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# SMS's at the Public Broadcaster to control editorial decision-making

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# SMS's at the Public Broadcaster to Control Editorial Decision-Making

**Lydia-Anne Plaatjies**

**A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Journalism and Media Studies**

**Johannesburg, May 2012**

# DEDICATION

**This study is dedicated to my soul mate, Daniel Plaatjies, and my children, Danelle and Lidian, I love you.**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**This study would like to acknowledge the following people:**

My supervisor, Dr Last Moyo and all the respondents - Thanks for sharing your experiences. For editorial assistance, Tebogo Brock, and Leandre Roman, I thank you and those that gave advice, support and read my course work, THANKS!

# DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

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Of

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# ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| ANC | African National Congress |
| ANC-led government | African National Congress led government |
| SABC JHB TVN | South African Broadcasting Corporation Johannesburg Television Newsroom |
| SMS | Short message systems (SMSs) |

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# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 Introduction

Broadcasting in South Africa consists of public, community and commercial broadcasting. All broadcasting organisations are either licensed or obligated to be licensed, albeit for commercial, community or public interests. The public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the focus of this study, provides public broadcasting services in the form of electronic, television and radio services. These public services have both a national and regional coverage. The regional coverage allows the SABC to broadcast in the specific regional or provincial languages of the country.

According to the 2010 Annual Report of the SABC,

> *At the core of public service broadcasting is the provision of news and current affairs programmes. In this regard, SABC News enjoys freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence as enshrined in the Constitution. The Division is the content provider for all news and current affairs programmes carried by the SABC's Radio, Television and Digital Media platforms.*

Freedom of expression is guaranteed and protected in the constitution. The SABC as public broadcaster of South Africa plays a dominant role in setting the media agenda to determine the public debate. Accordingly, the SABC offer programmes that contribute to and draw on the diversity of the people. The programmes do this by using, interviews and other content formats (packages and vox pops) which take into account the eleven (11) official languages, the different cultures, gender and various historical marginalised groups such as those living with disabilities groups. Editors in the SABC newsroom are obligated to practice the highest level of ethical standards at all times and this need to be reflected in the news and current affairs stories. As the public broadcaster, the SABC is obligated to provide news and local programme in the public interest. Given the nature of public interest, editorial independence forms the basis for all news production decision-making in the SABC. However, the SOS Coalition (2011:9) has reported that the SABC has experienced a range of problems such as:

> *Court findings of political factionalism and bias affecting decisions in respect of news and information programme that are contrary to the SABC's editorial policies, it's Charter as set out in legislation, and the public interest, arising out of the so-called "Blacklisting Saga" and rulings such as the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) on news reports.*

The time period of this study, that is, November 2008 until April 2009 was determined by two inter-relating factors. The first factor was the highly polarised political climate in the country, particularly within the ruling ANC, leading up to the national and provincial elections of April 2009. The second factor was the climate of instability at the SABC. The public broadcaster experienced multiple resignations by board members, and it was going through a crippling financial crisis (refer to annexure: News Clippings). These two factors impacted on the relationship between the government and the public broadcaster. The ANC, as the ruling majority party within government, however has always been accused of being biased and interfering in the news decision-making process at the SABC.

This chapter outlines the research context of the study, research problem statement, questions that informs and directs the data collection, and the significance of this study.

## 1.1 Background to the study

During the period November 2008 to April 2009, South Africa was preparing for its general elections which were held in April 2009. The South African Broadcasting Corporation Television Newsroom in Johannesburg (SABC JHB TVN) reported on the different events during this study period that influenced the public debate regarding the elections.

The SABC, by the Board, editorial teams, journalists from other news houses, unions and the general public, have blamed political interference for compromising the editorial quality relevance, balance and fairness at the public broadcaster. The claim has been made that officials aligned to the ANC-led government involved in communication to and with the media, especially the SABC, however have publicly denied these accusations (Eyewitness News, 2009; Mail & Guardian Online2011 and the Freedom of Expression, 2010).

In 2009 SABC Board members at a parliamentary committee meeting blamed the ANC for the troubles at the SABC. One board member revealed the following: “I rue the day I agreed to serve on this board. Now we’ll just have to be honest about the political meddling. We were in a difficult position from the start and constantly had to look over our shoulders,” News 24, (2009). After the parliamentary meeting one board member in an interview said that: “Phone calls and demands made to board members … I was shocked by the ANC’s meddling,” News 24, (2009). In November 2008 a media freedom advocacy organisation, the Media Institute of South Africa, released a statement saying: “Some of the SABC workers reported having been sent SMS and having been called by political party representatives, threatening them and forcing them to report favourably towards certain political parties,” The Times (2008). Over the past years there has been a call for a media tribunal in South Africa. The Mail & Guardian Online (2010) reported that a media tribunal would “move towards state intervention and control of the media”. Political pressure as opposed to journalistic integrity has always been questioned at the

SABC, particularly with regard to undue political influence, censorship and the blacklisting of political commentators during 2006 and 2007.

An editor within the SABC responded in the following manner when asked about the nature of editorial power in the SABC newsroom (Arndt, 2007 p.: 64):

> "*[Editors] are appointed without power at the SABC. That's the problem also. You will often be told, 'when you come in you do a, b and c' – and then when you come in you can't do anything. You are just there to be abused by whoever is in power. They just want someone [to be blamed] when something goes wrong… You see, the place is very coded in that way. A lot of what can really be done is hidden. People aren't always clear about what they can do. And it happens at the different layers.*"

This implies that when editors are employed at the SABC they are instructed on what to do, how to do it and when to do it. The statement, by implication, also means that the decision-making process from news gathering, production and broadcasting is controlled from outside the editorial team and the newsroom. The rule of practice is that the editors are appointed by senior news management and with this appointment comes newsroom functions and responsibilities. The statement that the 'the *place is very coded in that way'* suggests that there is a certain culture within the newsroom that editors need to abide by, but that it is not clear what the '*code'* is or how it is determined. Kovach (2005) argues that the role of journalists is more than just keeping us informed:

> *"…journalism enables us, as citizens, to have our voices heard in the chambers of power and allows us to monitor and moderate the sources of power that shape our lives"* (Technology section, para.1).

The role of journalists' role is also to inform and explain to the public the dynamics of the political-economy of the state, developments within the market economy and the political and executive management of government, party and state. The considered view is that democracy cannot prosper without media freedom. Kovach (2005) goes on to argue that the:

> "*Ways in which information is being controlled by people and institutions of power become more sophisticated by the day. Those who hold power realize that the success of their economic plan or political programme depends on their ability to get the majority of people to see the world in their terms"* (Power section para. 8)

Digital communication with SABC editors and journalists in the form of SMS was a practice used by various people inside and outside the corporation. Previously, communication within the SABC and specifically the newsroom was via facsimile, telephone calls, emails, and at times briefing notices. The introduction of communication

via mobile technology through SMS brought profound changes and challenges to communication in the newsroom, including transmission of news-worthy story lines to be explored and messaging to the editors, journalists and other functionaries within the newsroom.

## 1.2 Research Problem

Mobile phones are dynamic tools that have improved communication including giving voice to marginalised people through citizen journalism. According to Stevenson (2008) text messages are “written communications sent from one cell phone to another cell phone or handheld device” (Text-message section, para. 3). A 2007 Consumer Survey by Statistics South Africa revealed that about 32%of the population, that is about 10 million of South Africans, own mobile phones. South Africa has more than five different mobile phone operators and texting costs less than one South African Rand per text message. Almost everybody with a mobile phone sends text messages. Politicians and journalists have been using this communication tool strategically to communicate with and amongst each other. The SMS received from people with political and management and administrative power outside the SABC, the claim is, has either indirectly or directly influenced how a particular news item with political overtones has to be broadcast, or how a particular news story line was told, and/or whether a news item was postponed or dropped entirely. Oppenheim (1958. p 515) suggests that control, influence and power are often used interchangeably and:

> *"the proposed interpretation of control will lead to the conclusion that control and causation are overlapping categories, for example, that not all causal links between political events are control relationships and -what may seem more startling-that one may have control over someone else's behaviour without actually causing him to behave as he does."*

The control by news editors can therefore be described as professional control, that is, gatekeeping. However, such professional conduct and control are also influenced or constrained by political control.

The use of SMS as a form of communication by the newsroom team not only influences news production and broadcasting, but also editorial behaviour, practices and control. The net-effect of the SMS seems to be that of a tool of gatekeeping. McQuail (1994: p. 213) defines gatekeeping as:

> "*the process by which selections are made in media work, especially decisions whether or not to admit a particular news story to pass through the "gates" of a news medium into the news channels*".

Gatekeepers are those in control of the flow of news information in a media organisation. According to Bruns (2005, p. 12-13) there are three gates in the media process, which can be bypassed:

> "…. *two gates are controlled in news organisations: one at the input stage through which news and information is allowed into the news production process, and one at the output stage through which news reports emerge into the media … the third form of gatekeeping takes place after the publication of the initial news report and relates to audience responses where gatekeeping practices that manifest themselves as letters to the editor are accepted or rejected for publication … these stages apply to traditional print and electronic media, but not to new digital media like the World Wide Web where all three gates kept by news organisations can now be bypassed*".

Bruns (2005) builds on this argument by referring to the process happening at the online phase as gatewatching. During the online phase anyone can publish news worthy information online and users act as their own gatekeepers. During online publications anyone and not only news organisations act as gatekeepers, the question therefor arise: "Who is watching the gates?"

> "*Thus, for the online context gatekeeping may no longer be the most appropriate newsgathering paradigm; instead, it is possible to find new forms of newsgathering*

*which have developed entirely new organisational structures*." Burns (2005) (Gatewatching section, para. 5).

The view is that mobile technologies have influenced the pace, quality and production of news stories. If editors do not control which stories are broadcast they might be accused of being biased. Editors might also broadcast stories that are not factual, including raising questions about the role of the public broadcaster and that of editors in the newsrooms. There is therefore a tension regarding the use of mobile technologies for professional gain versus the use of mobile technologies for political control. In a different way, Herman and Chomsky (1998) argue that distribution of political and economic power contributes to the nature of influence on different publics. Oppenheim (1958. p. 517) argues that:

"*While it seems plausible that to persuade is to influence, and to influence is to control, there seems to be some reluctance to drawing the logical conclusion that persuasion is a form of control … this may be due to the fact that this form of influence is seldom institutionalized, and that in many instances it does not even implicitly refer to the possibility of sanction, while the notion of control is often associated with the use or at least the threat of force" Multi-media technologies improved benefits for news processes, productions and broadcasting, including a systematic influence control over the news collection, production, and editorial and broadcasting practice within the newsroom*".

The SMS as communication tools, according to Reid and Reid (2004), are an opportunity for intimate personal contact, whilst at the same time offering the detachment necessary to manage self-presentation and involvement. It is especially in this form of communication within the context of the gatekeeper that it is often difficult to predict how much power the editors have relative to management in terms of messages received. The gatekeeper control over story decisions is based on a combination of professional, organisational, technological and cultural influences in order to frame and shape news (Schudson, 1989).

Jue, Marr and Kassotakis (2010) argue that the communication landscape is changing – both inside and outside newsrooms because of the convergence between new and old technologies. These changes are applying pressure on an increasingly complex business environment; and evolving and changing workforce demographics. Software technology that enables social connection has created new opportunities to facilitate communication and sharing. It is therefore argued within the study that the utilisation of text message communication as a strategic facility within the news room has led to:

(i) an increased influence and control from the side of people – those in echelons of political power - over news collection, production and broadcasting, thus leading to a situation where independence and autonomy have either been impeded or enhanced;

(ii) tensions and conflict with the editorial teams, journalists and producers, thus resulting in a more contested newsroom;

(iii) management or its various proxies within the newsroom serving as gatekeepers to making possible or constraining, editorial independence and autonomy, including quality news broadcasts.

**1.3 Research Questions**

The main purpose of this study is to analyse the way SMS is used as a tool of control by those with authority and political power to influence and control editorial decision-making at the public broadcaster during the period November 2008 to April 2009. This study argues that the use of text-messaging has not only contributed to the improvement of media processing and broadcasting in the SABC, but also led to increased control over the news production process.

The study argues that

> *SMS as a digital technology contributed to a new form of control in the newsroom, and sending and receiving of SMS made it difficult for news editors to follow proper news decision-making processes and editorial guidelines which impacted on the role of the public broadcaster. This resulted in self-censorship, job insecurity and professional ethical problems for newsroom staffers within the SABC.*

The primary question of the study is to examine:

1. *To what extent was SMS or texting by politicians and officials aligned to the African National Congress (ANC) used to influence the news production process at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)?*

The sub-questions questions are:

a) To what extent was SMS used by politicians and officials used to influence and control the news production process at the public broadcaster?

b) In what manner did SMS influence or interfere with the news production process at the public broadcaster?

c) How did the SMS impact on the news production of the public broadcaster?

## 1.4 Significance of the study

The aim of the study is to establish whether SMS was used by the African National Congress (ANC) aligned government and if so, how it influenced and controlled the decision-making process at the SABC.

The study builds on and contributes to work on mobile communication in the media (Goggin, 2009; James 2008; Thurlow & Poff 2011; Reid & Reid 2004). There are already studies in mobile communication which have examined the role of mobile technology in the advancement of communication and marketing in the media (Otieno 2009; Solomon 2001; Butcher 2010). However, there has not been an extended study of the role of SMS as a communication political tool aimed at controlling the editorial and production processes. As such the study provides additional insights into the use of text-messaging as a form of editorial control for political ends.

**This study therefore:**

a) Examines the role of SMS in the decision-making process in the newsroom;

b) Analyses the impact of the SMS on the decision-making in the newsroom;

c) Comments on the possibility of policy or regulation mechanisms with regard to the use of digital media in the newsroom;

d) Contributes to the body of knowledge that deals with the impact of political control on professional integrity in public broadcasting;

e) Examines how digital technology (SMS) has allowed greater political intervention in the editorial decision-making process in newsrooms; and

f) Shows that digital technology has not always resulted in balanced and objective journalism.

Although numerous studies (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950; McNelly, 1959; Snider, 1967; Bass, 1969; Whitney & Becker, 1982; Bleske, 1991; Shoemaker, 1996 and Bissel 2000) have identified gatekeeping as a means of editorial control, very little analytical attention has been given to the role of text-messaging in gatekeeping.

With the introduction of the world-wide-web the term ‘gatewatching’ has been introduced (Bruns, 2005; Channel, 2010). “Gatewatching complements or, in some cases, entirely supplants traditional journalistic gate*keeping* practices” (Bruns, 2005). The research study examines how mobile telephones and text-messaging are consequently challenging the practices of gatekeeping and gatewatching.

The researcher addresses this issue by demonstrating that text messaging has have played, and continues to play, a definitive influence on how social, economic and political issues and stories are transmitted to the public.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This chapter captured the background, problem, questions and significance of this study.

Digital technologies have changed the landscape for societies and more specifically for the media. Instantaneously news can be broadcast and shared. Digital technologies have the ability to move and control through space and time. Digital technologies (DT) can and do improve and provide new opportunities for communications. However the study argues that digital communication through SMS can also be used as a form of surveillance and control over the public broadcaster, and its editors and journalists.

This study will provide useful information and share experiences of interference innews programmes via digital technology by people with political control / power.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a literature review of text-messages as tools of editorial control within the newsroom. The literature review further shows that the mass media contributes to the behaviour and opinions of the public on a range of social, economic and political issues. The section goes on to locate the public broadcaster as a dominant player in the mass media, given its influential public role and its varied resource base. The SABC is funded by the Government through public funding, advertisers, licence fees and programme sales. This raises the challenge of how media news and programming content is influenced by government because of the transactional funding relations and the challenge of safeguarding freedom of the SABC. The further indirect influence is the government policies and regulations on the content of the SABC. It is within the context of public broadcasting that digital communication tools, such as text messages, are considered. Text messages, the study argues, are used by people with political power as a tool to control the newsroom.

## 2.1 Public Broadcasting

Since its inception in the 1960s, public broadcasting has played a critical role in communicating to, and connecting with, citizens. Public broadcasting's primary role is to present media programmes through radio, television and all electronic media outlets available which must educate, inform, and be inclusive and diverse. In order for the public broadcaster to fulfil these functions, it is necessary to have a society where people's rights, and the media's freedom and independence are protected that the news and current affairs programmes from a public broadcaster. Curran (2000) alludes to this by arguing that countries with democratic principles make it easy for the media to facilitate open and free public debate.

Media independence is enshrined in the policy framework of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) which also guarantees freedom of expression. The 1999 Broadcasting Act 4, of South Africa states, that SABC services are owned and controlled by South African citizens. The Act identifies core values and specific policies for News and Current Affairs programmes. The Act also confirms the independence of the public broadcaster. The public broadcaster thus represents the news and current affairs interests of the citizens of South Africa. This understanding obligates the upholding of legislative frameworks, core values and policies in news and current affairs programme of the public broadcaster.

The SABC has newsrooms that provide news via radio, television and online platforms. In some areas of South Africa, the SABC is the only source of news and information – and in many others - the only media in the community's home language. As such, it plays an omnipotent role in public information.

The public broadcaster has a complex relationship with political power and government. Board members are selected through public nominations and appointed by the President of the country. Government also contributes to the funding of the public broadcaster.. It is this complex relationship that can have a negative impact on the operations of, and the news and current affairs products by, the public broadcaster.

Mendel (undated) argues that "*despite its importance, independence is a key problem in many countries as governments seek to assert control over public broadcasters for their own ends"*. In terms of the content of news programmes, if independence is not upheld and there is interference, the diversity and inclusiveness of programmes will be affected. As a result, the constitutional and institutional autonomy of the public broadcaster will be undermined. According to Mendell, (undated) there are three different tensions that challenge the role of the public broadcaster: "…*independence from government, the principle that the public broadcaster must be accountable to the public and the need for adequate, stable funding to allow for quality programme*".

A March 2008 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study (*Between TRUST and SCEPTICISM: public confidence in institutions)* showed that since 2003 the SABC was consistently ranked the second most trusted institution. Seventy-two per cent of those surveyed mentioned that they trusted or strongly trusted the public broadcaster. This compared with churches, which were trusted by 82 per cent of respondents, while 68 per cent of those surveyed expressed confidence in the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and 59 per cent in national government. Notwithstanding this the SABC has over the years been marred by controversies, and has often been the subject of news reports rather than just a producer and broadcaster of news. Some of the controversies at the public broadcaster have arisen as a result of the involvement of the government.

The involvement of the government at the SABC is broadly within three contexts: management, funding and content. At a management level, the government appoints the board of directors at the broadcaster. This can, however, pave the way for interference if the government appoints officials who are sympathetic to the ruling party (ANC) policies in key structures such as the board of the corporation. At a content level, the intervention refers to the direction given regarding the editorial treatment of news and current affairs. These interventions can affect the institutional autonomy of the public broadcaster if the broadcaster's constitutional mandate is not taken into account. At the third level, government is a major contributor towards the funding framework of the public broadcaster and can direct how funds are allocated.

Public media experience different kinds of pressures and are best served if they develop a reputation for independence that wins public trust and sustains political support (Curran, 2000). The challenge for the SABC is to produce news and current affairs programmes that are independent from power structures of management within the SABC and from government. Such a practice ought to facilitate social confidence and trust. Kovach (2005) however warns journalists about challenges to their role brought about by the development of digital technologies:

> *"To meet this challenge journalists must aggressively expose self-serving propaganda. When they don't, citizens who depend on our credibility become disillusioned. The public—all of us—are ignorant of many things, but we are not stupid. Sooner or later, citizens recognize when journalists fail to ask the right questions at the right time to hold a public official responsible or expose private corruption that threatens their welfare. In this era of unlimited producers, when we fail to do our job, why should the public stick with us? Why shouldn't people turn to a more exciting source, one that agrees with their prejudices, even if they can't necessarily trust the integrity of the work?" (Challenge for journalist section para. 10)*

Journalists, therefore, have to be vigilant and take responsibility when it comes to the content mandate of the public broadcaster. The credibility of journalists is at stake if they don't tell true stories that reflect independence, balance, diversity and education in

the interest of the public debate. When "*credibility questions are raised, this affects the participation in public debate, which in turn will undermine intelligent and rational public debate"* (Curran, 2000). The net-effect is that public debates facilitated and produced by the broadcaster can become less relevant and important, leading to the loss of viewers in the news and current affairs programmes.

### 2.1.1 The notion of newsrooms

The newsroom is considered the physical and virtual space where various operators within news processing, production and broadcasting gather to make editorial decisions. It is within the newsroom, as a virtual space, where news stories are planned, processed, written, edited and prepared for broadcasting. The newsroom comprises a range of functionaries with different, but complimentary responsibilities and interests. The functions within the newsroom comprise of news resources**;** news sourcing; process and inputs; news production and quality material checks and outputs; editorial systems and practices; and finally, broadcasting. The size of the newsrooms depends on the output of the media facility. Bennet (1982) suggests that media institutions have the same attributes as large-scale industrial organisations with hierarchical structures; internal division of labour; and role differentiation. The argument is that within media institutions there are specified institutional goals, translated into specific policies and organisational practices with clear lines of communication and accountability structures.

### 2.1.2 Editorial practices in the newsroom

Freedom of speech in democratic societies enables space and diverse voices in society to participate in and influence public debate through the media. The independence of the media as guaranteed by the South African constitution is therefore fundamental to the operations in a newsroom. Editors are guided by editorial policies when covering a story. Editorial policies confirm the important role the media play in society. This role therefore demands a service that can be trusted by its audience. The information disseminated via the newsroom to the public needs to be informative and educational. Mass media exercise a powerful and persuasive influence which requires an ideology that is committed to values such as objectivity, impartially and fairness.

## 2.2 Theories of control

Control is understood to be the ability to purposefully direct, or suppress change in order to exercise authority or have a dominating influence over someone or something. Theories about control in the media relate to practices inside and outside the newsroom. It is argued in this research paper that the control inside the newsroom is professional control, and those who want to control the public broadcaster from outside the newsroom exercise political control. A number of theories, such as the agenda-

setting theory identifies factors that influence or impact on the media agenda from outside, while gatekeeping deals with news processes in the newsroom. The decision-makers or editors in the newsroom are referred to as gatekeepers.

Gatekeeping is rooted in a combination of professional, organisational, technological and cultural influences in order to frame and shape news (Schudson, 1989). The term gatekeeping was first coined by a German social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, in 1947 and later duplicated in different media, criticized and built on by White, (1950); McNelly, (1959); Snider (1967); Bass, (1969); Whitney & Becker (1982); Bleske (1991); Shoemaker, (1996) and Bissel, (2000). Gatekeeping challenges the gathering, filtering and distribution of news. Shoemaker et al. (2001, p. 235) describes gates as "decision points at which items may be stopped or moved from section to section or channel to channel".

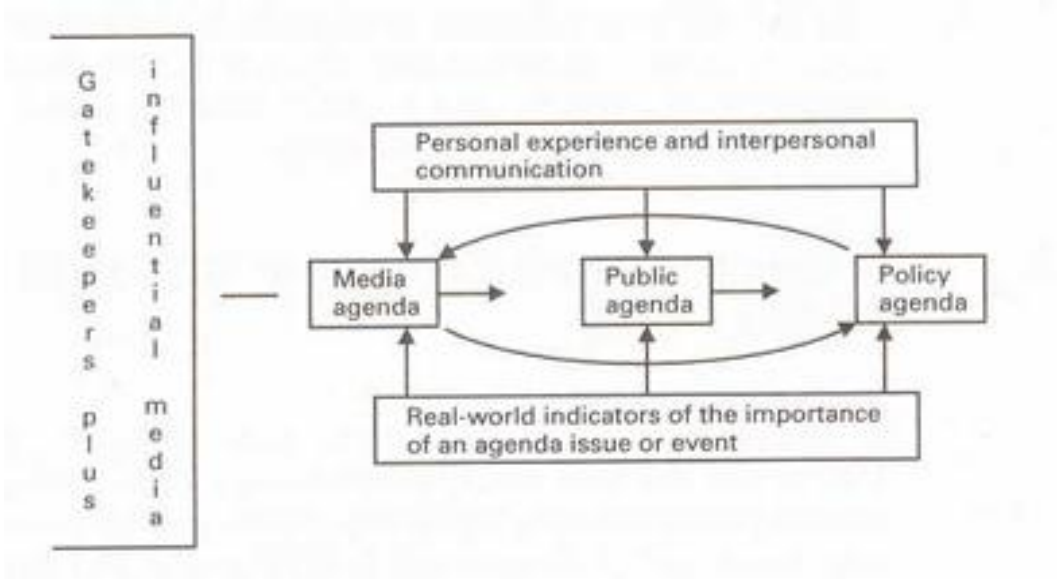
News comes from different sources and news editors decide the kind of message they want to present to their audience. The tension is when the editor as the one with the professional power, that is the gatekeeper, is presented with a message from those with political power. It is, however, difficult to predict how much power gatekeepers have, including the power to decide what message goes out. The precarious situation that editors might find themselves in is aptly explained by Herman and Chomsky (1999, p22):

> *"the powerful can use personal relationship, threats, and rewards to further influence and coerce the media. … the media may feel obligated to carry extremely dubious stories and mute criticism in order not to offend their sources and disturb a close relationship… It is very difficult to call authorities on whom one depends for daily news liars, even if they tell whoppers"* Herman & Chomsky (1999, p. 22).

The editors need to play the roles of managers and mentors of journalists during news production meetings and must exercise their role as gatekeepers to influence the media agenda.

### 2.2.1 Conceptual model

McQuail & Windahl (1993) presented the following model in the figure below in explaining gatekeeping and its nfluence of the media:




*McQuail and Windahl (1993)*

According to this model gatekeeping and influence of the media formulate the media agenda, which is influenced by personal experiences, the importance of the event and what the policy says. The role the media plays is through gatekeeping that impacts on the "media agenda" that determines and influences the public broadcasting and debate. White (1950) for example noted that "not all that happens in the world gets into the news". Tensions stem from a perception that the media sometimes want to be in "favour of government in order to have access to information...and therefore sometimes editorially distort their reporting to favour government and corporate policies in order to stay in business (Herman and Chomsky, 1999). The contestation happens when those who have the political power want to control, determine and influence the public debate. In the newsroom, stories go through a news process cycle which includes meetings and inputs by various players before the stories are finally broadcast.

Stories enter newsrooms in various ways. How these stories are assigned and inputs develop differ' from newsroom to newsroom. In the SABC newsroom for example, news processing and production starts through a scheduled daily meeting in the morning between the Input Editor – the person responsible for putting the stories on the diary – and different teams of journalists. This is followed by 'a line meeting' – where all the editors are connected via a conference telephone line – with various Input and Output Editors from the regional offices in South Africa. This meeting discusses and make decisions about the various diary stories and assignments for

journalists. The view is that this conventional is that of bidding and bartering about the importance of certain stories over others. The determination of which story is eventually broadcast is based on serving the public interest. The decision making is also influenced sometimes by factors which are only known to editors. It is at this level where journalists are sometimes not aware why their stories are not carried through to the broadcasting point. It is also possible that decisions of which story carries from input to output with eventual broadcasting are influenced by political or economic factors, including what is a practical newsworthy story or what is in vogue at the time.

According to Kovach (2005) journalists need to let their viewers know what the situation is around the story in order to win their trust. Journalists also need to be transparent and “never deceive your audience”. The responsibility of journalists builds on the term coined by Edmund Burke in the late-eighteenth century ‘fourth estate’ which gives the journalist the role of a ‘watchdog’. The term ‘fourth estate’ positions the media as a ‘fourth branch’ of government Burke (1729 - 1797).

This role of ‘watchdog’ is about protecting the public by preventing those in power from overstepping the mark and misusing their power. According to Golding and Murdock (1997) a small number of people have “direct impact on the socio-political, economic and cultural concentrations of media organisations, and impacts directly on

the news process". The relationships are further challenged when a newsroom operates according to its profitability. In some cases the unequal distribution of resources results in partial information being given to the public, even though the information that is freely given is true, it may not be complete and balanced representation.

McNelly (1959) introduces the idea of multiple gatekeepers, focusing not only on editors but also reporters, and claims that "reporters at the 'source' of news serve as the first of multiple gatekeepers between a potential news event and ultimate publication". Bass (1969) builds on the gatekeeping theory by introducing "double-action internal newsflow". This "double-action internal newsflow" refers to the difference between news gatherers and different news processes, and the importance of focusing more on news gathering than news processing, as "stories that are not reported will never reach the point where they will be processed" Bass (1969).

In news reporting and professionalism, Soloski (1989 p. 226) argues that "to minimize the potential of conflict, management has established news policies that further limit the professional behaviour of its journalists". Breed refers to control (1955) as set by news policy guidelines. The suggestion is that the news policy is set by the leaders and that it needs to be followed by staffers. The argument by Breed suggests that not all staffers follow the policy automatically and that it is difficult to maintain the implementation thereof. The reasons, Breed, suggest are because of ethical journalistic norms, liberal views and attitudes, and the lack of enforcement by the leadership to follow policy.

Currently there are no policies and regulations within the SABC JHB TVN on the use of mobile phones and SMS as communication tools.

With the introduction of the world-wide-web the term “gatewatching” has been introduced (Bruns, 2005 and Channel, 2010). The mobile phone and text-messaging, consequently, challenge the practices within a news room of gatekeeping and gatewatching. The emerging view from the study is that text-messaging has played a definitive influence on how social, economic and political matters are transmitted to the public, including influences over issues of journalistic practices and editorial controls. Kovach (2005) suggests that:

> *“A journalist standing by the gate—opening it to allow this “fact” to pass through but closing it to other information that has not been verified—looks silly when, on either side of the gate, unfiltered, indiscriminate information is flooding through”.*

The ways of work in the newsroom have changed with the advent of mobile technologies. Stories now enter the newsrooms in multiple ways and the cycle of news processing is influenced by digital technologies. Time, space and location are no longer issues: news and information can now be accessed from almost any location at almost any time.

## 2.3 Political Control

According to Oppenheim (1958. p: 515) control, influence and power are often used interchangeably and “the proposed interpretation of control will lead to the conclusion that control and causation are overlapping categories”. Oppenheim, F.E, (1958, p. 517) elaborates on the nature of control:

> *“While it seems plausible that to persuade is to influence, and to influence is to control, there seems to be some reluctance to drawing the logical conclusion that persuasion is a form of control … this may be due to the fact that this form of influence is seldom institutionalized, and that in many instances it does not even implicitly refer to the possibility of sanction, while the notion of control is often associated with the use or at least the threat of force”*

In a different way, Herman and Chomsky (1999) argue that distribution of political and economic power contributes to the nature of influence on different publics. The question which arises is: who is controlling the agenda of the media?

Some argue that mainstream media are more concerned with telling the stories that favour those who control the performance and the effects within a propaganda model. The propaganda model of Herman & Chomsky (1999) refers to the news media’s dependence on private and governmental news sources. The propaganda theory explores the news agencies that want to be in favour of government in order to

have access to information. News media sometimes editorially alter their reporting to favour government and corporate policies in order to stay in business, Herman and Chomsky (1999). This results in media control that can curtail press freedom which in turn can threaten democratic principles.

## 2.4 Digital technology

Mass media uses different platforms such as television, print, radio, internet and multi-media technologies to tell news stories. Digital technologies have improved operations within the media, especially in electronic broadcasting. Digital technologies impact on the functions of the press and offer greater news broadcasting choices. Digital technologies have also increased the pace, quality and production of news stories, resulting in new markets and audiences that can access information. However these technologies demand different and improved ways of working from those currently used within newsrooms.

Kovach (2005) suggests that the changes that digital technologies brought about demand from editors, because of the critical role they play, to develop a newsroom culture that “rewards critical thinking and discourages and exposes dishonest behaviour”. Kovach (2005) confirms that the role of the editor did not change because of all the new digital technologies and that this “includes after-the-fact quality control”. The challenge for the newsroom is then to maintain high standards and “embrace forward-

looking quality-assurance practices" and that the "criticism is not so much aimed at finding fault but in learning from the mistakes". The onus therefore rests on the editor for the success or failure of journalists and it cannot be blamed on the digital technology.

Mobile phone technology has changed the way people communicate with and amongst each other. There are more mobile subscriptions than personal computers, landlines and televisions combined in South Africa. Otieno (2009, p. 19) suggests that "Nearly everybody with a mobile phone in Africa can text, a fact that has already made the SMS very popular and a key driver of the mobile networks' revenues". The argument is that almost anybody who has a cell phone can send or receive messages by using the keyboard on the phone to type a message and send it to the relevant person. The concept "text–messaging" is used for messages that are no longer than 160 characters according to the "father of text messaging", Hillebrand (1984). This is the most widely used data application in the world, with 2.4 billion active users, or 74% of all mobile phone subscribers. The widespread use of this digital technology amongst the general public is mirrored by its use within newsrooms. Most journalists possess and use one or more mobile phones, giving them instantaneous and direct access to each other. This technology also makes the newsroom accessible to people outside the broadcaster.

Thurlow and Poff (2011) argue that "whether or not any mechanical feature of any technology presents as a communicative constraint or opportunity, however, invariably depends on the user and on the context of use". For example, unlike a direct phone call,

a text message relies on the receiver to choose to engage with the message. A receiver of a text message can ignore text but not really a direct phone call. The question therefore is: where does the power lie - with the sender or the receiver? What if the receiver claims that he or she never received the message from a sender?

Notwithstanding the improved benefits to news gathering processes, production and broadcasting, mobile technologies have progressively influenced practices and behaviour within the newsroom. More specifically, these technologies have contributed to tensions and conflict within and between the various processes and structure from sourcing a story to final broadcasting of the story. It is therefore argued that:

(i) mobile communication has contributed to the improvement of media processing and broadcasting,

(ii) the use of mobile communication has led to increased control over the news production process and journalists within the newsroom, and

(iii) the use of mobile communication has influenced the way people in the newsroom communicate with and amongst each other.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The literature review of this research study focused on public broadcasting, theories of control and digital technologies. The theories of control are considered to understand the case study (SABC Newsroom) and the role of SMS in the newsroom. This chapter argues that the public broadcaster has a very important role to play in society and that there are certain values, policies and mandates which guide and legislate this role. Media freedom and independence of the public broadcaster are protected in legislative frameworks and in the Constitution of South Africa. The role of the public broadcaster is therefore to protect media freedom. This protection of media has the added-value of a free independent media and active citizenship, given the public broadcaster's responsibility to uphold the public interest news and programming in South Africa.

The chapter builds on the understanding of the public broadcaster's newsroom on how it operates and how decisions are made to uphold the legislative framework and the core values of news. The threat is that diversity and inclusiveness of all programmes can be affected which can result in the constitutional autonomy of the public broadcaster to being undermined.

The study positions the role and responsibility of the editor as gatekeeper and mentor of journalists and producers to uphold the editorial policies within the newsroom. The main

responsibility of an editor is to have editorial control in the newsroom and, through its gatekeeping role, to uphold the mandate of the public broadcaster. A story goes through different cycles before it goes out on air or not; all of this constitutes the decision-making process in the newsroom. The decision-making process is influenced by different factors, which can include intervention by those with certain powers. The study further argues that the role of the editor as gatekeeper increased with the introduction of digital technologies. The research question therefore is how those with political power used digital technologies, particularly SMS, to influence the decision-making process in the newsroom.

# CHAPTER 3

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology and shows how the tools used will aid the collection of information that addresses the primary research question. It also explores the case study method within the qualitative paradigm and the tool of semi-structured interviews.

The research required a highly exploratory approach as the objective was to gain an insight into how SMS was used in the SABC JHB TVN. This chapter looks at research ideas and deals with:

a) Case study

b) Semi-structured interviews

This research report explores how the news decision-making process at the SABC was impacted on by the political (outsiders) and institutional (internal management) climate,

through text messaging. The study achieves this goal by using the public broadcaster as the case study, conducting and analysing semi-structured interviews with current and previous SABC employees about their experiences and observations. The process of semi-structured interviews is supported and guided by content analysis of newspaper reports during the study period. (See appendix 3 and 4)

## 3.1 Research design, methodology and data collection

The approach of this study is located with the qualitative method, which according to Powell (1997) is to understand rather than to predict, including the ability to determine: a) how digital technologies contributed to digital surveillance and control in newsroom; b) how SMS control constrained practices of autonomy and editorial independence at the public broadcaster; c) how this control impacted on journalistic practices at the public broadcaster; and d) how the lack of policy impacted on the decision-making process in the newsroom. Lindlof (1995; p: 21) indicates that *"qualitative researchers seek to preserve the form and content of human behaviour and to analyse its qualities, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations.*"

Deacon (1999, p: 270) confirms that the benefits of the qualitative research method are:

a) Research is conducted in the natural setting of social actors as the aim is to describe and understand events within the concrete, natural context in which they occur ;

b) A focus on process rather than outcome;

c) The primary aim is in-depth descriptions and understanding of actions and events in order to understand the events against a background of the whole context and how the context relates to the events;

d) The research process is often inductive in its approach, resulting in the generation of new hypotheses and theories as this approach allows the researcher to describe events as accurately as possible in order to develop a hypothesis and then ultimately a theory that can make sense of the observations which makes objectivity a key feature ;

e) The qualitative researcher is seen as the 'main instrument' in the research approach.

**The Research Design**

The research design comprises a cases study located within the qualitative method. It also includes

a) a literature review on the theory and practice

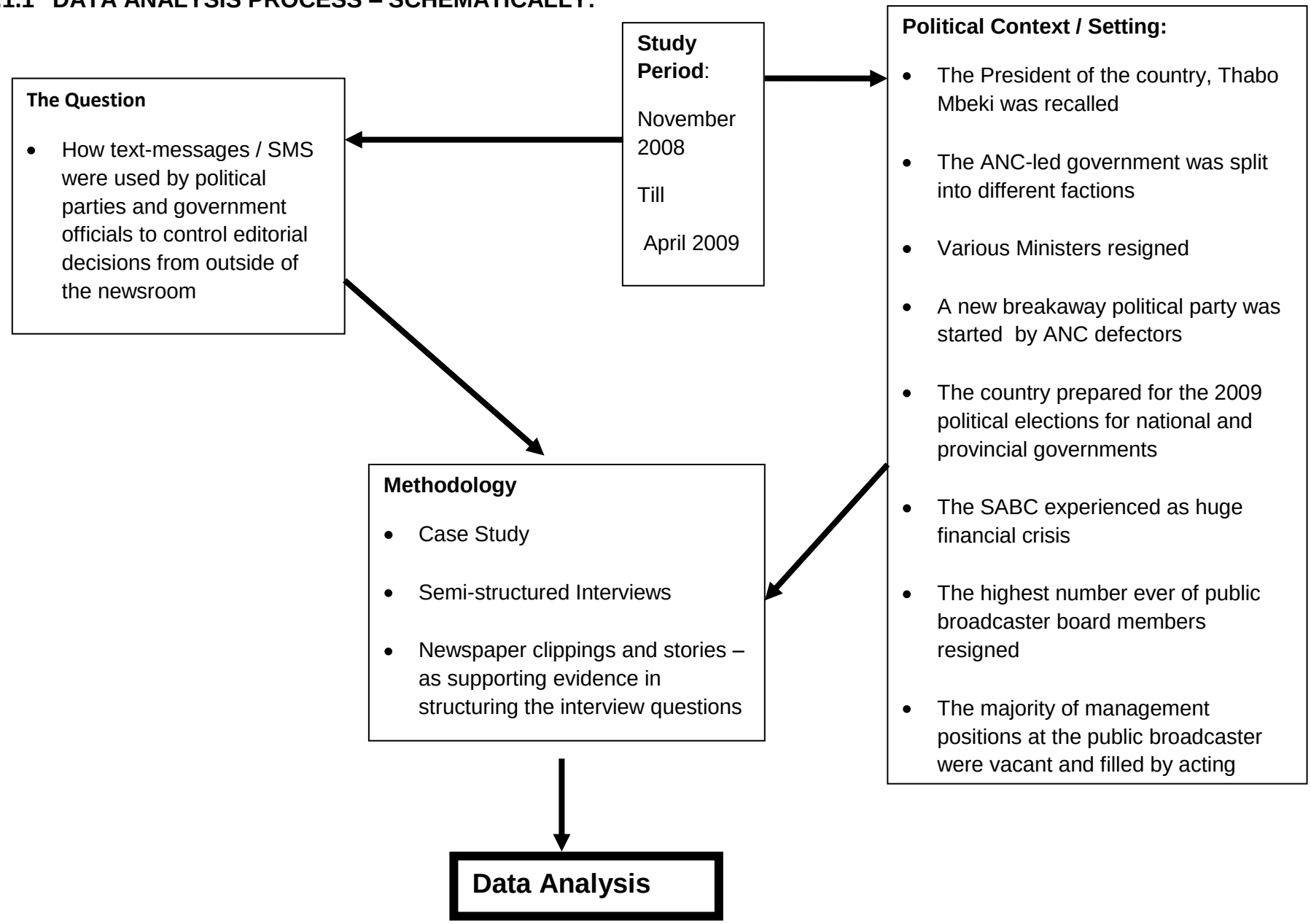
b) content review of the public discourse within commercial newspapers

c) review of the news production cycle in the newsroom

d) interviews, that were semi-structured, with six respondents from the SABC news management and two producers and journalists

Diagram 3.1.1 –Data Analysis Process shows the content issues within the research approach toward analysis

### 3.1.1 DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS – SCHEMATICALLY:



## 3.2 Case Study

The study located in the qualitative research paradigm utilises a case study, the SABC Newsroom, as the unit of research.

A case study is “an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed” (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg, (1991)). Case studies suggest that the researcher observes the characteristics of individuals or persons, neighbourhoods, processes, organisations, events, an entity, or a programme, or a story about something unique, special or interesting Faltis, (1997); Cohen & Manion (1997; p.107); Johnson, (1992); Nunan, (1992); Palena, et al (2006). A case study allows the researcher access to natural context and setting of the phenomenon.

The case study helps to explain the phenomena given that:

a) The data is examined within a specific context;
b) It allows for exploration and the understanding of complex issues;
c) The researcher can go beyond the quantitative statistical results;
d) It is appropriate to the research question;
e) It is possible to record a chain of evidence within this case study; and that
f) It is linked to the theoretical framework: the role of public broadcasters

*“Case studies are multi-perspectival analyses; they give a voice to the powerless and voiceless,* (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg, (1991)). The case study shows a correlation between the semi-structured interviews and analysis of newspaper reports. The newspaper reports were used in the research study to guide the researcher in structuring the interview questions (see appendix 2). The newspaper reports were also used as a record of the public debate during the study period (appendix 3 and 4).

Case studies can explore and investigate current “real-life phenomena through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions, and their relationships” Zainal (2007).

### 3.3 Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews as a tool of data collection were conducted within an open framework, thus allowing respondents to be flexible and conversational. Semi-structured interviews are an efficient and practical way of getting data. According to Durrheim (2006, p. 47) “*qualitative researchers collect data in the form of written or spoken language, or in the form of observations that are recorded in language, and analyze the data by identifying and categorizing themes*”.

A series of five interview questions was produced in order to develop a semi-structured interview. Questions were created during the interview, allowing both the interviewer and the respondent the flexibility to probe for details. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with current and former editors and senior journalists and SABC managers at the JHB SABC TVN. The interview questions were designed around specific news events that happened during the study period. The technique of using newspaper articles was helpful to collect the qualitative data. This technique allowed the researcher to focus on the topic researched. Unlike the questionnaire framework, where detailed questions are formulated ahead of time, the semi structured interview starts off with more general questions. This approach permits flexibility in that new questions are raised as follow-ups to the interviewee's responses where clarity or more details are needed. There is no rigid determination by the researcher. This technique worked as there was not more than one chance to interview respondents. The results of the interview were reflected by identifying and categorising themes. In order to get maximum participation from the interviewees, a confidentiality clause was included and communicated to participants. The interviews with respondents were audio-taped and where necessary, detailed notes were taken.

### 3.3.1 Selection of Respondents

The researcher first selected print media reports of events from and including November 1st 2008 to April 30th 2009 from which to do the study. A selection and content analysis of print media (newspaper) stories regarding different mayors of municipalities during this period made it clear that South African politics was in turbulence. Concurrently, the SABC was embroiled in different challenges and events that were widely published. From the SABC Board level to the newsroom, staff was resigning, and most of the posts at management level were filled by staff in acting positions. It was important to identify respondents who were key role players in the newsroom for in study. The selection in itself presented challenges as some of the potential respondents had left the broadcaster and were thus not readily accessible. In cases of possible respondents who were accessible, either still employed at the broadcaster or at a different organisation, further challenges were experienced. Certain respondents were not prepared to speak about what happened in the newsroom during the study period, as they were scared of criticism and intimidation. The statements from participants and from those who declined to participate made anonymity of the interviewee a key condition of the study. It was of paramount importance to ensure that respondents were not compromised in any way.

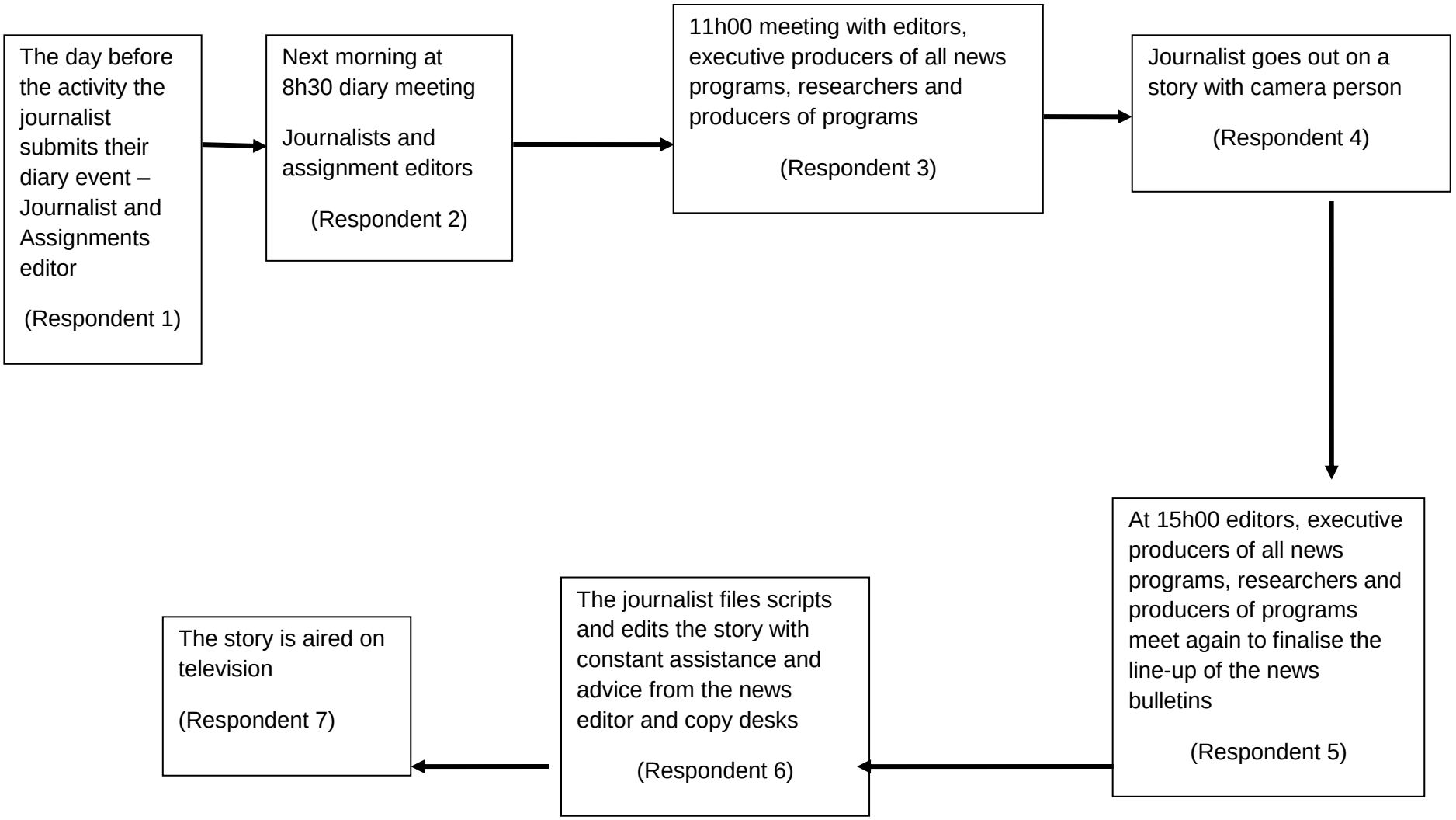
The researcher then studied the news production cycle or process. This process refers to the initialising of a story until it gets on to air. Interviews with different people about the news cycle also helped the researcher identify potential respondents.

Diagram 3.3.3, Selection of Respondents based on the News Cycle, gives a diagrammatic flow of content of the news cycle in the SABC News room.

### 3.3.2 Respondents

Seven (7) possible respondents within the cycle of the news production were identified to participate in the study. Each one of the potential respondents was contacted telephonically. The first interviews were conducted during September 2011. During some of the interviews, respondents also identified other possible respondents.

### 3.3.3 Selection of Respondents - Schematically



## 3.4 Limitations of the study

The main limitations of the study are the following:

a) The study focuses on the public broadcaster in South Africa, which makes it difficult to generalise about all media.

b) The interview participants worked during the study period in the newsroom, when South Africa went through significant political changes. The situation was very fragile and explosive, and subsequently affected operations and decision-making at the public broadcaster.

c) Not everybody approached by the researcher was willing to speak, because of fear

d) There were no clear rules and regulations about the use of text-messaging within the newsroom so each respondent had his or her own interpretation

e) The research study focuses on the role of text messaging that excludes the role of other digital technologies used in the newsroom.

## 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the research design and methodology of the study with emphasis on the SABC JHB TVN as the case study and semi-structured interviews with identified respondents. The chapter also explored the methodological limitations of the study.

The use of content review of news clipping, information from semi-structured interviews information, and the literature review help to identify appropriate categories that reflect the purpose and key questions of the study. The methodology and tool of semi-structured interviews leads to the processing of the data collected into various themes or categories, and interpretation of the data. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 4

# DATA ANALYSIS

## 4.0 Introduction

This chapter analyses the respondents' views on how SMS was used by ANC-led government aligned officials to interfere in the newsroom of the SABC. It looks at:

1. How digital technologies contributed to digital surveillance and control in newsroom;
2. How SMS control constrained practices of autonomy and editorial independence at the public broadcaster;
3. How this control impacted on journalistic practices at the public broadcaster; and
4. How the lack of policy impacted on the decision-making process in the newsroom

## 4.1 Digital Control and Surveillance

A finding of this study is that digital technology, namely SMS, expanded the means of control within the newsroom at the public broadcaster. The following analysis focuses on how digital surveillance, as a form of control, cut through time, space and location.

The advent of control via digital technology meant that distance and time were no longer operational factors to the extent that they had been previously. As a respondent remarked:

> *"I see the SMS or phone calls that come at any given time - even in the middle of the night"*

In addition, control was exercised from the production stage until, and even after, a story was broadcast. A respondent's understanding of the period:

> "*It was SMS all the way; and I think to a large extent those that could not take the pressure left. Some reporters, those that could not, left as well. I think it was a huge challenge to news management*".

The reference to '*SMS all the way*' suggests that SMS came in at any given time. This further suggests that the SMS transcended geographical constraints – they found the journalist or media practitioner wherever they were. The '*SMS all the way'* ignored the chain of command, organisational procedures, or decision-making processes within the newsroom. In some cases, this was so pervasive that it resulted in the loss of human resources: 'Some reporters, those that could not, left as well'. This left news management with 'a *huge challenge'*. This challenge can be referred to as: how to

managerially and editorially handle SMS received; and how to replace the people that left and contain the staff shortage and its consequences.

Digital media in the form of mobile phones had configured control, introducing a new form of surveillance on the work of journalists. It was possible to ignore a phone call, but the text message went directly to the receiver, and could be tracked by the sender. This meant it was a direct or pointed form of control and surveillance. An email can also be a form of pointed control: the sender can say 'I communicated with this or that person on the basis of just sending a text message or mail'. SMS was used to communicate with individuals in the newsroom on how to treat a story. Thurlow & Poff (2011) argue that it is not so much what the technology can do, but rather how it is used and to what end, that presents it as a promoter of or hindrance to communication. The SMS were sent by people, according to one respondent, who wanted to control the SABC JHB TV newsroom. As one respondent suggest:

*"Senior people within the main party, the ANC, that were sending those SMS*.

Senders of SMS wanted, respondents agreed, to manipulate the news gathering processes to favour their own political objectives. Some of the people who sent the SMS were known to editors and journalists and were in very powerful positions in the ruling party or in the ANC-led government. One of the respondents describes not only the fact that their cellphone numbers were known but also the nature of the SMS and interference:

*"So these things were real, they were not imaginary. And you wouldn't know, you wouldn't question 'where did you get my number from'. It was abusive. I think Q when I told him about the incident, he told me that someone has called him as well --- it was tough"*.

Digital surveillance was made possible because mobile telephone numbers of operators within the newsroom were known and the technology reached people wherever they were. This enhanced the way the newsroom was controlled. The following four responses capture respondents' understanding of the flow and impact of SMS:

*"The decision-making process was being eroded in the newsroom. I think it migrated more to Luthuli House and the Presidency. Those were the people making the calls and I think this is where the challenge was, where instead of us making the correct decision in the newsroom the power now resided elsewhere … the news editors - the power base - was more at a political level rather than in the newsroom".* [Respondent]

*"There were reporters that belonged to certain factions and once people have decided at 15h00 what were their main stories or what angle people were going to take, that information was immediately fed back to the ANC.*

*And before you could flight any story people would be sending SMS about the content of a story that was not even on air. It was a very difficult period because you became suspicious of your own reporters because you were not sure in terms of whatever I would be talking to you about who it will land on. It created a lot of animosity in the newsroom"* [Respondent]

*"I suspect to a large extent even within senior management people could not just trust each other because we were not sure where the mole was"* [Respondent]

*"Remember the ANC was the ANC that was in government, there was the ANC that was outside government. So you had another pressure from the people that were in government, people in the main that were working in the Presidency, people that were questioning the decisions you were making*" [Respondent]

*"And then you had people in the ANC that was saying 'but no, this person does not represent us anymore. Then you had COPE (Congress of the People – political party) outside, it was pressure from all over. And it was very difficult to make decisions because of this innovation"*

These responses indicate that there was interference into the news production process via SMS by and between the ANC-led government and its factions at the SABC. It is further understood from the responses that the messages were for example send and received by:

i. ANC-led government officials or factions of the ANC-political party to SABC board members

ii. ANC-led government officials or factions of the ANC-political party to journalists and producers

iii. ANC-led government officials or factions of the ANC-political party to SABC and news management

**Sometimes the flow of the SMS was from:**

i. ANC-led government officials or factions of the ANC-political party to SABC Board members to SABC management to News management to journalists and producers

ii. ANC-led government officials or factions of the ANC-political party to SABC management to News management to journalists and producers

iii. journalists to each other

iv. journalists to news management

v. news management to journalists or producers

Each one of the above had different influences and different implications for the decision-making process, with regard to interference in the practises in the newsroom. The messages that were sent for example to board members were maybe just passed on as a directive on what to do and from there it could for example form a norm that if a message is received from those with the highest power then you do not ask questions. Some of the SMS were most probably send just to make news management aware that there is dissatisfaction from those with the highest power but it did by implication mean that the instruction must be implemented. Another interpretation can also be that the message was received and forwarded to the relevant decision-makers in the newsroom with the understanding that proper decision-making procedures will be followed within the framework of the editorial policies. Some SMS were direct threats and told news management what to do; in this instance it can be argued that the receiver was scared that if he/she didn't comply that they would loose their job. The SMS that was sent to

journalist a can be interpreted as an instruction on what to do and how to do and did not allow the journalists to ask questions. One of the respondents rightly say that sometimes journalists became ‘foot soldiers’ and never owned the story.

It was also not possible to ignore the SMS because they were sent by people in *powerful positions* which were either formal positions in government or the ruling party or by mere association. Stories that influenced the public debate were constantly monitored and responded upon, sometimes even before they went on air. According to another respondent many in the newsroom were receiving “slates” of proposed leadership lists from various groups – ostensibly from presidential political opposing groups with the ANC. The SABC newsroom was divided and it was clear that the political situation during the study period was hostile, volatile and not conducive for professional, objective and balanced reporting and broadcasting. One of the respondents suggests that the SABC newsroom was also organised according to opposing camps, mirroring the political situation:

> *“But remember them [journalist] they were supporting certain factions, so they were questioning your decisions as well: why am I even going to a W press conference, why don’t you send V, she is closer to W than us.”*

During the same period one of the ANC presidential candidates, now President of the Republic of South Africa, was appealing the state's case of corruption against him. So much so was the influence of the ANC's elective leadership campaigning and the type of reporting and producing of headline stories that a respondent observes that:

> *"The SABC was not prepared for this kind of thing. We were used to one President of the Republic, one President of the ANC. It was much easier to report about them in a [this] manner. It was much easier to report."*

The newsroom was a highly contested area, and this impacted on the decision-making process, because of the way digital technology was used. The following response gives a sense that there was a politically charged newsroom within a professional newsroom; and this had an effect on the work environment and final product:

> *"So your briefings were questioned by the reporters themselves, but not only by the reporter, but by the executive producers themselves; and by researchers to a certain extent. You will recall people of research participated at meetings. So a whole lot of stakeholders, producers from both radio and television sit in this one meeting, and meanwhile you are sitting at 11h00, you think you have briefed people on the correct stories. Meanwhile,*

*they [reporters] are getting other notifications on SMS, a different story altogether. It impacts on your whole value chain"*

A conventional diary planning meeting took place on a daily basis at 11h00 ZAR time where executive producers of the different programmes; producers, researchers, input editors, output editors and technical people met to decide which story to put on the diary and who would cover which story and how, essentially the bidding and bartering process. However, outside of these meetings, journalists also received SMS *notifications* that briefed them about other stories. This resulted in a very porous newsroom and ultimately, news stories that were no longer openly discussed and subjected to the competitive bidding and bartering process. The outcome of this was that stories which were not informative, balanced, educational and diverse made it to air, which undermined the SABC's constitutional mandate. The newsroom at the public broadcaster was under immense pressure during the study period because of digital surveillance through SMS. These SMS compromised the standards and the mandate of the SABC News, which impacted on the role of the journalists and on the public's right to know. The SMS was immediate and cut through space and time and people in the newsroom felt threatened. This resulted in stories that were not fair and balanced and the public's right to know was compromised.

## 4.2 The role of the public broadcaster

The role of the public broadcaster is more than just that of a broadcaster: According to one of the SABC (2007) financial reports:

> "*The SABC also exists to support, sustain and advance the democracy we live in, in a country rich in diversity. The SABC is more than a broadcaster. It is the electronic memory and consciousness of the South African nation. It is the archive and repository of the hopes, dreams and aspirations of millions of South Africans. This is where South Africa 'happens', where our history occurs, this is the keeper of the South African story – past, present and future*".

There was a clear understanding from the respondents about the autonomous role of the public broadcaster. The SABC's autonomy and editorial independence were, however, challenged during the study period through the sending and receiving of SMS. One respondent refers to this as the:

> "*SABC playing fiddle to government – starts right from the way on how the SABC board is appointed and the chairperson is appointed".*

The President of the Republic of South Africa appoints the board members after public nominations and a parliamentary interview process. SABC staff have questioned the

way the board is appointed and suggest that as long as the board members are recruited, selected and appointed by government; and the President who appoints after the Parliamentary interviews, the SABC will be dictated to by government: '*playing fiddle to government'*. Another respondent disapproves of the fact that the SABC board is appointed by the ruling party. The respondent suggests that negative interference will not be curbed, and that these kinds of appointments will always filter through to SABC news management. The respondent suggests,

> "*For as long as the ANC or the government or the ruling party is tasked with appointing board members we will have these kinds of problems – as this kind of loyalty from the board members will cascade into news management as the board instruct the GCEO of the SABC to do stories that are favourable to government and to approach the stories in a particular way or manner".*

The public broadcaster has a constitutional mandate and it is part of the SABC board's responsibilities to fulfil this mandate. It can also be argued that because government is elected by the people, government officials operational in the political party assume that they represent the people and that they have a right to say to the public broadcaster what must go out on air, and how. Such a notion not only increases the propensity of political interference, but also lead to a politically and ideologically charged newsroom.

It is the public broadcaster's responsibility to have programmes that support the democracy we live in, and these need to be educational and informative, especially the news programmes. The news programmes must advance the public interest and there needs to be a plurality of news supply offering a diverse and wide range of views. According to Curran (2000) countries with democratic principles make it easy for the media to facilitate open and free debate. However, this did not happen as there was a new, technologically enhanced way of controlling the newsroom. The democratic principles of the country could also not be brought forcefully to bear in order to help the public broadcaster to facilitate a public and open debate. The available news programmes did not offer a variety of news, or information that was objective and clear; instead news stories were "immoral," "inaccurate," and "biased". Journalists became puppets on a string, and they no longer owned the stories they were telling.

A factor that compounded this was that, if they refused to do as they were told, they faced the prospect of losing their jobs. As one respondent recalls:

> "*I know I receive SMS – but the wording it is not overt – like – you just buried the next president – receive stuff like that and you feel intimidated".*

Part of the role of the SABC board is to ensure that the news department is a place where the best available talent is cultivated in a way that they would not want to leave. The Board has a clear mandate with regards to employees:

> *"Revitalise the corporation, particularly the news department, by making it a preferred place of employment that attracts, retains and nurtures the best available talent in the country" SABC (2007).*

The respondents stated that, in actual fact, the situation was different. The newsroom was full of threats and intimidation which impeded their ability to work. One respondent describes the situation:

> *"But in some cases it also depends on how powerful people are. You know some SMS you can ignore, but if you ignore them it's dangerous. You ignore them to your peril. So it also depends on where the SMS comes from and who's sending the SMS. If I get, for instance, an SMS from X and I know his number and I know it is him sending the SMS, I'd be stupid to ignore it. Or if it is an SMS from Y and I've got his number and here is an SMS from this man. I'll have to take it bloody seriously because it impacts on whether I have a job or not, if I ignore him or I don't ignore him"*.

Another respondent echoes the above sentiment. A SMS received contained a veiled threat about job security and professional advancement:

> *"YOU just killed your career on air"* (SMS undated) or *"– you receive an SMS that says 'we watching you' or whatever and you would not know the source".*

People in the newsroom felt threatened by the SMS, but did not have the security that they could rely on the SABC Board for succour. Respondents mention that the SABC was not the preferred place of work and that SABC board members did not do much to retain, revitalise or nurture staff. The finding within this analysis is that the SABC board did not fulfil its mandate to protect and nurture its news employees.

The sending and receiving of SMS increased tensions in the relationships between audiences, media professionals, decision-makers and politicians and editorial teams on the one hand, and editorial teams and journalists on the other. This tension undermined the mandate of the public broadcaster to facilitate an inclusive, balanced and accurate public debate. Respondents corroborate this, saying some stories that were broadcast during this period were not objective and balanced:

> *"One would be that some stories were not objective. Some stories would not have met the editorial criteria you will use or would have fallen out of that bracket. But because you were responding to political pressure, they went on air; not based on their editorial strength but based on political threats through SMS";* [Respondent]
>
> *"Do this story and this is how you going to do it – for example interview a minister to talk about a programme that will be launched with no substance"* [Respondent]

The tradition within the newsroom of engaging in in-depth discussions on daily news, story ideas and current affairs changed. The change, it seems, originated from the practice of editorial control within the newsroom when text-messages were received and used during the editorial decision-making process. The process also changed depending on who got the text message. A respondent describes how delicate the newsroom was:

> "*We were not used to people belonging to this faction or that faction; it's unheard of in the newsroom. There were reporters that belonged to certain factions and once people have decided at 15h00 what were their main stories or what angle people were going to take, that information was immediately fed back to the ANC. And before you could flight any story people would be sending SMS about the content of a story that was not even on air. It was a very difficult period because you became suspicious of your own reporters, because, you were not sure in terms of whatever I would be talking to you about who it will land on. It created a lot of animosity in the newsroom"*

Mendel (undated) notes that the interference of governments into public broadcasting is a problem and that independence of the media is challenged as governments seek to assert control. One of the respondents recalls the divisions in the newsroom because of political interference:

*"The challenge was around people that wanted to manipulate the news gathering processes in favour of their own political objectives and it really unsettled even news management in a bad way. In particular stories that did not favour whatever faction it was. That became quite dominant in terms of trying to sway stories in their own favour. It created a very polarised newsroom to be honest, because while we were making decisions about stories, there were people in the newsroom, which was quite new, we were not used to people belonging to this faction or that faction; it's unheard of in the newsroom.*

Control over editorial decisions is part of the news decision making process. It is important that editors have control cause because if they do not, they can be accused of being biased, or of broadcasting stories that are not factual. These accusations can and do raise questions about the role of the public broadcaster. One of the respondents says it was difficult not to relent to this kind of pressure and control that originated outside the newsroom:

*"You were relenting more to the pressure from the political party, and it all comes through a SMS 3 lines: "why is that man on air?" And I don't have to explain myself to you of who it comes from, it is not from X, but I'll protect sources. I think through SMS you will have numerous sources, but in the end it's the editor on the desk who must make the call, without disclosing who the*

*sources are. They were using it very…, they knew they knew. It was around pressure. It was pressure from political parties, not only from the main political parties but also from the presidency"*

The interference came from multiple sources, which were at times anonymous. There was no accountability and the citizen's right to know and access to information were not protected. Mendell (undated) confirms that the constitutional and the institutional autonomy of the public broadcaster will be affected. Respondents were concerned about their integrity as employees at the broadcaster:

"*I think basically we failing to do our jobs that's why the SABC will always loose its integrity - we have to tow the government lin*e"

The government line was to tell the stories that put government in a positive light and the SMS received were clear on how stories should and would be handled:

*…whether it was in the use of an analyst, if it was an analyst they didn't like, very harsh in their SMS to whoever made the decision on the day to use the analyst. In particular stories that did not favour whatever faction it was. That became quite dominant in terms of trying to sway stories in their own favour*"

> *If you use the story – please remove the reference to Gwede being whisked away - he claims he was not 'whisked' away – he left after receiving a memo and has a good relationship with taxi drivers. Say so, by correcting it in your next news bulletin* (SMS 31 March 2009)

Curran (2000) suggested that if the credibility of the public broadcaster, who acts as the public watchdog, is questioned that will result in disunity and divisions that will impact on restrictions within the public debate. These restrictions will in turn undermine the intelligence of the debate. Other observations by respondents about SMS with regard to interference and the pressure:

> *"We become part of this propaganda to make government look good and that government is doing something – when in fact they are falling very short of their responsibilities of delivering*".

People in the newsroom felt that they were used by government to make government 'look good' while government was not delivering. It can be argued that it is the role of the public broadcaster to tell the public what government does with regard to delivering. If government felt that they needed to highlight what they achieved then maybe they could tell the public broadcaster to say just that. The quality and accuracy of the stories was questioned:

> *"It compromised the quality of the stories that you aired. One, the journalists were partisan. But also someone was always watching you. You knew you were going to get a SMS. In the end, in some instances, the public were not fed the correct information of stories. So, it was either half-baked story, because we were not sure which angle to go with, so we took the middle ground which will not offend both parties"*

It is clear from the respondents that during the study period there was interference in the decision-making process and one of the cornerstones of upholding democracy within South Africa's, freedom of the media, was not upheld. As one respondent contends:

> *"And I think that impacted negatively on how we operated as a newsroom. I think there are decisions that we would have taken then, with hindsight if you were to question me about them, I would say probably a lot of them, I would say the influence was from the SMS, sometimes from the X at the time, so it was a very difficult period"*

Messages were sent to key people in the newsroom which shows that the newsroom was monitored from inside and outside the SABC. Sometimes newsrooms are structured in such a way that people with political power have direct access to those

that have the professional power, and they make certain demands. This results in people with political power bypassing the hierarchy to get their directives across. The newsroom was permeable and fragile and journalists and editorial teams had no choice but to cover the story the way they were told. For example one of the SMS received read:

"*If you up sound Zille and George – u have to up sound Mantashe – please do that in the next bulletin"* [SMS 12 December 2008].

Editors were told what to do and how to do it. During the news process decision-makers would decide which different stories would be covered and how they would be covered. However, a SMS from outside would then suggest to the newsroom on what to do and when to do it. This kind of behaviour suggests that news production processes were carefully monitored and interrupted if decisions did not find favour with the influential and powerful. The mode of communicating displeasure was the SMS. This kind of action and expectation suggests that the sender knows that if a SMS reached the targeted person, the desired action would be taken.

In summary of the above, the country went through a testing time during the study period. There was a powerful, but conspicuous argument that because government was elected by the people, it could tell the public broadcaster how to tell news stories.

Also, the mandate of the board is to protect the autonomy of the public broadcaster and freedom of expression. However, the study finds that this was not the case. Respondents felt threatened and people were very scared of losing their jobs. SABC news has an editorial code that guides management on the kind of stories that were covered. The editorial code indicates:

> *We shall report, contextualise, and present news honestly by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts, or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis.*

However, interference via SMS created a highly pressured and hostile work environment, leading to unprofessional and unethical conduct.

### 4.3 Control

Interference, especially when political, can in some cases result in self-censorship which is another form of gatekeeping, as one of the respondents alludes:

> "*my role is to defend the truth, and we violated all of that because there was that element of self-censorship*".

Those working in the newsroom knew that their responsibility was to tell the truth, but because of the interference and influence of people in powerful positions they submitted to self-censorship. With self-censorship the people in powerful positions didn't have to say anything or even send an SMS. The politicians would, for example, strike a relationship with key editors and they (editors) would in turn comb through a story before it was aired. The argument can also be that if there is conflict of interest there will be self-censorship.

This kind of self-censorship results in stories that were toned down to satisfy people in powerful positions. Another respondent portrays the situation about self-censorship as:

> "*And in some cases it is actually self-censorship. You have situations where we second guess what people in power may think or may want; and because they have such power and influence over what we do, so sometimes they don't even have to cough. You yourself, from history, you know you have to think twice".*

Gatekeepers also have the power to sabotage a story as one of the respondents states:

> *"I can sabotage a story with an SMS, just by sending information to a journalist that may not be right".*

Herman & Chomsky (1999) argue that the media sometimes want to be in favour of governments in order to have access to information and sometimes editorially alter stories to stay in favour. According to the respondents, the editorial decision-making process was tested. It was challenged by those with political power who wanted to control the newsroom. There were also those who had first access to information, especially regarding the diary events and stories of the Presidency at the time. It was clear from the respondents that the news decision-making power resided somewhere else, and that it was influenced by those with political power:

> *"Instead of us making the correct decisions in the newsroom the power now resided elsewhere. So they were there, as news editors but the power base was more at a political level rather than in the newsroom"*

The following example of SMS were received with regards to news stories and how they were covered:

> *Zuma had a rally in E.Cape yesterday… you keep on showing COPE you did yesterday and today stop doing it!* [SMS 5 December 2008]
>
> *Stop showing Zuma dancing; this will be your last time!* [SMS 16 December 2008]
>
> *We have been ordered to apologise to the ANC* [SMS 31 March 2009]

The most important objective of the public broadcaster is to be independent and editors need to assert their professional control in order to maintain such independence. Professional control demands that editors practice and implement regulations and guidelines in order to ensure that the news stories that are broadcast adhere to the standards of good journalism practices and fulfil the role of a public broadcaster. Gatekeepers will apply a combination of professional, organisational, technical and cultural influences to decide what message goes out. One of the respondents, however, describes the newsroom as:

> *"If it is a public broadcaster we have systems in place that we don't undermine the country or we don't undermine the politicians. What I am saying is that all of us, unless you are outside the mainstream and you are a small organisation - you can be more open and more democratic, but in the mainstream all of us are conformist. At the same time, the media has projected itself as the voice of the voiceless, all this bullshit; and the reality is that we are not democratic organisations in the way that we organise ourselves internally"*

The respondent argues that all news rooms are under surveillance and that it is practice not to undermine the country or the politicians. The respondent also implies that only small media organisations '*can do the right thing'* and none of the big media houses

represent the public sphere. Media houses have management structures and decision-making structures in place and each have a way of organising themselves which suggests that they speak on behalf of the people and contribute to the public debate.

Some intervening or interference relates to the appointment of government officials in the structures of public broadcasting services, for example, the board of the corporation. Interference also refers to the content broadcast in news and current affairs programmes. The interference made some feel powerless:

> *"What needs to happen at the SABC is that there needs to be an independent group of editors that are gatekeepers to actually analyse the stories that we do and to make a decision if the stories are good enough to go on air. Cause for as long as journalists within the SABC just take instructions and we know that the instructions are wrong and unethical and we are powerless at our level to do something about it we will always be powerless and will never have credibility. Senior journalist and middle management can look at a story and say we don't want these kind of stories, cause it is unethical and it is against the SABC own editorial policy."*

The respondent suggests that if there is a group of editors who are independent and separate to decide on the news value of a story it will impact on the kind of stories

which are broadcast. It confirms that editors felt powerless and threatened, and that is maybe how some of the messages and the interference bypassed all the editorial controls and the structures within the organisation. There is an editorial policy that guides journalists and news management on how to cover stories. However, it becomes more difficult to select which stories to cover if there is interference from outside. One of the respondents went so far as saying that a newsroom is not a democracy and that stories conform to certain ways of doing by describing it as follows:

> "*A newsroom is not a democracy. The media has over the years perfected the controls. And you have internal systems. You have gatekeepers all along the way. You have journalists who gather stories. You have assignment editors whose jobs are to make sure that the stories are done in accordance with the company's editorial principles. In the case of a place like the SABC, you have desks which are another level of gatekeeping and you have news editors and heads of news and editors-in-chief whose jobs are also a kind of final gatekeeper. So, newsrooms, are not a democracy, newsrooms are structured in a way that stories conform*"

The powerless situation confirms the level of professional intimidation and anxiety experienced, as people were so scared of losing their jobs that they rather towed the line. Those with the decision-making power in the newsrooms found that decision-

making within the newsroom was taken away over a period of time, as suggested by another respondent:

> *"…my role is to defend the truth, and we violated all of that because there was that element of self-censorship - given the authority of the person who that was sending the SMS, so you wouldn't question any decisions. And I think that then led to a period where I would say silently without any written rule, the decision making process was being eroded in the newsroom*"

One of the respondents also says it is because:

> *"News is instant. There was no way that you were going to ignore an SMS from X or Z".* Another respondent said that "*I think we were more abused … then using them for our own news gathering purposes. But I think it also led to self-censorship*".

Control over the newsroom is one of the most important roles for editors. Editors are mentors to journalists in the newsroom. From the above responses it is clear that there was no control in the newsroom. Kovach 2005 argued that the introduction of the digital era does not mean that the editors' role have changed in relation to journalists in the newsroom. The professional position and authority of editors were tested because of

surveillance by people with political power. It was evident in the responses that the editors didn't know what to do. This caused decision-makers in the newsroom to doubt themselves and either yield to the interference or apply the rule of self-censorship, which in this case went beyond the call of gatekeeping, and safer for their own continued employment security..

### 4.4 Evolution of Editorial Policy

The study finds that respondents experienced a lack of editorial policy regarding digital technology, and that there should be guidelines in place regarding the treatment of SMS in the newsroom. Organisations have specified institutional goals, translated into specific policies and organisational practices with clear lines of communication and accountability structures. Breed (1955) refers to control as set by news policy guidelines. The policy is set by the leaders and needs to be followed by staff. In instances where staffers do not follow editorial policy, there are procedures in place to address non-adherence and give advice on remedial action. However, when there is no policy as is the case with SMS, the editorial system breaks down and the potential for abuse becomes greater. As one respondent postulates:

> *"No, no I think with hindsight guidelines would have assisted. But remember these innovations as they are coming out they are not waiting for you to*

*develop guidelines. We failed to take advantage of this. By taking advantage I am referring to us using them effectively, to our own favour, rather than people abusing us through this innovation."*

Another respondent remarked that the occupational benefits of the technology were realised, but without the corresponding checks and balances to minimise negative interference:

"*They have embraced these innovations but they have not created guidelines to say this is what you can say and this is what you can't.*"

All respondents in this study agree that there were no policy, regulations and guidelines in the newsroom addressing the use of digital technologies focusing on SMS as official communication – the drafting, sending, receiving and storing of SMS. This lack of a digital policy on SMS communication within the overall editorial regulations has serious consequences on control and decision-making in the newsroom. The following response is a clear indication of this:

*"Ensuring how your editorial policy accommodates new media, including this nice innovation around SMS. I think either people can abuse it to their own*

*end, or as a newsroom, we should embrace it, use it to our advantage, but have set guidelines, that will guide journalists.*"

The respondent suggests that there was a need for SABC editorial policy to include new media, specifically SMS regulation. This could have helped managers to guide journalists on what to do when they send or receive SMS. The importance of having such policy, regulations and guidelines, is confirmed by another respondent:

*"The framework or I think the silence of the editorial policies; at that point we should have revised our editorial policy to accommodate these innovations: SMS social media. I don't think even now it's been updated, which means you don't have an ethical approach to social media in general. I think that is something that warrants attention quite urgently. I've looked at other news media. The have sort of embraced that and are using it to their advantage*";

The respondent goes further to suggest that the guidelines are still not in place, and need to be drafted and implemented as a matter of urgency. A policy on digital technology would clearly regulate SMS as communication tools within the newsroom, and would guide their drafting, sending, receiving and storing. Such a policy framework would bring stability and uniformity of practice to the newsroom by assigning

responsibility and accountability. This would better allow for the benefits of SMS to be reaped while the regulations would isolate or deter unwanted practices or behaviour.

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined whether the claim of the sending and receiving of SMS at the public broadcaster lead to the control of editorial decisions. This chapter also analysed the responses of the interviewees on how and what role SMS played that constrained the autonomy and the editorial independence of the public broadcaster; the impact it had on journalistic practises and how the lack of policy guidance affected the decision-making process in the newsroom.

In this chapter it has been strongly argued that:

a) The sending and receiving of SMS between those with power and the SABC newsroom contributed to constraining the autonomy and the editorial independence of the public broadcaster and the SABC JHB TVN. In many instances the sending and receiving of SMS have contributed to editorial staff resolving difficult controversial issues with regard to maintaining the ethical and editorial standards. In some cases the rule of self-censorship was applied and in other instances editors just did what they were told which compromised their mandate.

b) The analysis showed that SMS as a digital technology brought about a new form of control. This kind of control through digital technologies cut through time, space and location. This kind of control impacted on the role of the public broadcaster and left newsroom staff rattled and insecure. The control further escalated to either people resigning, some just did as they were told; and others took the rule of self-censorship so as not to offend those with power in the organisation and those with the political power outside of the organisation.

c) The sending and receiving of SMS impacted on journalistic practises in and outside of the newsroom. The SABC editorial code states that journalist can use the practise of upward referral before they make a decision but because of the mistrust and directives the relationship was very fragile in the newsroom. Journalists in some cases did not own their stories and became foot soldiers they did what they were told.

d) The SABC and the newsroom have clear mandates and guidelines on how to do their work and what to do. The sending and receiving of SMS and how to handle it when it comes from people with the highest decision-making power and political power in the country affected the leadership in giving direction. The lack of a clear policy guideline with regard to how to handle SMS that interfered in time and space to control the decision-making process was lacking.

e) The media agenda was eroded. The board of the SABC, which was appointed by the President of this country, did not protect the freedom and independence of journalists in order for them to enjoy freedom of expression and stories that, were creative and independent a right that is protected by the constitution of this country.

# CHAPTER 5

# CONCLUSION

This study explored how short message services (SMS's) were used at the public broadcaster to control decision making during the period November 2008 to April 2009. During this period there was intense and constant struggle for news and current affairs programmes to be independent. There is an understanding in South Africa that the public broadcaster news is propaganda news. Even with the advent of constitutional democracy in 1994 the SABC have consistently struggled to uphold its constitutional and legislative mandate, including being unable to maintain an independent relationship with the ANC-led government. This has been widely reported and commentated on by newspaper reports.

This study demonstrated the relation between political control and inference through the utilisation of digital technology on the one hand, with professional norms and control on the other. This study identified a range of constraints the news production and broadcasting process exercised through digital technology and SMS communication. The study holds that these constraints impeded and even undermined the mandates of the public broadcaster.

During the study period South Africa went through various challenges and so did the SABC. The political landscape was in turmoil as the ruling ANC was split into different factions. At the same time the SABC went through its worst financial crisis and sustained loss of key personnel. It was during this period that members of the ANC-led government used their mobile technology and specifically SMS to control the decision-making process in the newsroom.

The literature review identified key principles of public broadcasting, such as independence, inclusiveness and balance. The literature review provided useful knowledge about the tension of these principles at case study level, especially with regard to the structure and dynamics of the newsroom.

The study reviewed theories of control and gatekeeping as an editorial function within newsrooms and the impact of digital technology (SMS) on these established means of control. It provided a theoretical understanding of political control and its interplay and its effects on the public broadcaster's mandate. This research report argued that the use of text-messaging has not only contributed to the improvement of media processing to broadcasting in the SABC, but has also led to increased control over the news production process.

The study is located in a qualitative paradigm, and used the SABC JHB TVN as the case study. The research methods also included semi-structured interviews and archived newspaper clippings.

The study confirms that digital communication through SMS's was used as a form of surveillance to control the public broadcaster, its editors and journalists. The considered view, based on the research study, is that SABC News needs to provide programmes that offer: equality, editorial independence, nation building, diversity, human dignity, accountability and transparency.

The media contributes to the behaviour and opinions of the public on a range of social, economic and political issues. The study is therefore of the view that during the study period, control through SMS had a negative impact on the way stories were told, thus undermining the public mandate and the citizens of South Africa.

Furthermore, the SABC undermined the intellectual ability of the citizens, including being politically disrespectful, as the news stories were not independent. The consequence is that the leadership and editors in the newsroom did not practice the highest level of ethical standards because they allowed – real or apparent – those close to political and administrative power to control the editorial decisions and the newsroom via SMS. Editorial independence was therefore too usurped and eroded from the newsroom.

The lack of internal guidelines and news policies on what to do with regard to sending and receiving of SMS by powerful people contributed to editors doubting their professional competence which in some cases lead to self-censorship.

This research study found that people felt threatened by the SMS and that they were very scared of losing their jobs so they did not ask questions when they received SMS. The credibility of journalists took a nose dive.

There was a high degree of mistrust in the newsroom that manifested in forms of mistrust between editors and journalists that led to an antagonistic approach to each other and to stories. Journalists even gave editors instructions on who must cover story lines with political overtones as a result of factions within the newsroom.

In addition, editors did not make decisions assessed on their professionalism and based on editorial policies. The SMS found people wherever they were and contained news process and production directives. As the study confirms, there was no policy in place with regard to the sending and receiving of SMS in order to control the newsroom. Editors were thus further disempowered through a lack of editorial policies to guide them.

## Recommendations

More studies are needed in order to get a sense how other newsroom use digital technologies and if they experience any form of digital control through surveillance. If the current editorial policy does not guide editors and journalist with regard to rules and regulations on how to use the technology the newsroom need to develop such guidelines. Interference will always be a problem in the newsroom and as Oppenheim (1958) suggests that influence will always come as a ‘threat of force’; but editors and journalists must do their jobs and abide by the mandate of the public broadcaster as a guiding tool.

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## ANNEXURE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS INTERVIEW GUIDE

Note: Not all the questions were asked in every interview. Questions were also not asked in any particular order. Individual interviews lasted between one to two hours and were, without exception, conduct face to face.

The aim of the questions was to answer the following questions

1. How digital technologies contributed to digital surveillance and control in newsroom.
2. How did SMS control constrain practices of autonomy and editorial independence at the public broadcaster?
3. How did this control impact on journalistic practices at the public broadcaster
4. How the lack of policy impacted on the decision-making process in the newsroom

SABC Background

- How long in the business of media
- How long at the SABC
- Different positions at SABC

Digital technologies

- What do you use at work
- What do you use your mobile phone for
- What does the SABC policy about using your mobile phone

- Where did the SMS come from

Study period

- What was your role during the study period
- Have you ever send or receive SMS that impact on your work
- Can you still remember what the SMS said
- How did it make you feel

# Annexure: News Clippings

Selected stories, press statements and news report clippings related to the study and stories that dominated the public debate during November 2008 and April 2009

The table is in date order followed by what the headline was who published the story or statement and the source.

| DATE OF PUBLICATION | HEADLINE | WHO | SOURCE |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2 July 2006 | *Revealed: how the BBC used M15 to vet thousands of staff* | The Telegraph Hastings, C. (2006) | Available: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1522875/Revealed-how-the-BBC-used-MI5-to-vet-thousands-of-staff.html Last accessed 14 February 2012 |
| Published: 26 January 2011 | *Warriors for truth win in ruling on SABC, ICASA* | Daily Maverick (2011) | Available: http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2011-01-26-warriors-for-truth-win-in-ruling-on-sabc-icasa Last accessed 10 October 2011. |

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|---|---|---|---|
| 5 November 2009 | *God to sort out media: ANC* | News 24 | Available:<br>http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/God-to-sort-out-media-ANC-20091105<br><br>Accessed: 28 November 2011 |
| *7* November 2008 | *South Africa: SABC journalists take flak* | European Journalism Centre (2008) | Available:<br>http://www.ejc.net/media_news/2008/11/07/\<br><br>Accessed: 28 November 2011 |
| *9 November 2008* | *ANC intimidating SABC*<br>Statement issued by the Democratic Alliance November 9 2008 - SABC Board must continue to protect journalists from political intimidation | Smuts (2008) | Available:<br>http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71654?oid=109324&sn=Detail<br><br>Accessed: 28 November 2011 |
| 9 November 2008 | The SABC and the ANC – 9 November 2009 | The Harbinger | Available;<br>http://www.theharbinger.co.za/wordpress/2008/11/09/the-sabc-and-the-anc/<br><br>Accessed: 28 November 2011 |
| 17 November 2008 | *SABC Journalists Allegedly Intimidated By Political Party Representatives* | Media Institute of Southern Africa | Available<br>http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-189255574/sabc-journalists-allegedly-intimidated.html<br><br>Accessed: 28 November 2011 |

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| 20 November 2008 | SABC warned to be unbiased in adulation for ANC | Hayibo.com | Available: *http://www.hayibo.com/sabc-warned-to-be-unbiased-in-adulation-for-anc/* Accessed: 20 January 2012 |
| 13 January 2009 | *Jacob Zuma corruption charges reinstated* | Gaurdian | Available: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/13/jacob-zuma-corruption-charges-appeal Accessed: 28 November 2011 |
| 13 January 2009 | *Jacob Zuma corruption charges reinstated* | Gaurdian | Available: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/13/jacob-zuma-corruption-charges-appeal Accessed: 28 November 2011 |
| 24 January 2009 | *SABC blames crisis on political interference* | Eye witness news | Available : http://www.ewn.co.za/articleprog.aspx?id=16042 Last accessed; 20 October 2011 |
| *22 March 2009* | *South Africa blocks visit by Dalai Lama* The Dalai Lama has been refused a visa to visit South Africa amid accusations of pressure from China. | Telegraph | Available: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/southafrica/5032807/South-Africa-blocks-visit-by-Dalai-Lama.html Accessed: 28 November 2011 |

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|---|---|---|---|
| **24 June 2009** | **ANC blamed for SABC woes** | News 24 | Available: http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/ANC-blamed-for-SABC-woes-20090624 Accessed: 28 November 2011 |
| Published: 26 January 2011 | *Warriors for truth win in ruling on SABC, ICASA* | Daily Maverick | Available: http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2011-01-26-warriors-for-truth-win-in-ruling-on-sabc-icasa Last accessed 10 October 2011. |
| 5 August 2011 | US on 'sad state of SABC' | WikiLeaks (2011) | Available: *http://www.channel24.co.za/TV/News/Wikileaks-US-on-sad-state-of-SABC-20110905* Accessed: 20 January 2012 |
| Various dates | Articles about Snuki Zikala- TV news boss during study period | Mail & Guardian Online (2011) | Available: http://mg.co.za/person/snuki-zikalala Last accessed on 20 October 2011 |