

***“Monitoring” the Entire “Spectrum”:
The Influence of Journalism Ideology on the Content Producers of a South African
Public Radio Station’s Current Affairs Programmes***

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Abstract

More than 20 years after the demise of Apartheid, South African journalists are still in the process of determining their own “journalistic ideology” according to a “Global South” approach. Various scholars argue that this approach should be anchored in African values and philosophies (such as *Ubuntu*), and take the unique South African context into consideration. In this article, the author has identified certain issues that could influence a reporter’s “journalism ideology”, such as education and training, newsroom routines and the role of the audience. She used these issues as a starting point for open-ended interviews with producers that create and edit content for the Current Affairs shows on RSG, one of the public radio stations at the South African Broadcasting Corporation.¹ The media forms part of a network of shifting power relations and in a country where many of its citizens live under the breadline, radio still wields a huge amount of influence. Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model is used as theoretical framework informing the type of questions the author asks in her qualitative interviews, as she also regards media practitioners’ performance and actions as being strongly influenced by “the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate”.

Keywords: Journalism ideology, “Africanisation”, newsroom, Radio, RSG, SABC, South Africa, Current Affairs, “Global South”, power, content, sound, airwaves.

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¹ With the death of RSG Current Affairs editor and senior producer, Suna Venter in July 2017, making international headlines, this research conducted in April 2016, provides a brief “snapshot” of the newsroom values of the radio station where she spent her last days before being targeted as part of the SABC 8.

Introduction

“The exploration of how journalists articulate their own role, and how they conceptualise ideas, is of utmost importance for broadening the understanding of journalism as a contextual and reflexive practice,” (Rodny-Gumede, 2014, p. 67).

In South Africa, where radio is still one of the most popular mediums amongst audiences, traditional radio journalists still have a lot of influence. Here, radio is “constant and stable”, and “unlike other media, where people have become quite fickle - particularly in print, those who have favourite radio stations still listen loyally to them,” (Krost Maunder, 2015, p. 1). This can also be measured in terms of advertising: “While radio’s share of total world expenditure is on the decline, South Africa’s is on the rise” (Beck, 2015, p. 4).

There are close to 200 radio stations broadcasting analogue or digitally in the country. At the same time, online radio stations that only have a digital footprint are also being created to attract niche audiences (Beck, 2015, p. 5). Therefore, in taking radio’s the power and influence as a medium into consideration, I decided to use qualitative interviews with a sample of the producers of “Radio Sonder Grense” (abbreviated as “RSG”), one of the largest radio stations in South Africa, as case studies for this qualitative paper. I focused on determining how the producers’ “journalism ideology” influences the way in which they select and produce content for the RSG’s daily Current Affairs programmes. For the purpose of this paper I define “journalism ideology” as being a core belief system that are created whilst journalists are studying or getting hands-on “on the job experience” (Tuchman, 1977).

Social context of the study

South Africa, with its population of roughly 54.96 million people, is a country with a diverse range of languages, cultures ethnic groupings (StatsSA, 2015). Since the country’s transition to democracy in 1994, the media has undergone various changes in terms of ownership, editorial staff and content. The purpose of these far-reaching changes were for the media to act as the instrument of transformation (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005, p. 76). Institutions that served largely as mouthpieces for the White Apartheid government, such as the state broadcaster, the SABC and the Afrikaans press were affected most by these changes (Harber, 2004, p. 79). The SABC specifically states in its editorial policy that it is *not* “the mouthpiece of the government”. Its policy document adds that the public broadcaster should not “broadcast its opinion of government policies, unless they relate directly to broadcasting matters,” (SABCBoard, 2016, p. 14). However, more than 20 years into democracy, at the time of writing this paper, the SABC is still frequently criticised for being a mouth piece for the new ANC-led government (Moerdyk, 2016).

The SABC has a mandate to provide broadcast corporation in all 11 of the country’s official languages, and thus each of these language groups have their own radio station dedicated to broadcasting content specifically catering for their needs and interests (SABC, 2004).

Four of the SABC’s radio stations: RSG, SA FM, 5 FM and Radio 2000, are the only South African radio stations that broadcast nationwide on the airwaves (TheMedia,

2015, p. 43). This means that if you do not have access to data to listen to online radio or on your mobile phone, and you are reliant on listening to regional radio stations, these four stations would still be accessible on a normal transistor radio from any part of the country (Reid, 2016, p. 30).

Rationale

At its peak times, RSG broadcasts to an audience of almost ten million listeners locally and internationally (via their online footprint), (Nevill, 2017). Therefore it is relevant to use the interviews with the producers who work for the Afrikaans language public radio station as research case studies, as very minimal research has been done in the recent past about RSG – a radio station that is regarded as one of the biggest in South Africa in terms of audience size and broadcast signal reach (Nevill, 2017, p. 44).

In terms of previous research, I could only find one scholarly work on RSG. Adapted to a book chapter called *Finding a home in Afrikaans Radio*, Froneman (2006) discusses the transition of the former Apartheid Afrikaans radio service, “Afrikaans Stereo” to the present radio station “RSG”, one of the eleven public radio stations at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).

Whilst highlighting that some Afrikaans community radio stations was at the time still clinging to *volksnasionisme*² (he uses “Radio Pretoria” as an example), he argues that the Afrikaans public radio service has been “reconstructed as a non-racial station in step with the new political dispensation” (Froneman, 2006, p. 11). His article focuses on the broad changes made at RSG. He discussed how they incorporated new programmes that appealed to a different demographic, for example religious programmes that focused on Islam. RSG also achieved transformation by employing producers and presenters from other cultural backgrounds, especially the Coloured³ community.

Froneman (2006, p. 11) argues that RSG’s brand identity “accepts incorporation into a wider South African nation” whilst actively supporting “the construction of an inclusive Afrikaans language community, but within the ideological framework prescribed by the ruling class.” As Froneman did not explore the Current Affairs shows or news service of RSG in his research, it is a relevant topic to discuss in this paper.

Methodology

The journalists whose interviews are used as case studies for this paper all work for RSG’s Current Affairs programmes. Technically they are employed by the SABC News and Current Affairs division, and not by the radio station RSG *per se*, but as the current affairs programmes *Monitor*, *Spektrum* and *Naweek-Aktueel* are broadcasted

² The ideology propagated by the White Afrikaner National Party that inspired the country’s Apartheid policies. It forms a base for the Nationalistic White Afrikaner ethnic identity (Degenaar, 1975).

³ In South Africa the term “Coloured” is an ethnic identity subscribed to by a cultural grouping that has distinct traditions differentiating them from other cultures. In this context the term “Coloured” is not used to refer to mixed race parentage.

on the Afrikaans radio station, RSG, I will use the term “RSG Radio Current Affairs” to differentiate them from the other current affairs sections at the SABC.

Firstly I conducted a qualitative survey by sending an e-mail to the full time staff members and regular freelancers of RSG Radio Current Affairs inviting them to participate in the study. Because of busy schedules most of the producers declined to participate in the research or failed to reply by the time the study was completed. I managed to interview five out of the eleven journalist-producers at RSG, and as my sample also included a “senior producer” (“editor”) and presenter, I felt that I would have sufficient data to construct an argument. Thus the selection of the interviewees was made purely on their willingness to take part in the study, and their availability for an interview, as I conducted all the interviews during the first week of April 2016. Statements that are made by these respondents reflect their own opinions and do not necessarily represent those of the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

The participants of the five in depth qualitative interviews are:

- 1) Hendrik Martin, a senior producer that has worked at RSG Current Affairs as both a journalist and producer for twenty years.
- 2) Wilna Matthee, a senior producer at RSG Current Affairs that has worked in various capacities at the SABC for the last 25 years.
- 3) Anita Visser, the co-anchor of *Monitor* who has worked at RSG Radio Current Affairs for 20 years. Prior to becoming a presenter she was a producer on the programmes.
- 4) Marlineé Fouché, a journalist/producer at RSG Current Affairs for almost four years.
- 5) Metzi van der Merwe, a journalist who has been a producer on RSG Current Affairs for almost 20 years.

An auto-ethnographic approach

At the time of writing this paper, I have worked on a freelance base as a journalist and producer for RSG Radio Current Affairs for ten years. Therefore, in the next section, I follow an auto-ethnographic approach and mostly draw on my own experience of the inner workings in describing the RSG Current Affairs’ newsroom in terms of its structure, format and style.

If one turns the dial to RSG on weekday mornings between 6 am and 8 am, one would hear the voices of the anchors, journalists and producers of *Monitor* (“monitor”), the morning current affairs programme. The lunch time current affairs programme is called *Spektrum* (“spectrum”) and is broadcasted weekday afternoons between 1pm and 2 pm, whilst *Naweek-aktueel* (“weekend actuality”) is broadcasted on Saturday afternoons between 12 am and 1pm. RSG also has a weekly news and current affairs overview programme on a Sunday evening between 8 and 9, called *Kommentaar*. In the latter programme the anchor discusses the news of the week with various political analysts, newspaper editors and other news organisation managers. *Kommentaar* is the only current affairs show broadcasted on RSG that does not feature a wide range of contributions from the various producers, as it has a “talkshow” format.

RSG's Current Affairs programmes follow a public service format similar to that of the BBC. The broadcast is made up of packaged interviews, sound reports, actuality and other contributions. The majority of the programme's content is produced "in house" by the producers that are specifically employed by RSG Current Affairs, but between two to five stories per show comes from the other SABC regional offices. If these regional stories are only available in English, the producers will translate the script to Afrikaans⁴, before voicing, editing and packaging it all together.

There are three daily news meetings that are crucial in determining the RSG "news diary" and programme content. The executive producer, Foeta Krige, and the relevant senior producers⁵ attend these meetings, together with the producers assigned to a programme on a specific day. During these meetings the executive producer, senior producers and producers make suggestions of topics to "cover" in the programme, whilst also giving feedback on the other participants' suggestions. This feedback is crucial in determining the final "diary" for the programme.

In the following part of the paper I will explain the theoretical framework and also summarise some of the current debates on the role of "journalism ideology" in South Africa.

Theoretical framework: Towards an "African approach" to Journalism

In the last decade many scholars made the case that the journalism profession in South Africa is in search of an "occupational ideology" and that a more fundamental approach should be used to comprehend local journalism (Berger, 2005). The function of journalism could be understood differently by the various role-players, from the functionalist perspective to the libertarian 'watchdog of democracy' viewpoint to those promoting the "Africanisation of news" for a "national interest" (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). As many South African journalists were educated in tertiary institutions with a mostly "Western libertarian"-view, some scholars still grapple with what a "Global South" or "African" approach to journalism ideology will look like.

"Africanising the media" is a phrase often used by those who have tried to exert control on the South African media. One may argue that the term "African journalism" are often exploited and used to muzzle or manipulate the media, instead of advancing a true new belief system or "journalism ideology" suited for South African newsrooms. A recent South African example was the lead-up to the country's municipal elections, where the SABC's then Chief Operating Officer, Hlaudi Motsoening, stated that the public broadcaster would focus more on "good news" and would avoid showing violent protests (Rabkin, 2016).

Berger (2005, p. 134) states that South Africa journalists need to balance the traditional Fourth Estate-role with the country's developmental needs, whilst Rodny-Gumede (2015, p. 109) argues that amid calls for an "Africanisation" of journalism,

⁴ They are required to do these translations because of the public broadcaster's language policy to broadcast current affairs in each of the country's official languages (SABC, 2004).

⁵ The senior producer could be regarded as the "editor" in the traditional newspaper sense, in contrast to a more traditional newsroom RSG has three senior producers/editors that alternate between the various shifts and shows.

the adoption of *Ubuntu*⁶ Journalism could be a framework to open up the news media to a broader South African audience. However, scholars have criticised the contemporary notion of “Ubuntu” for being a historically burdensome term, as it was “appropriated for ‘domestication’ purposes as apartheid began to unravel in the 1980’s,” (Tomaselli, 2016, p. 3).⁷ According to Tomaselli (2016, p. 5) “Ubuntu” is now being applied across disciplines and in any context, and therefore “by being all things to all people, the popular and ideological use has eclipsed the discursive trajectory”. Therefore, as Tomaselli (2016, p. 9) argues for a post-Africanist rather than an Ubuntu-approach for intercultural communication, a similar argument could perhaps be made for a post-Africanist approach to journalism in South Africa.⁸

Nevertheless, whilst scholars are debating these issues surrounding the role and functions of journalism, it is the attitudes of the journalists who work in a certain society that determine their ideology, norms and values (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 96). Keeping these debates surrounding a “South African journalism ideology” in mind, the final part of this article will explore the “journalism ideology” of the case study respondents who produce RSG Radio Current Affairs. The subheadings indicate the core question that the interviewees’ answers relate to.

The influence of education and training on a producer’s “Journalism Ideology”

According to Shoemaker & Reese (1996, p. 64) the following factors are intrinsic to a journalist: their personal and professional background, their education, personal attitudes, values and beliefs, professional orientations and role conceptions, and lastly their viewpoint on their professional role and ethics. They explain that this process of “socialisation” (in which a new journalist “discovers and internalises the rights and obligations of his status” as well as the institutions’ “norms and values” are primarily shaped on the job or in professional education (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 61). These arguments concur with most of the answers of the respondents.

Senior producer, Wilna Matthee (2016), explains that the principals of journalism were “drilled” into her whilst she was studying and then again when she began working in the newsroom. Whilst it has been many years since then, she still applies the same basic guidelines.

Senior producer Hendrik Martin (2016) studied political sciences and law during his first year of university, and according to him his studies had a profound influence on his journalism approach and also on questioning Apartheid as a young journalist.

Anchor Anita Visser (2016) states that she has a “conservative” journalism ideology that is based on the “old news rule” that three sources need to confirm a story before it can be broadcasted: “It does not help to be first with a false story. Rather confirm

⁶ *Ubuntu* is an African concept that promotes the communitarian idea of human interconnectedness. The word comes from the Zulu language and translates to “we are people through other people” (Tomaselli, 2016, p. 1).

⁷ Tomaselli (2016, p. 5) explains that *Ubuntu* was creatively repurposed by apartheid intercultural scholars “as an indigenous means to better manage labour relations, corporate governance and social responsibility” and that it is still used in this way after the end of Apartheid.

⁸ Rooted in pragmatism, this post-Africanist approach will advocate to include the world’s best practices, irrespective of which country they originate from (Tomaselli, 2016, p. 9).

your facts, because you will lose credibility with your listeners if your story later turns out not to be true.” Although this statement might sound obvious to those that has studied journalism or media studies, Visser emphasises that in radio, where the pressure is on to broadcast and “break” new stories every hour, this can be neglected, especially with the tight deadline they have for the midday current affairs programme, *Spektrum*.

Producer Metzi Van der Merwe (2016) explains that she has never really given her own journalism ideology much thought. She does mention that one aspect that she can identify concerns her relationship with sources. Because of the pressure in a radio deadline driven newsroom (where one usually have about three hours to find sources, record interviews, script, voice and package), most of the RSG Current Affairs journalists share the contact details of their sources (from political commentators to government spokespeople) with each other, unless it is a confidential source or individual has specifically asked for his/her information not to be shared. Van der Merwe (2016) says there have often been times where she preferred not to share “contacts” and “numbers” and she feels this relate to her own “journalism ideology”.

All five of the producers whose interviews served as case studies concurred that the role of journalists are globally the same, namely to establish what is happening in their society and report on it accurately. Producer Marlineé Fouché (2016) explains

The influence of Newsroom routines on news selection and content production

In South Africa, similar to most countries, many journalists embark on their careers and enter industry full of high ideals but the frustrations of having to produce journalism that can mostly pass for “churnalism” greatly affect their workflow and the quality of work they produce (Delmar, 2008). At RSG Current Affairs, the producers usually have about three hours (from 9 to 12 am) to produce content for their midday current affairs programme. During this short space of time, producers have to arrange interviews, record them, write a script, package and edit the soundfiles of the story. According to Van der Merwe (2016) the result of this is that at times one may use an analyst that is easy to get hold of and readily available to be interviewed, instead of a peer that might be considered to be “the best in the field”, but difficult to get hold of telephonically (as one need to record an interview to cut soundbites from it).

Tuchman (1977, p. 43) argues that through journalists’ routines they actually “make news” by allowing everyday occurrences to be recognised as news. In a similar manner, at RSG Radio Current Affairs, as with most other newsrooms, there are certain “routinised” practices that the producers do to accomplish their tasks.

Visser (2016) explains that the atmosphere in their newsroom might seem “loose and comfortable”, but that every producer has his/her own role and task within the workflow: “the editorial team abides by the rules and the result is a seamless broadcast”. She describes a top down hierarchical broadcast protocol: “Presenters are there to present a programme, but it’s the senior producer’s programme and he or she has the final say about which stories will be broadcasted”.

Visser adds that the interaction and banter between the presenters, senior producer and producers during the daily news meetings is another integral part of their

newsroom culture: “Outsiders have commented that it seems robust and adversarial, but it gives everyone an equal chance to comment on a story that was pitched for the programme”.

The race, gender and age of the participants of the news meeting directly influence the outcome of the meeting and the news diary for the following day (Matthee, 2016). Matthee comments that since the RSG Radio Current Affairs team is a sample of the broader RSG community, the producers’ input could be the deciding factor in her decision to include a story in the programme.

Fouché, as the youngest of the respondents, admits that when she gets assigned to a story, her interview questions are often guided by the senior producer’s advice. Thus, the angle are often dictated or shaped by the decisions made at the news meeting. This sentiment is shared by Van der Merwe, who explains that the stories she pitches at the news meeting are directly influenced by her own prior experience of the senior producers’ decision-making processes: “Through working with them, you get a feeling of what type of story suggestions will be accepted, and you will *only* pitch these types of stories to them, because if you do stories that are not prioritised by the senior producer, it will not be used the programme. It does not mean that these stories will go to the recycle bin, but they will then be used during the weekend show where less “breaking news” or “softer” stories are used” (Van der Merwe, 2016). Thus the RSG daily news meeting routine, similar to those in other newsrooms, serves as a gatekeeping mechanism that could constrain a producer: he or she might argue to “let a story in”, the senior producer can accept or veto it, and even the producers themselves could be gatekeepers by not even pitching the story. Shoemaker & Reese (1996, p. 106) describe this as “the occupational setting” that limits the individual’s decision-making. Still, the respondents concur that as the senior producers rotate weekly (and at times daily), it gives them an opportunity to pitch different types of stories at the meetings, in contrast to a typical South African newspaper setup where there is usually one news editor in charge of the daily meetings.

The influence of the sound medium on the content of current affairs programmes

Although the respondents agree that news values are an important aspect of their decision-making process, they all emphasise the importance of the radio format in determining their content. Martin explains that certain stories are more suitable for the sound medium than others: “The immediacy of radio and the the impact of emotion in the voice of a victim that tells the story of an accident or disaster, are two of the strongest elements of the medium, and will definitely play a role in which stories get selected and how they get produced for broadcast”.

Matthee (2016) also explains that radio as a medium has its advantages and disadvantages: “Unfortunately an e-mail response to your questions is not enough - in radio you always need a soundbite from a source.” A way around this would be to use other types of information in a voice over, but according to Matthee this may create its own challenges for the producer.”

Fouché’s journalism ideology is also reflected in how she uses the radio medium to tell stories: “I try to use as little as possible of my own speech (*voice-over*) in the audio package, and instead focus on using soundbites. In doing this, the story is

mostly told by the source instead of me.” I would interpret this last statement as being a prime example of how a journalists’ ideology could influence her routine/workflow, and thus in turn influencing the content or format of a news story.

The role of the audience in determining the news selection process

Fouché (2016) affirms that knowing audience preferences influences her news selection. “There are stories that one has to be careful about airing regularly or explicitly since we have a conservative listenership.” Nevertheless she explains that she regularly “pushes the boundaries” by producing an unconventional story that an audience member “might feel uncomfortable with”. She then produces it in such a way “that it is not harsh and explicit but conveys the relevant information”. She adds that she has made peace with the fact that if a listener does not want to hear the information, they will switch to another station.

Martin (2016) agrees with Fouché’s observation, stating that at times he needs to give the listener some “medicine” (those news that he feels they *need* to hear) together with the news that they would like to hear. “There are certain things that the listener does not want to hear about, but remember, we have a mandate at the SABC to promote reconciliation. So at times we need to report accordingly”.

In terms of audience feedback Van der Merwe explains that listener comments often directly leads to story ideas and at times it also gives the reportage a different direction/angle than the one she initially intended.

Matthee explains that the wants and needs of an audience directly influence the weight she would give to a story. This in turn will have a direct influence on the time allocated to the story in the two hour current affairs show (e.g. a 3 minute prerecorded package versus a 15 minute discussion with live studio guests).

Conclusion

There are ensuing debates about the role of journalism in the post-Apartheid democratic South African society. Yet, whilst the academics are having a discourse about journalism paradigms suited for the “Global South”, radio producers are actively creating content that influences audiences, based on their own journalism ideologies.

It can be concluded from the interviews with the producers that their “journalism ideology” are strongly influenced by their studies when they start out in the field, and that they still keep to these same norms during their news production process. These same norms combined with newsroom routines influences their news selection and production process. In the meanwhile internal pressures such as keeping to strict broadcast deadlines and working for a sound influence the content they produce. Lastly the newsroom routines could lead to gatekeeping and self-censorship within the news meeting context, although all participants have strongly emphasised that they do adapt their styles and approaches to the various senior producers they work for, and thus it is a constantly fluid process.

Other contributing factors influencing the content that are ultimately broadcast on RSG Current Affairs include: the audience's ability to give feedback about the news content, the producers' privilege being of choosing the experts that can either confirm or challenge the official slant of the news; and the strict broadcast protocol (such as the senior producer instead of the presenter being ultimately in charge of the show).

During these interviews, the organisational influence of the public broadcaster, the SABC, was identified as having a strong influence on the journalists' news selection, and this could be the subject for future research.

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