

THE CHALLENGING MEDIA SPACE

EDITORS REFLECT ON THE STATE OF JOURNALISM

Academics have often regarded the work that the media in South Africa does in opposition to the perception of their role by the government. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the government has adopted a view that the media should fulfil a developmental role in supporting the work that the government does and promoting the national agenda in an effort to first establish and then sustain the 'rainbow nation'. Journalists, scarred by the memories of having to work in the restrictive apartheid environment, strongly support a liberal perspective which allows them to act as watchdogs of society with the freedom to question and criticise governments and political parties.

Academics have theorised about what works best, what roles should be taken on, and what roles are currently at play. But journalists and editors speak very differently about their own work and the role they see themselves fulfilling. Their perceptions do not always fit neatly into a normative box, and they also use different words and language to speak about their work. What is perhaps most striking is that journalists that we spoke to noted significant changes not only in the newsrooms and broader media environment, but also in the way that they thought about the work that they do and the role that they play in broader South African society.

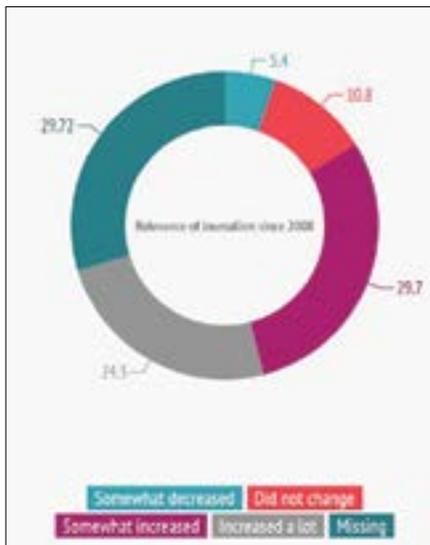
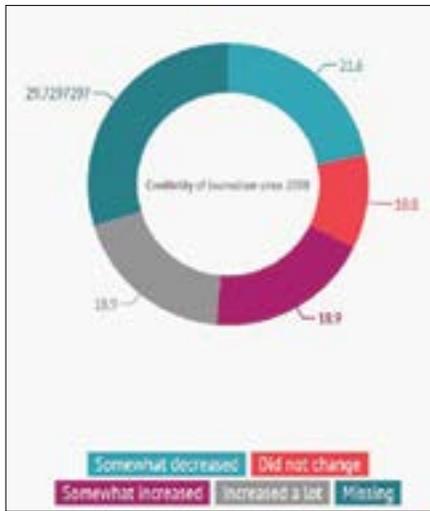
When we surveyed journalists from the Eastern Cape¹, 77.9% felt that it was extremely or very important to monitor and act as a watchdog of political leaders. This traditional liberal model of media contradicts the developmental model which emerged from the survey results showing that 81% of the respondents felt that it was very or extremely important for them as journalists to support national development. This developmental approach to their practice was further identified by the fact that 78.3% of respondents felt it was very or extremely important for them to advocate for social change in their role as journalists. Interestingly though, only 16.2% of the respondents surveyed felt that it was very or extremely important in their role as journalists to support government policy. This could be explained by the fact that while the journalists felt that they had a role to play in the broader development of society and the national agenda, it was not through the support of the government that this would be achieved. There was in fact, a strongly negative perception towards supporting government and politics in general from the respondents. When asked if they thought it was part of their role as journalists to portray a positive image of political leaders, only 16.2% of respondents thought it was very or extremely important, while 54% thought it was unimportant or of little importance to them professionally.

It would seem in fact that the contradictory nature of the results are in fact not contradictory, as the journalists often equate the support of national development with the monitoring of government and informing citizens of the work of public institutions – i.e. fulfilling their watchdog role. Their notion of development journalism is far closer to that of the traditional liberal model which supports the watchdog role of journalists than initially expected, and that often these two roles are not in conflict with each other, but are a balance of the need to ensure government and public institutions are accountable, and in doing so support the development of the country.

These insights into the way that journalists think about the role they play in society in South Africa today are interesting. More pertinent to this article is the perception of how things have changed for journalists in the last five years. 54% of journalists surveyed felt that profit making pressures have strengthened somewhat or a lot over the last five

Trying to understand how journalists and editors in the South African media landscape think about the work they do and the environment in which they work is not easy. However, while many of us speculate about why things are reported on in one way or another, this article gets to the heart of the issue – or the mouth – by speaking to journalists and editors about the work they do and how things have changed in the last few years within this complex institution we call the media.

Compiled by Vanessa Malila



years, while only 5.4% said it had weakened. While audiences sometimes lament the sensationalisation of news, almost 30% of journalists surveyed felt that the pressure to produce sensational news over the past five years had not changed, but 35.1% said it has grown somewhat or a lot. The use of technology, social media and user-generated content has, as expected, increased for the vast majority of the journalists surveyed. Despite the use of technology in the newsrooms, 32.4% of those surveyed felt that the time they had to research stories had decreased a lot or somewhat over the last five years, while the average working hours of journalists was said to have increased a lot or somewhat by 51.3% of those surveyed.

Beyond these changes in newsroom processes and influences, the majority of journalists surveyed were positive about the way they think society regards their practice. 37.8% said they felt that the credibility of journalism had increased somewhat or a lot over the last five years, while only 21.6% felt it had decreased somewhat. Perhaps related to the journalists' perceptions about their role as watchdogs of society, there has been a significant increase in the relevance of journalism for society by those surveyed. 54% of those surveyed thought that journalism was somewhat or a lot more relevant in society today than it was five years ago.

For this special reflective edition of *Rhodes Journalism Review* we invited editors from different newspapers across the country to reflect on some of the changes they have perceived over the past 20 years. Many of them touch on the same issues which emerged from the WJS research including the rise of technology in journalism processes, the challenges of reporting on corruption and the changes in newsroom management.

What has been the biggest positive change in the press over the past 20 years?

GASANT ABARDER: The advent of digital publishing has allowed newspapers to extend their platforms and break news digitally, while saving the best for print. But it has been a tough convergence since digital isn't easily monetised.

These days, anyone with a cellphone can publish news so it allows established and credible news brands to be the discerning voice among the noise. The onset of digital and online media has made the world a smaller place and has changed the behaviour and demographic of target markets.

JEREMY GORDIN: I started work in 1976 on the *Rand Daily Mail*. With that as background, I'd say the biggest positive change is that I/

we are no longer working all the time under the dark shadow of the security police and the courts – in short, we are very much able to print whatever we wish to print (provided we honour the Press Code) without being muzzled or fined or jailed. That's pretty amazing.

SAZI HADEBE: For me the biggest thing is the widening of space for people and various organisations to launch whatever newspapers they want to. But more personally was to see the birth of my newspaper *Isolezwe* in 2002. This was history in the making because before then there was no Zulu daily newspaper in the country and it is still the one and only that publishes seven days of the week in a vernacular language.

That meant a lot to me about the restoration of this rich language and it is a lot of pride to over 10-million people of KwaZulu-Natal and elsewhere who speak the language. This venture meant a lot to journalists like myself, who are well versed in the language, in that it widened the space in which we could seek employment.

Other than that, it has been a good 20 years for South Africa in that there has been a huge success in entrenching the freedom of the press despite the attempts by some in the government to curtail what could be reported.

The media in SA is very free and it is a vital tool in restoring the people's pride in their country in the institutions of government. Without a vibrant media that reports without fear or favour we don't know where our country could be today.

The country was also very lucky to have a president like Mandela in 1994 because he believed very much in the freedom of the press. That put a lot of pressure on his successors to have respect of the media which is a good thing for any democracy.

CHRIS ROPER: Undoubtedly, the growth of citizen journalism, and how access to, and production of, news is being removed from the hands of elites.

What has been the biggest negative change in the press over the past 20 years?

GASANT ABARDER: The juniorisation of newsroom remains a problem. There has been a move to developing multimedia practitioners and not enough emphasis has been placed on the "grey beards" in newsrooms – the specialists who have institutional memory and history. But many media houses have realised that in order to nurture quality news coverage and analysis they need to invest in newsroom and investigative capacity. The game has changed and it is the media houses that can create the best content that will succeed.

JEREMY GORDIN: The efficacy and influence

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– Sazi Hadebe



PRESCELLA MOLOKE – SECRECY BILL MARCH ON PARLIAMENT – CAPE TOWN:
from the series *Life under Democracy* – Dale Yudelman

The notion or
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– Gasant Abarder

of the press seems – ironically (given its new-found freedom) – to have diminished. Ironically (as I said), because the new government’s power base flows from people who do not care THAT much about the press – either because they cannot afford it, or do not have access to it, or do not trust it – the incumbent government can afford to pay less attention to the press and, though they still pay a great deal of lip service, as each general election passes by and it becomes clearer that it doesn’t matter very much what the press says about electoral matters or serious corruption issues (eg Nkandla), well, its influence is attenuated...

SAZI HADEBE: The circulation of the print media going down. This has been the biggest sore point for mainly the English commercial media over the past two decades. The only positive is that most of the commercial newspapers, despite the decline in terms of

circulation, in revenue terms they are still doing well. If they were not, we would have seen a great deal of closing down of the reputable commercial titles but we haven’t.

A lot of newspaper people, whether they are journalists or press minders, have lost jobs during this time, which is not good at all. Also during this period we have seen a lot of juniorisation of the newsroom as senior guys either leave the profession or get promoted to senior positions. This has led to poor quality in terms of content in many newspapers which is one factor contributing to the decline of circulation.

CHRIS ROPER: The Secrecy Bill. It’s our biggest threat to the freedom of the press.

In your opinion, how has the notion ‘public interest’ changed in South Africa over the past 20 years?

GASANT ABARDER: The notion of public interest has changed. The insatiable appetite the public have for the Oscar Pistorius trial is a case in point. An editor like me would like to believe that the elections would be far bigger in terms of public interest – and there certainly was greater public interest in the days immediately before and after the voting. But entertainment is definitely playing a role; DSTV set up a pop-up TV channel to focus on the trial when they could easily have set up an election channel too. But they were smart to capture the astonishing interest in the trial and are likely getting a handsome return on their investment.

JEREMY GORDIN: According to the Random House dictionary, public interest is “1. the welfare or well-being of the general public; commonwealth. 2. appeal or relevance to the general populace: a news story of public interest.”

I think the role of editors has changed considerably over the last 20 years – but not necessarily in tandem with what has been happening in the country over the last 20 years. – *Jeremy Gordin*

I guess the major change during the last 20 years is that previously the state's interest/s were placed before anything else – so that if you previously placed real public interest before the state's, you were immediately renegade – whereas now the major interest is really, genuinely public interest per se – an interest that includes all people regardless of colour, creed or whatever.

SAZI HADEBE: There has been a couple of cases where the public interest term has been abused by the media and some have got into trouble because of this. There have been stories that have been published before all tracks of litigation were covered. In most cases it is desperation on the part of those doing that. This desperation is fuelled by commercial gains that the organisation or editors are after.

I think there is a need to go back to the drawing board and look at our Code of Ethics and stick to them no matter what.

CHRIS ROPER: It's starting to be defined by the actual public, as opposed to people purporting to speak for the public.

Which South African president over the past 20 years has had the biggest influence on journalism in South Africa, and why?

GASANT ABARDER: Without a doubt, Nelson Mandela. Mr Mandela set the tone for the relationship between the media, the government and other spheres of society. He understood that in order to have a strong democracy, a free, robust and outspoken media was necessary. He successfully laid the foundation for an interface with the media that in the past was characterised by suspicion, banning and control by the apartheid state apparatus.

JEREMY GORDIN: Mandela had the biggest positive influence – he genuinely seemed devoted to freedom of speech and press and insisted that they be exercised – but probably Zuma, in terms of influence generally or negatively – in terms of press coverage, curiosity, friction with the media, the generation of stories etc – might have had a bigger influence (if you count the column inches, as we old-timers would say).

SAZI HADEBE: I think all three of our presidents have had a huge influence on our journalism because they were different characters who challenged reporting about them in different ways. In the Nelson Mandela era there was a lot of positivity and



ARTHUR MZINGISI - NEWSPAPER HOUSE - CAPE TOWN:
from the series *Life under Democracy* - Dale Yudelman

reconciliation reflected in the media because of his influence. He also showed a lot of character in terms of respecting our chapter nine institutions and their role in the society.

The Thabo Mbeki era was more global and more African. He opened people's eyes about the task ahead in terms of levelling the fields economically. He also put South Africa on the global map and the country was very much aware of what was happening elsewhere.

The Jacob Zuma era was a mixture of both Mandela and Mbeki era but the issue of corruption in government got more prominence in the media in relation to Zuma in the way he got to be number one.

So all of them in my opinion have had an influence on the media.

CHRIS ROPER: Jacob Zuma. He's kicked us out of the honeymoon period, and sharpened the focus of journalists.

If you could choose one news story that has

left the biggest impression on you personally over the past 20 years, which would it be and why?

GASANT ABARDER: Without a doubt, the September 11 attacks on the US. *The Cape Times* captured the moment in a front page headline on top of a picture of the burning Twin Towers that read: "Moment the world changed".

I worked as a TV news reporter for eNews on the day of the attacks and I remember vividly how the story broke on US TV networks. Jimi Matthews, our head of news at the time, had no hesitation to carry the 24-hour news feed live from the moment the story broke and continued with the live coverage for a few days after.

The story had so many facets, locally and abroad and it gave me great insight into how to cover big, breaking news – wall-to-wall,

with great depth. It is what the tabloids in the UK call “earthquake journalism”; covering the big stories comprehensively.

JEREMY GORDIN: I suppose – given that I was involved in generating it – the news story that most impressed me was the revelation that a judge (Jeremiah Shongwe) had to recuse himself from Zuma’s rape trial because Zuma had had a child with Shongwe’s sister.

SAZI HADEBE: Nelson Mandela. His name has put South Africa on the global limelight. We gained a lot because of his influence and presence. We’ve been able to host sporting World Cup in rugby, cricket and soccer, mainly because of his influence. His coverage in the media of the past two decades can never be compared and even after his death last year not much has changed.

Everything pertaining to his life, public or private has been well documented.

CHRIS ROPER: Nkandla. It’s the story that has laid bare the fault lines in how South Africans perceive democracy.

How do you think the role of editors has changed over the past 20 years in South Africa?

GASANT ABARDER: Editors can no longer be detached from the business of newspapers. My view is that editors need to embrace their entrepreneurial spirit and become the CEOs of all they can have an influence on – from editorial, circulation, advertising, marketing and digital brand extensive – with a view to making their publications sustainable in the face of growing threats to its viability.

At the same time, editors need to – far

more than ever – defend the integrity of their publications against legislative threats and creeping censorship. It doesn’t have to be adversarial; I believe that a lot can be achieved through negotiation and engagement.

JEREMY GORDIN: I think the role of editors has changed considerably over the past 20 years – but not necessarily in tandem with what has been happening in the country over the past 20 years. I think editors have lost considerable power and prestige – and are no longer the respected people of gravitas and wisdom that they used to be. Or maybe I am simply 20 years older.

SAZI HADEBE: It has changed a lot. Before editors used to be not so hands-on in terms of content because they had people employed to take of that. Today’s editors have to know each and every story in the paper because of limited budgets to hire people to do that task. This has resulted in editors not fulfilling their roles in terms of being the face of their titles.

CHRIS ROPER: Thanks to squeezing of resources, and massive new competition from digital, editors are now much more business minded, which translates to showing much more respect for their readers.

What do you think is the biggest influence over the way journalists and editors conduct themselves today? How was that different 20 years ago, or when you entered the industry?

GASANT ABARDER: One of them is social media and how it has forced journalists and editors to bring depth and analysis in everything they do. When I entered the industry, it was very much a case of

newspapers playing the role of “newspaper of record” in breaking the stories of the day. These days, it is impossible to beat Twitter and other forms of instant media to the punch so we are forced to do things differently.

Twenty years ago, too, I remember newsrooms had massive resources and editorial teams. These days, we are having to do more with a lot less and this has forced editors to be a lot more hands-on in their approach to editing newspapers.

JEREMY GORDIN: I think my answer to (1) has reference here.

SAZI HADEBE: Journalists of today have had to adapt to new media and the challenge this poses to their profession. The principles are still the same in terms of applying ethics and codes of conduct.

CHRIS ROPER: Without a doubt, it’s social media and digital. Journalists are now in constant communication with their readers. This makes them do better journalism.

Endnotes

1. The data comes from a project headed by Prof Arrie de Beer and Prof Herman Wasserman as part of the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS). The WJS provides a tool to understand how journalists in South Africa (SA) regard their role in the current environment. Results discussed here are from a pilot study involving a quantitative survey (N=37) and qualitative interviews (N=10) done with journalists across the Eastern Cape.



Gasant Abarder is the editor of the Cape Times and before that he worked as a news journalist for about four years at e.tv and later as an elections specialist at SABC news. He was also a member of the team that launched the Daily Voice, eventually becoming its deputy editor. From there he moved to the Cape Argus.

Sazi Hadebe is a ML Sultan Technikon (now DUT) journalism graduate. He started his journalism as an intern at the The Witness in Pietermaritzburg in 1997. After that he spent two years as a soccer writer at the Sunday Times (2003-2005). He was the sports reporter when Isolezwe was launched in 2002 and in 2005 was appointed sports editor, in 2011 Deputy Editor and in 2012 was appointed to his current position as Editor.



Jeremy Gordin started in journalism in 1976. He worked on the Rand Daily Mail, Sunday Express and Cape Times. He has been business editor of the Financial Mail, editor of Playboy SA (the first sortie), news and managing editor of Sunday Independent, and acting editor of, and special group writer at, the Independent News Network. He was 2007 Mondi Shanduka SA Journalist of the Year. He is the publisher of the Daily Sun and Sunday Sun.

Chris Roper is the editor-in-chief of the Mail&Guardian. He is the first editor-in-chief of a major South African newspaper to come from a digital background, and he works agnostically across several media platforms. He was founding portal manager of Vodacom World Online, portal manager for MWEB, South Africa’s largest ISP, Editor-in-Chief at 24.com, South Africa’s largest online publisher, and editor of the Mail&Guardian Online.

