

# Journalists and their codes

Understandings and criticisms from a  
South African perspective

Marenet Jordaan



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In today's converged media environment journalists face new challenges but their essential mission of staying loyal, first and foremost, to the truth and to the needs of their audience remains constant.

(Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021:8)

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The Press Council, the Press Ombud and the Appeals Panel are an **independent co-regulatory mechanism** set up by the print and online media to provide impartial, expeditious 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, over the editorial content of publications.

[Press Code](#)[Rulings](#)[Make a Complaint](#)[Constitution](#)

The Council is the custodian of this Code and may amend it from time to time. The print and online media industry believes in independent co-regulation involving exclusively representatives of the media and representatives of the public because it is the only way that the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of the press and other media guaranteed in the Constitution of the Republic can be truly exercised. Any other form of regulation would threaten the independence of the media and freedom of expression.

The Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) was established by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) in 1993 and recognised by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) in 1995 in terms of section 56(2) of the IBA Act 1993 as a formal tribunal. The IBA Act was repealed by the Electronic Communications Act 36 of 2005. The BCCSA is now recognised by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) as a formal tribunal in terms of section 54(3) of Act 36 of 2005.

**INDEPENDENT PANEL REPORT**

# ***Inquiry into Media Ethics and Credibility***

by:

**Judge (retired) Kathleen Satchwell  
Nikiwe Bikitsha  
Rich Mkhondo**

**Commissioned by  
The South African National Editors Forum**

**January 2021**

This Inquiry was commissioned following the events and controversy surrounding the publication and subsequent retraction of a series of stories by the Sunday Times between 2011 and 2016, and the questions raised thereby about reporting, newsroom processes and the stances adopted by a single media house.

Although the Panel's hearings and perusal of submissions revealed some issues specific to the Sunday Times, **what also emerged was a shared set of systemic problems imperilling ethical conduct across the whole media landscape.**

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The Panel was able to use data on complaints submitted to the PCSA and the BCCSA to map public opinions about media failings. The majority of these complaints related to the failure to follow up stories; **truth, accuracy and fairness**; the **right of reply**; the handling of protected comment; and the use of **misleading** page furniture (headings and captions).

(Satchwell, Bikitsha & Mkhondo, 2021:10)

# Selected recommendations from the Satchwell report (on ethics and standards)

- Initiate awareness campaigns that underscore the value of ethical journalism
- Consider aligning the sanctions of the Press Council with those of the BCCSA
- Keep experts on specific topics and fact-checkers “on retainer”
- Use an “ethical reporting checklist” before awarding journalistic prizes
- Establish guidelines on the tension between “right of reply” and not publishing “outlier opinions contrary to verified facts, particularly in the areas of science and medicine”
- Establish an internal ombudsman at all media outlets and ensure they have sufficient authority





## 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 in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at  
Stellenbosch University*

Supervisor: Dr Marenet Jordaan

March 2024



Nicolene Louw



Nicolene is die uitvoerende regisseur van RSG se nuus- en aktualiteitsprogramme, Monitor, Spektrum, Brandpunt, Kommentaar en Naweekaktueel. Dis die eerste keer dat 'n vrou dié pos beklee. Nicolene het in die Kaap grootgeword, maar het diep wortels in Namakwaland in die Noord-Kaap. Sy het haar Nasionale Diploma in Joernalistiek en B.Tech-graad in joernalistiek aan die destydse Skiereilandse Technikon in Bellville verwerf, en beskik oor 'n meestersgraad in joernalistiek van Stellenbosch Universiteit se Department Joernalistiek. Nicolene het 28 jaar gelede haar loopbaan by Media 24 in Kaapstad begin, en het sedertdien haar merk gemaak in die uitsaaiewese en gedrukte media. Sy was voorheen ook die uitvoerende regisseur van *Fokus* op SABC 2, en het groot lof vir haar voorgangers, Freek Robinson en Foeta Krige, wat sy as haar rolmodelle in televisie en radio beskryf. Sy hou van reis en bly fiks deur saam met haar kinders aan staptogte deel te neem.

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.

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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.

(Louw, 2024)



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.

**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.

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.**



# Worlds of Journalism

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## WJS 2021 - 2023 Mapping journalism's hostile environment

The third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study is currently underway. Researchers from more than 120 countries are surveying representative samples of journalists, this time focusing, among other topics, on journalists' safety, deteriorating editorial freedom, influences on news production, the impact of technology, and increased precarization of journalistic labor. First results will be available in early 2024.

## How strongly do you agree with the following statements about how journalists respond to ethical problems?

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by <b>professional standards</b> regardless of situation and personal judgment	12.8%	7.6%	79.6%
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards <b>unless extraordinary circumstances</b> require disregarding them	22%	14.8%	63,3%
What is ethical for journalists should <b>depend on each specific situation</b>	52.9%	16.3%	30.7%
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of <b>personal judgment</b>	77.1%	14.4%	8.5%



**Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?**

	<b>Not approve under any circumstances</b>	<b>Justified on occasion</b>	<b>Always justified</b>
Claiming to be somebody else	66.7%	32.7%	0.7%
Using hidden recording devices	28.7%	69%	2.3%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	23.1%	71%	5.9%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	27.5%	69.2%	3.3%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	53.1%	46.6%	0.3%
Paying people for confidential information	81%	19%	-
Accepting money from sources	99.3%	0.7%	-
Accepting a free product or service from sources	73.9%	25.8%	0.3%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	86.5%	13.2%	0.3%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	87.6%	12.1%	0.3%

# Thank you!

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