



# **An exploration of criticism against the South African media: Media experts and academics respond to complaints against the media at the South African Press Council**

by  
Nicolene Louw-De Wee

*Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Journalism) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University*

Supervisor: Dr Marenet Jordaan

March 2024



## **Declaration**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

March 2024

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the nature of criticism against the South African print and online media during the period 2021 to 2023. Research for this study focuses on complaints against the media submitted to the Press Council and which has been adjudicated by the Press Ombud. The study explores who the complainants are and the nature of the complaints. As a second phase of the study, five media experts share their views on these findings, the state of journalism in South Africa and their views on how public trust in the media can be improved in future.

In this exploration the social responsibility theory was used to investigate the role of journalists and their responsibility to ensure true, accurate and fair news is shared with the public they serve. A qualitative research design was chosen for this study and data was gathered in two phases. Firstly, this researcher gathered data from the website of the Press Council, which is in the public domain, on complaints against the press and online media. Through a thematic analysis three themes were identified which assist in answering the research questions. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five media experts to gather their views on the state of the media and how public trust in the media can be improved. As part of the discussion of semi-structured interview findings, four themes were identified relating to the nature of complaints against the media, ethical breaches, quality and standards of journalism and public trust in the media. Some of the major findings of the first phase of the study, which relates to complaints at the Press Council, include regular instances of unethical and inaccurate reporting by the print and online media. Fact-checking and a lack of proper editing and mentoring due to limited resources in newsrooms, lead to complaints about misleading headlines and unbalanced reports. In the second phase of the exploration, media experts expressed concern about the digital age and the faster pace at which news is produced which leaves room for error because of the need to be first. The issue of unethical journalism is another cause for concern, leaving some of the participants convinced that print and online journalists are not all familiar with the content of the Press Code and code of ethics for journalism.

## Opsomming

Hierdie studie ondersoek die aard van kritiek teen die Suid-Afrikaanse gedrukte en aanlyn media tydens die periode 2021 - 2023. Navorsing vir die studie fokus op klagtes teen die media wat by die Persraad ingedien is en waaroor die Persombud uitspraak gelewer het. Die studie ondersoek wie die klaers is en wat die aard van die klagtes was. As 'n tweede fase van die studie deel vyf mediakenners hul menings oor die bevindinge, die stand van joernalistiek in Suid-Afrika en hulle sienings oor hoe die publiek se vertroue in die media in die toekoms verbeter kan word.

In die verkenning is die sosiale verantwoordelikheidsteorie gebruik om die rol van joernaliste en hul verantwoordelikheid te ondersoek om te verseker dat ware, akkurate en regverdigde nuus met die publiek wat hulle bedien, gedeel word. 'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsontwerp is vir die studie gekies en data is in twee fases ingesamel. Eerstens het hierdie navorser data ingesamel vanaf die webwerf van die Persraad, wat in die openbare domein is, oor klagtes teen die gedrukte- en aanlynmedia. Deur 'n tematiese ontleding is drie temas geïdentifiseer om die navorsingsvrae te beantwoord. Tweedens is semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude met vyf mediakenners gevoer vir hulle menings oor die stand van die media en hoe die publiek se vertroue in die media verbeter kan word. As deel van die bespreking van die semi-gestruktureerde onderhoudsbevindinge, is vier temas geïdentifiseer wat verband hou met die aard van klagtes teen die media, etiese oortredings, kwaliteit en die standaard van joernalistiek en die publiek se vertroue in die media.

Van die belangrikste bevindinge van die eerste fase van die studie, wat verband hou met klagtes by die Persraad, sluit gereelde gevalle van onetiese en onakkurate beriggewing deur die gedrukte- en aanlynmedia in. Feite-kontrolering en 'n gebrek aan behoorlike redigering en mentorskap as gevolg van beperkte hulpbronne in nuuskantore, lei tot klagtes oor misleidende opskrifte en ongebalanseerde beriggewing. In die tweede fase van die studie het die deelnemers hulle kommer uitgespreek oor die digitale era en die vinniger tempo waarteen nuus vervaardig word, wat ruimte laat vir foute omdat daar 'n dringendheid is om eerste te wees met nuus. Die kwessie van onetiese joernalistiek is nog 'n kwelpunt vir van die deelnemers wat nie oortuig is dat joernaliste in gedrukte en

aanlyn media nie almal vertrou is met die inhoud van die Perskode en etiese kode vir joernalistiek nie.

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I want to thank God for carrying me through this journey. It was not easy, but I managed to believe in myself and persevered.

Thank you to my family, friends and colleagues for your support and encouragement. There were dark days, but you believed in me and never doubted my ability.

I dedicate this degree to my children. We managed to soldier on through a difficult and emotional year and together we managed to support each other and make this work. I am forever grateful to all of you.

Thank you to the research participants for your time and assistance. Your valuable input will undoubtedly contribute to the improvement of journalism.

To my supervisor, Dr Marennet Jordaan, thank you for your patience and coaching. I am grateful for your guidance and encouragement on those days when I was ready to give up. Thank you for believing in me.

## Table of contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Opsomming</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>List of tables</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>12</b>
1.1 Rationale	12
1.2 Preliminary literature review	13
1.3 Working definitions of key terms	14
1.3.1 Media	14
1.3.2 Media responsibility	14
1.3.3 Media regulation	15
1.3.4 Media criticism	15
1.4 Problem statement	15
1.5 Theoretical framework	16
1.6 Research questions	16
1.7 Research methodology and design	17
1.8 Chapter layout	18
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1 Introduction	20
2.2 The South African media landscape in a democracy	20
2.3 Media regulation	23
2.3.1 Government regulation	23
2.3.2 Self-regulation	24
2.3.3 Co-regulation	25

2.3.4 Media regulation in South Africa	25
2.4 Media criticism	28
2.5 Gaps in current literature	29
2.6 Summary	30
<b>CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>31</b>
3.1 Introduction	31
3.2 The origins and aim of normative media theory	31
3.3 Social responsibility theory	32
3.3.1 Criticism of the social responsibility theory	35
3.3.2 The social responsibility theory in a South African context	35
3.4 Central theoretical departure point	37
3.5 Summary	37
<b>CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>38</b>
4.1 Introduction	38
4.2 Quantitative versus qualitative research design	38
4.3 Sampling	40
4.4 Data gathering	41
4.5 Data analysis	43
4.6 Ethical considerations	44
4.7 Summary	45
<b>CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS</b>	<b>46</b>
5.1 Introduction	46
5.2 Overview of adjudicated complaints to the Press Council	46
5.2.1 Theme 1: Distortion of facts and misleading headlines	48
5.2.2 Theme 2: Failure to provide right of reply	49



5.2.3 Theme 3: Lack of accuracy and context	50
5.3 Discussion of semi-structured interview findings	51
5.3.1 Views on complaints and mistakes made by print and online media	52
5.3.2 Views on reasons for ethical breaches by print and online media	54
5.3.3 Views on the levels of quality and standards of journalism	56
5.3.4 Views on public trust in the media	57
5.4 Summary	58
<b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION</b>	<b>60</b>
6.1 Introduction	60
6.2 Summary of research project	60
6.3 Response to research questions	61
6.3.1 Who is criticising South African print and online media through complaints to the Press Ombud?	61
6.3.2 What is the nature of the criticism levelled against print and online media in South Africa?	61
6.3.3 What are the views of media experts with regard to criticism against the media and the current state of journalism in South Africa?	62
6.4 General conclusion of study	63
6.5 Limitations of study	64
6.6 Recommendations	64
6.6.1 Recommendations for further study	64
6.6.2 Recommendations for the journalism industry	65
<b>References</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Addendum A: Confirmation of research ethics approval</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Addendum B: The Press Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media</b>	<b>79</b>

**Addendum C: A list of complaints at the Press Council of South Africa cited in  
this study**

**85**

## **List of tables**

Table 4.1: Details of the participants for this study	42
Table 5.1: Themes in analysed complaints to the Press Council (2021-2023)	48
Table 5.2: Themes in semi-structured interviews	53

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Rationale

The media play a pivotal role in any democracy by providing a forum for public debate on the one hand, but also enabling citizens to make informed decisions (Aalberg & Curran, 2012:89). Dramatic changes caused by democratic transitions are currently occurring in many countries placing a renewed emphasis on the media's important role in democratisation (Haerpfer et al., 2019:335).

In South Africa the media have played a crucial role in the political and social realm since the end of apartheid more than two decades ago (Wasserman, 2020b). Investigative reporting into corruption and malfeasance across all spheres of government and the private sector has over the years led to laudable exposés. In 2015, the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism, for example, exposed how former President Jacob Zuma managed to secure a two-million-dollar deal for his nephew's controversial mining company, Aurora Empowerment (AmaBhungane, 2020). The centre's investigation into the so-called #GuptaLeaks scandal uncovered how companies owned by the controversial Gupta family managed to secure deals with state-owned entities in South Africa (AmaBhungane, 2020). All this information is contained in a final report by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State, better known as the Zondo Commission, released in 2022. Harber (2022) notes that the role of journalists is three-fold: to investigate, verify, and publish or broadcast. The author adds that it is then up to the justice system to ensure that those with power are held accountable (Harber, 2022).

The role of journalists, according to Wasserman (2020b), has been strongly contested and criticised, despite uncovering corruption and maladministration through their investigations. Cheruiyot (2019:26) concurs and adds that "critics of the media vary from those with a background in media studies and journalism practice to politicians, to audiences or the public". In many instances, investigations into the media's conduct tend to feed this criticism. For example, the recent independent panel report on the Inquiry into Media Ethics and Credibility, commissioned by the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) found, among other things, "ethical lapses" by journalists at the *Sunday Times*

newspaper (Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021:57). According to Harber (2022), journalists are faced with political, financial and disinformation challenges and it is imperative that the media do more good and less harm. The Sanef-commissioned report, however, warns that “while the majority of media can still be characterised as free, ethical and trustworthy, it would be remiss not to be wary of attempts to erode this” (Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021:58). In his response to the report, Wasserman (2021) notes that “the ethical problems plaguing the South African media requires thinking about the question of ethics as a more radical project”.

Wyatt (2018:3) notes that criticism of the press is essential in a democracy – something the media has often recognised. However, criticism against the media by a variety of external and internal actors raises several questions: What type of criticism do the South African media face? Who is criticising the South African media? Why are the South African media faced with criticism by external and internal actors? This study will answer these and related questions by researching and analysing complaints lodged at the Press Council of South Africa.

In the second part of the study, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with media experts and academics. This will contribute to a clearer understanding of the media’s social responsibility towards the public and how the general state of journalism can be improved in a democratic South Africa.

## **1.2 Preliminary literature review**

The South African media have a long way to go to rebuild lost public trust, given the growing crisis of disinformation (Wasserman, 2020b). He adds that “the media are vulnerable to unethical practices such as capture by political role players while cutting corners and producing superficial journalism” (Wasserman, 2020b). The circulation of disinformation is just one of the latest in a range of challenges to the authority of journalists as “arbiters of what is true and real” (Vos & Thomas, 2018:2006). A study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism into public trust in the media worldwide found that a significant portion of the public believes that the media are used by powerful people to push their own political and economic agendas, thus not prioritising the public’s interest (Newman & Fletcher, 2017:5).

Over the years, several scholars have defined media criticism, with some regarding criticism as an important role player in a democratic arena. From a normative perspective, Marzolf (1991) notes that media critics are often concerned with the quality of news, impartiality of journalists, and fair and accurate reporting. Carey (1974:25) sees media criticism as a tool to improve journalistic standards and develop a “critical community of active audiences”. Judgement, according to Carroll and Shabana (2010), is a fundamental part of criticism and a product of feedback from audiences.

In today’s democratic South Africa, press freedom is guaranteed in the Constitution. But the media are regularly subjected to criticism by political role players. Zuma, for example, criticised the media for “reporting on the opposite of the positive” when addressing journalism students at the Tshwane University of Technology in 2015. Zuma claimed the media did not care about informing the public nor building South Africa’s image (Makinana, 2013). Cheruiyot (2019) argues that “criticism questions the standards of journalism as it points out the fallacies and errors made by the media”. The author argues that the issues raised by critics often have to do with quality and standards of journalism, which, in many cases, are aimed at improving the quality of the practice (Cheruiyot, 2019:24).

The aim of this study is firstly to determine the nature of the criticism against the press and online media and secondly to establish what can be done to improve the overall state of journalism as a practice by gathering the views of media experts.

### **1.3 Working definitions of key terms**

#### **1.3.1 Media**

Jennings (2018:414) describes “media” as:

The tools we use to share messages, ideas and information with other people. This could take the form of printed, recorded and broadcasted information.

Media existed in various forms for thousands of years of which cave paintings can be described as the most primitive form of media and communication.

#### **1.3.2 Media responsibility**

In a seminal definition, Elliot (1986) describes media responsibility as follows:

“The responsibility that the media holds whether privately or governmentally owned, whether or not the controlling news judgments are made within the news organisation itself or by an outside agency”.

McQuail (2000) defines “media responsibility” as follows:

“The obligations and expectations that society has regarding the media, which is located on different levels; the media institution as a whole, the ownership, the organisation, the professional employee and the individual or journalist as the performer”.

The different clauses in the South African Press Code outline the responsibility of the media in its entirety and, more specifically, the responsibility the media has to the public they serve.

### **1.3.3 Media regulation**

Freedman (2015) describes “media regulation” in the following manner:

“The process by which a range of specific, often legally binding, tools are applied to media systems and institutions to achieve established policy goals such as pluralism, diversity, competition, and freedom”.

In South Africa the Press Council exists with the aim of maintaining and promoting media freedom, ensuring that a large amount of accurate media coverage is filtered through to the public and that a code of ethics is adhered to by the print and online media (Press Council of South Africa, 2023).

### **1.3.4 Media criticism**

Vande Berg (2004:222) defines media criticism as “[d]escribing, analysing, interpreting, and evaluating patterned relationships to share an informed perspective with others”.

In this study the researcher will focus on criticism against print and online media and demonstrate how, according to media experts, journalists can ensure that they fulfil their social responsibility to the public as required by the code of ethics.

#### **1.4 Problem statement**

The aim of this study is to determine the nature and extent of criticism against print and online media in a democratic South Africa. The researcher will do a qualitative content analysis of complaints submitted to the Press Council against print media from March 2021 to March 2023.

For the purpose of this study, publicly available information about the findings of the South African Press Ombud will be accessed on the Press Council's website via the internet. Thereafter, qualitative, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with five media experts to describe their responses to the findings of the analysis. The findings of the study will not only highlight the nature and extent of criticism against the media, but also inform the future improvement of journalistic practices in the newsroom.

#### **1.5 Theoretical framework**

The social responsibility theory provides normative guidelines for how the media should act (McQuail, 2010:571). He notes that the public should benefit from press freedom, leaving the media with the responsibility to report truthfully and objectively (McQuail, 2010:273). According to Ravi (2012), "the media's responsibility to serve the public and their obligation to stay free from government interference are regarded as the cornerstones of the social responsibility theory". More importantly, "the theory led to the establishment of press councils, the drafting of codes of ethics and anti-monopoly laws in several countries" (Ravi, 2012:325). Thus, the social responsibility model argues that, for the media to receive and analyse information, they should be subjected to some form of responsibility to the public (Pickard, 2015:40). For the purpose of this study, the researcher will use the social responsibility theory and its guidelines as a basis for the exploration into the nature and extent of critique against the South African media. The theoretical framework will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.



## **1.6 Research questions**

In addressing the problem statement set out in section 1.4, this study will answer the following general and specific research questions.

General research question:

What is the nature of criticism against South African print and online media as captured by adjudicated complaints to the Press Ombud (2021-2023) and the views of media experts?

Specific research questions:

- Who is criticising South African print and online media through complaints to the Press Ombud?
- What is the nature of the criticism levelled against print and online media in South Africa?
- What are the views of media experts with regard to criticism against the media and the current state of journalism in South Africa?

## **1.7 Research methodology and design**

This study will use a qualitative research design, and information will be gathered in two phases.

The first step is the collection of information related to complaints against the media submitted to the Press Council and adjudicated by the Press Ombud during the period March 2021 to March 2023. This publicly available information will be accessed on the website of the Press Council. The data-gathering method will provide important information and findings that will form the basis for the second phase of the exploration. The information pertaining to complaints against the media accessed on the Press Council website will be downloaded as PDFs to allow the researcher to make notes as part of the content analysis process.

For the second step, a purposive sampling method will be used, which allows for the selection of participants with experience in the phenomenon being explored (Creswell & Clark, 2010:112). The researcher will approach five possible participants (two media

experts and three journalism academics) to respond to findings relating to media criticism obtained through the Press Council. The participants will be asked to respond to the information gathered from the Press Council and Press Ombud and provide insight into the current state of criticism against the South African media.

The interviews with the five participants will be done on a virtual platform and recorded on a digital voice recorder after obtaining the full consent of participants. The researcher will also take notes during the interviews to ensure that important key issues are written down in case of follow-up interviews or questions. After the interviews are concluded, the data will be transferred from the digital voice recorder to the researcher's personal laptop where it will be saved in a marked file on the researcher's desktop. For the purposes of safekeeping and ensuring that a backup is available, the file will be transferred onto the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive. To ensure that a high level of confidentiality is maintained with the data at hand, all the files will be protected with a password.

Thematic content analysis will be used for this study. This is done to ensure that patterns can be selected in the meaning of the data which in turn will allow for the selection of themes. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), "thematic analysis helps to identify common patterns emerging from data". In analysing the Press Council data, the researcher will be able to group specific complaints under themes to determine who the complainants are and what the nature and extent of the complaints are. Information gathered through semi-structured interviews with the media experts and academics will also be analysed and coded by identifying words or phrases dictated by the research questions. It will further allow for themes using the research questions as a guide.

## **1.8 Chapter layout**

The thesis is organised as follows:

Chapter 1: This chapter provides a summary of the researcher's motivation for undertaking the study and provides a brief analysis and overview of the literature reviewed, a problem statement, working definitions of key terms, a brief theoretical overview, and a list of the research questions.

Chapter 2: This chapter contains literature reviewed for the purpose of this exploration and previous studies conducted on the subject. It gives an overview of the South African media landscape in the pre- and post-apartheid era and the criticism levelled against the media throughout these periods. The concepts of media criticism and quality journalism are also discussed in this chapter, with a strong emphasis on media responsibility and the changes in media regulation before and in a democratic South Africa.

Chapter 3: This chapter discusses the social responsibility theory – the theoretical departure point for this study – including the criticism levelled against the theory.

Chapter 4: In this chapter, the research design and methodology for this study are discussed. A qualitative research method, which involves the gathering of web-based data for thematic analysis, followed by semi-structured interviews, are described.

Chapter 5: The research findings for this study are discussed in this chapter. Themes, identified from data collected from the website of the Press Council relating to complaints against the media, are described, as well as examples of the complaints to determine their nature. This process is followed by a thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with five academics and media experts. A summary of findings concludes this chapter.

Chapter 6: This chapter contains a conclusion that the researcher draws from the findings of this study, with a focus on recommendations and possible future topics for further studies.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

A literature review can be described as “a study of existing literature, which as an individual body of work, allows researchers to reflect on prior work done in their field and helps them to identify gaps to fill through their own research” (Post, Sarala, Gatrell & Prescott, 2020:352). A literature review is, therefore, regarded as a crucial element in any research or study. It also indicates which topics require further investigation. According to Snyder (2019:334), previous research information serves as a guideline to measure the research area and in turn motivate the aim of the study. The aim of this chapter is to ensure that the reader has a clear understanding of what is known about the research topic and why it is important (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013:221).

To find existing research on the conceptual focus of the study, search engines, like Google Scholar, and the Stellenbosch University Library database for online academic journal research articles and books were used. Search terms like “media” and “media criticism in South Africa” were researched. Other search items include “self-regulation” and “co-regulation of the media”, “popular criticism against the media”, “the current state of the South African media”, “the history of press councils globally and in South Africa”, “the role of news ombudsmen”, “the media’s accountability to the society it serves” and “media quality and the importance thereof in a democracy”.

This chapter firstly examines literature relating to South Africa’s changing media landscape in a democracy, which includes the challenges faced by print and online media. Secondly, the chapter focuses on media regulation globally and in South Africa with the dawn of democracy and the development of the Press Council of South Africa in the current post-apartheid era. Thirdly, the focus of this chapter then shifts to media criticism globally and in South Africa, as this is the key focus of this study. Gaps in current literature on the topic of media criticism in South Africa are also identified.

### **2.2 The South African media landscape in a democracy**

The South African media’s ability to report on news during the apartheid era was seriously limited (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:193). According to Alhadeff (2018:9), the apartheid

government had a culture of banning people and organisations. Radebe (2021:163) notes that “the formulation of Apartheid in 1948 also formalised the racist media which saw the exclusion of black people from media ownership and the banning of content on communism”. Former, so-called right-wing media, according to Radebe (2021:165), were seen as a tool to promote racial oppression. During the same era, activists like Nelson Mandela were imprisoned and their organisations banned, while it was made illegal for the media to promote banned people or even publish photographs of them (Alhadeff, 2018:9). At one point, the media also received a stern warning from then President PW Botha to act responsibly or face action (Nel, 2001:57). According to Bird and Garda (2005:6), the alternative press, including *New Nation*, *Weekly Mail* and *Vrye Weekblad*, were “courageous” enough to publish information other media were not allowed to print.

The Afrikaans newspapers were far less vehement in their opposition to the restrictions placed on the media by the Apartheid state, while the English press knowingly or unknowingly supported the ideology and discourse of the apartheid system (Bird & Garda, 2005:6).

The dawn of democracy in South Africa led to more freedom for the media. Freedom of expression is enshrined in the Constitution (Section 16), and includes acknowledgement of the media’s freedom and independence, but emphasises their ethical accountability towards society (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). “South Africa’s post-Apartheid era and new democracy placed a renewed focus on the media and their responsibility to keep the public informed, to maintain their objectivity and to honour their commitment to fair and accurate reporting” (Berger, 2005:23). The author describes this “watchdog” role of the media as “representing the public interest and upholding human rights” (Berger, 2005:23). Despite the media’s constitutional freedom at the advent of democracy, Wasserman and De Beer (2005) refer to “occasional clashes” between government and the media with regard to the role of journalists in society and the media’s obligation to the public. These clashes led to several meetings between the state and the South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef) to “iron out issues around the media’s responsibility and to examine relations between the state and the media in the interest of strengthening democracy” (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). Then President Thabo Mbeki

referred to this “fragile relationship” (between the state and the media) in his 2003 address at Sanef’s meeting on the media and specifically pointed to the “conflicting views on the media’s role and the media’s lack of commitment to transformation” (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:193). The ANC government’s irritation with the media’s lack of transformation was often mentioned by politicians like Mandela, who referred to the media’s “racial profile” during his address at the International Press Institute’s congress in February 1994.

South Africa’s daily newspapers are cast from the same racial mould, because they are white, they are male, they are from a middle class background. In a country whose population is overwhelmingly black, the principal players in the media have no knowledge of the life experience of that majority (Mandela, 1994).

In the same address, Mandela (1994) noted that “a critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy”. Daniels (2010:2) agrees that the media play a vital role in the strengthening of a country’s democracy. She argues that the role should at all times receive the necessary recognition by government and the public, while journalists are trusted and allowed to perform their ethical duties as the public’s servants. Wasserman (2021), however, posits that unethical behaviour has, over the years, dented public trust in the media. He was reacting to the findings of the Independent Panel Report Inquiry into Media Ethics and Credibility of 2022, which had been commissioned by Sanef. The investigation by retired Judge Kathy Satchwell and panel members Nikiwe Bikitsha and Rich Mkhondo found, for example, “ethical lapses by journalists at the Sunday Times newspaper; and a shared set of systemic problems harming ethical conduct across the media landscape, which included the harassment and manipulation of journalists; and increasing social media pressure to break stories” (Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021). According to Wasserman (2021), South African journalism has to focus on rebuilding lost trust, especially in the current age of disinformation. The Sanef-commissioned report further warns that “while the majority of media can still be characterised as free, ethical and trustworthy, there should be renewed efforts not to destroy this” (Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021). The report shows that trust in the media in South Africa declined between 2018 and 2021. The decline in trust is attributed to the closing of two news sites;

journalists of the media company Independent Media not receiving their full salaries; and legal challenges involving journalism, which has a negative effect on media freedom (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023).

The more positive feedback contained in the Sanef-commissioned panel report is its reference to the success of the Press Council and the fact that it “appears to be working well” (Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021). The Press Council is an independent co-regulatory body that was set up by the print and online media (Press Council of South Africa [PCSA], 2023). In light of the decline in media trust, as mentioned in the aforementioned report, the panel responsible for the Sanef-commissioned report suggests tougher sanctions by the Press Council, as media regulator, for members of the media who do not adhere to the industry’s ethical standards (Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021).

The researcher further discusses the history of the Press Council in section 2.3.4.

## **2.3 Media regulation**

Media regulation, as defined by McQuail (2007), “refers to all means by which media organisations are formally restrained or directed in their activities”. Freedman (2017) sees a close relation between media regulation and media policy, with the aim of creating a specific media structure and behaviour. Media regulation gives an authoritative body the power to determine the type of message that should be distributed, how much information should be provided and the quality thereof (Schejter, 2018). Regulation is, according to Schejter (2018), “the metaphor used to describe the assumption of authority over the media”.

The most prominent forms of media regulation are discussed in the following subsections.

### **2.3.1 Government regulation**

Silverblatt and Zlobin (2004:22) define government media as “any media organisation that is either directly or indirectly owned or operated by the state and is often associated with authoritarian governments using state media to control, influence and limit information”. The media in this case often reflect the values of the government they are operated by,

which could lead to biased reporting and a stronger focus on government propaganda (Djankov, La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes & Shleifer, 2002:21). Examples are countries like China, Russia, Iran, Nigeria and Zimbabwe (Walker & Orttung, 2014). The authors argue that media regulated by the government not only exist to glorify the government, but to “trash and discredit alternatives to the authoritarian status quo before these can gain traction with citizens at large” (Walker & Orttung, 2014).

### **2.3.2 Self-regulation**

The term “self-regulation”, according to Campbell (1999:714), points to the media’s regulation by the industry itself and not government. According to Campbell (1999:717), self-regulation places a strong emphasis on “professional activity driven by the social conscience of journalists”. Self-regulation has emerged as the main tool for global and commercial media as a new means of governance and consists of two main characteristics: “independence from government control and the involvement of members of the media organisation in the regulation process” (Puppis & Van den Bulck, 2019:8). One of the main objectives of self-regulation is keeping communication channels between the media and the public open for the delivery of quality content on all platforms (Haraszti, 2008:10). Quin (2016) and Pickard (2010) concur and see a strong correlation between self-regulation of the media, quality of content and professional ethics. In their study into self-regulation of the media in Chile and the establishment of an ethics council there, Gonzalez and Lecaros (2020:483) argue that regulatory bodies (e.g. press councils and ethical councils) play a relevant role in ensuring that the media fulfil their obligation to the public and the media as a profession. Codes of ethics for journalists, a press code and a press ombud are examples of self-regulation tools, as well as editorial guidelines developed by the media. A complaint mechanism can be set up to deal with justified concerns in a rational and autonomous way (Gonzalez & Lecaros, 2020:486). According to the Organisation of News Ombuds and Standards Editors (ONO, 2020), “an ombudsman shuttles ideas, observations and opinions from the public to journalists and news management and back again”. The aim of this process is more transparency between the public and journalists and to allow for understanding about journalistic processes (ONO, 2020:19). While codes of ethics provide guidance on editorial



standards, Haraszti (2008:11) believes that a complaint mechanism, offered by press councils, can be regarded as some form of “quality insurance” to the public.

### **2.3.3 Co-regulation**

Co-regulation is a combination of self-regulation by the media and regulation by the state and involves government, independent regulatory agencies and the public (Cishecki, 2002:10). Media co-regulation can thus be found in areas closer connected to governments. According to Closs (2003), “co-regulations is a framework of overall objectives, basic rights, enforcement and appeal mechanisms, and conditions for monitoring compliance which is set in the legislation”. The definition of co-regulation, also referred to as “regulated self-regulation”, has one thing in common: “[It] is based on a legal framework in which private entities administer their affairs by codes of conducts or sets of rules” (Doelker, 2010). The system can also be seen as responsibility-sharing between the regulator and stakeholders in the media industry.

### **2.3.4 Media regulation in South Africa**

In the pre-democracy period, South Africa’s mainstream press subscribed to a non-statutory body, called the Media Council, funded by the Newspaper Press Union (Berger, 2010:294). But, according to Berger (2010:294), the Media Council was criticised for being “a tool of self-censorship which allowed governmental abuse of media freedom under apartheid”. In 1994, the South African newspaper industry moved from a council system and introduced the office of the Press Ombudsman, as well as an Appeals Panel in 1996, established by the Print Media of South Africa, the South African Editors’ Forum and the South African Union of Journalists (Berger, 2010:295). In 2002, the Media Council was renamed, which led to the establishment of the Press Council. In 2010, debates about press regulation and press freedom emerged that contested the ANC government’s ideas of press freedom and supporting self-regulation (Berger, 2010; Duncan, 2014). The Press Ombud and the Press Council, responsible for regulating press freedom until 2012, operated on the premise of self-regulation (Sindane, 2018:156).

A review of the Press Council in 2012 saw the country’s media moving from being self-regulated since 2007 to an independent co-regulated industry (Sindane, 2018:156). The

review was managed by the Press Freedom Commission, put together by the South African Editors' Forum and Print Media South Africa with the aim of ensuring greater public participation. One of the proposals by the commission was that the print media industry be co-regulated, which would involve the public and press without government participation (Sindane, 2018:156). The Press Freedom Commission's (PFC's) Report on press regulation in South Africa (2012) notes that independent co-regulation is "a system of the press that involves public and press participation with a predominant public membership, which makes the media accountable to the public" (PFC, 2012:7). The Press Council initially refused the submission of third-party or public complaints, but after the internal review process in 2010 to 2012, the rule was amended (Report on Press Regulation in South Africa, 2012). The press's accountability to the public is also stipulated in the Press Council's (2023) preamble on its website: "The press exists to serve society and self-regulation by the press is enriched by public participation in a co-regulatory process."

The Press Council had its share of criticism during the first years of democracy and was, according to Wasserman (2020b:455), described as "a toothless mechanism with little commitment to impose strong enough sanctions against the media".

By definition, the Press Council, the Press Ombud and the Appeals Panel are independent co-regulatory mechanisms set up by the print and online media to provide impartial and cost-effective adjudication to settle disputes between newspapers, magazines and online publications, on the one hand, and members of the public, on the other, relating to editorial content (PCSA, 2023). The Press Code was adopted, with the approval of media organisations, aimed at guiding the journalists in their daily practice of gathering and distributing news, while also defending press freedom in the country (PCSA, 2023). The Press Council is the custodian of the Press Code and is allowed to amend the content when and if needed. (The full Press Code is attached as Addendum B). Truthful, fair and balanced reporting with an opportunity for right of reply to subjects of critical reporting are some of the guidelines contained in the Press Code (PCSA, 2023). To ensure the project's independence, Haraszti (2008:21) is adamant that the state should not be actively involved in drawing up a press code. The author further argues that press councils remain "an indispensable element" with regard to public debates about

quality and responsible journalism in a democratic media environment (Eberwein, Fengler & Karmasin, 2019:6).

In South Africa, Reid (2014:59) explains that “before the review, third parties, or persons who may have been concerned about the content of a newspaper report, but were not directly affected by the report, were not permitted to complain”. By definition, the review now allowed the public to take part in journalistic accountability. Reid (2014:60) further notes that the review, which now allowed the ordinary reader into the system, “raised the public profile of the Press Council and allowed for greater diversity within the regulatory framework”.

The study, published in 2015, firstly focused on the role of the Press Council and secondly on work done between 2009 to 2013 in order to assess the complaints submitted to the council and the nature of the complaints. It is important to note that the bulk of the research was done prior to the Press Council’s 2012 review. Third-party complaints were subsequently introduced as part of the Press Council’s procedure in 2013. According to the research, “the council received 27 third party complaints between 2009 and 2013 of which 12 were submitted by 2013” (Reid & Isaacs, 2014:16). Research between 2009 and 2013 found that a significant number of complaints were dismissed before ruling, because they were found “superfluous or unacceptable due to anonymity, maliciousness or fraudulent” (Mobabra, 2014). A content analysis of the profiles of the complainants found that businesses and the private sector account for the majority of complaints ruled upon by the Press Council, while the most prominent criticism of the press since 2010 was submitted by politicians and the ruling ANC party (Reid & Isaacs, 2014:58). The researchers drew two important conclusions: “[T]he business sector is less tolerant of criticism by the press than the political sector and the press is often criticised for publishing content that is critical of government and politicians, and less of corporate and the private sector.”

Almost a decade after the restructuring of the Press Council, a new inquiry into media ethics and regulation was launched by the South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef) in 2019. Sanef (2019) noted that a number of disturbing trends in the media industry, including “the erosion of public trust in journalism, the decline of editorial independence, misinformation and journalists sometimes backing certain political factions”, painted a

dark picture of the industry. These trends prompted Sanef to establish an inquiry into media ethics by a commission headed by a retired judge.

The aim of this inquiry is to investigate what went wrong with some of our journalism in recent years and how we can fix these gaps and loopholes so that trust and alliances between us and the public can be built (Sanef, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, the researcher explores the nature of complaints against the print and online media between March 2021 and March 2023 to provide more updated research information on complaints submitted to the Press Council, the nature of the complaints and the profiles of complainants.

## **2.4 Media criticism**

In seminal work on press criticism, Carey (1974:242) argues that “criticism must exist in a forum that allows continuous, ongoing exchange and debate between the members of the press and the critical audience”. Journalists are often criticised for either their substandard news offering, misconduct or objective journalism, which is, according to Marzolf (1991:211), a major cause for concern. Williams (1985) describes media criticism as “fault-finding and judgement by media critics”, which should exist to allow for continuous exchange and debate between journalists and their audiences. Butler (2001) argues that media criticism could be taken a step further from just “judgement” by referring to criticism as “practices in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing”. Holt and Krogh (2010), in turn, attribute the growth of the “critical community” to the “declining quality of media, a more educated and media literate public and the dawn of the digital age”. Stiernstedt (2014) notes that criticism is necessary to improve news media and adds that it distinguishes between “pragmatic” and “interest-based” forms of criticism. “While pragmatic is a rather normative approach, the latter is driven by the particular concerns of specific groups” (Stiernstedt, 2014). Cheruiyot (2019:18) adds that criticism also takes on different forms by different role players – ranging from the public, politicians and the private sector – while paving the way for improved journalism. The author further notes that criticism can, in many instances, force the media to do self-

evaluation, and it could act as a call to journalists to uphold their promises to keep the public informed and deliver free, fair and accurate content (Wyatt, 2018:2).

Press councils, according to Eberwein, Fengler and Karmasin (2019), provide ethical guidelines that journalists should adhere to when exercising responsible and quality journalism in a newsroom environment. Should these guidelines be violated, those affected by the misconduct have the right to file a complaint, which is then investigated (Eberwein, Fengler & Karmasin, 2019). It is important to note that complaints filed at the Press Council of South Africa against the media are not the only criticism against the media's conduct. In democratic South Africa, the media have been the subject of wide criticism – not only by political role players, but equally by the public sector and society (Harber & Renn, 2010). In their research into the nature of complaints submitted against the media at the Press Council of South Africa between 2009 and 2013, Reid and Isaacs (2013) focused on the most common errors arising in news reporting. Although relatively low in number, infringements pertaining to headlines and captions, and allegations and rumours presented as facts, are some of the findings by the researchers. Newspapers against which the most complaints were laid are the *Sunday Times*, the *Sowetan*, the *Star*, the *Sunday World* and *Beeld*. However, this does not necessarily indicate that the particular publications are more errant with regard to the press code than others (Reid and Isaacs, 2013).

According to Duncan (2014:170), most of the complaints received by the Press Council deal with a lack of accuracy by journalists, not granting right of reply to subjects of critical reporting, and a lack of context of balance. This, according to the author, could point to a need for fact-checking systems to be improved. However, due to economic pressure, several newsrooms across South Africa have been forced to implement cost-cutting measures (Duncan, 2014:170). Economic challenges have further led to retrenching senior journalists and cutting skills development budgets (Harber & Renn, 2010).

## **2.5 Gaps in current literature**

At the time of writing, there is an apparent lack of academic research on the current complaints submitted at the Press Council. Although Reid and Isaacs (2015) focused on the role of the Press Council and its work between 2009 to 2013 in order to assess the

complaints submitted to the council, minimal information is available on public complaints or third-party complaints after the 2012 Press Council review. This study focuses on the complaints against the media between March 2021 and March 2023 at the Press Council and the nature of these complaints. Through qualitative interviews, the study includes the views of media experts and academics on these complaints. The exploration uses the views of the participants to identify the gaps in responsible reporting by the South African media.

## **2.6 Summary**

Arguments in the literature reviewed for this study point to a wide range of criticism against the South African media by politicians, the private sector and the public. Several scholars argue that the critical ability of citizens is important for increased journalistic accountability (Kaun, 2014:489). Data gathered for the studies on which this literature review was based was obtained through several methodologies, including interviews and content analysis. This is a strong indication that qualitative interviews for the purpose of this study would be an effective tool for data collection from which conclusions can be drawn and findings produced.

The chapter firstly gave an overview of the state of the South African media in a democracy with a discussion of media regulation and its different forms. The chapter then discussed media regulation in South Africa and the role of the Press Council in ensuring proper control and regulation of the country's media. Media criticism in the South African context was then discussed. Thereafter, the chapter concluded by identifying gaps in current literature.

In Chapter 3, the social responsibility theory – as the theoretical point of departure for this study – will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the media's ethical responsibility to the public and their obligation to provide fair, accurate and quality news content to the public. According to Stam (2010:1499), a theory is "a statement of a problem within a certain framework, presented logically to prove a point". It provides an opportunity to question our beliefs and how we make sense of the world (Race, 2010:301). The theoretical framework provides a path and should speak to every aspect of the research study – from the introduction of the problem, the literature review, the methodology, the discussion, and findings to the conclusion of the research study (Adom, Hussein & Adu-Agyem, 2018:438).

This chapter discusses normative theory with a focus on social responsibility theory and how it developed from libertarianism. Thereafter, the social responsibility theory, which places a strong emphasis on morals, values and principles, is discussed in detail. Fourie (2017:111) describes the social responsibility theory as a "yardstick" for measuring media performance, quality and accountability. Criticism against the social responsibility theory is also discussed. Thereafter follows a discussion of the application of the social responsibility theory in the South African context specifically.

The researcher also provides a definition and analysis of quality journalism and what quality journalism constitutes – as part of the background to media criticism.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the central theoretical point of departure of this study.

### **3.2 The origins and aim of normative media theory**

Normative media theory was described in a seminal book by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in 1956 and historically consisted of four theories: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and soviet communist (Fourie, 2007:192-193). According to Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956), "normative theory attempts to locate media configuration and performance in the environment they operate". The adoption of normative theory laid the foundation for the media operating in specific social and political systems, including forms of government (Piontek, 2016:50). Specific

guidelines regarding the media's role in society and what they should achieve in relation to their own expectations as an institution is, according to McQuail (2010:162), another cornerstone of normative theory. Basic questions around the media's role in a democratic society, and how the media can contribute to the development of a democracy, are seen by Christians, Glasser and Nordenstreng (2009:9) as the foundations of normative theory. The libertarian media theory, which was developed in the United States, is regarded as a precursor to the social responsibility theory of the media. The libertarian media theory was based on total freedom of public expression and did not allow any government interference in any facet of the media (Oluwasola, 2020:29). "Abuse of the freedom from censorship granted to the media under the libertarian theory, led to its modification and the birth of the social responsibility theory" (Oluwasola, 2020:36). The difference between the libertarian and social responsibility theories of the media is defined as the libertarians seeking "freedom from something", for example government, while the social responsibility theory seeks "freedom for the people" (Woollacott, 2017). The social responsibility theory provides a balance between press freedom, with a strong focus on the media's responsibility to society, while promoting specific ideals regarding accuracy and truth (Fourie, 2008:116).

### **3.3 Social responsibility theory**

The social responsibility theory was described in 1947 and recommended by the Hutchins Commission as a mechanism to curb the pressures against the freedom of the American press (Oosthuizen, 2014). The commission, led by University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins, settled on a range of guidelines contained in a report titled *A Free and Responsible Press* (Gupta, 2015:2). The aim of the guidelines was to ensure a socially responsible press. It described the press as "a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, that it should give a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society and clarify the goals and values of the society" (Gupta, 2015:3). The report by the Hutchins Commission underlined the importance of a free media in a democracy, while at the same time emphasising the notion of social responsibility and the importance of mass media in social and political processes (Piontek, 2016:54). The media's responsibility to serve the public and their obligation to stay free from government



interference are, according to Ravi (2012:325), cornerstones of the social responsibility theory. McQuail (2005:170b) concurs by referring to the media's normative role to create a platform for the exchange of comment and criticism, while at the same time allowing for political participation of ordinary citizens through the media.

Dashti, Johar, Al-Maamari and Al-Abdullah (2020) applied the social responsibility theory to shed light on the role of the print media in shaping the concept of citizenship in the Gulf region. The researchers focused on states with full or partial freedom, specifically Kuwait and Oman. The authors concluded that "regardless of the fact that it is considered to be a nation without a free press, Oman's local newspapers demonstrate social responsibility in protecting citizens, while Kuwait's press failed to report in a socially responsible manner by using offensive language and inciting hatred amongst readers" (Dashti et al., 2020:290).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) outline ten important elements and principles of good journalism, which are in line with the guidelines of the social responsibility theory of the media on which their research is based. The authors agree with McQuail (2005) that the media should allow and provide a forum for public criticism and debate.

Journalism carries with it a responsibility to improve the quality of debate by providing verified information and intellectual rigour, because a forum without regard for facts fails to inform and degrades rather than improves the quality and effectiveness of citizen decision-making (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

Truth, according to the authors, is necessary and allows the media to operate on a day-to-day basis (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). They argue that transparency by journalists creates a sense of trust with audiences, which allows for "context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Journalists' commitment to citizens and the protection of their rights are described by the authors as a foundation for the journalistic business model while striving to put public interest above their own self-interest (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

The ten elements of socially responsible journalism highlighted by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) are:

- Obligation to tell the truth: The truth can change, but facts should be verified before an article is published.
- Loyalty to citizens: Journalists must remember to represent all members of society. By ignoring certain groups, journalists lose credibility along with readers.
- Verification of information: Journalists must verify information by “seeking out multiple witnesses, disclosing as much as possible about sources, or asking various sides for comment” in order to get the best truth to a story.
- Practitioners’ independence from subjects: Journalists must avoid straying into arrogance, elitism, isolation or nihilism.
- Monitor those in power: Journalists often take on the role of “watchdog” to those higher up in power to guard against tyranny.
- Provide a forum for public criticism: There must be a forum for individuals to voice criticism, as well as compromise.
- Keep news interesting and relevant: Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. It should do more than gather an audience or catalogue the important.
- Keep news comprehensive and proportional: Keeping news in proportion is a cornerstone of truthfulness. Journalists must cover all areas of news as opposed to sticking with a few demographics to cover.
- Maintain personal sense of ethics and responsibility: It is critical for journalists to have a voice of reason when obtaining the news and certain information.
- Citizens have rights and responsibilities: It is vital for individuals to be media literate so their rights and responsibilities can be met accurately.

The social responsibility theory allows for all citizens to express their opinion about the press, including criticising its conduct, while the media are tasked with taking care of social responsibility (Obagwu & Idris, 2019:30). The major assumption behind the social responsibility theory is the media’s obligation to deliver a quality product in the form of objective, true and balanced news (Piontek, 2016:56). “This theory stipulates that journalists need to face the social consequences of their actions, as well as the expectations of the audiences and owners of media institutions” (Piontek, 2016:57).

### **3.3.1 Criticism of the social responsibility theory**

The main component of the social responsibility media theory is the media's obligation to the public in providing truthful, accurate, objective and fair content. Obagwu and Idris (2019:29) posit that "journalists should act as the watchdog on behalf of the public" and, although free and self-regulated, should follow codes of ethics in its conduct. Merrill and other libertarian theorists viewed the social responsibility theory as an attempt by journalists and news managers to hide behind their irresponsible behaviour by using phrases like "in the public interest" (Newman, 1989:142). Other scholars like Curran and Seaton (2010:338) argue that "the social responsibility model only led to weak reforms". Pickard (2015:195) refers to the social responsibility theory as "a tweaked libertarian model allowed to prevail unabated".

Despite some critique against the theory by scholars, the social responsibility theory was chosen for this study because of its ability to reflect on the precise role and function of the media. According to Pickard (2015:40), "the social responsibility model of the liberal theory argues that freedom to receive and disseminate information should be accompanied by some form of responsibility to the public". Factual and fair reporting are core elements of this responsibility, which in turn allow for the promotion of public debate (Pickard (2015:40). This study provides an analysis of criticism against South African print and online media and aims to determine the nature of the criticism against the news offering. Public interest and citizens' right to know are seen as cornerstones of the social responsibility theory (Wyatt, 2007:145). The media are, therefore, obliged to provide accurate information to the public, which will equip citizens to participate in all democratic processes (McQuail, 2005).

### **3.3.2 The social responsibility theory in a South African context**

In South Africa, regulatory bodies like the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa, that deals with complaints about television and radio broadcasts, and the Press Council of South Africa, dealing with print media (and later also online media) complaints, were established (Fourie, 2007:194). In order to adhere to ethical standards, both regulatory bodies have codes of ethics for journalists.

It is argued by McQuail (2010:54) that the social responsibility theory can only be applied successfully if press freedom is guaranteed. In a joint report by several media monitoring organisations on World Press Freedom Day 2022, concern was raised about the threat to the media's freedom of expression after at least 59 separate incidents of physical and verbal attacks against South African journalists had been recorded (Press Council of South Africa, 2023). The attacks were mainly performed by members of the South African Police Service and supporters of various political parties (Sanef, 2022). Another possible limitation to media freedom, according to McQuail (2010:56), is the government's Protection of State Information Bill, commonly known as the Secrecy Bill, which at the time of this study, has still not been signed into law by the president. The legislation aims to "address the rising threat of espionage and hostile activities, the selling of information and the protection of critical databases in government, without impeding the constitutional rights of citizens to access information" (Government Communication and Information System, 2021). But critics are of the opinion that the legislation restricts the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the media to access certain information held by the state that is in the public's interest (Onyancha & Ngoepe, 2011).

Despite some weaknesses in the theory, McQuail (2010) and Oosthuizen (2014) still find the social responsibility theory the most appropriate to determine the state of South Africa's media. Several studies have been done over the years to determine the relevance of media theory in a democratic South Africa. In one of the studies, Rabe (2016:871) uses the social responsibility theory as a theoretical point of departure. The study found that "media freedom remains conditional and never final and more importantly, that media freedom remains under continued pressure" (Rabe, 2016:871).

Several Master's graduates at Stellenbosch University have used the social responsibility theory as a point of departure for their journalism studies. Whittles (2021) uses the theory to highlight the responsibility of mobile professional journalists to the society they serve, while Bruns (2019) uses the social responsibility theory in research into journalists and their attitudes towards journalism ethics and professionalism and to determine whether journalists are well-equipped for ethical issues in the newsroom.

The researcher is of the opinion that, despite criticism against the social responsibility theory, it remains relevant for this study, based on its strong emphasis on the media's

ethical responsibility to the public it serves. In this researcher's opinion, it serves as a barometer to measure media rights, restrictions and responsibility, which are fundamental elements contained in the South African press code.

### **3.4 Central theoretical departure point**

The goal of this study is to examine whether the South African media fulfils their obligation to the public by providing fair, balanced and accurate information that allows citizens to make informed decisions to the benefit of the democracy. This is done by examining the criticism levelled against the media and the nature of the criticism. The theoretical departure point of this study is that South African print and online media have a responsibility to the public and an obligation to maintain high standards and quality journalism as prescribed by the South African press code.

### **3.5 Summary**

This chapter outlined the theoretical framework for this study. The framework is based on the social responsibility theory. The researcher uses this theory to evaluate the social responsibility of the South African media towards society and the media's obligation to elevate society's standards by providing objective, truthful and relevant information for informed decision-making. In the researcher's opinion, the social responsibility theory is best suited to guide media practitioners and journalists thanks to its alignment to ethical journalism.

In the next chapter, the research design and methodology will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an outline and discusses the research methodology and design used in this study to determine the nature of criticism against the South African media, who the critics are and how complaints against the media are dealt with by the ombud and Press Council of South Africa. The approach followed to gather the views of media experts and academics on this criticism against the media is also described.

According to Lombard (2016:5), research methodology is a data-gathering process performed by a researcher with a specific research project in mind. The design of the research can, according to Du Plooy (2009:85), be described as “a proposal of how the study will be conducted, who the participants will be and when and where such research will be performed”.

Firstly, the characteristics of a quantitative versus that of a qualitative research design are discussed with a motivation for the use of a qualitative research approach for both phases of this study. Secondly, the methods used to sample the data for both phases of this study are outlined. Thirdly, the data gathering and data analysis methods for both phases of the study are described, followed by a summary of the ethical and practical implications of the study.

### **4.2 Quantitative versus qualitative research design**

Matthews and Ross (2010) refer to a decades-old debate between social researchers about the value of quantitative and qualitative approaches to collecting and analysing data. The debate has arguments for and against a fundamental distinction between qualitative and quantitative research methods (Matthews & Ross, 2010:141). There appears to be clear differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches, but some researchers maintain that the choice between the two research methods has more to do with methodologies than positioning oneself with a particular research tradition (Wigston, 2009:4).

According to Matthews and Ross (2010:142), “qualitative research methods are concerned with stories and accounts which include subjective understandings, opinions

and beliefs”. A quest to find out something new is, according to Richards (2015:1), one of the main reasons why researchers use a qualitative approach to research, rather than challenging existing information. Another important characteristic of the qualitative method is that “it allows the researcher to explore and better understand the complexity of a phenomenon” (Williams, 2007:70). To this Leedy and Ormrod (2013) add that general research problems and questions can easily be identified through qualitative research. In their definition of qualitative research, Joubert, Hartell and Lombard (2016:4) note that “a qualitative approach takes the exploration beyond the limitations and borders of a quantitative analysis by focusing on the social and cultural historical background of the data”.

This researcher is of the opinion that a qualitative research method is best suited for this study because it helps to find answers and explore new topics. This study aims to answer the following general research question:

What is the nature of criticism against South African print and online media as captured by adjudicated complaints to the Press Ombud (2021-2023) and the views of media experts?

In order to answer the main research question, the following specific questions were used to gain insight into the conduct of the South African media and the views of media experts on what can contribute to improving the state of journalism.

Specific research questions:

- Who is criticising South African print and online media through complaints to the Press Ombud?
- What is the nature of the criticism against print and online media in South Africa?
- What are the views of media experts with regard to criticism against the media and the current state of journalism in South Africa?

This study was conducted in two phases: firstly, data was gathered from the website of the Press Council relating to complaints against print and online publications between March 2021 and March 2023. The information is in the public domain and available on the internet. Using the data analysis from the first phase of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants: two media experts and three journalism

academics. The aim of the interviews was to gather the participants' views on, firstly, the criticism against the media and the nature thereof and, secondly, how the state of the South African media can be improved in future.

### **4.3 Sampling**

Sampling is regarded as an essential element of any research project that can impact the validity of the study (Matthews & Ross, 2010:154). The aim of qualitative sampling is, according to the authors (2010:155), “a deliberate attempt by researchers to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that they are studying”.

In order to answer the research questions for this study, the researcher decided to focus on the Press Council that deals with complaints from the public against media publications subscribing to the Press Code. “The council provides mediation and adjudication of disputes over editorial matters relating to newspapers, magazines and online publications” (Press Council of South Africa, 2023). As part of this purposive sampling method, the researcher focused on all complaints against the media received by the Press Council between March 2021 and March 2023 and was of the opinion that the three-year period is sufficient to gather enough data for a proper analysis for the purpose of this study. A decision was made to focus on the complaints and their nature, who the complainants are, which sections of the Press Code were breached and which of these complaints went through the adjudication process. The researcher opted to focus on complaints against print and online media instead of the broadcast media, because of her current role as radio manager, her direct involvement in the production of broadcast content and the responsibility, as media manager, to deal directly with complaints from the public within the public broadcast sector.

Purposive sampling was also used for the second phase of the research, which allowed for the selection of participants with experience in the field of study to share their views. According to Creswell and Clark (2010:112), purposive sampling is “cost effective and time-effective and is often used when there are a limited number of primary data sources available that can contribute to the study”. The researcher approached five possible participants – two media experts and three journalism academics – to respond to findings relating to media criticism obtained through the website of the Press Council, and all of



them agreed to participate. Due to the limited scope of the study the researcher opted for five participants who are all actively involved in journalism and the media industry. The aim was to gather enough relevant information from each participant which will be beneficial to the improvement of journalism in the future. The participants were asked to share their views on how the state of journalism in South Africa can be improved in light of the data gathered by the researcher during the first phase of the study. See Table 4.1 for the details of the participants.

**Table 4.1: Details of the participants for this study**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>
William Bird	Director Media Monitoring Africa
Professor Johannes Froneman	Retired emeritus professor in journalism at North-West University
Yolandi Groenewald	Lecturer: Languages and cultural sciences at Akademia, a private higher education institution
Professor Anton Harber	Executive Director Campaign for Free Expression
Dr Sisanda Nkoala	Senior lecturer: Department of Communication Sciences at the University of South Africa

#### **4.4 Data gathering**

Bhandari (2023) defines data gathering as “a systematic process by which observations or measurements are gathered as part of the research process”.

Engelbrecht (2016:110) adds that qualitative data can be gathered in different ways, for example by conducting interviews, making observations or examining documents. The author (2016:110) posits that, in the case of qualitative data gathering, the researcher ultimately decides how, where and when the data is collected.

For the first phase of this study, the researcher collected data from the website of the Press Council that relate to criticism against the South African media. Lee and Willnat (2009) note that web-based data collection is an evolving type of research methodology

where the internet is used as a medium of data collection. According to Polit (2004), “internet qualitative research methods can be easily defined as internet methods used to collect qualitative data for interviews, observations or document analyses”. The researcher focused on all complaints filed in the 2021 to 2023 timeframe against print and online media and saved the data on her personal Microsoft OneDrive cloud backup system for analysis.

The researcher further contacted the Press Council via email to request a synopsis of all complaints received during the research period in order to compare the data gathered from its website and captured by the researcher to ensure accuracy and a true reflection of the state of affairs.

Semi-structured interviews with the participants were used to gather data for the second phase of the study. Using semi-structured interviews as part of the qualitative research design and data-gathering process allows for the preparation of interview questions in advance, which does not limit the information-gathering process (Du Plooy, 2001:177). The author (2001:177) further argues that although semi-structured interviews contain standardised questions, the method does allow the researcher to deviate from these questions if it is warranted by the participants’ answers. Due to the interactive nature of qualitative interviews, Yanow (2000) notes that they allow unexpected topics to emerge, which then allows researchers to explore these topics and add more questions to the interview. However, Engelbrecht (2016:113) warns against veering from the research topic by asking too many additional questions.

Two media experts and three journalism academics participated in the study. Each participant was allowed to answer the questions in their capacity as either media expert or journalism academic. All the participants often comment on public platforms on the state of the South African media or the overall state of journalism in the country.

Preliminary discussions took place between the researcher and each of the participants via email. WhatsApp messages and email correspondence with the participants were formally scheduled, which allowed the researcher to get a clear sense of each participant’s planned contribution to the field of research.

The participants were given the option to be interviewed via virtual meeting platforms, such as Zoom, MS Teams and Skype, or WhatsApp video call. Virtual meetings can be

done without any additional costs, but a stable internet is needed for connectivity. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many researchers to opt for online research methods, also referred to as virtual methods (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). The authors (2022) argue that video-based interviews can increasingly be considered as a default option because video-based formats are the closest to the in-person interaction, which also allows for recording and transcription of data.

The interviews for this study were conducted in September 2023 to accommodate both the researcher and participants' schedules as to allow for interaction in a relaxed atmosphere. The length of the interviews varied between 30 and 40 minutes. Both the researcher and participants were allowed to ask questions during the interviews to ensure that the specific research questions were answered effectively and to allow for follow-up questions.

The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and the researcher's cell phone voice recorder for accuracy and transcription purposes. Participants were also asked for their permission to record the interview on the different virtual meeting platforms, and a copy of each interview recording was saved on the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive cloud, which is only accessible to the researcher. The researcher also wrote additional notes on paper during the interviews for reference purposes during the transcription process. The interview recordings were transcribed by the researcher, and these transcripts were stored on the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive cloud.

#### **4.5 Data analysis**

Mouton (2001:108) defines data analysis as the arrangement of available information into themes, patterns, trends and relationships in order to interpret the data and provide underlying meanings. According to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004:101), the "true test" of a competent qualitative researcher is the ability to do a proper and effective data analysis. Engelbrecht (2016:117) adds that qualitative research textual analysis takes place when transcripts or notes are being made during the data-gathering process. A common error often made by researchers during data analysis, according to Mouton (2001:110), is drawing interpretations from the data that are not supported by the information gathered. The issue of bias is also a common phenomenon during the

interpretation process when researchers decide on specific data to be used in the research study (Mouton, 2001:110).

The data for the first phase of the study was accessed on the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive cloud where it was stored after downloading it from the website of the Press Council. The researcher read through all the complaints in the timeframe of March 2021 to March 2023 and downloaded all the related complaints adjudicated by the Press Ombud. Themes were identified, which assisted the researcher in making certain conclusions in line with the aim of the research: determining the nature of criticism against print and online media. The themes identified during the data analysis and transcribing process are outlined in Chapter 5.

The data analysed during the second phase of the study consisted of the information given by participants during the semi-structured interviews, of which the video and sound recordings, transcripts and researcher's notes were stored on the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive cloud.

During the transcription process, the feedback from the participants was qualitatively analysed according to themes, which, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), "allows for the identification of similarities and parallels". In this study, the researcher identified similar words used by the participants and created themes and subthemes while transcribing the gathered data. The themes identified during the data analysis and transcribing process of the second phase of the study, will also be outlined in Chapter 5.

#### **4.6 Ethical considerations**

The rulings by the Press Council are available on the council's website and are, therefore, in the public domain. This information can be accessed freely, and no ethical clearance is required to perform this search or use the information for research purposes. The researcher, however, took caution not to engage with this information out of context.

Hartell and Bosman (2016:40) say that the underlying principles of research should be based on "mutual respect, trust, protection and an agreement between all parties who participate in the research". The authors (2016:41) add that researchers have a responsibility to their discipline to prioritise accuracy and honesty when dealing with the information gathered from participants. Respecting human dignity is, according to Bos

(2020:39), one of the ethical principles of research and includes being mindful of fabricating and misrepresenting data.

Considering these factors, the researcher applied (and received) clearance from the Research Ethics Committee for Social Behavioural and Education Research at Stellenbosch University to do the study (ethical clearance letter attached as Addendum A).

Informed consent was obtained from the participants in this study to conduct the semi-structured interviews with them on the agreed days and times.

All participants were informed and provided with details of the aim of this study and an extensive outline of the research questions before the semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The raw data gathered during the semi-structured interviews and recorded on a personal dictaphone are stored on the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive cloud. The researcher's computer and cloud are password-protected and only accessible to the researcher.

On the consent form, the participants were given the option of participating in the study anonymously, withholding all information regarding their names and job titles. They were asked to acknowledge on the form if they agreed to their names and titles being used for the purpose of the study. None of the participants requested participation on the grounds of anonymity and all agreed that their names and job titles could be used in this study.

#### **4.7 Summary**

This chapter outlined the process of data and information gathering, data analysis and interpretation for this study. A qualitative internet-based data-gathering method was used to gather information from the website of the Press Council relating to complaints against the press and online media. The second phase of data gathering for this study involved semi-structured interviews with five sampled participants (media experts and journalism academics) to get their feedback on the data gathered from the website of the Press Council relating to criticism against print and online media, as well as their views on how the general state of the South African media can be improved.

In Chapter 5, the findings of this study will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 4, the researcher outlined the research methodology used in this study, how it was selected and how the research was conducted. This chapter discusses the findings of the data gathered from the website of the Press Council of South Africa and the semi-structured interviews conducted with the five participants sampled for this study.

Firstly, this chapter contains the data collected from the Press Council's website relating to complaints against print and online media. This researcher did a thematic analysis of the data collected, which involved identifying three themes relevant to the study.

After the analysis of complaints found on the Press Council's website, this chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews.

### **5.2 Overview of adjudicated complaints to the Press Council**

The Executive Director, Press Ombud; Deputy Press Ombud and Public Advocate, all serve on the council and have no voting rights (Press Council of South Africa [PCSA], 2023). The complaints procedure of the Press Council determines that upon formal acceptance of a complaint by the public advocate, "he or she shall immediately notify the publication of the complaint in writing to ensure the respondent has enough time to investigate the matter" (Press Council of South Africa [PCSA], 2023). The media outlet then has seven days in which to investigate the matter and respond to the complaint. Should the complaint not be settled within 15 working days of the media outlet receiving the written notice of the complaint, the public advocate then has the right to refer the complaint to the Press Ombud for adjudication (PCSA, 2023). It is important to note that not all matters are referred for adjudication. "The Press Ombud may decide the matter on paper unless some aspects of the complaint need to be clarified through a formal hearing with the two parties in question" (PCSA, 2023).

As discussed in Chapter 4, all the data related to adjudicated complaints against print and online media between March 2021 and March 2023 were downloaded from the Press Council's website.

During the first year of analysis (2021), the Press Council received a total of 845 (of which 466 were part of multiple complaints) from various sectors of society against various newspapers and online media platforms, particularly *Sunday World*, *The Citizen*, *News24* and *City Press*. According to data provided by the Press Council, 33 of the complaints were sent for the Press Ombud's adjudication. In 2022, the Press Council received 261 complaints of which 21 were sent for adjudication. In the first three months of 2023, 6 of the 67 complaints received were sent for adjudication.

More than 50 complaints between 2021-2023 were analysed. The aim of this research is to contribute to the improvement of the quality of journalism which therefore led to the identification of the most prevalent complaints during the focus period of this study (2021-2023). The researcher categorised the data according to the frequency of the specific complaints while highlighting the clauses of the Press Code (attached as Addendum B) that had been contravened. The researcher manually extrapolated from all the interviews which themes were covered by each participant's contribution. Exhaustive notes were made of each audio interview which was then copied into its corresponding theme as listed below. All notes were captured using an Excel spreadsheet.

**Table 5.1: Themes in analysed complaints to the Press Council (2021-2023)**

<b>Theme 1: Distortion of facts and misleading headlines</b>	Complainants accuse the media outlets of distorting the facts and misinforming the public with inaccurate headlines
<b>Theme 2: Failure to provide right of reply</b>	Complainants accuse the media outlets of failing to report in a balanced manner and omitting material information relevant to the story
<b>Theme 3: Lack of accuracy and context</b>	Complainants accuse the media outlets of not verifying facts before reporting and not reporting accurately and truthfully

Many of the complaints analysed for the first phase of this study can be sorted under more than one theme. For this study, the researcher focused on the most prominent

complaints, of which ten, adjudicated by the Press Ombud, are used as examples below. They are discussed with examples of who the complainant is, the nature of the complaint and what the subsequent ruling of the Press Ombud was. Addendum C contains a list of complaints to the Press Council cited in this study.

### **5.2.1 Theme 1: Distortion of facts and misleading headlines**

Several newspapers and online media platforms were frequently found to have breached Press Code clauses that stipulate that the media should not mislead the public with incorrect facts and misleading headlines. Below are examples of such contraventions by print and online media affiliated to the Press Council.

A complaint by Transnet chief executive Siyabonga Gama in June 2021 against a *Sunday Times* headline was upheld by the Press Ombud. The complainant took issue with the use of the phrase “Gupta Four” by the publication. According to the complainant’s lawyers, he denied having any relations with the controversial Gupta family or that there was any evidence justifying the publication’s statement. The lawyers argued that allegations by an “anonymous witness” do not constitute proof or reasonable basis upon which the complainant can be referred to as a “Gupta Four” member. According to the Press Ombud’s finding, the *Sunday Times* was directed to publish an apology to Gama citing that clause 10 of the Press Code, which relates to “misleading and factually incorrect headlines, had been contravened.

In a similar matter, a complaint was submitted in May 2022 by the National Arts Council against *The Citizen* for the publication of an article that transgresses clause 10.1 of the Press Code. The complainant argued that it had not been given a fair opportunity to comment and that its comments were not sufficiently reflected in the article. The complainant further argued that the article’s headline contained inaccuracies. The headline was found to be in contravention of clause 10 of the Press Code and the publication was directed to print an apology to the National Arts Council with strict instructions that the headline should be rectified.

In November 2022, Afrivent Fleet Management complained against News24’s use of the headline “City of Crooks” in reference to the lease agreement between Afrivent and the City of Johannesburg. The article implies that Afrivent overcharged the City. Afrivent



complained that the headline unfairly identifies Afrigent as “crooks” and that the online media platform states the core allegations of the article as fact when they are merely accusations. In addition, Afrigent argued the headline breaches clause 10.1 of the Press Code in that it does not reflect the contents of the article. The Press Ombud ruled that the headline is indeed in breach of clause 10.1. News24 was directed to correct the headline.

### **5.2.2 Theme 2: Failure to provide right of reply**

Complaints relating to journalists not affording newsmakers a right of reply had a strong prevalence during the analysis of the web-based data. Below are examples thereof:

In a 2021 matter between Siphelele Madikizela, an artist known as “Nampree”, and *Sunday World*, the complainant claims that she never gave the media outlet consent to publish her sworn statement to the South African Police Service relating to a case of alleged rape against a well-known DJ and media personality. The complainant argued that the newspaper had infringed her right to privacy and confidentiality and of protection under law. The complainant further claimed that the reporter had not sought her views prior to publication. The Press Ombud ruled that the publication was in breach of clauses 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.7 and 3.3 of the Press Code.

In March 2022, Conrad Gallagher and The Chefs Playground complained that they had not been afforded a right of reply by News24, stating that the online publication breached clause 1.8 of the Press Code. The article claims that Gallagher, a renowned chef and restaurateur, has developed a reputation as a scamster and debt dodger. The complainants argued that News24 had not made a real effort to grant Gallagher a right of reply and subsequently settled for a biased and unbalanced article without meaningful and proper comment. The Press Ombud upheld the complaint that the article is in breach of clause 1.8 of the Press Code. In addition to an apology, News24 was ordered to allow the complainants a right of reply to be published at the bottom of the original article.

In October 2022, Asante Sana Consulting complained that *City Press* had failed to afford the company right of reply in one of its articles. According to the article, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) intensified its legal bid to compel the company to repay nearly R20 million for contracts that were allegedly “solicited outside proper tender processes” between 2013 and 2016. This was reportedly a continuation of a battle

between the company – which *City Press* referred to as “Gupta-linked” – and the public broadcaster since 2018, with the SABC obtaining a court order in 2019 nullifying the contracts awarded to Asante Sana to provide various accounting and consulting services to the public broadcaster. The company complained that the publication had failed to give it an opportunity to respond to the allegations (PCSA, 2023). The Press Ombud expressed concern that the publication had not made “substantive efforts to reach the company or its directors”. However, the Press Ombud found no indication that this was the result of any malicious intent and dismissed the complaint.

### **5.2.3 Theme 3: Lack of accuracy and context**

Below are examples of complaints received by the Press Council relating to unbalanced reporting or a media outlet tarnishing the image of a complainant, indicating a lack of fact-checking before publishing content:

In February 2021, a complaint by Themba Mfeka, a principal worker at the Municipal Workers Retirement Fund, alleged that an article by the *Mail & Guardian* as a whole was untrue, unfair and unbalanced. The article focuses on the firing of “controversial asset manager” JM Busha Investments by the board of trustees of the Municipal Workers Retirement Fund after the loss of R60 millions of municipal workers’ money. A statement in the article that the complainant is being investigated by the Financial Sector Conduct Authority (FSCA) left the publication in breach of clause 1.1 of the Press Code. The *Mail & Guardian* was directed to apologise to the complainant for stating, as fact, that he was under investigation by the FSCA and for unnecessarily tarnishing his reputation and dignity.

In September 2022, Jabulile P Hlatshwayo and others claimed that *City Press* had transgressed clauses 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 of the Press Code. The complaint makes reference to six articles by *City Press* relating to several “irregular payments and alleged corruption” within a municipality. The Press Ombud directed *City Press* to apologise to the complainants for breaching clause 1.2 of the Press Code for not presenting news in context and for unbalanced reporting.

In March 2023, the chief executive officer of the group #I’mStaying, Shireen Ebrahim, claimed that the *Sunday Times* had contravened clauses 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 of the Press

Code. According to the *Sunday Times* article, the complainant cannot account for R2 million of the company's funds. Ebrahim argued that the allegations are false and that they should have been verified with her. She added that the claim that #I'mStaying had no audited financials was untrue. She refuted the publication's claim that #I'mStaying was an illegal company by pointing to its registration with the Department of Labour and its valid bank account. The Press Ombud ruled that the *Sunday Times* had breached clause 1.2 of the Press Code by exaggerating with respect to an audit. The publication was directed to apologise to Ebrahim, #I'mStaying and its readers for presenting a report that was misleading through exaggeration.

In a complaint by the DA and party leader John Steenhuisen against the *Mail & Guardian*, the publication was accused of "unfair, inaccurate and misleading" reporting, leaving it in contravention of clauses 1.1 and 1.2 of the Press Code. These clauses relate to truthful, accurate and truthful presentation of news in context and in a balanced manner. The complaint relates to an article in which accusations of sexual assault against Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana prompted the *Mail & Guardian* to remind its readers of other politicians and their sexual activities under the headline "Predator Politicians". In the article, reference is made to Steenhuisen's love affair with the DA's provincial spokesperson, whom he later married. The Press Ombud ruled that the *Mail & Guardian* had breached clause 1.2 of the Press Code by presenting facts out of context and clause 10.1 for using a misleading headline.

### **5.3 Discussion of semi-structured interview findings**

The semi-structured interviews, which formed the second phase of this study, were conducted after the analysis of the web-based content containing complaints against print and online media. Questions relating to this researcher's findings on the complaints data were drafted for the interviews with the participants, including questions on the future state of journalism in South Africa.

Themes identified from the semi-structured interviews were aligned with the research questions. The themes were identified and grouped using an Excel spreadsheet with a separate page for each of the topics. The feedback from each participant was copied

according to its relevance on the numbered pages on Excel. The findings are discussed in Table 5.2 below.

**Table 5.2: Themes in semi-structured interviews**

<b>Theme 1: Views on complaints and mistakes made by print and online media</b>	Participants share their views on complaints to the Press Council against print and online media
<b>Theme 2: Views on reasons for ethical breaches by print and online media</b>	Participants share their views on several ethical breaches by print and online media and the possible reasons for them
<b>Theme 3: Views on the levels of quality and standard of journalism</b>	Participants respond to the current state of journalism in the country and the quality of news produced by print and online media
<b>Theme 4: Views on public trust in the media</b>	Participants share their views on the state of public trust in the media and how it can be improved

### **5.3.1 Views on complaints and mistakes made by print and online media**

Some of the participants in this study agree that print and online media have to apologise for their mistakes, which is a worrying phenomenon because of the frequency of the mistakes:

Yolandi Groenewald, lecturer in languages and cultural sciences at Akademia, notes that the immediateness of news in a digital age can be one of the attributing factors for the number of mistakes journalists make:

I do think time plays a role, especially where there's competition for the story to go out first. It often happens that journalists never bother to get the proper comment. For the life of me, I can't understand why, as a journalist, you want to put yourself in that position of writing a story and not giving a critical person, who is named in the story, a chance to respond. That is a sign of lazy journalism (Groenewald, 2023).

Groenewald further argues that news presented out of context is highly unethical:

Some journalists are pushing a certain narrative and construct the news and facts around that narrative. That is unethical journalism and it undermines the credibility of journalists.

On the issue of mistakes occurring more frequently, Professor Anton Harber, media expert and executive director of the Campaign for Free Expression, notes that current newsrooms have shrunk significantly due to budget constraints, while, at the same time, the news cycle has become faster:

There are smaller newsrooms and fewer subeditors. Sub rooms used to be the heart and soul of the newsroom. We now have fewer people and fewer skills to do what is an absolutely critical part of the news process: writing headlines (Harber, 2023).

According to Harber, the presence of gatekeepers at media outlets has also been reduced due to smaller newsrooms, arguing that a faster production process in the digital age creates room for errors:

The news cycle has become faster and faster and now it's instant. It used to run over 12 hours with space to stop and debate a headline. But online, now sets the pace with less time for gatekeeping, and the editing process has also shrunk for cost reasons (Harber, 2023).

Dr Sisanda Nkoala, senior lecturer in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of South Africa, agrees with Harber (2023) that the "points of verification of news content" has decreased significantly due to smaller newsrooms:

Many heads were put together ahead of a story to strategise on angles and questions. Now it's only the journalist and the editor who are juggling many balls leading to things slipping through the cracks. It's not a lack of ethics and morals driving the decline in the quality of journalists (Nkoala, 2023).

William Bird, media expert and director of Media Monitoring Africa, supports Nkoala's (2023) view that smaller newsrooms produce bigger challenges:

Many of our newsrooms went through that phase of trying to amalgamate and having a subs desk centrally located in Johannesburg, even though they're dealing with regional media. When you look at those factors and just the generalisation of skills across the board, it's not really surprising that you are getting so many. It's a disaster (Bird, 2023).

However, Harber is slightly less concerned than other participants about the number of complaints against print and online media:

Don't judge by the number of complaints and corrections. Lots of complaints mean the system is working. Lots of corrections mean that publications are caring about getting it right. What we have to worry about instead is when newspapers don't correct their mistakes or are not even a part of the self-regulatory system (Harber, 2023).

### **5.3.2 Views on reasons for ethical breaches by print and online media**

Participants agree that ethical breaches can be attributed to a lack of knowledge about ethical journalism in many newsrooms.

Groenewald (2023) raises concern about journalism students and qualified journalists' knowledge of the Press Code:

I think most newsrooms in South Africa have a code of ethics, but it's not presented up front. It's not the newsroom and editors' job to teach journalists about ethics, that should be done at a journalism school level. But they have to be orientated into the code of ethics (Groenewald, 2023).

On the question of whether all print and online journalists are aware of the Press Code and its content, Harber (2023) notes that not all media outlets ensure that their journalists are fully informed about the regulations and rules:

I think, generally, the requirement – that newsrooms ensure their people are fully informed and understand the Press Code – varies enormously. I don't think newsrooms do that enough to ensure that reporters young and old are keeping

abreast of the Press Code and the rulings of the Press Council. I think editors and news editors are failing in their responsibilities (Harber, 2023).

As a journalism lecturer and from an academic point of view, Nkoala (2023) does see a gap between the ethics that are taught in the classroom and how it is eventually applied in the newsroom:

Media studies curricula across the country, and the journalism ones in particular, do have a considerable focus on theories around ethics and objectivity. The gap would then not be coming from a lack of knowledge, but rather in how it's applied or in the examples that are used (Nkoala, 2023).

Professor Johannes Froneman, a retired emeritus professor in journalism at North-West University, is, however, of the opinion that journalism schools do good work to ensure graduates are equipped with the code of ethics when entering the newsroom:

The Press Code should be put up very prominently in every newsroom, and discussions should be held about this. It should be an ongoing discussion, especially in the newspapers about ethics and they must be prepared to take the punch (Froneman, 2023).

But on the basic rules of journalism as contained in the Press Code (i.e. fair, accurate and balanced reporting and the objectivity of journalists), Froneman has a strong opinion:

Objectivity or objective reporting is a myth, because it never existed. It was merely a bluff. There are arguments about the origin of the term objectivity. Newspapers at the start of the 20th century had strong feelings about criticism and objectivity. It was a way that journalists tried to put themselves on a higher level (Froneman, 2023)

Bird says his organisation's research into the behaviour of the media over decades found the current South African media to be far more ethical than before:

The media is overwhelmingly unbiased in an election period, with their news remaining balanced and accurate. If you look at the coverage of children and even gender-based violence, they are really doing well (Bird, 2023).

### **5.3.3 Views on the levels of quality and standards of journalism**

Participants are not equally positive about the quality of news the country's print and online media are producing. They are, however, in agreement that several obstacles, outside of the media's control, are preventing journalists from delivering a quality product.

Harber notes that the country's investigative journalism is currently of a high standard:

There are pockets of world-class journalism being done, mostly outside the mainstream. But on the outside of those pockets, the situation is pretty dire. There should be greater investment in the country's newsrooms. We need to think differently and not employ old business models and think advertising is going to come back and journalism is going to start making money again (Harber, 2023).

Bird concurs by also referring to "pockets of excellence" within the South African media and the high quality of investigative journalism:

AmaBhungane and Spotlight are two of the examples where investigative journalism is on par with the rest of the world and where quality journalism is produced. But outside of that, with the default news report is where there's a huge gap in quality. In my view, the general news reporting is appalling. General news reporting is not up to standard, because of juniorisation, lack of mentorship in the newsroom and lack of training (Bird, 2023).

Harber adds that a recent announcement of further retrenchments in the industry, which could lead to smaller newsrooms, can further jeopardise the quality of journalism:

I don't think one can think in terms of a return to the level of quality we had in the past, because journalism is different and always will be different. Due to improved technology, the whole process of collection and distribution is radically different. We need to spend money to improve the quality of journalism (Harber, 2023).

Groenewald believes that, despite the low standard of news in some areas as referred to by Bird (2023), the media is more alive today thanks to the digital age and the public's access to media:



I personally think the media is stronger and more relevant than ever. Times are changing and people might not get their news in the same way they did, but they learn to adapt and they will always have their favourite publications, whether in print or in an online format. But we have to ensure that we instil ethics into our newsrooms and invest in the media's credibility (Groenewald, 2023).

### **5.3.4 Views on public trust in the media**

Participants all agree that the media's credibility must be restored and that specific attention should be given to restoring public trust in the media.

Harber notes that the current challenges facing several media outlets include the issue of resources and budget constraints:

The papers that are doing well and growing their audience and growing their revenue around the world are those who've been able to spend money on quality. It's, however, very difficult to rebuild the media's credibility and public's trust in journalists when you don't have the resources (Harber, 2023).

According to Nkoala, a recent study she was involved in found a decline in public trust in the media over the years:

People used to really trust the media, but now there's quite a lot of scepticism around it. I found that the conversation is no longer about the stories that journalists do, but about journalists themselves. Are they opted into an agenda? You're seeing journalists being labelled that they belong to certain factions, and those are the elements that are causing a deterioration in public trust in the media (Nkoala, 2023).

Groenewald sees fake news as a major stumbling block for rebuilding public trust in the media:

There are still online publications that we can trust, but we see in the data analysed that even the *Daily Maverick* burnt their fingers. We need to ensure that the media make fewer mistakes as editors, that we as journalism teachers lay a good ethics

foundation and that the process of rebuilding public trust in the media becomes a priority (Groenewald, 2023).

Bird argues that public trust in the media has everything to do with quality journalism:

The media must be forced to accept the fact that the quality of their product is appalling. In today's digital age, your audience is the boss and no longer the advertiser like in the past. If you're gonna build trust, credibility is the key. If they're gonna have any hope of surviving, credibility has to be a priority, because that is the single most valuable asset that the media has (Bird, 2023).

Harber says increasing revenue and spending money on improving the quality of journalism are the only ways to build public trust in the media:

I don't think we're in a good place. We need to find ways for society to invest and support the media and bolster journalism. For me, public trust in the media is lost when people don't correct their errors. Admit your mistakes, correct them and accept them. Well, that's a basis of building trust, because it shows a care for accuracy, and, you know, the hope is that when you have to make corrections, chances are that you won't make them again (Harber, 2023).

#### **5.4 Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher presented the findings of the study that was done in two phases. The first phase of the study involved the analysis of data gathered from the website of the Press Council relating to complaints submitted against print and online media. Examples were given of the complaints, which determined who the complainants are, the nature of the complaints, which clause of the Press Code was contravened and the adjudication of the complaint by the Press Ombud. The findings from the semi-structured interviews were then discussed according to themes that were identified by the researcher during the coding process.

The data gathered from the website of the Press Council and the semi-structured interviews were analysed separately in this chapter to allow for a comprehensive explanation of the nature of criticism against the South African media and how journalism

can be improved in future. The findings indicate that criticism against the South African media is still at a worrying level and that most of the complaints are centred around basic mistakes made by print and online media, such as not providing a right of reply, quoting newsmakers out of context and using misleading headlines. Participants interviewed raised their concern about journalists' limited knowledge of the content of the Press Code and the fact that journalists often do not adhere to the ethical requirements of their discipline. Participants also referred to the "poor state of news reporting" in the country, with specific reference to the fast pace of news production due to the digital age, which often leads to inadequate fact-checking by journalists. All participants agree that the rules around ethical journalism should be taught in the journalism classroom and that editors have the responsibility to act as gatekeepers to ensure these rules are implemented in the newsroom. Budget constraints appear to be one of the elements that prevent the production of quality news, particularly due to staff retrenchments, leading to gaps in the flow of news at several media outlets.

Chapter 6 will conclude the study by answering the research questions and making recommendations for further study.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a summary of all elements contained in this study, including a general summary of the study, a response to the research questions, a description of limitations of the study, and recommendations for further studies that could follow this research.

### **6.2 Summary of research project**

In Chapter 1, the reasons for undertaking the study, the research problem, and the focus of the study were outlined. The researcher also gave a brief overview of literature relating to the current and past South African media landscape and how the media was criticised during these periods. The concept of media criticism and the quality of journalism were discussed with a focus on different forms of media regulation and the responsibility of the media in the current political dispensation.

In Chapter 2, the concepts central to this study were discussed in detail. The focus was on existing literature relating to changes in the South African media landscape in the pre- and post-apartheid era, different forms of media regulation, and media criticism. The literature review formed the basis of the research and assisted the researcher in formulating specific research questions.

Chapter 3 provided a discussion of the theoretical framework that informs this study. Attention was given to the origins and aims of normative media theory with a specific focus on the social responsibility theory and its development from libertarianism.

In Chapter 4, the research design and methodology of the study were described. A qualitative research design was applied with the aim to determine the nature of criticism against the South African media and the adjudication process used by the Press Council of South Africa and Press Ombud to deal with complaints against print and online media.

Chapter 5 presented a summary of the findings from data collected from the Press Council's website and the semi-structured interviews conducted with five participants.

### **6.3 Response to research questions**

The specific research questions, outlined in Chapter 1, are answered by using the data gathered and presented in Chapter 5.

#### **6.3.1 Who is criticising South African print and online media through complaints to the Press Ombud?**

This researcher established that complaints levelled against print and online media originate from different levels of society, including third parties, politicians and the private sector. Analysis for this study found that it is rarely regular members of the public who complain about the news content of print and online media. Most of the complaints come from people who, in some way, have a public profile. Politicians and well-known members of the private sector are sometimes quoted out of context, not given a right of reply, or inaccurately described in misleading headlines. Complaints by government entities mainly dealt with the contravention of clauses 1.1 and 1.2 of the Press Code, which warn against untruthful and inaccurate reporting and intentional distortion of facts. Complaints by third parties and the private sector mostly dealt with misleading and damaging headlines, which the media outlets often had to publicly apologise for.

#### **6.3.2 What is the nature of the criticism levelled against print and online media in South Africa?**

The thematic analysis of the Press Council complaints between 2021 and 2023 identified three prevalent contraventions of the Press Code: the distortion of facts and the use of misleading headlines, the media's failure to afford a right of reply to those mentioned in media reports, and a lack of accuracy and context in journalists' reporting on news events. Media outlets were also ordered to apologise to complainants about several cases of unbalanced reporting and tarnishing newsmakers' reputation and dignity. A worrying phenomenon to this researcher and the media experts interviewed for this study is regular contraventions of several important clauses contained in the Press Code. As stipulated in the code, "the media exist to serve society", but constant contraventions of these rules do not allow society to make informed decisions and judgements on issues of the day. This leaves the media in contravention of one of the five ethical cornerstones of

journalism, namely accountability. It is, therefore, worrying that a free South African media with a clear responsibility to keep the public informed are often found in contravention of the Press Code clauses (1.2, 1.3, 1.8 and 1.10) pertaining to always telling the truth and verifying information before publishing.

### **6.3.3 What are the views of media experts with regard to criticism against the media and the current state of journalism in South Africa?**

The media experts are of the opinion that a lack of fact-checking and unethical and inaccurate reporting remain causes for concern when it comes to journalism in South Africa. The digital age and the pressure tight deadline times create are further phenomena the media experts identify as detrimental to creating quality news content. Limited knowledge of ethical journalism and the contents of the Press Code should be addressed urgently, according to the media experts. The fact that journalists often have no knowledge of the Press Code is seen as a threat to the media's credibility, which further contributes to a lack of public trust in the media. Smaller newsrooms due to budget constraints leaves the industry with fewer skills to do what is necessary in news production, according to the media experts. Gatekeeping, mentoring of junior reporters and proper editing of content and story headlines, which were important elements in newsrooms countrywide in the past, have also been reduced due to budget cuts. This, according to some of the media experts, creates room for errors and an overall lack of quality journalism. Another worrying phenomena, according to some of the participants, is an apparent disregard for the basic ethical principles of journalism. The fact that the publication apologises for any misconduct and not the journalists themselves, leaves one with concern about the ethical and social responsibility of reporters and whether they are really focused on improving their news offering. As discussed in Chapter 3, the media has a social responsibility to the public: They have to provide trustworthy and relevant information and include a diversity of voices. This researcher would, therefore, argue that the media experts view various limitations on quality journalism, as described, as causes of concern for the media to live up to their social responsibility.

#### **6.4 General conclusion of study**

In this section, the general research question for this study is answered:

##### **What is the nature of criticism against South African print and online media as captured by adjudicated complaints to the Press Ombud (2021-2023) and the views of media experts?**

Complaints received by the Press Council and the nature of the complaints indicate regular instances of unethical, unbalanced and inaccurate reporting by print and online media. A lack of fact-checking and resources to ensure that important news elements, like headlines, are written and edited properly are concerns raised in the complaints. According to media experts interviewed for this study, the digital age appears to hamper the delivery of quality news content due to a faster pace of news delivery and increased competition between online media outlets to be first with their news offering. South Africa's investigative news reporting is heralded as on par with the rest of the world, but the poor level of news reporting raises questions about journalism training and whether journalists are familiar with the requirements for fair, balanced and accurate reporting and the need for ethical journalism. The fact that the credibility of journalists is being threatened because of a lack of resources in the newsroom and growing budgetary constraints, is a cause for concern for most of the participants. In order to grow readership money should be invested to employ skilled journalists.

The general conclusion of this study is that criticism against the South African media centres on the distortion of facts and misleading headlines, failure to provide a right of reply, and a lack of accuracy and context. The reasons for these types of inadequate reporting include budget constraints, smaller newsrooms, and a lack of proper guidance and mentoring of journalists.

This researcher would, therefore, conclude that, despite a strong system of independent co-regulation as set up through the Press Council, South African journalists make mistakes that could be avoided if they adhered to the basic guidelines set out in the Press Code. These mistakes undermine the clearly formulated social responsibility journalists have to report accurately and fairly about issues in the public interest. It is further of concern to the researcher that one of the participants referred to the fact qualified journalists enter and exit the journalism classroom without knowledge of the press code

which is an essential tool for accurate news reporting. This, in the researcher's opinion, could be detrimental to the trust the public holds in the media. Judged by the input and feedback by the participants regarding public trust in the media, it is clear that the media can ill-afford any inaccuracies or indication that their knowledge of something so important as the press code, is not fully understood or implemented in their daily reporting of the news.

## **6.5 Limitations of study**

This is a small, pilot study that is limited to print and online media. The researcher did not include the broadcast media, which is regulated by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa). This may have given a broader view of all South African media outlets and included a larger sample of media expert participants. However, the decision to exclude the broadcast media in this study was deliberate, since the researcher holds an editorial position at a radio station of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Due to practical constraints, this researcher did not analyse more than three years of data accessed on the Press Council's website and only five media experts participated in the study.

## **6.6 Recommendations**

### **6.6.1 Recommendations for further study**

Recommendations for future research include:

- A study to determine the view of industry professionals, such as print and broadcast editors, on the criticism against the media;
- Research to determine whether print and online journalists are aware of the content and importance of the Press Code;
- Research among broadcast journalists to determine their knowledge of Icasa regulations;
- A study among journalism students to determine whether they are equipped with knowledge of the Press Code and its content before entering the newsroom;



### **6.6.2 Recommendations for the journalism industry**

This study points to certain concerns about the media industry that could arguably be addressed through the following recommendations:

- It is recommended that more emphasis be placed in journalism classrooms on the content of the Press Code and that journalism education on codes of ethics and rules around ethical journalism be prioritised;
- In light of the juniorisation of newsrooms, the need for mentoring in the newsroom and the role of the gatekeeper should be revisited to reduce the frequency of mistakes. The
- There appears to be a gap between the ethical principles of journalism taught in the classroom versus what is implemented and enforced in the newsroom. It is recommended that editors make a concerted effort to ensure that journalists are reminded of their social responsibility to the public they serve and their responsibility to ensure accurate and balanced reporting at all times.
- It is further recommended that media outlets hold regular workshops with, for example, organisations like the Press Council, Sanef and Media Monitoring Africa, to give feedback on the performance of newsrooms, especially after major news events like elections. This will assist editors to determine whether news coverage is balanced, accurate and fair and how it can be improved on.
- It is recommended that ethics training, which can act as a refresher course for practising journalists, be presented at all news outlets to ensure reporters are aware of their roles and responsibilities with regard to the code of ethics and ethical reporting. It often happens that journalists are not aware that children should not be named when reporting on minors. Often family members of minor victims of gender based violence are identified and this information is repeated by other news outlets because of a lack of fact checking which is caused by smaller newsrooms. The refresher course in ethical reporting should be compulsory for all news staff and repeated at least every second year.
- It is recommended that news outlets prioritise news through a transparent and balanced process. Due to smaller newsrooms caused by financial constraints at most news outlets, it is important that editors and news editors prioritise certain

news events and decide at diary meetings what can be covered and what should be prioritised. Care should be taken to keep this “sifting process” as transparent and balanced as possible, while ensuring that public interest is prioritised. In the past, hours were spent on news production, but due to the immediateness of news in the digital age, less time and manpower is spent on a full editing process. It is thus advisable to cover less stories to ensure that a high level of quality of journalism is still maintained. The quality of news reporting should therefore not be jeopardised by a lack of resources .

## References

- Aalberg, T. & Curran, J. 2012. *How media inform democracy: A comparative approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Adom, D., Hussein, E.K. & Adu-Agyem, J. 2018. Theoretical and conceptual framework: Mandatory ingredients of a quality research. *International Journal of Scientific Research*, 7(1):438-441.
- Alhadeff, V. 2018. Journalism during South Africa's Apartheid regime. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 10(2):7.
- AmaBhungane. 2020. *Special report: The #GuptaLeaks and more – All our stories on state capture* [Online]. Available: <https://amabhungane.org/stories/special-report-the-guptaleaks-and-more-all-our-stories-on-state-capture-2/> [2023, June 23].
- Asemah, E.S. 2009. *Principles and practice of mass communication*. Jos, Nigeria: Great Future Press.
- Bajrachararya, S. 2018. *Social responsibility theory* [Online]. Available: <http://www.businessstopia.net/mass-communication/social-responsibility-theory> [2023, August 9].
- Baydar, Y. 2011. *Professional journalism and self-regulation: New media, old dilemmas in South East Europe and Turkey*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- Berger, G. 2005. Current challenges, in A. Hadland (ed.). *Changing the fourth estate: Essays on South African journalism*. Pretoria: HSRC Press, 19-26.
- Berger, G. 2010. The struggle for press self-regulation in contemporary South Africa: Charting a course between an industry charade and a government doormat. *Communicatio*, 36:3.
- Bhandari, P. 2023. *What is qualitative research: Methods and examples* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/qualitative-research/> [2023, October 26].
- Bird, E. & Garda, Z. 2005. Media representations of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and their commitment to reconciliation. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 17(2):181-199.
- Bos, J. 2020. *Research ethics for students in the social sciences*. Springer: Switzerland.

- Bruns, N.J. 2019. South African journalism graduates' preparedness for newsroom ethics: Views of early-career journalists at News24, Eyewitness News and Independent Online. Unpublished master's thesis. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.
- Busetto, L., Wick, W. & Gumbinger, C. 2020. How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*, 2(14).
- Butler, J. 2001. *What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue* [Online]. Available: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en> [2023, October 23].
- Campbell, A. 1999. Self-regulation and the media. *Federal Communications Law Journal*, 51(3):11.
- Carey, J.W. 1974. Journalism and criticism: The case of an underdeveloped profession. *The Review of Politics*, 36(02):227.
- Carroll, A.B. & Shabana, K.M. 2010. The business case for corporate social responsibility: A review of concepts, research and practice. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 12(1):85-105, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00275.x
- Cheruiyot, D. 2019. *Criticising journalism: Popular media criticism in the digital age*. Published doctoral dissertation. Karlstad, Germany: Karlstad University Press.
- Christians, C., Glasser, T.L. & Nordenstreng, K. 2009. *Normative theories of the media: Journalism in democratic societies*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Cishecki, M. 2002. *Co-regulation: A new model of media regulation*. Division for the Advancement of Women Expert Group Meeting on "Participation and access of women to the media, and the impact of media on, and its use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women". Beirut, Lebanon.
- Clarke, V. & Braun, V. 2016. (Mis)conceptualising themes, thematic analysis, and other problems with Fugard and Potts' sample-size tool for thematic analysis. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19(6):739-743.
- Closs, W. 2003. *Co-regulation of the media in Europe. Published by the European audiovisual observatory, Strasbourg* [Online]. Available: <https://www.ivir.nl/publicaties/download/IRIS-Special-Co-regulation-of-the-Media-in-Europe> [2023, October 26].

- Cohen-Almagor, R. 2014. Towards responsible journalism: Code of practice, journalist oath and conscience clause. *Ethical Space*, 11(1/2):37-43.
- Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 200 of 1993. 26 of 2005.
- Creswell, J.W. & Clark, V.L. 2010. *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Curran, J. & Seaton, J. 2010. *Power without responsibility: The press, broadcasting and the internet in Britain*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Daniels, G. 2010. The role of the media in a democracy: Unravelling the politics between the media, the state, and the ANC in South Africa. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Dashti, A., Johar, H., Al-Maamari, S. & Al-Abdullah, H. 2020. Hatred versus tolerance: The effect of the media on the notion of citizenship in Kuwait and Oman. *Global Media and Communication*, 16(3):271-291, doi:10.1177/1742766520946475
- Denney, A. & Tewksbury, R. 2013. How to write a literature review. *Journal of Criminal Education*, 24(2).
- Dicken-Garcia, H. 1989. *Journalistic standards in nineteenth-century America*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Djankov, S., La Porta, R., Lopez-de-Silanes, F. & Shleifer, A. 2002. The regulation of entry. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 117(1):1-36, doi:10.1162/003355302753399436
- Doelker, A. 2010. *Self-regulation and co-regulation: Prospects and boundaries in an online environment*. Master's thesis. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia.
- Duncan, J. 2014. A political economy of press self-regulation: The case of South Africa. *Media, Culture and Society*, 36(2):167-182.
- Du Plooy, G.M. 2001. *Communication research: Techniques, methods and applications*. Cape Town: Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Du Plooy, G.M. 2009. *Communication research: Techniques, methods and applications*, 2nd edition. Cape Town: Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Eberwein, T., Fengler, S. & Karmasin, M. 2019. *Media accountability in the era of post-truth politics: European challenges and perspectives*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

- Elliott, D. 1986. Foundations for news media responsibility. *Responsible Journalism*, 32-44.
- Engelbrecht, A. 2016. Kwalitatiewe navorsing: Data-insameling en -analise, in I. Joubert, C. Hartell & K. Lombard (eds.). *Navorsing: 'n Gids vir die beginnervorsers*. Pretoria: Van Schaik, 109-127.
- Fourie, P.J. 2007. *Media studies: Media history, media and society*. Cape Town. Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Fourie, P.J. 2008. Ubuntuism as a framework for South African media practice and performance: Can it work? *Communicatio*, 34(1):53-79.
- Fourie, P.J. 2017. *Media studies: Social (new) media and mediated communication today*. Cape Town. Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Freedman, D. 2015. Paradigms of media power. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(2):273-289.
- Freedman, D. 2017. Populism and media policy failure. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(6):604-618.
- Froneman, J.D. 1997. Mediatransformasie dek die tafel vir 'n nuwe joernalistiek. *Literator*, 18(3):199-220.
- George, T. 2022. *What is a thesis: Ultimate guide and examples* [Online]. Available: <https://www.scribbr.com/author/tegan/page/3/> [2023, July, 28].
- Gibbons, T. 1998. *Regulating the media*. 2nd edition. London: Sweet and Maxwell.
- Gonzales, F. & Lecaros, M. 2020. The concept of self-regulation and the ethics council of the media federation of Chile. *Journal of Information Communication and Ethics in Society*, 18(4): 481-496.
- Government Communication and Information System (GCIS). 2021. *South Africa Yearbook 2021/22* [Online]. Available: <https://www.gcis.gov.za/south-africa-yearbook-202122> [2023, October 26].
- Gray, J. 2005. Television teaching: Parody, The Simpsons, and media literacy education. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(3):223-238.
- Gupta, M. 2015. *Emerging issues in social responsibility theory of media in today's era* [Online]. Available: <http://scholararticles.wordpress.com/2015/08/28/mg1/> [2023, July 20].

- Haerpfer, C.W., Bernhagen, P., Welzel, C., & Inglehart, R.F. 2019. *Democratization*. Oxford University Press.
- Haraszti, M. 2008. *The media self-regulation guidebook*. Vienna, Austria: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.
- Harber, A. 2022. Anton Harber: Protect freedom of speech if you want to protect your other freedoms. *News24*, 27 April. Available: <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/columnists/guestcolumn/anton-harber-protect-freedom-of-speech-if-you-want-to-protect-your-other-freedoms-20220427> [2023, October 26].
- Harber, A. & Renn, M. 2010. *The troublemakers: South Africa's feisty investigative journalists*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Hartell, C. & Bosman, L. 2016. Beplanning van 'n navorsingsvoorstel vir nagraadse studie, in I. Joubert, C. Hartell & K. Lombard (eds.). *Navorsing: 'n Gids vir die beginnervorser*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 19-72.
- Henning, E. 2004. *Finding your way in qualitative research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Henning, E., Van Rensburg, W. & Smit, B. 2004. *Finding your way in qualitative research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Holt, K. & Krogh, T.V. 2010. The citizen as media critic in periods of media change. *OBS-Observatorio*, 4(4):287-306.
- Jennings, B. 2018. *What is media?* Mankato, MN: Capstone Press.
- Joubert, I., Hartell, C. & Lombard, K. 2016. *Navorsingsboek: 'n Gids vir die beginnervorser*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Kaun, A. 2014. "I really don't like them!": Exploring citizens' media criticism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17(5):489-506.
- Khan, T. & MacEachen, E. 2022. An alternative method of interviewing: Critical reflections on video conference interviews for qualitative data collection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21:1-12.
- Kiger, M.E. & Varpio, L. 2020. Thematic analysis of qualitative data. *Medical Teacher*, 42(8):846-854.
- Kohring, M. & Matthes, J. 2007. Trust in news media. Development and validation of a multidimensional scale. *Communication Research*, 34(2):231-252.

- Kovach, B. & Rosenstiel, T. 2001. *The elements of journalism: What newspeople should know and the public should expect*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Kovach, B. & Rosenstiel, T. 2007. *The elements of journalism: What newspeople should know and the public should expect*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Kruger, F. 2020. *Black, white, and grey: Ethics in South African journalism*. Cape Town. Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Lacy, S. & Rosenstiel, T. 2015. *Defining and measuring quality journalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers School of Communication and Information.
- Lee, T. & Willnat, L. 2009. Media management and political communication in Singapore, in L. Willnat & A. Aw. *Political communication in Asia*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis. 93-111.
- Leedy, P.D. & Ormrod, J.E. 2013. *Practical research: Planning and design*. 10th edition. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Leedy, P.D., Ormrod, J.E. & Johnson, L.R. 2019. *Practical research: Planning and design*. 12th edition. New York, NY: Pearson.
- Lombard, K. 2016. 'n Inleiding tot navorsing, in I. Joubert, C. Hartell & K. Lombard (eds.). *Navorsing: 'n Gids vir die beginnervorsers*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Makinana, A. 2013. Zuma condemns opposite of the positive SA media. *Mail & Guardian*, 10 September. Available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-09-10-zuma-condemns-opposite-of-the-positive-sa-media/> [2023, July 30].
- Mandela, N.1994. *Address by Nelson Mandela to the International Press Institute Congress* [Online]. Available: [http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela\\_speeches/1994/940214\\_press.htm](http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1994/940214_press.htm) [2023, October 25].
- Marzolf, M. 1991. *Civilizing voices: American press criticism 1880-1950*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Matthews, B. & Ross, L. 2010. *Research methods: A practical guide for the social sciences*. London, UK: Pearson Longman.
- McCombes, S. 2019. *How to create a research design* [Online]. Available: <http://www.scribbr.com/research-process/research-design> [2023, August 19].
- McQuail, D. 2000. *Mass communication theory*. London: Sage Publications.



- McQuail, D. 2005. *Mass communication theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- McQuail, D. 2007. *Mass communication theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- McQuail, D. 2010. *Mass communication theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mobabra, L. 2014. *Report on Press Council Workshop* [Online]. Available: <https://journalism.co.za/new/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/WITS-Council-Workshop.pdf> [Access: 31 July, 2023].
- Mouton, J. 2001. *How to succeed in your Master's and Doctoral studies: A South African guide and resource book*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Murray, G. 1972. *The press and the public*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Mutsvairo, B., Columbus, S. & Leijendekker, I. 2015. Reconnoitring the role of (citizen) journalism ethics in the emerging networked public sphere. *Equid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 35(3):4-22.
- Nel, F. 2001. *Writing for the media in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Newman, W.R. 1989. *Common knowledge: News and the construction of political meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Newman, N. & Fletcher, R. 2017. Bias, bullshit and lies: Audience perspectives on low trust in the media. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3173579
- Obagwu, P. & Idris, K. 2019. Social responsibility theory of the press: A critique of its application and constraints. *The International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 8(12).
- Ogola, G. & Rodny-Gumede, Y. 2014. The future of quality journalism and media accountability in South Africa and Kenya, in P.J. Anderson, M. Williams & G. Ogola (eds.). *The future of quality news: A cross-continental analysis*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Oluwasola, O. 2020. The normative theories of the press in the digital age: A need for revision, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3678282

- Onyancha, O.B. & Ngoepe, M. 2011. The protection of information bill and access to information in South Africa: An informetric study of the media coverage. *ESARBICA Journal*, 30.
- Oosthuizen, L.M. 2014. *Media ethics in the South African context: An introduction and overview*. Cape Town: Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Organisation of News Ombuds and Standards Editors. 2020. *The ONO handbook for news ombudsmen* [Online]. Available: <https://www.newsombudsmen.org> [2023, July 9].
- Pickard, V. 2010. Can government support the press? Historicizing and internationalising a policy approach to the journalism crisis. *The Communication Review*, 14(2):73-95.
- Pickard, V. 2015. Media ownership, in G. Mazzoleni (ed.). *The international encyclopedia of political communication*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Piontek, D. 2016. Normative media theories: The media in the new democracies. *Przeład Politologiczny*, (2):49-62.
- Polit, D.F. & Beck, C.T. 2004. *Nursing research: Principles and methods*. Pennsylvania Furnace, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Post, C., Sarala, R., Gatrell, C. & Prescott, J. 2020. Advancing theory with review articles. *Journal of Management Studies*, 57(2):351-372, doi:10.1111/joms.12549
- Press Council of South Africa (PCSA). 2023. *Press code* [Online]. Available: <https://www.presscouncil.org.za/ContentPage?code=PRESSCODEENGLISH> [2023, October 24].
- Press Council of South Africa (PCSA). n.d. *Welcome to the Press Council of South Africa* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.presscouncil.org.za/> [2023, October 25].
- Press Freedom Commission. 2012. *Report on press regulation in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Print Media South Africa, South African National Editors Forum.
- Puppis, M. & Van den Bulck, H. 2019. Introduction: Media policy and media policy research, in H. van den Bulck, M. Puppis, K. Donders & L. van Audenhove (eds.). *The Palgrave handbook of methods for media policy research*. New York, NY: Springer. 3-21.

- Quin, R. 2016. Co-regulation and anti-corruption in U.S. journalism. *Journal of Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, 31(2).
- Rabe, L. 2016. The importance of media freedom in South Africa. Two centuries, two case studies from the Magna Carta to the Secrecy Bill. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 56(3):856-874.
- Race, R. 2010. Critical theory, in N.J. Salkind (ed.). *Encyclopedia of research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Radebe, M. 2021. Corporate media and the nationalisation of the economy in South Africa: A critical Marxist political economy approach. Doctoral dissertation. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Ravi, B.K. 2012. Media and social responsibility: A critical perspective with special reference to television. *Academic Research International*, 2(1):306-325.
- Reid, J. 2014. Third party complaints in the system of press regulation: Inviting the reader to take part in journalistic accountability and securing press freedom. *Ecquid novi: African journalism studies*, 35(2):58-74.
- Reid, J. & Isaacs, T. 2015. *Press regulation in South Africa: An analysis of the Press Council of South Africa, the Press Freedom Commission and related discourses*. Research report. Johannesburg: Media Policy and Democracy Project.
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. 2023. Digital news report 2023 [Online]. Available: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023> [2023, October 26].
- Richards, L. 2015. *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rodny-Gumede, Y. 2014. South African journalists' conceptualisation of professionalism and deviations from normative liberal values. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 33(2):54-69.
- Rodny-Gumede, Y. 2015. An assessment of the public interest and ideas of the public in South Africa and the adoption of ubuntu journalism. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 30(2):109-124.
- Satchwell, K., Bikitsha, N. & Mkhondo, R. 2021. *Satchwell independent panel report: Inquiry into media ethics and credibility* [Online]. Available:

- <https://sanef.org.za/programmes/media-ethics-and-credibility-inquiry/> [2021, July 1].
- Schejter, A.M. 2018. Mmedia regulation and policy, in P.M. Napoli (ed.). *Mediated communication*. Boston, MA: De Gruyter Mouton. 471-490.
- Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T. & Schramm, W. 1956. *Four theories of the press*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T. & Schramm, W. 1963. *Four theories of the press*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Silverblatt, A. & Zlobin, N. 2004. *International communications: A media literacy approach*. 1st edition. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Sindane, S. 2018. Press regulation in South Africa and its implications for press freedom. *Communitas*, 23:155-164.
- Snyder, H. 2019. Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104:333-339.
- South African National Editors' Forum. 2019. *SANEF AGM takes critical decision to support the media industry and to launch an inquiry into media ethics and credibility issues* [Online]. Available: <http://sanef.org.za/sanef-agm-takes-critical-decisions-to-support-the-media-industry-and-to-launch-an-inquiry-into-media-ethics-and-credibility-issues> [2023, 8 July].
- South African National Editors' Forum. 2022. *State of the media report* [Online]. Available: <https://sanef.org.za/tag/2022-state-of-the-media-report/> [2023, October 25].
- Stam, H.J. 2010. Theoretical communities and theory & psychology: A decade review. *Theory & Psychology*, 20(6):723-731.
- Stiernstedt, F. 2014. *Mediekritik*. Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur.
- Vande Berg, L.R. 2004. Media literacy and television criticism: Enabling an informed and engaged citizenry. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48(2):219-228.
- Vos, T.P. & Thomas, R.J. 2018. The discursive construction of journalistic authority in a post-truth age. *Journalism Studies*, 19(13):2001-2010.
- Walker, C & Ortung, R.W. 2014. Breaking the news: The role of state-run media. *Journal of Democracy*, 25(1):71-85.

- Wanayama, L. 2015. Media control in Kenya: The state of broadcasting under the new Kenya Information and Communication Act of 2013. *New Media and Mass Communication*, 33:17-22.
- Wasserman, H. 2020a. Fake news from Africa: Panics, politics, and paradigms. *Journalism*, 21(1):3-16.
- Wasserman, H. 2020b. The state of South African media: A space to contest democracy. *Publizistik*, 65:451-465.
- Wasserman, H. 2021. *Herman Wasserman: SA media at a critical crossroads: Partnerships key to improving ethics* [Online]. Available: <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/fridaybriefing/herman-wasserman-sa-media-at-a-critical-crossroads-partnerships-key-to-improving-ethics-20210121> [2023, October 26].
- Wasserman, H. & De Beer, A. 2005. Which public? Whose interest? The South African media and its role during the first ten years of democracy. *South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, 19(1-2):36-51.
- Whittles, C. 2021. Mobile journalism and broadcast news: e.tv News & Sport in South Africa. Unpublished Master's thesis. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.
- Wigston, D. 2009. Quantitative content analysis, in P. Fourie (ed.). *Media studies*. Vol. 3. Cape Town: Juta & Co, Ltd. 3-38.
- Williams, C. 2007. Research methods. *Journal of Business & Economics Research*, 5(3), doi:10.19030/jber.v5i3.2532
- Williams, R. 1985. *A vocabulary of culture and society*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Woollacott, J. 2017. *Culture, society and the media*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Wyatt, W. 2018. *Critical conversations: A theory of press criticism*. Hampton, NY: The Hampton Press.
- Yanow, D. 2000. *Conducting interpretive policy analysis*. University papers series on qualitative research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R.K. 1994. *Case study research design and methods: Applied social research and methods series*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

## Addendum A: Confirmation of research ethics approval



### CONFIRMATION OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (SBER) - Initial Application Form

18 September 2023

Project number: 28079

Project Title: An exploration of criticism against the South African media

Dear Mrs N De Wee

**Identified supervisor(s) and/or co-investigator(s):**

Dr M Jordaan

Your REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (SBER) - Initial Application Form submitted on 06/09/2023 08:53 was reviewed and approved by the Social, Behavioural and Education Research Ethics Committee (REC: SBE).

This approval is only valid until the end of the protocol approval period:

Protocol approval date (Humanities)	Protocol expiration date (Humanities)
18 September 2023	17 September 2026

**GENERAL COMMENTS PERTAINING TO THIS PROJECT:**

**INVESTIGATOR RESPONSIBILITIES**

1. Please take note of the General Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter.
2. Always use your project ID number (28079) in all correspondence with the REC: SBE concerning your project.
3. Please note that the REC has the prerogative to ask further questions, seek additional information, and monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process, where required.

**List of documents approved by the REC: SBE:**

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Research Protocol/Proposal	Research proposal N De Wee May 2023 updated final revised by M Jordaan copy for ethical clearance(2)	04/05/2023	3
Informed Consent Form	CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANT (4)	05/09/2023	4
Recruitment material	INTRODUCTORY EMAIL version 3	05/09/2023	3
Data collection tool	Interview guide for participants (3)	06/09/2023	3
Default	REC RESPONSE LETTER - ETHICAL CLEARANCE (4)	06/09/2023	4

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC administrative officer, Mr Aden Williams at [aden@sun.ac.za](mailto:aden@sun.ac.za)

Sincerely,

Mrs Clarissa Robertson ([cgraham@sun.ac.za](mailto:cgraham@sun.ac.za))

Secretariat: Social, Behavioral and Education Research Ethics Committee (REC: SBE)

# Addendum B: The Press Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media

## Press Code

Choose a language:

### The Press Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media

(Effective from 30 September 2022)

The Press Council of South Africa adopts the following Code for print and online media (together referred to as "the media").

#### PREAMBLE

The media exist to serve society. Their freedom provides for independent scrutiny of the forces that shape society, and is essential to realising the promise of democracy. It enables citizens to make informed judgments on the issues of the day, a role whose centrality is recognised in the South African Constitution.

Section 16 of the Bill of Rights sets out that:

*1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes:*

- a) Freedom of the press and other media;*
- b) Freedom to receive and impart information or ideas;*
- c) Freedom of artistic creativity; and*
- d) Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.*

*2. The right in subsection (1) does not extend to:*

- a) Propaganda for war;*
- b) Incitement of imminent violence; or*
- c) Advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.*

The media strive to hold these rights in trust for the country's citizens; and they are subject to the same rights and duties as the individual. Everyone has the duty to defend and further these rights, in recognition of the struggles that created them: the media, the public and government, who all make up the democratic state.

The media's work is guided at all times by the public interest, understood to describe information of legitimate interest or importance to citizens.

As journalists we commit ourselves to the highest standards, to maintain credibility and keep the trust of the public. This means always striving for truth, avoiding unnecessary harm, reflecting a multiplicity of voices in our coverage of events, showing a special concern for children and other vulnerable groups, and exhibiting sensitivity to the cultural customs of their readers and the subjects of their reportage, and acting independently.

#### Application of the Press Code

1. This Code applies to the following content published by members:

- 1. all content that is published in a printed edition;
- 1. all content that is published on a website operated by a member;
- 1. all content that is published on a social media account operated by a member; and
- 1. all content that is created by a member and published on any platform that is available on the world wide web (i.e. online) or in digital format.

2. All content published by a member through one or more of the platforms mentioned in 1 must comply with the Code, regardless of whether the content is in written, video, audio, pictorial or any other form.

3. Members must ensure that when they share content created by a third party through their social media accounts (for example by retweeting) they do so in a manner that is compliant with this Code.
4. Members must develop their own social media policies, guided by this Code.

## **Chapter 1: MEDIA-GENERATED CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES**

### **1. Gathering and reporting of news**

The media shall:

- 1.1 take care to report news truthfully, accurately and fairly;
- 1.2 present news in context and in a balanced manner, without any intentional or negligent departure from the facts whether by distortion, exaggeration or misrepresentation, material omissions, or summarization;
- 1.3 present only what may reasonably be true as fact; opinions, allegations, rumours or suppositions shall be presented clearly as such;
- 1.4 obtain news legally, honestly and fairly, unless public interest dictates otherwise;
- 1.5 use personal information for journalistic purposes only;
- 1.6 identify themselves as such, unless public interest or their safety dictates otherwise;
- 1.7 verify the accuracy of doubtful information, if practicable, if not, this shall be stated;
- 1.8 seek, if practicable, the views of the subject of critical reportage in advance of publication, except when they might be prevented from reporting, or evidence destroyed, or sources intimidated. Such a subject should be afforded reasonable time to respond; if unable to obtain comment, this shall be stated;
- 1.9 state where a report is based on limited information, and supplement it once new information becomes available;
- 1.10 make amends for presenting inaccurate information or comment by publishing promptly and with appropriate prominence a retraction, correction, explanation or an apology on every platform where the original content was published, such as the member's website, social media accounts or any other online platform; and ensure that every journalist or freelancer employed by them who shared content on their personal social media accounts also shares any retraction, correction, explanation or apology relating to that content on their personal social media accounts;
- 1.11 prominently indicate when content that was published online has been amended or an apology or retraction published. The original content may continue to remain online but a link to the amendment, retraction or apology must be included in every version of the content which remains available online;
- 1.12 not be obliged to remove any content which is not unlawfully defamatory; and
- 1.13 not plagiarise.

### **2. Independence and Conflicts of Interest**

The media shall:

- 2.1 not allow commercial, political, personal or other non-professional considerations to influence reporting, and avoid conflicts of interest as well as practices that could lead readers to doubt the media's independence and professionalism;
- 2.2 not accept any benefit which may influence coverage;
- 2.3 indicate clearly when an outside organization has contributed to the cost of newsgathering; and
- 2.4 keep editorial material clearly distinct from advertising and sponsored events.

### **3. Privacy, Dignity and Reputation**

The media shall:



3.1 exercise care and consideration in matters involving the private lives of individuals. The right to privacy may be overridden by legitimate public interest;

3.2 afford special weight to South African cultural customs concerning the protection of privacy and dignity of people who are bereaved and their respect for those who have passed away, as well as concerning children, the aged, and the physically and mentally disabled;

3.3 exercise care and consideration in matters involving dignity and reputation, which may be overridden only if it is in the public interest and if:

3.1.1 the facts reported are true or substantially true; or

3.1.2 the reportage amounts to protected comment based on facts that are adequately referred to and that are either true or reasonably true; or

3.1.3 the reportage amounts to a fair and accurate report of court proceedings, Parliamentary proceedings, or the proceedings of any quasi-judicial tribunal or forum; or

3.1.4 it was reasonable for the information to be communicated because it was prepared in accordance with acceptable principles of journalistic conduct; or

3.1.5 the article was, or formed part of, an accurate and impartial account of a dispute to which the complainant was a party;

3.4 not identify rape survivors, survivors of sexual violence which includes sexual intimidation and harassment\* or disclose the HIV / AIDS status of people without their consent and, in the case of children, from their legal guardian or a similarly responsible adult as well as from the child (taking into consideration the evolving capacity of the child), and a public interest is evident, and it is in the best interests of the child.

3.5 only disclose sufficient personal information to identify the person being reported on as some information, such as addresses, may enable others to intrude on their privacy and safety, and such disclosure shall only be made if in the public interest.

\* *The World Health Organisation inter alia defines sexual violence as follows: "Sexual violence encompasses acts that range from verbal harassment to forced penetration, and an array of types of coercion, from social pressure and intimidation to physical force..."*

#### **4. Data protection**

Members of the media shall:

4.1 take reasonable steps to ensure that data containing personal information under their control is protected from misuse, loss, and unauthorized access;

4.2 amend inaccuracies in published personal information where a person requests a correction;

4.3 inform the affected person(s) and take reasonable steps to mitigate any prejudicial effects where it is reasonably suspected that an unauthorized person may have obtained access to personal information held by the media;

4.4 use and disclose personal data only for journalistic purposes.

\* *"Personal information" is defined as follows in Section 1 of the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013: "Personal information" means information relating to an identifiable, living, natural person, and where it is applicable, an identifiable, existing juristic person, including, but not limited to (a) information relating to the race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, national, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental health, well-being, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and faith of the person; (b) information relating to the education or the medical, financial, criminal or employment history of the person; (c) any identifying number, symbol, e-mail address, physical address, telephone number, location information, online identifier or other particular assignment to the person; (d) the biometric information of the person; (e) the personal opinions, views or preferences of the person; (f) correspondence sent by the person that is implicitly or explicitly of a private or confidential nature or further correspondence that would reveal the contents of the original correspondence; (g) the views or opinions of another individual about the person; and (h) the name of the person if it appears with other personal information relating to the person or if the disclosure of the name itself would reveal information about the person.*

#### **5. Discrimination and Hate Speech**

The media shall:

5.1. avoid discriminatory or denigratory references to people's race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth or other status, and not refer to such status in a prejudicial or pejorative context – and shall refer to the above only where it is strictly relevant to the matter reported, and if it is in the public interest; and

5.2 balance their right and duty to report and comment on all matters of legitimate public interest against the obligation not to publish material that amounts to propaganda for war, incitement of imminent violence or hate speech – that is, advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.

## 6. Advocacy

The media may strongly advocate their own views on controversial topics, provided that they clearly distinguish between fact and opinion, and not misrepresent or suppress or distort relevant facts.

## 7. Protected Comment

7.1 The media shall be entitled to comment upon or criticise any actions or events of public interest; and

7.2 Comment or criticism is protected even if it is extreme, unjust, unbalanced, exaggerated and prejudiced, as long as it is without malice, is on a matter of public interest, has taken fair account of all material facts that are either true or reasonably true, and is presented in a manner that it appears clearly to be comment.

## 8. Children

In the spirit of Section 28.2 of the Bill of Rights<sup>4</sup> the media shall:

8.1 exercise exceptional care and consideration when reporting about children<sup>5</sup>. If there is any chance that coverage might cause harm of any kind to a child, he or she shall not be interviewed, photographed or identified without the consent of a legal guardian or of a similarly responsible adult and the child (taking into consideration the evolving capacity of the child); and a public interest is evident;

8.2 not publish child pornography<sup>6</sup>; and

8.3 not identify children who have been victims of abuse or exploitation, or who have been charged with or convicted of a crime, without the consent of their legal guardians (or a similarly responsible adult) and the child (taking into consideration the evolving capacity of the child), a public interest is evident and it is in the best interests of the child.

\* Section 28.2 of the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution says: "A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child."

<sup>4</sup> A "child" is a person under the age of 18 years.

<sup>6</sup> Child Pornography is defined in the Film and Publications Act as: "Any visual image or any description of a person, real or simulated, however created, who is or who is depicted or described as being, under the age of 18 years, explicitly depicting such a person who is or who is being depicted as engaged or participating in sexual conduct; engaged in an explicit display of genitals; participating in or assisting another person to participate in sexual conduct which, judged within context, has as its predominant objective purpose, the stimulation of sexual arousal in its target audience or showing or describing the body or parts of the body of the person in a manner or circumstance which, in context, amounts to sexual exploitation."

## 9. Violence, Graphic Content

The media shall:

9.1 exercise due care and responsibility when presenting brutality, violence and suffering;

9.2 not sanction, promote or glorify violence or unlawful conduct; and

9.3 avoid content which depicts violent crime or other violence or explicit sex, unless the public interest dictates otherwise – in which case a prominently displayed warning must indicate that such content is graphic and inappropriate for certain audiences such as children.

## 10. Headlines, Captions, Posters, Pictures and Video / Audio Content

10.1 Headlines, captions to pictures and posters shall not mislead the public and shall give a reasonable reflection of the contents of the report or picture in question; and

10.2 Pictures and video / audio content shall not misrepresent or mislead nor be manipulated to do so.

#### **11. Confidential and Anonymous Sources**

The media shall:

11.1 protect confidential sources of information – the protection of sources is a basic principle in a democratic and free society;

11.2 avoid the use of anonymous sources unless there is no other way to deal with a story, and shall take care to corroborate such information; and

11.3 not publish information that constitutes a breach of confidence, unless the public interest dictates otherwise.

#### **12. Payment for Information**

The media shall avoid shady journalism in which informants are paid to induce them to give the information, particularly when they are criminals – except where the material concerned ought to be published in the public interest and the payment is necessary for this to be done.

## **Chapter 2: USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES\***

### **13. Principles**

The media:

13.1 are not obliged to moderate all user-generated content (UGC) in advance;

13.2 shall have a UGC Policy, consistent with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, governing moderation and/or removal of UGC or user profiles posted;

13.3 may remove any UGC or user profile in accordance with their policy;

13.4 must make their policy publicly available and set out clearly the:

13.4.1 authorisation process, if any, which would-be users must follow, as well as any terms, conditions and indemnity clauses during such registration process;

13.4.2 content which shall be prohibited; and

13.4.3 manner in which the public may inform them of prohibited content;

13.5 should, where practicable, place a notice on the platforms to discourage the posting of prohibited content;

13.6 should inform the public that UGC is posted directly by users, and does not necessarily reflect their views;

13.7 shall encourage users to report content which may violate the provisions of their policy; and

13.8 shall particularly carefully monitor online forums directed at children.

### **14. Prohibited Content**

Material constitutes prohibited content if it is expressly not allowed in a member's UGC Policy, and in Section 5.2 of this Code (which refers to Section 16 of the Bill of Rights, and overrules anything to the contrary contained in a UGC policy).

### **15. Defence**

15.1 It is a defence for the media to show that they did not author or edit the content complained of;

15.2 However, where a complainant has sent a written notice to the particular media, identifying the content concerned, specifying where it was posted, and motivating why it is prohibited (see Clause 14); the media must then either:

15.2.1 remove the relevant UGC as soon as possible and notify the complainant accordingly; or

15.2.2 decide not to remove the UGC and notify the complainant accordingly. In the latter case, the complainant may complain to the Press Ombud, who will treat it as if the UGC was posted by the member itself.

*\* This section applies where a complaint is brought against a member in respect of comments and content posted by users on all platforms in controls and on which it distributes its content.*

**Addendum C: A list of complaints at the Press Council of South Africa cited in this study**

Siyabonga Gama vs Sunday Times. 2021.

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/siyabonga-gama-vs-sunday-times-4622>

National Arts Council vs The Citizen. 2022

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/national-arts-council-vs-the-citizen-4644>

Afrirent vs News24. 2022.

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/national-arts-council-vs-the-citizen-4644>

Nampree vs Sunday World. 2021.

Available at: <https://www.presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/nampree-vs-sunday-world-4540>

Conrad Gallagher vs News24. 2022.

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/conrad-gallagher-and-the-chefs-playground-vs-news24-4628>

Asante Sana Consulting vs City Press. 2022.

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/asante-sana-consulting-vs-city-press-4652>

Themba Mfeka vs Mail & Guardian. 2021.

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/asante-sana-consulting-vs-city-press-4652>

Jabulile P Hlatshwayo and Others vs City Press. 2022.

Available at: <https://www.presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/jabulile-p-hlatshwayo-and-others-vs-city-press-4648>

Ebrahim vs Sunday Times. 2023.

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/ebrahim-vs-sunday-times-4660>

John Steenhuisen and others vs Mail & Guardian. 2022.

Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/Ruling/View/ebrahim-vs-sunday-times-4660>