

# “Journalism ideology” and its influence on the producers of *RSG Radio Current Affairs*

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## ABSTRACT

In the same way that a person can have a political or a personal ideology, professional identities and how a craft or occupation is practiced may be influenced by what can be labelled as a “professional ideology”. Through interviews with producers of the Afrikaans radio programmes *Monitor*, *Spektrum*, and *Naweek-Aktueel*, this research shows that there is indeed such a thing as a “journalism ideology”. The interviews focused on how “internal influences” such as a journalist’s background and training, newsroom routines and “external influences” such as the audience influenced the decisions they made in choosing news stories and producing content. This “journalism ideology” influences the producers and in turn the news content of these current affairs programmes that are listened to daily by almost two million listeners. The conclusion drawn from the study is that, although the participants’ “journalism ideology” largely determines the news stories for their programmes, structural forces, newsroom routines and organisational constraints often dictate their actions. Finally, although all the participants saw themselves as “watchdogs of democracy” internal pressures within the SABC could endanger that role.

**KEYWORDS:** Afrikaans, Broadcasting, Current Affairs, Journalism Ideology, *Monitor*, Newsroom, News Selection, Production, Radio, RSG, SABC

## 1. Introduction

Journalism and the news media’s main functions are to inform, educate and entertain (O’Sullivan et al. 1994, 125). Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 93) argue that the professional role of a journalist is to serve society through transmitting information, providing a context for events and “socialising new members of society”. And by informing, educating and entertaining, journalists also contribute to a community’s cultural growth (O’Sullivan et al. 1994, 125).

The above statements about the functions of journalism form part of a core belief system or “ideology” concerning journalism. Most journalists and journalism educators are trained in and practise elements of this “belief system”, and for the purpose of the paper the term “journalism ideology” will be used to describe this system (Tuchman 1978).

A professional vocational ideology is not unique to journalism. The term “occupational ideology” is defined as the characteristic strategies in which a practitioner of the occupation will be expected to conform to this code in a spontaneous and routine way (O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 208). In the recent past, many scholars have made the case that our journalism profession is in search of an “occupational ideology” and that a more fundamental approach should be adopted (Berger 2004).

## 2. A theoretical contextualisation of the role of South African journalism

Journalism as a craft is not an objective science with set laws for every situation. Berger (Berger 2005, 24) defines “journalistic ideology” as the set of values that underlie the profession. But how is this set of values determined? In Herman and Chomsky’s view, “the same underlying power sources that own the media and fund them as advertisers, that serve as primary definers of the news, and that produce flak and proper-thinking experts, play a key role in *fixing basic principles and the dominant ideologies*” (Herman and Chomsky 2002, xi) (My emphasis in italics).

According to Herman and Chomsky (2002, 15), there is a difference between the way the media are supposed to function and how they *are* actually functioning. In similar vein, the role of the news media in post-Apartheid South Africa has been hotly contested, with the mainstream media often clashing with the “government over the role that the news media should play in the nascent democracy” (Rodny-Gumede 2014, 55). Herman and Chomsky argue that the societal interests who control and finance the media have their own agendas that they want to advance. In South Africa, both during Apartheid times and after the dawn of a new democratic dispensation in 1994, the government tried to control the mainstream media mostly through the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, more commonly referred to as the SABC (Harber 2004, 79). This is an example of how Herman and Chomsky (2002: ix) explain how certain role players shape and determine media policy through their positions in society: “This is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the selection of right thinking personnel and by the *editors’ and working journalists’ internalisation of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness* that conform to the institution’s policy” (My emphasis in italics).

A recent example of this, at the time of writing the paper, was when the then COO of the SABC Hlaudi Motsoeneng announced in May 2016 that the public broadcaster would no longer be showing footage of protests that feature the destruction of public property. Motsoeneng stated that “it is regrettable that these protests are disrupting many lives and as a responsible public institution we will not assist these individuals to push their agenda that seeks media attention” (SABC 2016).

Reading this against Herman and Chomsky’s theory, I would argue that Motsoeneng was one of those “right thinking personnel” defining the news priorities of his institution and thereby assisting the “powerbrokers” to maintain power through the traditional media (Herman and

Chomsky 2002, xi). The public broadcaster specifically states in its editorial policy that it is *not* “the mouthpiece of the government of the day” and the document further states that the SABC should not “broadcast its opinion of government policies, unless they relate directly to broadcasting matters” (SABC Board 2016, 14). Still, the public broadcaster is frequently criticised for being a mouthpiece for government, with many analysts saying that Motsoeneng’s statement was just a ruse to not show anti-ANC and anti-government protests on national television (Moerdyk 2016).

However, one could also read Motsoeneng’s statement of not showing public violence against the “development model” – one of the four main normative media theories. This could be quite apt, as South Africa’s ruling party frequently asks the media to serve a “more developmental role” and to “be more supportive of their agenda” (Daniels 2012).

The “developmental” normative theory was formulated to accommodate conditions in developing countries. In these countries the general belief is held that the media should be used positively to “promote national development, autonomy and cultural identity” (Fourie 2001, 274). According to this theory, the state should be able to restrict the media if economic interests and the development needs of the society are at stake (McQuail 1987, 119). Therefore the developmental theory differs from other normative theories such as the social responsibility paradigm and the libertarian view of the media (Fourie 2001, 276).

The normative theories of the media were revised in the nineties – with arguments stating that the functions and roles of the media fall into two categories: those *prescribing* normative tasks for the media in society (what it should be), and those describing the *real role* of the media in society (Nordenstreng 1997). In the same time period, various South African scholars argued that a different approach to journalism ideology is needed in the Southern developing democracies (Berger 1998, 605). However, as most South African journalists were educated in tertiary institutions with a mostly “Western” or “libertarian” view of the media, many scholars still grapple with what a “Southern” or “African” approach to journalism ideology would be (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 109).

Often individuals and organisations have tried to exert control over the South African media by claiming that they are striving for an “African media”. An example is the one described above, with the then SABC COO Hlaudi Motsoeneng announcing that the public broadcaster would focus more on good news and avoid showing visuals of violent protests. It is worth noting that Motsoeneng made this announcement in May 2016, ahead of the August 2016 municipal elections, while the ruling party’s popularity was declining (Rabkin 2016). South Africa’s population of approximately 55 million still regards the public broadcaster as one of their main media sources (StatsSA 2015). Moerdyk (2016) argues that by trying to control the footage that viewers would see at home of anti-government protests, the ruling party, through the SABC, was trying to control these viewers’ perceptions ahead of the elections.

Consequently, some analysts argue that the term “African journalism” is often used as a code word for authoritarian measures to muzzle or manipulate the media (Moerdyk 2016). As Rodny-Gumede (2015, 109) states: “The current government has repeatedly reiterated that

South African journalism needs to change and reporting needs to be aligned to the national agenda as defined by the ANC leadership.” Still, in Rodny-Gumede’s study, in which she interviewed a select group of South African journalists and editors, she found that most of her interviewees agreed that they were “watchdogs of power” and “custodians of democracy”: “Reporting in the public interest takes precedence over reporting aligned to the national interest” (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 122). Hence, while scholars are debating about an “African” or “Global South” paradigm of journalism, South African journalists are determining their own ideology, norms and values. As Rodny-Gumede (2014, 67) states: “The exploration of how journalists articulate their own role and how they conceptualise ideas around professionalism is of utmost importance for broadening the understanding of journalism as a contextual and reflexive practice.”

Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 64) explain that the individual journalist plays a substantial role in determining news coverage and the content that is distributed to his/her audience. They summarise the following factors as being intrinsic to journalists: their personal and professional background, their education, personal attitudes, values and beliefs, professional orientations and role conceptions (partly as a function of being socialised in their jobs), and their viewpoint on their professional role and ethics (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 101). Therefore, I used these factors to design key questions to ask producers at SABC Radio Current Affairs, in an effort to determine their journalism ideology and the main influences on their content.

### **3. Rationale: Focusing on RSG and the producers of its current affairs shows**

In South Africa, where radio is still one of the most popular mediums of choice for audiences, the journalists or producers creating content and deciding on which news will be broadcasted, still wield a large amount of power (Beck 2015). Beck (2015, 4) writes that “while radio’s share of total world expenditure is on the decline, South Africa’s is on the rise”.

There are close to 200 radio stations broadcasting in South Africa, and that figure excludes radio stations that broadcast online only (Beck 2015, 5). According to Krost Maunder (2015, 1), 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, 1).

RSG (*Radio Sonder Grense*) is one of the 11 public radio stations at the SABC. It is one of only four radio stations that have a nationwide broadcast reach i.e. that can be listened to on a normal transistor radio from any part of the country (The Media 2015, 43). The only other radio stations that can be tuned into in this way are SA FM, 5FM and Radio 2000 (Reid 2016, 30). Since RSG broadcasts to an audience of almost 2 million listeners across the country (The Media 2015, 43), one may conclude that the journalists of RSG’s current affairs shows produce news content that has a wide reach and has a large potential for impacting its audience. Therefore, in taking the power and influence of radio in South Africa into consideration, I

decided to use the journalist producers of RSG Radio Current Affairs as case studies for this article. My main focus was to determine how the producers' "journalism ideology" influences the way in which they select and produce content for the daily current affairs shows, namely *Monitor*, *Spektrum* and *Naweek-Aktueel*.

Conducting research on the producers of these programmes also seemed quite fitting, as I could not find any prior research conducted on the RSG Current affairs section, apart from a small study that I conducted as part of my Masters in 2007, in which I investigated the role of South African foreign correspondents in covering the European Union for RSG Radio Current Affairs (Jansen van Vuuren 2008).

In 2006, Johan Froneman published an article titled "*Finding a home in Afrikaans Radio*" in which he discussed the transition of the former national conservative white Afrikaans radio service (*Afrikaans Stereo*) to the present post-Apartheid RSG. In his article he highlighted that, while other Afrikaans community radio stations such as Radio Pretoria was at the time still clinging to *volksnasionanisme*, the SABC's Afrikaans radio service has been "reconstructed as a non-racial station in step with the new political dispensation" (Froneman 2006, 11). The station's managerial team achieved this firstly, by employing producers and presenters from other cultural backgrounds, especially the so-called coloured community. Secondly, they incorporated programmes that would appeal to a wider target audience, e.g. Islam religious programmes that would not have fitted into the mould of the earlier Christian Afrikaans Radio Service during Apartheid times. Froneman (2006, 11) argues that, while "RSG accepts incorporation into a wider South African 'nation'; it actively supports the construction of an inclusive Afrikaans language community, but within the ideological framework prescribed by the ruling class". However, Froneman does not discuss the news bulletin service or the Current Affairs Shows of RSG. Therefore, its journalists and their "vocational ideology" is a relevant topic for this article.

#### **4. Methodology: Qualitative interviews and participatory research**

I decided to focus on one case study only, because I wanted to focus on one newsroom and its members in this article. The main aim was to investigate how the individual members and the team's "journalism ideology" influenced how they produced current affairs inserts.

##### **4.1 Qualitative interviews**

The data that forms the basis of this article has been collected from practitioners that produce the daily "output" of the RSG Current Affairs programmes. These participants are employed by the SABC News and Current Affairs division, but as the current affairs programmes *Monitor*, *Spektrum* and *Naweek-Aktueel* are broadcasted on RSG, I use the term "RSG Current Affairs" to differentiate the team from the other current affairs sections at SABC Radio.

The first step was to send an e-mail to the full-time staff members and regular freelancers, explaining the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate. Although my aim was to interview most of the staff members of RSG Radio Current Affairs, the constant pressure and

deadlines that these journalists are under made that an impossible task. In the end, five of the team of 11 current affairs practitioners responded positively to the qualitative survey and agreed to open-ended qualitative interviews. Thus the selection of the interviewees was made purely on their willingness to take part and their availability for an interview. I conducted all the interviews during the first week of April 2016. I felt that it would be sufficient, because I managed to interview almost half of the journalists that produce the shows, and my sample included two editors (or senior producers), two producers (or journalists) and a presenter, therefore it was representative of all the roles in the newsroom. Statements that are made by these respondents reflect their own opinions and do not represent those of the organisation (the SABC) that they work for.

#### **4.2 Participant observation and field research**

At the time of writing this paper, I have worked on a freelance basis as a journalist and producer for RSG Radio Current Affairs at regular intervals for almost ten years. Therefore one may say that I have a dual identity as a practitioner and researcher within a type of ethnographic research study, although I mainly collected data for this article from interviews. During the research process I did draw on my knowledge of the inner workings of the Afrikaans current affairs newsroom and its personnel, but I also relied on personal, open-ended interviews and e-mail correspondence in compiling the field research section of this paper. I did realise that the work relationship that has previously developed between myself and the participants had the potential to influence their answers and I really emphasised to them that they should be honest in their answers. All of them assured me that they are happy to share their insights and that they did not regard the questions as intrusive or their answers to be private.

I also realise that there was a danger of interpreting their answers subjectively; however, I have tried my best to avoid this and to use the theoretical framework as a strong base for writing up my arguments. Secondly, I did realise that there was a danger of “reactivity on the part of the participants”, meaning that “their awareness of being part of a research process [could] have an impact on their behaviour” (Du Plooy 2005, 302). However, I did not find any of the answers that they gave me to be out of character, and as I have worked with most of the participants for almost a decade during harsh conditions (e.g. covering various national elections, and the passing of former President Nelson Mandela), I also have insight into their behaviour in certain situations. Still, the reader should take note that as unbiased as I have tried to be, if an inkling of subjectivity did creep into the research, it was without my knowledge and intention.

#### **4.3 Participants of the qualitative open-ended interviews**

After staff members indicated their willingness to take part, five in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out in Johannesburg. The participants of these interviews were:

- Hendrik Martin, an editor at RSG Current Affairs for 19 years. Prior to this, he was a current affairs journalist at various other SABC radio stations. In total he has been at the public broadcaster for 29 years.
- Wilna Matthee, an editor at RSG Current Affairs for 25 years. Prior to joining the RSG team, she was a journalist and presenter for the SABC in Durban. When she retired in 2017 she had been at the SABC for 33 years.

- Anita Visser, the co-anchor of the morning show, *Monitor*. She has been at RSG Current Affairs for 20 years as a presenter/producer. In between, she freelanced as a researcher at the MNET Investigative journalism programme, *Carte Blanche*.
- Marlineé Fouché, a journalist/producer at RSG Current Affairs for almost three years. She began as an intern while completing her journalism studies at the University of Johannesburg.
- Metzi van der Merwe, a journalist/producer at RSG Current Affairs for 20 years. Before joining the team she worked for a community newspaper in Malmesbury, near Cape Town.

The questions that I asked the participants in the interviews all relate to my main argument that the specific journalist/producer/senior producer's own "internalisation of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness" that "conform to the institution's policy" influences their own "journalistic ideology", and that in turn shapes the content that they produce and that the audience ultimately consumes.

## 5. Journalism ideology of practitioners at RSG Radio Current Affairs

In the first part of this section of the article, I will mostly draw on my own experience in providing background on the structure, format and style of RSG Current Affairs programmes.

*Monitor* is broadcasted on weekday mornings between 6 and 8 am, *Spektrum* on weekday afternoons between 1 and 2 pm and *Naweek-Aktueel* on Saturday afternoons between noon and 1 pm. The content of the shows is determined during a daily news meeting, which is chaired by the executive producer (EP), Foeta Krige, and the relevant senior producer who is on shift during the specific day. The senior producer could be regarded as the "editor" in the traditional journalistic (newspaper) sense, with the main difference being that RSG Current Affairs has three senior producers/editors that alternate between the various shows.

There are three main meetings during the day: 1) the *Monitor*/morning show debrief and midday preparation meeting, which is held at 8 o'clock in the mornings; 2) the preparation meeting for the next morning's *Monitor* show, which takes place at 10 o'clock the day prior to the broadcast, and 3) the midday/*Spektrum* debrief meeting which takes place at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. During this meeting the editor from the afternoon show briefs the team that are preparing for the next morning's show about any relevant news items that were not covered in the midday show and that should be followed up for the next morning.

During the first two meetings of the day, the producers (journalists) make suggestions of stories to "cover" in the designated programme. All the participants in the meeting (EP, SP, presenters and producers) give comments and feedback on these ideas. Thereafter the producers line up interviews, conduct the interviews themselves, write a script, record a voice-over and edit all the elements together into an insert (package) that will be broadcasted on the final programme. Most of the programmes' content is produced "in-house" by these journalist-producers, but

two to five stories per programme come from the other SABC regional offices. If these regional stories are only available in English, the producers need to translate the voice-over script into Afrikaans, record their own voice-over, and edit it together with the sound bites into a package. Although the voice-over will always be in Afrikaans, as per the SABC's language policy for its public radio stations, the sound bites will remain as is in either English or Afrikaans (SABC 2004).

RSG also has a weekly current affairs programme on a Sunday evening between 8 and 9, called *Kommentaar*. In this programme the anchor discusses the news of the week with various political analysts, newspaper editors and other news organisation managers. The content of this show is determined by the anchor and the interviewees. This is the only current affairs show broadcasted on RSG that does not feature a wide range of contributions from the various producers.

Keeping these debates surrounding a "South African journalism ideology" in mind, the final part of this article explores the "journalism ideology" of the participants. The subheadings state the relevant questions posed.

### **5.1 Internal influences: *What are the main influences of your "journalism ideology"?***

I specifically asked the respondents how they regarded their role as a journalist and what would they say influenced their own "occupational ideology". As Herman and Chomsky (2002, 15) argue that journalists knowingly or unwittingly "serve their societal purpose by the way they select topics, frame issues, filter information, focus analyses, through emphasis, tone and other similar techniques", the follow-up question was: "How does your journalism ideology influence how you report on a story?"

All five of the participants concurred that the role of journalists are globally the same, namely to establish what is happening in their society and report on it accurately (Fouché 2016, Martin 2016, Matthee 2016, Van der Merwe 2016, Visser 2016). Fouché (2016) explains that the main principle guiding her "journalism ideology" is to tell both sides of the story: "As journalists we cannot possibly be objective, but we have to demonstrate many (and opposing) viewpoints to our audience. Then listeners can interpret it for themselves." Martin (2016) argues that a critical, questioning and investigative stance towards news events lies at the core of his reporting ideology, as well as reporting on a wide spectrum of events: "I know the white conservative listener sitting in her lounge in Pretoria might not be interested in the Hajj-pilgrimage to Mecca, but the Muslim Cape Malay listener *is* interested. And I believe in serving my listeners some medicine – there are some things they need to know, although they might not be interested."

Communicators' professional and ethical considerations are primarily shaped on the job or in professional education (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 91). Matthee (2016) agrees that journalism principles were "drilled" into her while she was studying and then again when she began working in the newsroom. Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 91) describe the latter as a "socialisation" process whereby "the new journalist discovers and internalises the rights and



obligations of the newsroom's status and its norms and values". This concurred with all of the respondents' answers on the factors that guided their own journalism ideology.

Whereas Matthee's studies had a communication-driven focus, Martin had studied political sciences and law. This had a profound influence on both his approach to journalism and on questioning Apartheid as a young journalist (Martin, 2016). This statement concurs with Shoemaker and Reese's argument that journalists' education (as well as their other background experiences and characteristics) influences their beliefs and may have "a potentially far-reaching effect on what is selected to report and on how it is reported". Martin (2016) explains that during his earliest years as a SABC journalist, he tried to demonstrate the injustices of Apartheid through his reporting to his listeners.

Van der Merwe (2016) states that she does not have a journalism ideology that is "out of the ordinary". One of her core beliefs relates to her relationship with sources. Because of the pressure in a radio deadline-driven newsroom most of the RSG journalists share their "contacts" (e.g. political commentators, SAPS and government spokespeople) and their sources' contact details with each other (unless it is a confidential source or the source have asked for their information not to be shared). Van der Merwe says there have often been times where she preferred not to share "contacts" and she answered that related to her own "journalism ideology". However, in understanding "journalism ideology" as a belief system, I would rather read "trust" to be one of the important aspects of her ideology, and that the sharing of sources is just a demonstration of that.

Martin (2016) argues that most journalists have a "liberal" ideology, but in contrast he does not regard himself as "liberal". He does, however, believe in the right of the individual. He feels that the "right of the individual" combined with "freedom of expression" and "morality" are the guiding principles of his "journalism ideology".

## **5.2 Newsroom routines: *Do you think the RSG Current Affairs newsroom routine combined with input from your colleagues; has a strong influence on how you produce content?***

As with most other newsrooms, the RSG Current Affairs team follow certain "routinised" practices to accomplish their tasks. One of these "routines" is the three daily meetings. As described before, a producer will put a story on the table at one of these meetings, and after a (sometimes robust) debate between the participants about the newsworthiness of the story, he or she will get the consent from the editor and EP to follow-up the story. According to Visser (2016), the interaction between the presenters, senior producer and producers during these news meetings form a central part of the RSG Current Affairs Newsroom culture, and "this gives everyone an equal chance to comment on a story that was pitched for the programme". Matthee (2016) comments that since the RSG Radio Current Affairs team is a sample of the broader RSG community in terms of their race, gender and age; the team members' input at the news meeting is important in finalising her news diary. "As a senior producer, a remark from a producer could be the deciding factor in my decision to include a story in the show or not. And this directly affects the media content that reaches an audience" (Matthee 2016).

As the youngest of the respondents, Fouché (2016) explains that when she gets assigned to a story, her interview questions are often guided by the senior producer's advice, because she "does not have the know-how of the superiors yet". She argues that "the voice of what is discussed in the news meeting comes out on air" (Fouché 2016).

Van der Merwe (2016) states that the stories she pitches at the news meeting are directly influenced by her experience of the senior producers' wants and needs for the programme: "Through working with them, you get a feeling of what type of story suggestions will be accepted, and you will pitch these types of stories to them." She explains that it does not serve a function to pitch stories "which you know an editor does not consider being a priority, as they will end up not using it in their programme. It will then only be used during the weekend show where more "soft" or less "breaking news" stories are often the staple (Van der Merwe 2016).

One could conclude that the "news meeting" routine may cause constraints. It could also be an example of gatekeeping, where the individual producers at the news meeting may argue to "let a story in" or "keep it out" and the editor has vetoing power. Even the producer herself can be a gatekeeper by not even pitching the story (McQuail 1987). Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 106) describe this as "the occupational setting" that limits the individual's decision making. However, both Van Der Merwe (2016) and Martin (2016) raised the point that because the editors rotate daily, it gives the producers an opportunity to pitch different types of stories. Therefore the producers might have more opportunity to cover diverse stories, in contrast with a newspaper setup where there is usually one news editor in charge.

Visser (2016) also raised the point of power relations in her discussion about "broadcast rules". According to her, if the editorial team abides by the strict broadcast protocol the result would be a seamless broadcast: "Presenters are there to present a programme, but it's the editor's programme and he or she has the final say about which stories will be used and which will be left out."

### **5.3 Newsroom routines and norms: *How does radio as a medium or format influence how you construct your news stories for RSG Current Affairs?***

Tuchman (1977, 43) argues that through journalists' routines they actually "make news" by allowing everyday occurrences to be recognised as news. Martin (2016) explains that although news values are important, the radio format plays a deciding role, as certain stories are more suitable for the sound medium than others. There are also certain slots for "hard news", "in-depth discussions/debate" and "softer stories", and if these 15-minute slots are full, stories will be kept for a later stage. Matthee also adds that the medium has its advantages and disadvantages: "The immediacy of radio and the impact of emotion in the voice of a victim, are two of the strongest elements of the medium, and will definitely play a role in how stories are selected and produced for broadcast. In radio you always need a sound bite from a source or a spokesperson. Unfortunately an e-mail response to your questions is not enough, unless you use the information in your voice-over – and that brings its own challenges" (Matthee 2016).

Fouché (2016) explains that she tries to use as little as possible of her own voice in the audio package, and instead focuses on using many sound bites: “Therefore the story is mostly told by the source, and not me.” I would interpret this last statement as being a prime example of how a journalist’s ideology could influence her routine/way of working, and therefore in turn could influence the content or format of a story that a listener will hear (Fouche, 2016).

A South African columnist writes that journalism has become “churnalism” and in an environment where journalist works many hours overtime a day, facts go unchecked (Delmar 2008). At RSG Current Affairs, I have personally seen how the rushed deadline for the midday current affairs show, pushes one to produce content in the space of three hours or less. During this short space of time a producer has to arrange interviews, record them, write a script, package and edit the voice-over and sound bites into a complete package. This means that at times, although a producer may try his/her utmost to secure the “best” analyst, you might end up using the one that is readily available to comment, instead of another one that is not available at the specific time.

Visser (2016) states that she strongly believes in the “old news rule” that three sources need to confirm a story before it can be broadcasted. She explains that many years ago a well-known radio station reported that the then leader of the Conservative Party, Dr Andries Teurnicht, had passed away. This station broadcasted the story immediately, while the SABC journalists spoke to his family first and realised that the story was false. Visser admits that in radio the pressure is on “breaking” new stories every hour. She has personally been tempted to trust her “gut” when she has less than two hours to complete a story for *Spektrum*; however, she remained true to her belief that it does not help to be first with a false story. “Rather confirm your facts, because you will lose credibility with your listeners if your story later turns out not to be true” (Visser 2016). Therefore, although Visser stated in her answer to the first interview question that the “three sources rule” forms the basis of her “journalism ideology”, I would draw the conclusion that *credibility* is the guiding principle of her occupational ideology.

#### **5.4 The role of the audience: *How does the RSG audience influence your news selection and production process?***

Knowing audience preferences regularly influences news selection. “There are stories that one has to be careful about airing regularly or explicitly since we have a conservative listenership” (Fouché, 2016). Nevertheless, Fouché says she regularly pushes the boundaries by producing an “unconventional” story that an audience member might feel uncomfortable with. “But I try to produce it in such a way that it is not harsh and explicit but conveys the relevant information.” Fouché explains that her role is “to inform an audience member about what is going on – and sometimes that might mean to gently lure you out of your comfort zone with a story about transgenderism or the rights of sex workers”. This is an active example of “framing” in the newsroom (McQuail 1987). Fouché adds that she has made peace with it that if a listener does not want to hear the information, they will switch to another station. Martin (2016) agrees, stating his role is to produce and broadcast news that the audience *needs* 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” (Martin 2016).

Matthee (2016) explains that she always tries to place herself in the shoes of the audience when she draws up her news diary, because that helps her to determine which stories will grab their interest. It also influences the weight given to a story, which has a direct influence on the time spent producing the story, and the duration that it will take up in the 2-hour current affairs shows (e.g. a 3-minute package versus a 15-minute discussion with live studio guests). She explains that personal interest plays a role, but this is not the ultimate measure. “I do see myself as a listener and I assume that a couple of thousand of the listeners will share my interest. Therefore, if I have questions about something in society, I will follow up on the story.”

Van der Merwe (2016) states that listener comments (via text messaging, e-mail and social media) often directly lead to story ideas and at times it also gives the reportage a different direction or angle than the one she initially intended.

### **5.5 Organisational influence: *How does the public broadcaster (the SABC) influence RSG Current Affairs’ journalism ideology and the current affairs it produces?***

When asking this last question, all the respondents agreed that many of the news sections at the SABC are under constant pressure to conform to the pressures from the SABC’s management, pressures that in their words influence the impartiality of the newsroom. According to the participants, RSG Current Affairs had at that stage been free from such pressures and was able to carry news that was accurate, fair and balanced. Possible reasons given was that RSG broadcasts in Afrikaans, and that the SABC’s top management does not necessarily understand the language, or that they just do not care about the Afrikaans radio station and its actions. The participants were also relatively sure that the status quo would remain, as they were always protected from the internal politics by their executive producer, Foeta Krige (Fouché 2016, Martin 2016, Matthee 2016, Van der Merwe 2016, Visser 2016).

All of this changed in July 2016 (three months after the interviews were conducted), when RSG Current Affairs’ executive producer, Foeta Krige and one of its editors, Suna Venter, were fired because they had stood up to a decision from the then SABC’s COO Hlaudi Moetsoeneng. These two and a journalist, Jacques Steenkamp, became the core of what would later become known as “the SABC 8” – eight senior employees of the SABC who refused to give up their principles and belief that journalists should be “the watchdog of society”. Seven of these employees returned to their posts on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2016, the same week that the country’s national elections took place. The eighth was not so lucky, as he was a freelancer and therefore not entitled to the same rights as the others (Krige 2016).

Although this case showed how vulnerable journalists could be to organisational pressures, RSG Current Affairs’ executive producer Foeta Krige (2016) says that the ongoing trials, including the one they won in the Constitutional Court, showed the power that journalism and the media can have in the country, and that these freedoms are enshrined in the Constitution.

The case of the SABC 8 is too complex to summarise in this article. It warrants extensive research on all the aspects and outcomes of the saga. Therefore I shall endeavour to pursue it in a follow-up article, and would encourage fellow researchers to do the same.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Various debates have ensued about the role of journalism in the post-Apartheid South African context. The traditional normative theories around the function of journalism could be applied and are favoured differently by the various role players, from the libertarian “watchdogs of democracy” viewpoint (held mostly by the South African journalists who participated in the study) to those that prefer a “development model” and media that actively promote a “national interest”.

Several scholars, from Berger to Rodny-Gumede, argue that the South African media form part of a network of shifting power relations and that journalists are still in the process of determining their own “journalism ideology” that will take the African norms and the unique local context into consideration.

In this research I investigated the “journalistic ideology” of five of the 11 team members that produce *Monitor*, *Spektrum* and *Naweek-Aktueel* (the current affairs shows) of RSG, the Afrikaans public radio station at the SABC. In constructing my questions for the open-ended interviews with producers, editors (senior producers) and a presenter from RSG Radio Current Affairs, I was guided by the works of Shoemaker and Reese (1996), Rodny-Gumede (2015) and Herman and Chomsky (2002), who all theorise the performance of the media and journalists in terms of the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate.

It can be concluded from the interviews with the participants that their “journalism ideology” was strongly influenced by their tertiary education when they started working, and that they still keep to the lessons and values that they learnt in the first newsrooms where they began their careers. However, I found the newsroom routines at RSG Current Affairs, such as the daily meetings where they pitch news stories, and the newsroom hierarchy, could lead to self-censorship and gatekeeping within the newsroom. Although most of the participants felt strongly about their objectivity and their “watchdog” role within society, pressures such as keeping to strict broadcast deadlines and working for a medium dominated by sound, influence the way they produce content. However, all of them agreed that their standards are high and that “sub-par” content would not be broadcasted by the editors.

Other factors influencing the choices the producers and editors make include the feedback of the audience (especially via sms'es and social media), the producers' privilege of choosing the experts that can either confirm or challenge the official slant of the news, and the strict broadcast protocol (such as the editor/senior producer instead of the presenter being ultimately in charge of the show).

Still, all of the participants agreed that since RSG's Current Affairs programmes have a diverse production team, and the editors as well as the producers rotate shifts on a daily basis, they have more freedom to pitch different types of stories and produce diverse content than they would have had in a newsroom setup where there was only one news editor.

Finally, while the participants interviewed were still confident about their newsroom's ability to remain independent from editorial pressures within the SABC, events surrounding the firing of eight SABC staff members three months after the interviews were conducted, illustrated that they were more vulnerable than they might have thought.

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As the author I would like to declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research.

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