

FLUX AND FLUIDITY BLURRY AND BORDERLESS THAT'S THE SA NEWSROOM NOW

By Glenda Daniels



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Journalists' work lives are changing almost as rapidly as news gets disseminated. Merge this with newsrooms becoming depleted of staff and we find the state of the newsroom in South Africa a tumultuous place today.

Caught in the middle of new demands brought about by technology and social media, coupled with decreased revenues resulting in retrenchments, journalists are working twice as hard in newsrooms, according to Wits Journalism's State of the Newsroom (SoN) South Africa: Disruptions and Transitions (2013) and Disruptions Accelerated (2014) reports. Journalists are also juggling more devices with which to disseminate news, in a longer working day, to keep up with "platform-agnostic" audiences. This means that consumers of news today show little loyalty to traditional brands, while demanding news anytime, all the time and on different platforms and devices.

This article aims to give a broad overview of some of the changes which range from depleting staff numbers resulting in understaffed newsrooms to social media taking centre stage thereby changing work routines. In addition, macro changes are on the horizon with a new regulatory environment poised to incorporate online offerings. In the meanwhile, while digital first is the trend, revenue continues to flow mainly from the traditional news products, such as newspapers.

These are conundrums that are messy and blurry and from which we cannot see the future of journalism, as it once was, too clearly.

These changes are outlined here but the main focus is on retrenchments, and changes to work life from the introduction of digital first and social media trends in the newsroom.

The data was drawn from the SoN research, which combined a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods.

The research used survey material in collaboration with the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) to discern social media trends. It also performed tweet extractions, and 1 800 tweets were analysed for statistical trends. Topical issues were selected which were pertinent to the seismic changes taking place in the newsroom.

A total of 147 journalists/editors and online staff were interviewed (70 were interviewed for the 2013 report and 77 for the 2014 report). News organisations that participated included: eNCA, SABC, CNBC Africa, Eyewitness News, Mail & Guardian, Business Day, The Star, Beeld, Sunday Times, City Press, The Witness, The Citizen, and Sowetan. For practical reasons, most of those interviewed were Johannesburg based. For information on retrenchments, SoN relied on a combination of company contacts in human resources departments, journalist sources in the newsrooms as well as the union, the Media Workers Association of South Africa (Mwasa).



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Retrenchments

Over 600 media workers lost their jobs between 2013 and 2015. This includes for example, the second largest media company in the country (after the SABC), Media24 retrenching 446 people (the company closed a number of magazines) between 2013 and 2014, Times Media Group (TMG) shed over 100 employees last year, while 50 of Independent Media's production staff were also retrenched last year.

In January this year, the South African Press Association (Sapa), South Africa's oldest news agency, closed down resulting in 48 more staffers losing jobs. In tandem with this The Media magazine reported earlier this year that the South African Freelancers' Association (Safrea) expanded its member base by 27% in 2014. The latest retrenchments were announced by the Mail & Guardian in July 2015, when 25 jobs were expected to be shed by August 2015.

Some of the reasons given to journalists who were retrenched over the last two years include: restructuring, structural changes in the media industry, cost cutting (salary bills) because of tough trading conditions (declining revenue and sales) other skills were needed, for example, more tech- and social-media savvy people for the online sections of the news organisation. In some instances, journalists were told that their jobs were not necessary, and that they needed to re-apply for them,

while others were called in for disciplinary hearings for spurious reasons and were then fired.

Retrenchments appear to have affected the more senior and experienced journalists (those with over 10 years' experience), who were earning better salaries than juniors (those with under five years' experience).

Independent Media last year created a stir over 12 senior members of staff who left their positions seemingly due to ownership interference in their day to day editorial affairs. Mwasa named them as Alide Dasnois (Cape Times editor); Janet Heard (Cape Times assistant editor: news); Martine Barker (managing editor); Dave Chambers (Independent production editor); Makhudu Sefara (The Star editor); Moshoeshe Monare (Sunday Independent editor); Philani Mgwaba (The Mercury editor); Donwald Pressly (Business Report Cape bureau chief); Terry Bell (labour columnist); Chris Whitfield (editor in chief); Ann Crotty (Business Report journalist); and Sybrand Mostert (Cape Times news editor). Cape Times chief sub and content editor Glenn Bownes was dismissed and the newspaper's opinions and analysis editor Tony Weaver left after a disciplinary inquiry, according to The Media online. Some of these journalists went freelance, a few went into other media companies and some went into public relations.

In 2015, TMG reduced by half the number of subbing jobs at Business Day, opting instead to form a subs hub.



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This amalgamated the subs desks of Business Day and The Times newspaper. Last year the company announced salary freezes for the top earners in the newsroom.

In the meanwhile, diversity of content has suffered due to the trend of syndicated copy across newspapers within the same owner group. The media revenue downturn has meant that there has been no re-hiring in the past year. This scenario does not look set to change over the next few years. Adding to the changes and pressures in the newsroom of today is the digital-first trend.

Changed work routines due to digital first and social media

Many newsrooms announced or proclaimed digital first (in other words the digital product (for instance news on mobile phone) must take precedence over legacy media, such as, newspapers) as far back as 2012. SoN found that the state of flux, fluidity and blurriness characterising this transition showed no signs of stabilising by 2015. This appears to be a phase of experimentation, with no obvious endpoint, as newsrooms deal with platform agonistic audiences and readers, loss of traditional (old media) journalists and revenue.

One of the key findings of the research showed that the seven news organisations' surveyed in the Digital First Developments chapter in 2014 – Daily Maverick, News

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24, M&G online, Times Live, Independent Online, SABC and Eyewitness News – all made significant progress with mobile news offerings. There was a dramatic percentage increase, 40%, of total online traffic being mobile year on year. However, the growth in mobile did not show a substantial shift from the type of content produced from any other platform, even print. In other words, content for mobile was not substantively changed from the traditional news item.

The use of social media in the newsroom was also increasing according to the vast majority of editors, 80% of those surveyed.

However, in the same breath, regulation issues posed a challenge with new regulatory frameworks to take effect from next year.

At the Sanef AGM in June 2014, there was agreement by editors that a “cross-platform, self-regulatory mechanism” was needed and should include all of the digital publishing spaces. By July 2015, a new media code was drafted (by Sanef, Press Council, IAB) which included online media. It was noted by the parties that this would create some guidelines given growing convergence. This new code would apply to news organisations, their social media and digital sites, as well as user-generated content appearing on the sites. Newsrooms would now have to deal with this uncharted terrain and learn how this new regulatory regime would work in practice.

Reverting to the SoN 2013 and 2014 research, all the newsrooms surveyed had policies in place for the editorial use of social media, but a smaller portion (75%) had a strategy for the marketing of their titles via social media; newsrooms also disclosed that they were often updating policies in tandem with changing conditions.

The biggest problem with social media use was the blurring of professional and personal lines, according to editors. They emphasised consistently that journalists were still members of their news organisations’ when they tweet or use Facebook. They were therefore bound by the ethos, culture and value system of their radio station or newspaper. Editors were aware that audiences and readers could confuse the news organisation’s view with the journalist’s view: if you tweet in your personal capacity and you offend your news organisation’s broad ethos, for instance on abortion or gay rights, then you are probably going to be given a warning or brought before a disciplinary hearing.

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social media ship. However, this was particularly true of 2013, but from the 2014 comments by editors, there was a shift, evidenced in an increased appetite for social media all round.

Many editors seemed to want some management or control over how social media was used in the newsroom, but none specified what and how. A few editors found it “a difficult space to have any control over and journalists had to just stick with the codes of conduct that were now in place”.

There were a few problems: a lack of certainty about how to navigate the new media space, for instance editor’s opinions were almost evenly split on whether journalists should declare in their profiles whether they are using an account for personal or professional purposes.

Editors cited “time wasted” on social media when journalists used it for personal reasons, a lack of understanding by journalists of how to use these platforms to maximum benefit for their news organisations’ and personal professional brands.

The court reporting on the Oscar Pistorius murder trial via Twitter was salutary: journalists had to be

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mindful of the usual restrictions on court reporting, even if it was social media reporting.

SoN found that the most used social media in the newsroom was Twitter. The results of the research were gleaned from an API twitter extraction method using twitter accounts of highly engaged social media editors/journalists. A total of 1 800 tweets over a month were analysed from nine Twitter accounts – in different newsrooms – both print and broadcast, all in Johannesburg.

Twitter and journalism key trends

While Twitter had become ubiquitous in newsrooms and was widely regarded as an indispensable professional tool, there was no homogeneity of views about its use. The main research focus was to establish what journalists were tweeting about: banal passing on of information or promoting their stories? Sharing opinion, debating issues and engaging with the public? Indeed, what took precedence? The journalists’ accounts under analysis showed the main reasons for Twitter use was work-related in more than 80% of cases or tweets. The

largest percentage proceeded in this order: broadcasting news (sending their stories out), sharing opinion, and interacting with audiences. The latter, interacting with audiences/public was small, a mere 5%.

Journalists spent, on average, at least 15 to 20 minutes per hour on Twitter – much more if they were live tweeting from events. In the newsrooms surveyed, some editors proclaimed that 100% of their journalists used Twitter and another said 90% did. There was evidence of some division among journalists with the tweeters being quite dismissive of non-tweeters in the newsroom.

Most journalists and editors interviewed said Twitter was now part of their everyday lives and while the majority were phlegmatic about it, and one or two said they were having “fun”, some expressed difficulty with the new changes in the newsrooms.

Most journalists agreed that Twitter had fundamentally changed the way workflow happened, with some stating that “having to keep track of what was going on in the Twitter sphere” had increased their workload “substantially”. A few expressed frustration that it was “difficult to multitask and use many gadgets at the same time”. For example, one journalist said that in the past she was used to just carrying a notebook and pen around on the field or to an interview. However, now she lugged a range of equipment – for instance, video camera, recorder, cell phone and iPad too – some or all at the same time. Her work day had become longer and she had to check twitter feeds at night, and update stories first thing in the morning before beginning a new diary. There were new skills involved in having to “storify”, “write captions”, “live tweet”, “live blog”, finding new ways to tell the same story, write story updates at virtually the same time. The reporter disclosed: “I prefer to do one piece of work and then move on to the next.”

The research found that most journalists were careful about what they broadcast on Twitter, often self-censoring or re-checking their tweets before sending them out. Journalists did not appear to indulge in huge amounts of time on self-promotion, but were involved in promoting their work, although it was difficult to separate the two categories completely.

Editors often claimed that journalists used Twitter for “interaction”, “engagement” and “crowd sourcing” but one must exercise some caution as this could be overstated, given the SoN quantitative research found that this engagement with public was the smallest percentage of the tweets disseminated in this analysis, coming last after spreading of news, then promoting news brand, and

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sharing opinions. This is a topic to investigate in the future.

Concluding reflections

The state of the newsroom and journalists lives today has blurry, undefined structural boundaries and borders. Newsrooms are still negotiating the new changes brought about by decreased circulations, low revenues from traditional products, no revenue from online, new technologies and demands of audiences who have become platform agonistics. Journalists are caught in the middle of these changes, and those who have survived the retrenchments of the past three years, are working a lot harder and for longer hours, with more devices to manage than ever before. The environment is highly pressured and stressful.

Amid this new terrain, journalists are also expected to engage with the public via social media. This is an enormous demand, given all the other changes they encounter in today's changed newsroom and media environment.

These seismic changes in the South African newsroom today are placing untold pressures on the working lives of those journalists still surviving in the profession.



Glenda Daniels on **THE STATE OF THE NEWSROOM**

SHORT SHARP

- 1 South African newsrooms are hugely-pressured environments.
- 2 South African newsrooms are confusing and messy.
- 3 The political landscape is threatening.
- 4 Technologically the shifts are seismic.
- 5 The traditional models of making journalism are outdated.
- 6 The new issues to grapple with are: innovation, sustainability and brand.
- 7 Mobile and social media are centre stage.
- 8 Change is the new stable signifier.
- 9 The identity of journalism has changed.
- 10 This is the beginning of the end of how it was.