 to June 2014, will more than double for editorial – up to R10.2-million.

Over the years Clay trained groups of between eight and 15 interns a year, with an average of between 10 to 12 interns. For 2013, Clay had a group of 10 interns, including one from the Discovery Health journalism programme. The training budget covered the funding of specialist-beat mentors and reporting/writing coaches, as well as "reputational" training for all staff. Courses on media law, the press code and so on were usually run in-house, with individual training needs supplemented by short courses. The development of senior staff leadership skills could include foreign secondments.

Clay brought in different experts to address the interns on a variety of themes: court reporting; getting organised as a reporter; generating story ideas; how to make stories work; writing intros; news; news values; and reporting on elections, for instance. A different theme was selected each year. It could be science or environment reporting. The internships last a year, from January to December. Some interns are kept on and some are not. In a few cases, she has had to ask interns if they might not be suited to something other than journalism as the aptitude was not there.

To get into the TMG training programme, applicants were required to write a general knowledge test and an essay. They then went through an interview process and were further assessed in a one-on-one interview. Clay said a lot of funds are invested in skills training. The training programme was for all the titles in the group such as *The Herald*, *Daily Dispatch*, *Business Day*, *The Times*. She did, however, add that it would "be wonderful to have more writing coaches at hand. It is difficult for interns to learn without having people available to them all the time. They are quite demanding. They have difficulties with fact gathering and contacts."

Clay regretted that one-on-one formal mentorships did not exist anymore. "We don't have enough people in the newsroom to mentor. They mainly get taken care of through the news desk". In her day, she noted, the copy got flung backwards and forwards "until you learnt how to write an intro. Today, there isn't the time; the news desk just rewrites it."

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Paul Weinberg

3. *Independent Newspapers*

Independent Newspapers spent between R3-4million on training in the last financial year, on about 30 interns, according to CEO Tony Howard's office.

For media trainer Jonathan Ancer, training was contingent on a variety of factors: "Generally speaking [training is taken seriously] although people in various positions and in different newsrooms have different attitudes to training at different times. I think it depends on what training is being offered and when and who is doing the training."⁶ In Ancer's experience most people in the editorial chain valued training. Editors and news editors were in favour of training because it helped reporters do their job better, which meant better newspapers, which meant increased circulation and so forth, he noted. "Reporters themselves are also keen on self-development. More skills equal better career prospects." However, he qualified this. "What I have found, and I'm sure that this is true across the industry, is that newsrooms are stretched so there is reluctance by news editors for reporters to be taken out of production to attend workshops, conferences and seminars. This is very frustrating especially when the journalist is pulled from the training at the last minute." News editors, Ancer added, "tend not to send their best reporters for training (because they want to keep them working) and training is then seen as a punishment rather than a reward". A culture of learning in media houses would enhance training, he felt. This

could be promoted through regular short, sharp sessions such as newsroom discussions on topical press issues, post-mortem sessions, writing, and media law and ethics workshops, in Ancer's view. Such sessions would not take reporters out of production and could be used to address skills gaps that have been identified and that were in line with the particular title's editorial philosophy, he felt.

"I also believe that one-on-one feedback, coaching and mentoring are the most valuable training interventions." Ancer felt it was unfortunate there were no formal mentorships in the company anymore. "We have tried to put formal mentoring in place but this doesn't take hold. However, informal mentoring between colleagues does take place." At Independent Newspapers, although capacity was limited, news editors tended to mentor young reporters, interns and cadets in a sort of informal training, which was taken seriously.

While the economic climate was putting a strain on media companies, Ancer felt that media companies recognised that training was crucial to their survival. He pointed to the relaunch of the cadet school at Independent Newspapers and Media24's Academy. "It's a healthy sign that most of the big media houses have employed editorial people (as opposed to HR people) to oversee training in their newsrooms."

Independent Newspapers had re-launched its cadet school, based in Cape Town. Each year nine cadets, all graduates, were recruited from KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the

Western Cape to join the journalism training programme. The cadets spend an initial three months in extensive fulltime training in Cape Town, after which they return to their regions and they work in the various newsrooms, receiving individual mentoring and monitoring. According to Ancer, there was buy-in from news editors and editors. The cadets' "before and after publication" work was recorded in portfolios and at the end of their training, cadet graduates received an in-house certificate and every effort was made to place them within the company.

In addition to the cadet school, Independent Newspapers also trained more than 20 interns in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Cape Town. These were mainly third-year journalism students in Durban, second-year journalism students in Cape Town and graduates in Gauteng. The interns were monitored and their training institutions received feedback on their progress for purposes of their work-place experience requirements.

Training, Ancer felt, should be a combination of external and in-house programmes. External workshops were valuable for continuing training and it was "important for reporters to meet colleagues from other newsrooms and share ideas". However, it was critical that "journalists who go on these courses are able to apply their new skills when they return to the newsroom". Editors and news editors needed to understand what skills the reporter would bring back from the course – and then make

sure that their new skills were used. “I think this would enhance training. It’s frustrating for reporters who come back all fired up from a course and who then go back to the same-old style of reporting.”

The training programmes run by Independent Newspapers were determined by a skills audit/needs analysis done at the beginning of each year. Depending on the outcomes, training programmes were identified. These consisted of a combination of in-house and external courses.

In-house training included writing workshops, induction courses, ethics sessions and monthly sub-editor training workshops. Regular weekly training takes place on the following subjects: objectivity; finding stories; diary planning; fact checking; building contacts; investigative journalism interview exercises; style; time and organisation skills; creativity; copy editing; writing intros; numeracy; pictures and caption writing; preparing copy to size; feature writing; legal and court reporting; asserting yourself; planning; sourcing stories; story structure; developing a news sense; phone skills; logic; grammar; authoritative writing; keeping abreast of the news; research; powerful writing; business writing; climate change; consumer writing; finding focus; preparing briefs; social media; data journalism and shorthand.

4. SABC

The total for training expenditure during 2012-2013 was R23-million, according to the SABC’s Tami Mashau, manager of skills development: projects and planning. The then SABC’s news-training manager Kieran Maree outlined how and what training happened at the biggest media employer in the country. Up to 60 interns were trained each year. Internships were offered to graduates under the age of 25 in a variety of areas including: finance, procurement, human resources, legal services; IT, radio production, marketing intelligence, graphic design, TV operations, media libraries, radio programming, journalism; film and TV production; and film and media studies.

Workplace skills plans were submitted annually along with an annual training report, Maree said. In addition, training was a “critical investment in the future of staff, the organisation and the country”. The SABC, he added, had “decentralised training

wings” attached to its divisions and a substantial dedicated training budget.

The broadcaster had numerous training partnerships with institutions and organisations such as Rhodes University, Wits Journalism, the IAJ, and Media Monitoring Africa, as well as other external providers and foreign-based trainers. Because the SABC did not have enough internal trainers, it often enlisted the help of external service providers. South Africa, he said, had a shortage of broadcasting trainers. The broadcaster trained about 60 interns a year. Training was diverse: news for radio, TV and new media; digital operations; on-air presentation; operator training; ethics; video journalism; contracting; studio play-out; and support service training in finance and human resources.

Enhancing training: Other trainers’ views

Trainers were asked whether training was taken seriously in newsrooms, how training could be enhanced and whether there was sufficient investment.

Benita Levin, the Johannesburg editor at Eyewitness News (EWN) and also head of training, said her organisation “threw their students and interns in the deep end” but also guided them. Mentors were appointed to help interns learn the ropes.

Freelance training consultant Barbara Ludman, however, said in her experience, training was not a serious business in newsrooms today. “When money is tight, the first to go, it seems, are training projects.”

Gwen Ansell, who trained at all the media houses except Caxton, felt that training in the country was taken seriously, generally: “I always find the climate towards training hospitable and receptive, so long as the training is demonstrably relevant and meets needs.” She did, however, qualify this. Newsrooms were “under-resourced and understaffed” and funds for training that had been granted to staff members were sometimes withdrawn simply because they were too busy to attend training courses. Ansell felt strongly that “what has declined is interest in training of in-newsroom trainers”.

Most trainers found it unfortunate that formal mentorships no longer existed in newsrooms anymore. Informal mentorships, however, were commonplace but none of the trainers could vouch for them. EWN was the only newsroom surveyed which had formal mentorships in place. Levin said that they were “working really well”. Ten years ago new reporters had to learn the ropes simply by asking questions. “Now, young reporters are assigned a senior reporter. They get to shadow them and learn on the job. The more mentorship training, the better,” Levin said. The process gave the new reporter a regular “go-to” person.

Ansell questioned the effectiveness of the informal mentorships present today, while Clay pointed out that senior people in the newsroom were often too busy to mentor younger journalists. Ansell noted that mentoring could play a vital role in enhancing the quality of work produced today. However, media houses would have to proactively embrace this. “Where I could run three or four Training the Trainer programmes a year, 10 years back, there is now no demand for these at all. It’s falsely assumed mentoring is a natural skill and anybody can do it.”

Clearly, while investment in funds for training was pouring in, in the millions, there are some areas such as mentorships, and adequate staffing and resources in newsrooms, that need some urgent attention.

This is an edited version of a chapter from State of the Newsroom South Africa 2013: Disruptions and Transitions report by Wits Journalism.

Endnotes

1. See ANC conference resolutions on the media at Polokwane 2007 and Mangaung 2012.
2. The Press Freedom Commission’s report, April 2012 (pages 61-65), lists some of the problems in journalism today.
3. In addition, Primedia did not respond to requests for information about their training budget figures.
4. Steyn, E and De Beer, A. 2002. Sanef’s 2002 South African national journalism skills audit. *Ecquid Novi* 23(1).
5. Mokotto, L. 2012. Email Interview 30 May 2012 Johannesburg.
6. Ancer, J. 2012. Email Interview 8 June 2012 Johannesburg.

Glenda Daniels is a senior lecturer at Wits Journalism where she is project co-ordinator and lead researcher on the State of the Newsroom project. She has a PhD in Political Studies (Wits) and is author of the book, Fight for Democracy: the ANC and the Media in South Africa (Wits Press).

