

Transparency and trust: newsroom policies

South Africa



March 2023

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1. Executive summary

Code for Africa (CfA) has undertaken this analysis of editorial policies in newsrooms in South Africa to gauge whether existing newsroom policies adequately address transparency in their operations. By analysing the policies, we also look at the media's susceptibility to 'capture' by foreign state actors.

One definition of media capture refers to 'a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own, nor able to exercise their main function, notably of informing people. Instead, they have persisted in an intermediate state, with vested interests, and not just the government, using them for malign purposes.'¹ While this might be overstating it for most South African media, which is in general strongly independent, it does speak to potential vulnerabilities which have the potential to be exploited by bad actors.

a. Summary of key findings

- Less than half of newsrooms in this sample declared their ownership and management structures on their websites.
- None of the newsrooms we sampled had a policy guiding or declaring their use of AI (artificial intelligence) or synthetic media.
- Out of the 30 newsrooms, only 12 listed their senior editors, editors-in-chief or equivalent decision makers.
- Two out of 30 newsrooms do not have contact pages.

b. Recommendations

Best practice policy templates. Our analysis shows significant gaps in clear newsroom policies that are also of importance to have available to audiences. We recommend that CfA and SANEF co-create templates of best practice policies which can be adapted by newsrooms to match their requirements.

Newsroom adoption of an AI policy. Use of AI in newsrooms is relatively new, but already plays a significant role in newsroom operations. It is deployed in areas such as recommendation of stories to readers, text to speech, and identification of media to accompany stories. However, this is happening without appropriate policies to guide the deployment of AI, or understanding the effect the technology is having in shaping the narrative. This report recommends the development of policies to guide AI use in news.

Media organisations should simplify the process to file complaints and pursue corrections by readers. While this study has found that there has been a deliberate effort among some media organisations to make their policies public, only a minority have made clear to their audiences the avenues to complain about coverage and to pursue corrections. Aside from the effect it has on eroding

¹ [Media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own](#) In the service of power, Media capture threat to democracy, CIMA 2017

trust in media, uncorrected errors have left media houses battling defamation cases and facing heavy costs.

2. Background and context

South African media's ranking on the press freedom index, as well as trust data from South African media research such as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Digital News Reports (Reuters DNR), paints a relatively positive picture of the landscape. The country has the highest ranking press freedom on the continent, according to the Reporters Without Borders 2022 Press Freedom Barometer.² The 2022 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Digital News Report (Reuters DNR)³ indicated that trust in South African media had increased by 9pp to 61% - second only to Finland at 69% and matching Portugal, while the average for the 46 markets that feature in the research is at 42%.

However, this same research said that only 44% of respondents said that the media is free from business and political influence. Adding to that, concern about misinformation and 'worry about identifying the difference between what is real and fake on the internet when it comes to news' is higher in Africa (74%), with the global average at 58%. The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer⁴ indicates that trust in government declined by 4pp to 22%, whereas media stayed the same at 41%.

The 2023 Reuters DNR is due to be published in June, but our early access to a draft version reveals that, after four years of growth when trust in news in South Africa grew from 49% to 61%, 2023 has shown a decline. (The report is embargoed until June 2023.) South African media needs to take immediate steps to reverse this decline, and increased transparency and availability of editorial policies is a key part of this.

3. Methodology

This research covers a sample of 30 media organisations in South Africa. The study was conducted between February and March 2023 and focused on mostly national media houses that publish in English. The range covers broadcast, print and online media. We have included only entities that have a newsroom and publish their news at a regular interval.

To conduct this research, CfA used a combination of analysis from our internal CivicSignal MediaData analysts, in tandem with a survey of senior editors who are members of the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF), to determine whether the newsrooms have the editorial policies that we tracked. SANEF is a non-profit membership organisation for editors, senior journalists and journalism trainers in South Africa.

The CivicSignal MediaData team checked the websites of the selected news organisations for the presence of the following policies:

²[Index | RSF 2022](#)

³[Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022](#)

⁴[2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report](#)

- Privacy policy
- Copyright Declaration
- Contact page
- Corrections page or a corrections policy,
- Complaints page,
- Ownership structure
- Management structure
- Declaration of editorial staff, including editor-in-chief or similar decision makers
- Public-facing editorial guidelines
- Ethics policy
- AI and synthetic media policy
- Link / declaration of adherence to the South African Press Code

Five of the organisations are print, six are television, six are radio, while 13 are online organisations. As a note, all of the brands we surveyed also publish their news online.

To identify the policies, we searched each platform's relevant webpages for the keywords 'editorial policy' or 'editorial guidelines' as well as related keywords like 'code of conduct' and 'newsroom guidelines'.

We also clicked through the various pages of the websites looking for any that contained any of the policies that were the focus of this research.

A questionnaire was sent out via SANEF to senior editors and newsroom managers. The findings from the questionnaire have been cross-referenced with the findings of our own research.

4. Presentation and analysis of findings

The operations of the media - what they publish, how and when - are guided by both internal and legal policies and codes. Editorial policies govern all the editorial content and staff in the various media platforms. The policy is an overarching document that directs issues of policy, professionalism, and the operations and administration of the newsroom.

Other areas stipulated by the policies include journalistic conduct in the field, journalists' relationship with sources, and their use of privileged information. Making these policies available and accessible to audiences is key in promoting transparency, accountability and ethical journalism, and bolstering trust in journalism.

For South Africa, we also compared the list of top 10 most-trusted brands as determined by the 2022 Reuters Digital News Report and the number of policies each had. We found that the ranking of top 10 most trusted media brands correlated with a high number of editorial policies in place, except for eNCA and EyeWitness News (EWN).

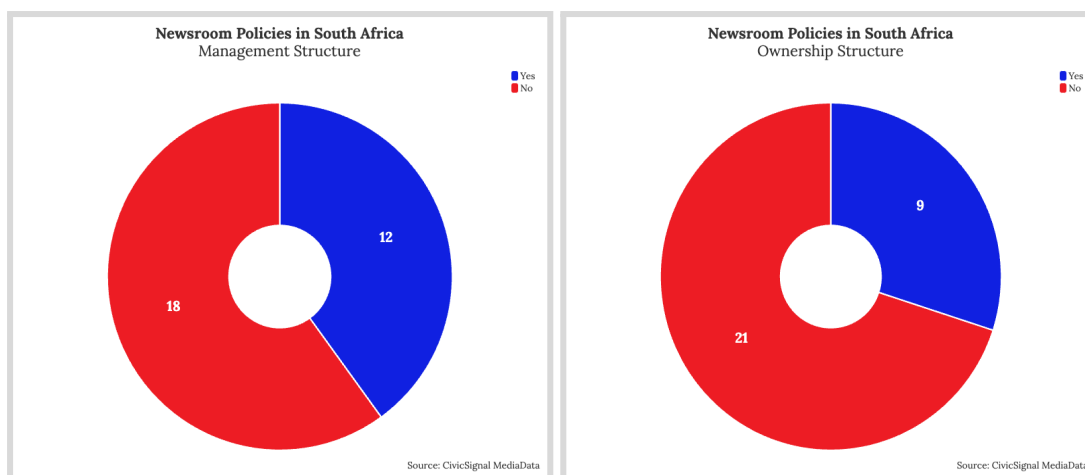
Media Entity	Ranking on DNR 2022	Number of editorial policies
News24	1	8
eNCA	2	2
SABC News	3	7
Sunday Times	4	7
Mail & Guardian	5	11
TimesLive	6	7
Citizen	7	7
EyeWitness News	8	3
City Press	9	8
Daily Maverick	10	7

Two of the respondents to the survey gave further feedback to indicate that the policies exist within their newsrooms, but are only available on the intranet and are not public documents. Another newsroom's response said, 'In terms of your newsroom policy survey - some of the areas raised are covered on the about us page on the site but we don't have formal policies written up yet - your list has given me some good direction. With a smaller newsroom it was easier to verbally share what the policies were. So I guess my response is, it's a work in progress.'

a. Ownership and management structure

This data point checked whether a newsroom had a clear explanation of its ownership and management - either by linking to its holding company or a page published online. The sample of 30 newsrooms found that nine were transparent about their management structure by listing the owners of the organisation, or the members of its board of directors online.

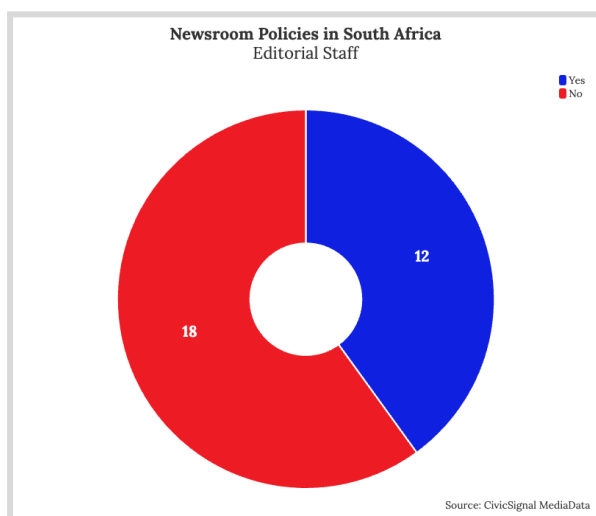
Twelve media organisations had their management structures published or linked to from their websites. The lack of this policy means it's not clear to the public who owns these organisations, and leaves the newsroom open to suspicion and attack when it publishes sensitive investigations. This renders media organisations vulnerable to potential media capture by either politicians or other foreign influences. Moreover, journalists in these media organisations could be seen to be under the editorial influence of their owners, or could apply self-censorship when reports cover their owners.



Eighteen newsrooms did not declare their management structure, and 21 did not declare their ownership structure.

b. Declaration of editorial staff, including editor-in-chief

Just under half of the newsrooms surveyed had listed their editor-in-chief or equivalent decision makers. The declaration of the editorial management would help ensure that it's clear whether editors and journalists wear 'different hats' or might be compromised from a previous role.

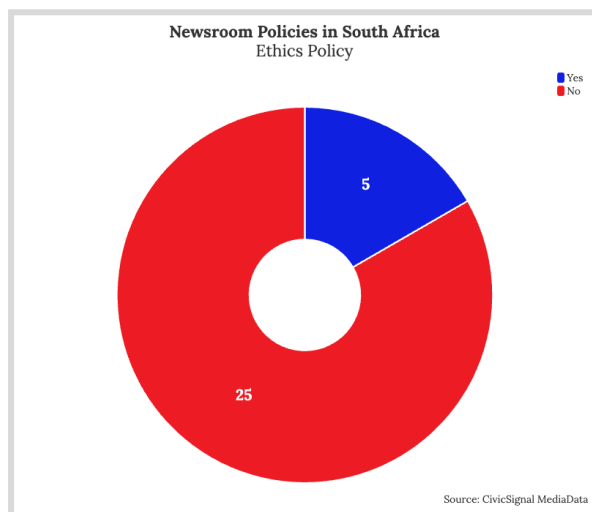


Eighteen out of 30 newsrooms have not listed their editorial managers.

C. Ethics, codes of conduct, gifts and gratuity policies

The majority of newsrooms had an ethics and code of conduct policy in place, mostly in one overarching document. This, together with the agreement to the South African Press Code⁵, offers a strong basis of accountability for newsrooms and journalists. In separate interviews, two newsrooms said the ethics and code of conduct policy was available internally and not published on their site. The Press Code adherence was declared on only 12 out of the 18 surveyed print and online websites, while the Broadcasting Complaints Commission appeared on five out of the 12 broadcasters' websites.

Along with ethics and code of conduct policies', newsrooms should have a well-defined policy to provide a clear guideline on how gifts, travel or training is declared. This would also help prevent journalists falling victim to political or external influence, with gifts or press junkets influencing them to report on a topic in a favourable way. A well-defined policy provides a clear guideline on how influence like this will be treated, and also ensures that any potential conflict is revealed to the reader.



Twenty-five newsrooms did not have an ethics policy available on their websites.

Editorial policies from the three newsrooms that have published the document online, and which we analysed for this study, were explicit about the news organisation's commitment to protecting and upholding public interest and stressed the importance of factual accuracy, fairness and balance.

The policies sampled showed that the newsrooms were particularly insistent that staff working for their outlets remain independent of vested interests or external influences.

As an example, the Mail & Guardian's editorial code of ethics says gifts over the value of R150 cannot be accepted in order 'to avoid an impression of a conflict of interest impacting on the reputation of the news organisation and its staff'.

d. Policy for training, fellowships or professional development

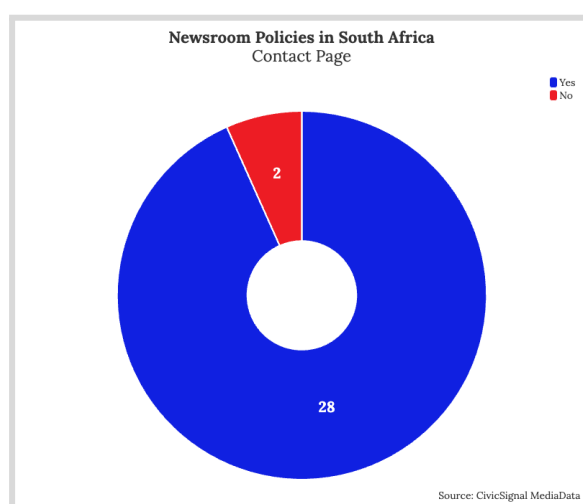
⁵ <https://www.presscouncil.org.za/ContentPage?code=PRESSCODEENGLISH>

This metric establishes whether newsrooms in South Africa have published their policy for training and professional development. Two out of the 30 newsrooms have published their policies. Previous research by CfA established that training and junkets were two ways news organisations in South Africa are rendered vulnerable to foreign influence.

This lack of policy as to who trains newsroom staff means that there could be a ‘return on investment’ expected from the trainers. It would also pre-define which actors they would not accept training from in order to safeguard against possible influence.

e. Ethics policy and code of conduct

The majority of media organisations we surveyed had contact details listed on their site specifically for the newsroom. Having this information in place provides contextual information to its audience and helps protect a newsroom from being operated anonymously from a foreign country.



Two out of the 30 surveyed newsrooms did not have a contact page or contact details for the newsroom.

f. AI and synthetic media policy

None of the newsrooms in South Africa had any publicly visible policy about the use of AI or synthetic media in the production or publishing of their content.

Lack of this policy exposes the media organisations to serious institutional damage as they may not be sure of the intentions of service providers, and may be prone to surveillance which in turn may lead to media capture. Newsrooms are already affected by the algorithms that control AI which determine how and what news gets to the audience, and not declaring where AI is used means that readers have no way of gauging potential bias in reporting.

5. Conclusion

Having policies that are well articulated and accessible to audiences and journalists alike is part of the mechanism that can help insulate news media organisations against attacks on their credibility and sustainability. Not having these in place means newsrooms run the risk of media capture because editorial independence can be compromised by pressure put on journalists by politicians, owners, professional organisations or publishers in the absence of accessible policies. It also makes the newsroom vulnerable to influence manipulation by bad actors who profit from eroding trust in the media.

It is important that we increase the audience's understanding of how journalism works, especially the decision-making and newsgathering processes that shape how the news is made. This will differentiate reputable news organisations from other, less professional sources. While we have used some of the more popular and larger media organisations in South Africa as samples for this study, the media space is quickly transforming and the audience choices switching away from mainstream media to social media, bloggers, or even some partisan media, which sometimes presents themselves as vernacular or community media organisations.

Our recommendations cover areas of support to media houses to develop up to date policies and guiding principles for their operations. Systems that rank the trustworthiness of news sites use AI-driven analysis of a site's structures to score a news organisation's vulnerability to information manipulation. News sites that do not have easily discoverable editorial policies and ownership structures will inevitably score low on these metrics, with a potential knock-on effect on revenue.

The awareness of the existence, variety and nature of accountability measures used by media increases the audience's trust, and news media can improve their relationship with readers by creating and maintaining an infrastructure of accountability practices that is accessible to those looking for it.

As Code for Africa 2021 studies into Media Market Risk Ratings for Kenya and South Africa, co-authored with the Global Disinformation Index, found⁶, 'transparency about a newsroom's operations can be a key mechanism for building online user trust in news sites by dispelling any concerns about conflicts of interest or shadow owners.'⁷

The absence of key operational policies that are easily accessible was highly correlated with sites that were assessed as producing more sensational content, clickbait headlines and stories that negatively targeted groups. 'Similar relationships between a site's operational integrity and the reliability of a site's content emerge from the findings, particularly when sites in the sample were found to have clear correction policies and processes as well as statements of editorial independence.' Implementing and making available operational and editorial policies decreases news organisations' vulnerability to information manipulation and erosion of trust.

⁶ [Disinformation Risk Assessment](#): The Online News Market in Kenya, Global Disinformation Index, 2021

⁷ [Media Market Risk Ratings: South Africa](#), Global Disinformation Index, Amanda Strydom, 2021

Code for Africa (CfA) is an ecosystem builder. It is the continent's largest network of non-profit civic technology and open data laboratories in 22 African countries. CfA builds digital democracy solutions that give citizens unfettered access to actionable information that empowers them to make informed decisions, and that strengthens civic engagement for improved public governance and accountability. This includes building infrastructure like the continent's largest open data portals at openAFRICA and sourceAFRICA. CfA incubates initiatives as diverse as the africanDRONE network, the PesaCheck fact-checking initiative, the machine-learning research and analysis lab at CivicSignal, the iLAB disinformation investigative team, and the sensors.AFRICA air quality sensor network. CfA also runs one of Africa's largest skills development initiatives for digital journalists, and seed funds cross-border collaboration.

CivicSignal is Africa's largest non-profit media monitoring/mapping initiative that uses machine learning/natural language processing tools for 'AI' analysis of media content across the continent. CivicSignal's analysis includes mapping media ownership and understanding the underlying media economy that shapes online content.

Its products, MediaCloud (for tracking content) and MediaData (for tracking media ownership) are regularly used by development agencies and regulators to develop intervention strategies.

The African Data and Democracy Observatory (ADDO) is a member-driven voluntary network of independent watchdog CSOs that use cutting-edge digital analysis and forensic research to better understand influence operations that seek to subvert or usurp public discourse across Africa.

ADDO was originally co-founded by the continent's largest civic technology and open data non-profit, Code for Africa (CfA), in partnership with the Atlantic Council's global Digital Forensic Lab (DFRLab) and the DT Institute in 2020 to help coordinate their ongoing research into foreign disinformation and propaganda campaigns that targeted an initial 21 sub-Saharan African countries.

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This research was developed by Code for Africa. The project was facilitated by funding from the Thomson Reuters Foundation in line with its commitment to advance media freedom, foster more inclusive economies, and promote human rights through its unique services; news, media development, free legal assistance and convening initiatives. However the content of this report is not associated with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Thomson Reuters, Reuters or any of its affiliates. The Thomson Reuters Foundation is an independent charity registered in the UK and US and is a separate legal entity from Thomson Reuters and Reuters.

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