

South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Since democratization, South Africa has enjoyed relative political stability, supported by a progressive Constitution. Yet it remains plagued by corruption and so-called state capture. In addition, despite strong public institutions and civil society organizations, South Africa is the most unequal country in the world. There are concerning levels of unemployment and poverty – especially amongst the youth. Inequality is also evident in a lack of diversity and access to media products in the country.

State control and clampdowns on journalists during apartheid made place for Constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, allowing journalists to do their work without fear of retribution. A strong tradition of investigative journalism has played a decisive role in exposing political and corporate malfeasance.

South African media outlets have not been immune to economic threats facing the media worldwide. Furthermore, ethical breaches and editorial interference from some media owners are steadily eroding trust in the media. Notwithstanding such challenges, most local journalists still play a key role in upholding democracy.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted towards the end of 2023 after the Covid-19 pandemic had decimated the media. With many journalists leaving the industry, and some media outlets closing without much fanfare, establishing a stable population of journalists from which to draw a representative sample was challenging.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The sample consisted of more female (58.6%) than male (40.0%) journalists, with some respondents (1.4%) indicating their gender as “other”. On average, journalists were 44.1 years old (Median = 43; SD = 11.9). South African journalists were well-educated with 64.7% having completed at least a bachelor’s degree, 16.6% with master’s degrees and 1.4% who had doctorates. Most journalists (80.7%) had some formal education or professional training in journalism specifically. Journalists might have undergone more than one form of training, with the most prevalent being university courses (81.7%), short-term courses (67.9%) and journalism internships (cadetships) at 53.2%.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Most respondents (63.2%) worked for private or commercial media, 22.2% for public service media, 6.6% for non-profit media and 4.2% for community media.

In terms of the background of their main employer, newspapers were more prevalent (35.3%) than internet native outlets (21.5%), followed by radio (13.5%) and television (11.8%). Altogether 7.6% of respondents did not have one main employer. Few journalists worked for news agencies (5.9%) or magazines (4.2%). Most respondents worked for media outlets that reach a national or transnational audience (76.9%) and 22.1% reached a local or regional audience.

South African journalists predominantly worked on full-time permanent contracts (81.2%) when the fieldwork was conducted. A further 10.2% indicated that they are self-employed or working as freelancers. Other working situations included full-time fixed-term contracts (5.0%), part-time fixed-term contracts (2.0%) or part-time permanent contracts (1.7%). Just under a third of journalists (30.3%) also earned an income outside of journalism. The average weekly working hours was 46.0 hours (Median = 45; SD = 12.2; for those in full-time employment).

Respondents had an average of 18.6 years of experience in journalism (Median = 17; SD = 10.4). More than half of the sampled journalists (57.0%) did not have a management role, with 28.9% working in middle management, and 14.1% fulfilling top management roles.

Almost three-quarters of respondents (73.0%) did not work on a specific beat. Less than half of journalists (44.6%) indicated that they are members of a union specifically aimed at people in the communications field.

Concerningly, respondents in this sample said they very often (42.6%) or often (23.9%) felt stressed out at work over the preceding six months. Another 25.9% sometimes felt this way, with very few journalists rarely (5.6%) or never (2.0%) having felt this way.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

The South African respondents’ perceptions on safety pointed to distressing mental health conditions. Instances of demeaning or hateful speech, public discrediting of their work and questioning of their personal morality were some of the most prevalent safety threats (see Table 1). These findings are underscored by the fact that almost two-thirds of respondents were worried about their emotional and mental well-being (see Table 2). A noteworthy percentage of journalists indicated that they were concerned about losing their job in journalism in the next 12 months. Despite the freedom they enjoy, a broad majority of journalists were worried that those who harm journalists in South Africa go unpunished.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	304	12.2%	16.8%	35.5%	23.0%	12.5%
Public discrediting of your work	305	5.9%	12.8%	30.2%	28.2%	23.0%
Surveillance	303	1.7%	5.3%	17.8%	24.4%	50.8%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	305	1.6%	2.6%	13.4%	24.9%	57.4%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	303	0.3%	0.3%	0.7%	3.6%	95.0%
Legal actions against you because of your work	304	1.6%	4.3%	13.2%	18.4%	62.5%
Stalking	300	0.7%	1.0%	7.7%	15.3%	75.3%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	304	2.3%	6.6%	23.7%	24.3%	43.1%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	304	0.3%	2.3%	5.9%	7.6%	83.9%
Other physical attacks	303	0.3%	1.0%	5.6%	9.9%	83.2%
Coercion	303	0.7%	2.6%	9.6%	13.5%	73.6%
Questioning of your personal morality	303	5.3%	10.2%	26.7%	23.1%	34.7%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	304	0.7%	2.3%	4.9%	10.5%	81.6%
Others disseminating your personal information	304	2.6%	4.6%	13.8%	17.4%	61.5%
Workplace bullying	305	4.9%	3.9%	18.0%	18.4%	54.8%
Abductions	303	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	1.7%	98.0%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	303	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	2.6%	96.7%
Intimidation that targets family	302	0.3%	1.0%	4.6%	6.3%	87.7%

Question: “In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?”

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	305	40.3%	3.10	1.31
Concerned about physical well-being	304	34.5%	2.88	1.28
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	303	63.7%	3.58	1.29
Concerned that those who harm journalists in South Africa go unpunished	305	78.4%	4.05	1.03

Question: “Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

South African journalists considered educating the audience, shining a light on society’s problems and counteracting disinformation as paramount (see Table 3). Taking a traditional critical-watchdog stance was considered important, yet it appears to be somewhat on par with more developmental roles, such as speaking on behalf of the marginalized. Politically assertive roles were amongst the least valued.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	303	67.7%	3.88	1.10
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	303	84.2%	4.34	0.95
Shine a light on society’s problems	305	91.5%	4.58	0.76
Motivate people to participate in politics	304	32.9%	2.90	1.31
Provide analysis of current affairs	304	76.6%	4.04	1.13
Let people express their views	302	76.5%	4.14	1.01
Provide information people need to form political opinion	305	67.5%	3.85	1.28
Advocate for social change	304	59.9%	3.73	1.21
Influence public opinion	302	42.4%	3.14	1.31
Set the political agenda	300	22.3%	2.42	1.32
Promote peace and tolerance	301	64.8%	3.85	1.16
Educate the audience	304	92.8%	4.60	0.71
Point toward possible solutions to society’s problems	304	72.7%	4.00	1.06
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	305	73.8%	4.09	1.10
Support national development	303	54.1%	3.49	1.29
Support government policy	303	11.2%	2.09	1.14
Convey a positive image of political leaders	303	1.3%	1.34	0.72
Provide entertainment and relaxation	304	35.2%	2.90	1.38
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	302	50.0%	3.45	1.30
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	302	41.7%	3.08	1.33
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	305	66.6%	3.80	1.03
Support efforts to protect public health	304	58.6%	3.59	1.27
Counteract disinformation	303	91.4%	4.56	0.77
Discuss future implications of current events	303	80.5%	4.14	1.00

Question: “Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work.” (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

South African respondents mostly agreed on perceptions of journalistic epistemology (see Table 4). The majority believed journalists should let the facts speak for themselves, with a similar percentage saying interpretation is necessary to make sense of these facts. Alerting audiences when a source's claim is untruthful were also viewed as important. There were more polarized views on whether journalists should be part of the communities they portray to ensure accurate reporting.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	295	89.8%	4.29	0.72
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	293	36.5%	3.00	1.12
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	291	35.7%	2.99	1.03
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	294	29.9%	2.90	1.14
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	293	68.6%	3.71	1.01
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	294	35.0%	2.91	1.11
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	293	26.6%	2.74	1.07
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	292	90.8%	4.30	0.74
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	291	40.5%	3.23	1.16
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	291	33.0%	2.86	1.20
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	294	87.8%	4.30	0.87

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

South African journalists' perceptions of ethics were strongly aligned with professional standards, rather than personal judgment (see Table 5). Some respondents (30.8%), however, (strongly) agreed that ethics could depend on specific situations. Controversial reporting practices, such as accepting money or paying for confidential information, were strongly rejected (see Table 6). Using government documents, or confidential information of powerful people, without permission were perceived as more justifiable.

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	303	79.5%	4.12	1.05
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	304	63.2%	3.56	1.17
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	305	30.8%	2.66	1.25
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	305	8.4%	1.94	1.00

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	305	0.7%	32.5%
Using hidden recording devices	302	2.3%	68.9%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	302	6.0%	70.9%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	304	3.3%	69.1%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	304	0.3%	46.7%
Paying people for confidential information	305	0.0%	18.7%
Accepting money from sources	302	0.0%	0.7%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	305	0.3%	25.6%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	302	0.3%	13.2%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	305	0.3%	12.1%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

South African journalists predominantly experienced editorial autonomy (see Table 7), with around three-quarters of respondents who indicated that they have freedom in both selecting stories and deciding which aspects of such stories to emphasize. A similar percentage of journalists experienced a great deal or complete media freedom in South Africa.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	302	75.2%	3.95	0.85
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	305	77.4%	3.97	0.85
Media freedom in South Africa	300	74.7%	3.80	0.63

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Journalism ethics and media laws and regulation were highly influential for South African journalists (see Table 8). Influences directly related to internal newswork practices were also very or extremely influential for a noteworthy percentage of journalists, including access to information, time limits and editorial policy. Less than 10% of respondents considered public relations, friends, acquaintances and family as very/extremely influential.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	280	40.7%	3.18	1.11
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	284	61.6%	3.73	0.99
The business managers of the news organization	248	24.6%	2.48	1.34
The owners of the news organization	243	30.9%	2.49	1.48
Editorial policy	295	67.1%	3.80	1.17
Advertising considerations	228	17.1%	2.16	1.27
Profit expectations	237	23.2%	2.41	1.32
Audience research and data	283	44.5%	3.19	1.27
Availability of news-gathering resources	297	61.3%	3.61	1.17
Time limits	292	68.8%	3.81	1.10
Journalism ethics	302	84.8%	4.30	0.96
Self-censorship	270	28.5%	2.64	1.38
Personal values and beliefs	289	46.7%	3.30	1.36
Colleagues in other media	289	21.5%	2.60	1.13
Friends, acquaintances and family	269	8.6%	2.13	1.05
Feedback from the audience	294	40.5%	3.22	1.08
Competing news organizations	288	30.6%	2.95	1.13
Media laws and regulation	295	74.2%	4.01	1.05
Access to information	296	81.4%	4.17	0.92
Government censorship	246	17.5%	2.17	1.33
Government officials	254	16.1%	2.04	1.28
Politicians	254	10.6%	1.93	1.15
Business people	265	12.8%	2.06	1.18
Public relations	282	8.9%	2.06	1.09
Relationships with news sources	286	47.2%	3.36	1.25
Police	245	25.3%	2.47	1.38
Issue advocacy groups	272	30.1%	2.79	1.28
Scientists or health experts	272	42.6%	3.20	1.29

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)