

Wits Journalism releases second State of the Newsroom report

At a Media Freedom Day celebration and Black Wednesday commemoration, co-hosted with the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) on 17 October 2014, Wits Journalism released its second State of the Newsroom report.

Continued decline of print circulation, on-going retrenchments, and an increased number of broadcast media, both television and radio stations, are some of the media landscape trends documented in the report, titled, 'Disruptions Accelerated'.



Growing harassment

The report also highlights an apparent growing trend in harassment of and violence against journalists, particularly of photojournalists, while an ominous legislative backdrop - the impending signing into law of the Protection of State Information and Intelligence Bills, and the existing anachronistic National Key Points Act - casts a dark cloud. In addition, the Media Appeals Tribunal still lurks as an ANC resolution.

Senior Lecturer at Wits Journalism, Dr Glenda Daniels, who leads the State of the Newsroom research, said, "The independent media in South Africa is strong but we have to be very vigilant because there are threats all around us."

Twitter 'indispensable professional tool'

In a chapter titled: 'Digital-First Developments: Experimentation and Promiscuity', the report notes that as audiences transition from traditional to new media, they are growing more and more "platform agonistic", showing decreasing loyalty to particular brands and demanding news from a variety of sources and in various forms. In turn, newsrooms are struggling to keep up. Digital offerings are still not bringing in sustainable revenue.

The use of social media in the newsroom has increased hugely but journalists and news editors feel that there is "too much pressure to do too many things." Twitter is regarded as an "indispensable professional tool" with journalists spending, on average, at least 15 to 20 minutes per hour on Twitter - much more if they are live-tweeting events.

There is a large sector of community newspapers that appear to be making a valuable contribution to diversity of news in terms of content and plurality of voices. Further, there is an inspiring idealism among editors and journalists - for most, their driving force is to serve their communities. However, the sector struggles with sustainability issues and is in need of a viable financial model.

Community radio faces challenges

The report also contains a section on community radio that uses three case studies to illustrate the challenges faced, including commercial difficulties, political pressures, community power plays from religious and traditional leaders, language and cultural sensitivities and tensions and pressures from listeners - all trying to add their particular influence, and often even interfering directly with the stations. The report documents a case of arson that destroyed a station building.

The State of the Newsroom research is the first of its kind from any journalism school in South Africa. Daniels said it was of huge value to the industry because it provided facts where previously there had been only assumptions.

According to Wits Journalism's Professors Anton Harber and Franz Krüger, writing in the preface to the Report, "Disruption in our newsrooms opens up opportunities as it shakes up institutions and leadership which may have become complacent, rigid and defensive. It can also be challenging and punishing, costing jobs, creating fear and uncertainty and sacrificing skills and experience.

"This turmoil is a global phenomenon as newsrooms take on the challenges of new technologies, but it has distinct local characteristics, particularly because of the on-going demands of social and political transformation needed to create a media which can best serve democracy and deal with the legacies of apartheid. State of the Newsroom aims to provide research that will inform and stimulate those engaged in these challenges."

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