

How would the proverbial typical journalist in South Africa describe his or her professional role, and even more so, how would such a journalist view the different issues, such as ethical news decision making, that confront journalists on a daily basis?

These are important questions as pressure from government and other quarters mount and journalists find it more and more difficult to fulfil their role unhindered in spite of a constitutional guarantee freedom of speech.

The difficulty in answering the questions posed above lies in the mere fact that up to now scant research has been undertaken on the journalistic profession in South Africa, except for a limited number of rather small studies dealing with restricted groups of journalists, usually in a qualitative fashion. The first and last countrywide study was the research project undertaken in 2002¹ for the South African National Editors' Forum. This project only covered journalism skills and was not aimed at getting a fuller picture of the way journalists view their work.

What was also missing until now was an effort to enlarge the sample to include most, if not all, journalists in the country. However, unlike the situation in certain authoritarian countries where journalists are required to be licensed or registered with a board overseeing their work, there are no formal and complete registers listing all journalists in South Africa.

There is perhaps a very good reason why this is so. The implementation of such a register, as was first suggested in South Africa in the apartheid era during the Steyn Media Commission's sittings, was again taken up more recently by government spokespeople who were making veiled threats that journalists in the country should be registered on a professional roll in order to secure 'responsible' reporting. Such a list (as is the case in a number of African countries) would be very helpful for the purpose of research, but could be highly problematic for journalists and the free flow of information.

However, this situation was about to change with the introduction of the World of Journalism Study www.worldsofjournalism.org (WJS) in South Africa in 2014 aimed at obtaining the views of as many possible journalists in the country on a wide range of issues.²

To regularly assess the state of journalism throughout the world, the academically-driven WJS project was founded to cover as many countries as possible worldwide, including countries from Africa. The study's primary objective is to help journalism researchers and journalists better understand worldviews and changes that are taking place in the professional orientations of journalists, the conditions and limitations under which they operate, as well as the social functions of journalism in a changing world.³

As stated in the WJS' mission, the project is a joint effort

HERE WE ARE

a rather ethical group
of news messengers

First survey results of the Worlds of
Journalism Study on the way South African
journalists see their professional roles

By Arnold S de Beer

of researchers from more than 70 countries, and aspires to the highest standards of scientific collaboration, democratic participation, and collective publishing. In so doing, the hope is that the WJS will become a vehicle for the global comparative study of journalism, and an institutional home for those who engage in it. (The basic principles of co-operation are formulated in the Study's Statute).

Originally planned as a pilot project and fielded in 2007-2011, the Study's initiators undertook interviews with 2 100 journalists from more than 400 news organisations in 21 countries. As was the case with the first project in which South Africa did not participate, the present project also focuses on journalism cultures (the role perceptions, epistemological orientations and ethical views of journalists), as well as on perceived influences on the news and journalists' trust in public institutions.

With countries from around the globe participating, Africa outside Greater Maghreb and Egypt is represented by Botswana, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, South Africa⁴, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

In order to have participated in the project the South African researchers had to come up with a credible number for journalists working in South Africa. Broadly speaking a journalist was defined as someone working in the South African news media sector receiving more than 50% of his/her income from a news medium.

Pinpointing the total number of journalists in the country became an envious task – no one seemed to know the answer as SA (as mentioned earlier) does not have a register of journalists (as is the case for instance for professions such as medical doctors or attorneys).

South African media houses, notorious for not being forthcoming and supportive of academic journalism research,

did not comply positively to requests made (with the support of Sanef) to co-operate in allowing the researchers to contact all the journalists in their employment.

The researchers consequently had to develop the first comprehensive countrywide database of employed journalists working in all news media in South Africa from a large variety of sources, including Google, the Media List, and webpages of newspapers, name lists available on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, governmental and commercial lists, and others.

On completing the database, the research team approached senior media managers to give their best ball-park figures based on their knowledge of the media scene, the number of media and the average number of journalists one could have expected to work in these media. The same was also done on social media. To the surprise of the research team, these figures broadly stayed in the range between 2 000 and 2 500 journalists, with a few running to 3 000 and more and less to numbers below 2 000.

Based on its own research and database, the research team decided that its list of 2 203 names of journalists with email contact addresses might not have been the final answer, but a solid enough number to be used in the WJS project.

All of the 2 203 journalists were invited by email to complete an online version of the WJS questionnaire (see www.imasa.org). A total of 531 journalists (24.1%) started the questionnaire, but only 371 (16.9%) completed it. Although this is a rather low response rate, it should be seen within the context of obtaining for the first time a census-like version of all South African journalists, and then deriving a sample from that.

In the following sections some results from the South African leg⁵ of the present WJS project are briefly discussed:

Positions held by journalists

The South African WJS sample captured a broad spectrum of positions that journalists occupy in the news media, with just more than 40% percent of the respondents being reporters or news writers, and a little more than a third being in senior positions. Of these, 90% were full-time and 10% part-time.

Academic qualifications

A total of 62.1% of the sample were female and 37.9% were male and 63% said that they earned a BA degree, 20% a master's degree, and 2% had a doctorate. Only 16% did not earn a tertiary degree: 7% only had a high school diploma and 9% had at least some tertiary education. Running against a general perception that very few journalists have journalism education or training, 49% indicated that they obtained a journalism degree; a 9% communication degree and 16% a degree in both journalism and communication, whereas only 26% did not study either of these subjects.

Political stance

In line with, for instance, the US and UK, South African journalists seem to be left of centre rather than right on the political spectrum. Only 10% considered themselves right of spectrum. While 35% identified themselves as belonging to the centre, just more than half (55%) stated that they are left of centre.

Deciding what is left or right in a political context is of course problematic, however it says something about the political discourse that a leftist government, such as the ANC, consider the print media to be too overtly critical, whilst only 10% of the journalists consider themselves to be right of

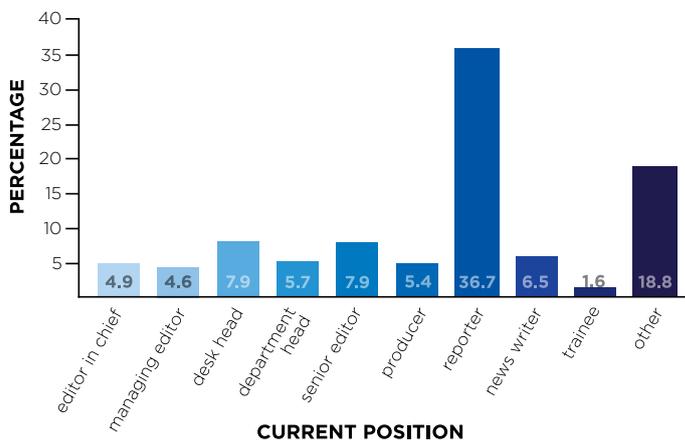


Fig 1: Positions held by journalists

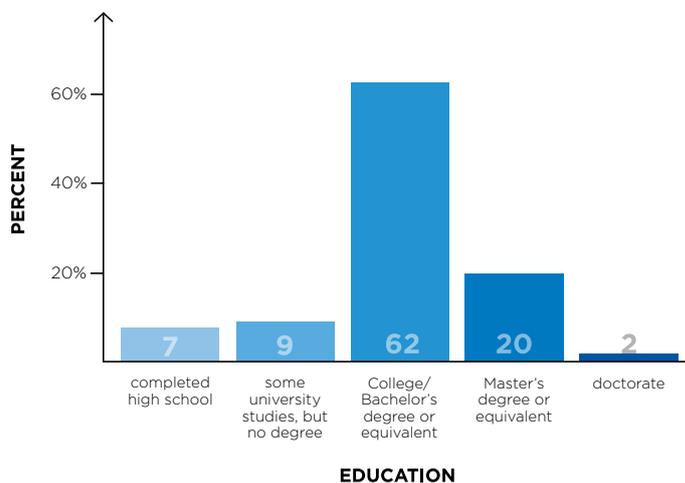


Fig 2: Academic qualifications

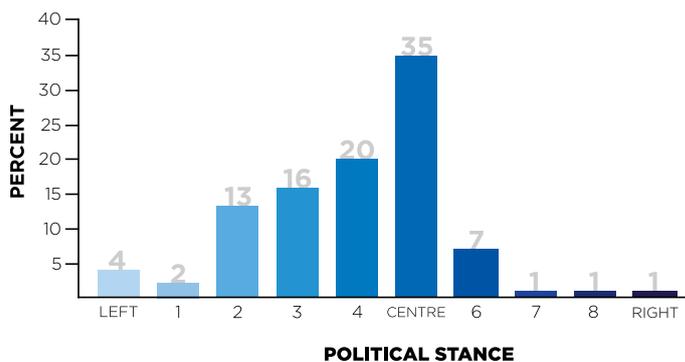


Figure 3: Political stance

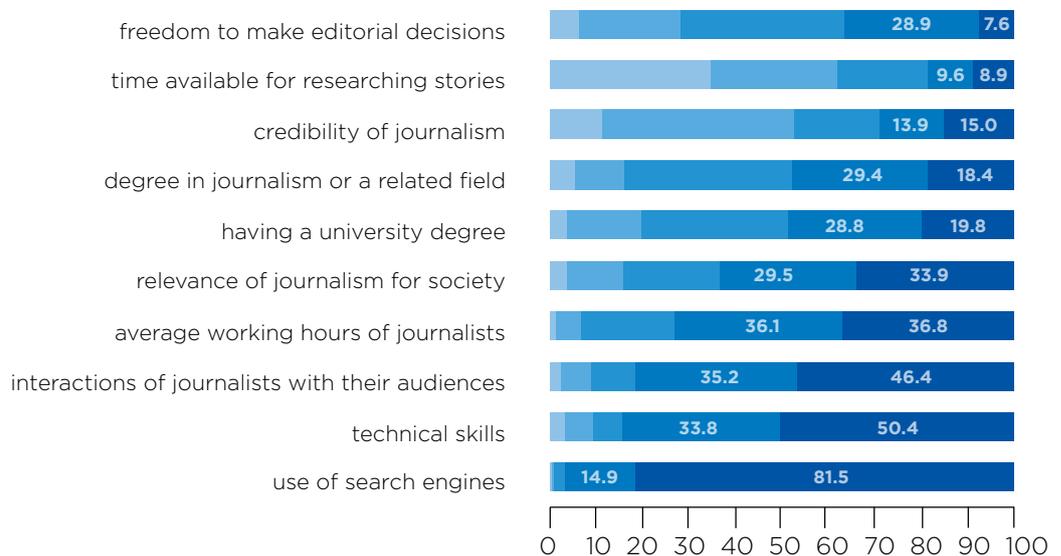


Fig 4: Changes over the last ten years

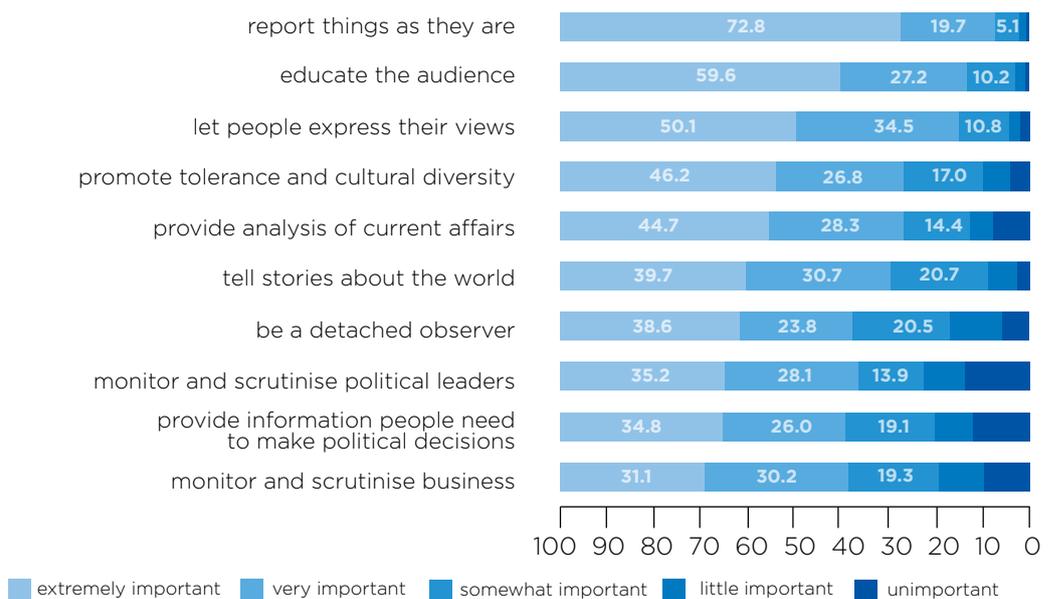


Fig 5: Ten most important roles of journalists

centre, with 7% to be just right to the centre and only 3% being more to the right.

Changes over the last 10 years

As one might have expected, the major change journalists experienced over the last 10 years was the use of search engines – 80% said that this was the biggest change, while only 4.6% did not experience it as such. The latter figure might be attributed in part to the few newsrooms where internet is not yet fully available to all the journalists. The need to improve their technical skills was noted by 84.2% of all the journalists in the sample.

Just more than 80% (81.6%) said that their interaction with their audiences had changed as well. Some of the other changes, experienced more than others, were an increase in working hours (72.9%); although perhaps more journalists than ever now have

university degrees, only less than half (48.6%) said the need to have a university degree changed over the last decade.

On the other hand, less than 30% of the journalists felt that the credibility of journalism had improved, though 63.4% believed the relevance of journalism to society had improved. Over the last decade, only 18.5% believed the time available to research news stories improved and just more than a third (36.5) believed their freedom to make editorial decisions had increased.

Most important role journalists play

South African journalists feel strongly about the essential role they play, namely to report about news events as they are, with 92.5% saying that they consider it their role to report things as they are. On the other hand, about 60% believe it is important to monitor and scrutinise business (61.3%) as well as political leaders (63.3%).

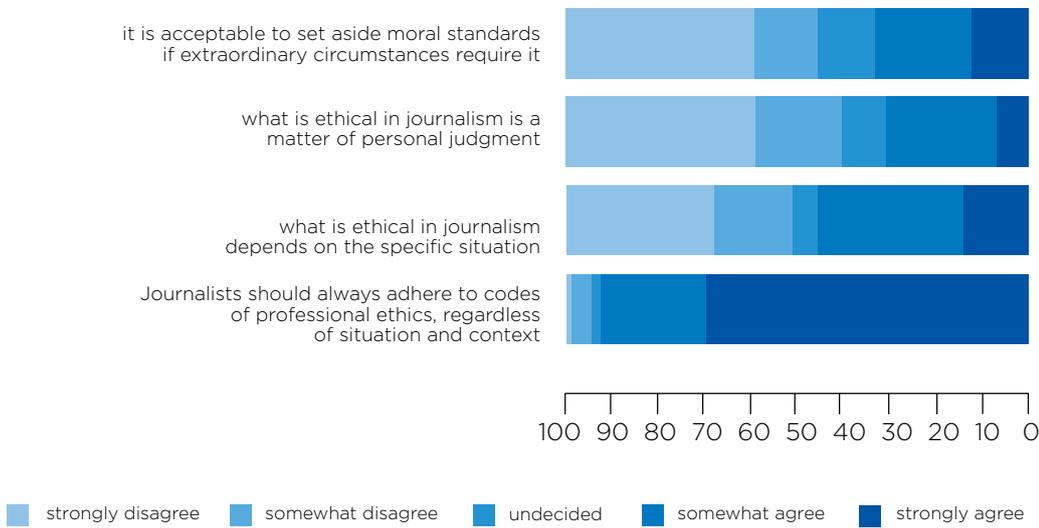


Figure 6: Ethical approaches

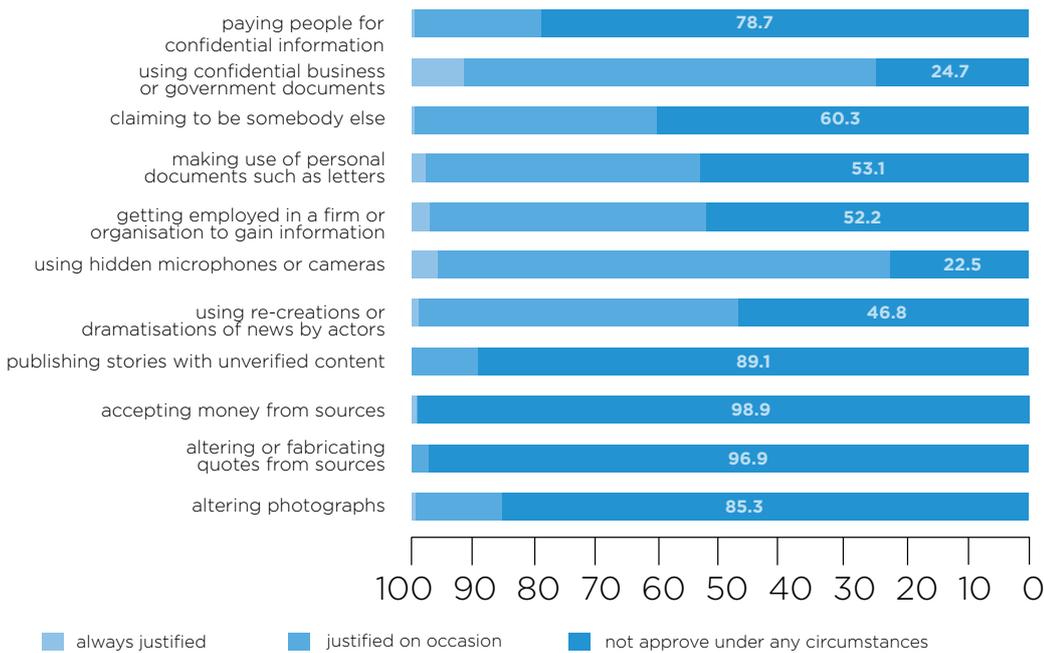


Figure 7: Ethical choices

In line with earlier findings in the South African WJS project, there seems to be a movement away from an emphasis on the watchdog role of the media to one that is more in line with nation building as 73.0% of the journalists believe their role is to promote tolerance and cultural diversity; to let people express their views (84.6%), and (86.8%) to educate their audience.

Ethical approaches to journalism

Journalists were almost equally divided on whether it would be acceptable for them to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it. On the other hand more than 70% felt very strongly that they should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of the situation and context. On the problematic issue whether decisions about journalism ethics should depend on the specific news situation, less than 15%

agree with the statement. Whilst 40% felt that ethical choices in journalism is not a matter of personal choice.

Ethical choices

Based on the WJS questionnaire, South African journalists seemed to have a very strong ethical approach to their profession.

On a number of indicators they have overwhelmingly indicated that they would not succumb to unethical behaviour. Journalists said they would not do any of the following under any circumstances:

- Accept money from sources (98.9%).
- Alter or fabricate quotes from sources (96.9%).
- Publish stories with unverified content (89.1%).
- Alter photos (85.3%).
- Pay people for confidential information (78.7%).

On the downside, 22.5% said that they would not under any circumstance use hidden cameras or microphones and 63% that they would not claim to be somebody else while writing a story.

Ethical Choices combined

In an analysis that takes journalists' views across a number of ethical choices in consideration, it seemed that South African journalists have strong views that they should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context (4.5). On the other hand, in this scenario (where 5 is extremely important and 1 is the least important) journalists would be more ambivalent to either reject or accept fully the proposition that what is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgement (2.4%); or that ethical choices in journalism will depend on specific situations (2.8%), and likewise whether they should set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it (2.5).

Conclusion

The WJS project offered for the first time the opportunity for South African journalism researchers and journalists to participate in what is generally considered to be the largest international research project ever on the role that journalists play throughout the world and how they perceive that role.

This project might thus lead to a better understanding of the role journalists see themselves playing in a changing South Africa.

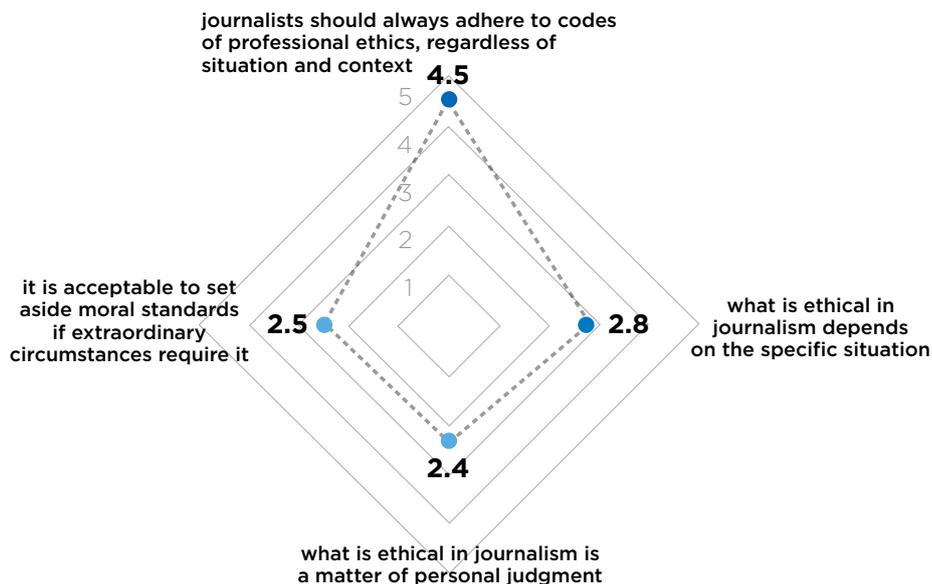


Fig. 8: Ethical choices combined

Notes

- 1 De Beer, AS. and Steyn, E. Sanef's '2002 South African national journalism skills audit' *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 23 (1), 11-86.
- 2 The international project leader is Thomas Hanitzsch from the University of Munich. The South African team consists of Arrie de Beer (project leader), Stellenbosch University; Herman Wasserman, Cape Town University; Vanessa Malila, Rhodes University; Sean Beckett, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- 3 See the WJS Preamble and Mission Statement at www.worldsofjournalism.org
- 4 The WJS' present phase was concluded on 30 June 2015. The results will be discussed in early September 2015 in Munich, Germany. A number of conference papers and journal articles will follow, as well as a book, provisionally titled *Worlds of Journalism: Comparing Journalistic Cultures in Fifty Countries*, edited by Thomas Hanitzsch, Arnold S de Beer, Folker Hanusch and Jyotika Ramaprasad. A paper on the role of journalists in post-authoritarian states (the Czech Republic and South Africa) will be read at the 2015 annual conference of the South African Communication Association in September in Cape Town.



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Soweto by Jodi Bieber