

Changes in making news in South African journalism: Implications for journalists' attention to their audience



HERMAN WASSERMAN

MUSAWENKOSI NDLOVU



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



Objectives

1. Background to current South African media system
2. Empirical findings about the journalist-audience relationships in the current South African media system

Background



- Major shifts since advent of democracy
- Freedom of expression enshrined in Constitution
- Vibrant media, growth of online and mobile, also citizen participation
- Professionalisation and transformation of journalist community
- New geopolitical influences changing flows and counterflows
- New treats to freedom of expression (PSIB, MAT, SABC)

Professional pressures

Similar pressures as many other parts of world:

- Changing business models
- Declining circulation figures for print media (tabloid newspapers exception)
- Growth point for journalism online, esp youth
- Implications attention journalists pay to their audiences and for news consumption patterns.



Empirical research



Interviews with journalists to assess their perceptions about:

- attention dynamics of local versus global media (e.g., are local media more attentive to their audience than central (or global) media;
- the difference between traditional and online news media in terms of providing additional spaces for communication with the audience, and
- the main functions of media that shape this relationship.

Findings

- Difference between traditional and online in providing *additional spaces* for communication with audience
- Online journalism still behind especially developed countries
- Naspers' *News24* was the first to venture into the online journalism space back in 1998; now it is one of the biggest news sites
- Majority of outlets began investing in online journalism after 2000
- Perception of online journalism as not imbued with established journalistic values.

“The country’s media is still very conservative and most editors I can only describe as ‘old school’ and have not fully embraced the notion of online journalism. As it stands most news media already have a newspaper or TV news or radio news and online is just an addition onto what they already have. (old media journalist, Johannesburg 2014)”

GroundUp

DAILY MAVERICK



Findings

- Lower social prestige of online news – as result majority of news websites are linked to traditional publications, mostly free or subsidised copy to their online audience
- Examples: News 24 (owned by Media24), www.enca.com (owned by eNCA), www.ewn.co.za (owned by Primedia), www.iol.co.za (owned by Sekunjalo/Independent Newspapers), www.sabcnews.com (owned by the SABC), and www.mg.co.za (owned by Mail & Guardian LTD).
- Competition between online and traditional media, traditional news media still seen to break stories first – attract advertising, online media business model still developing

“This impacts negatively on how online journalism is meant to work – breaking news as it happens when it happens ... as an online journalist you need to wait for the newspaper, radio news or TV news to break it before you can online. (new media journalist, Johannesburg 2014)”

Findings

- Perceptions of online journalism as not living up to the standards of professional journalism, including ethics.
- *“Credibility for the online journalist has been an uphill battle ...” (new media journalist, Johannesburg 2014).*
- *“There is also a perception amongst journalists, citizens and editors about online journalism that we are just a longer version of twitter and other social media which means that facts might be wrong and information misleading and this is far from the truth. We still have a long way to go in terms of online journalism. (new media journalist, Johannesburg 2014)”*



Findings



- Due to commercial factors, online journalism stronger in bigger cities than in smaller towns and rural areas
- *'One aspect is that digital newsrooms will struggle to generate the same amount of revenue traditional newsrooms can'* (digital media expert, Johannesburg 2014).
- Journalists felt similar degrees of responsibility to journalistic principles and norms, and obligations towards their news consumers regardless of medium
- Speed, packaging, distribution main differences between legacy and online
- Principles remain same, but digital platforms pushing journalists to produce convergent content – combination of written/audio/video - simultaneously

"Whereas with TV you have two minutes for a story or radio which is about 30 seconds or print which has space limitations, online has no space limitation and thus competition is fierce because all the content you want to put out, you reader must be interested enough to go through all of it. Online you have multimedia packages, info graphics, interactive maps; you can play around with the top quotes, a picture gallery. It gives enough space to work. (new media journalist, Johannesburg 2014)"

Findings

- Changing news consumption patterns noted by interviewees
- Online journalism changing ways audiences consume news, yet online journalism faces the same competition as legacy journalism
- For online journalism, main competition is social media
- *“The biggest problem for online journalists is Twitter because most people pick up the news from Twitter and that is why all media houses have Twitter accounts to re-direct followers to the full story on their websites” (new media journalist, Cape Town, November 2014).*
- Audiences, too, are consuming news differently
- *‘In this day and age people prefer their news on the go, and the greatest challenge is cutting what would have been a 2000 words story to 200 words because online audiences don’t have time for long stories and most likely would read the first five lines and move on’ (new media journalist, Johannesburg 2014).*

Conclusion: the future of digital journalism in SA

- SA news media outlets increasingly deliver news via new digital technologies, including downloadable apps
- Most local journalists have fully embraced social media, Twitter and Facebook, for news gathering, monitoring and dissemination.
- Traditional news media continue to offer subsidised digital copies of their print and TV versions (and are leveraging on existing brands).
- Reputable online news site are gaining in prominence and popularity, e.g. *Daily Maverick*, *Groundup*, *Mail & Guardian's Thought Leader*, *Rand Daily Mail*, *Politicsweb*
- Rise and growth' of these digital-only news services speak to growing confidence in independent online journalism that is more interpretive, investigative and opinionated

RAND DAILY MAIL



RDM CO
ZA