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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Going Online: An analysis of shifts in journalism practice in the *Mail & Guardian's* history of digitisation

Dinashree Balliah

Research question: How is journalism practice negotiated at the *M&G* with its digital and social first strategies in tandem with its print publication?

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Journalism and Media Studies.

Date: 17 February 2021

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy 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.

_____

Ms Dinashree Balliah, 17 February 2021

Abstract

The purpose of this study which focused on the South African newspaper, the *Mail & Guardian* (*M&G*), was to explore how a small to medium sized newsroom has negotiated its digital transition over the course of its history. The study used a triangulation of methods approach within the theoretical tradition of newsroom sociology. The methods of newsroom ethnography and autoethnography are included in the study to render a more nuanced picture of a local newsroom in transition as an attempt to avoid a generalised discussion which typifies traditional journalism studies.

The main finding of this study is that the *M&G* has bungled its digital transition at the most crucial of times and has instead remained committed to the print newspaper despite the obvious global decline of the latter. The result is a news organisation left in financial limbo as it appears unable to sustain its print offering but lacks a strong enough digital offering in order to monetise its online publishing effectively.

One of the conclusions drawn from this study, which also looked at the intersection between the practice of journalism and the teaching of it, is that the teaching hospital model needs interrogation and introspection. The model has always taken its lead from the industry for direction on what should be taught at the higher education level. But, in the current difficult climate for journalism, this pedagogical approach may need to embrace the idea that journalism education should become a site of innovation instead of waiting on a fractured industry to set the agenda. As we push for innovation and experimentation in the industry, so we must in spaces where journalism is taught.

Keywords: Online Journalism, South African Journalism, *Mail & Guardian*, South African Media, Digital Transition

Dedication

For my eldest, Erin Lily, and my youngest, Kyra Rose, who believed I could.

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This thesis has been a journey undertaken by many people without whom it would have never reached the end. I will forever be indebted to my supervisor, Prof Glenda Daniels, whose intellectual guidance and pastoral tenderness is what pushed this project to its completion.

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My Erin Lily, my rock, my hero. I hope that I have shown that you can rise up even when you find yourself in the deepest pit of despair. Thank you for your patience with me as I found myself distracted by my work. I am incredibly proud to be your mum and I hope you are proud of me.

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Chapter One: *Contextualising the study*

The *M&G* was the first news publication to go online in 1994 closely followed by *Die Beeld*, while both publications preceded the launch of the country's largest online website *News24*[1] in 1998 (Hadland, 2005:216). Despite its four-year head start, the *M&G* website did not manage to disrupt the practice of journalism in the country like the launch and exponential growth of the *News24* site did. The latter site marked a turning point in approaches to online journalism in South Africa, as the site and significantly high website readership numbers effectively mainstreamed online journalism and put an end to print's hold on 'breaking news'.

In the time that passed between the start of this study and its end, the definition of what journalism is and the forms its takes, along with how it is practiced, has shifted many times. While debates about the future of journalism and the forms it will take rage on (Deuze & Witschge, 2017), the practice of journalism continues in South Africa, the physical locus of this study. There are critical lessons to be learned about the future of journalism by looking at the digital transition of a news organisation in South Africa, especially as the industry finds itself in the most challenging period in its history (Rumney, 2020).

This introductory chapter maps out this study titled: *Going online: an analysis of shifts in journalism practice in the Mail & Guardian's history of digitisation.* This is done through a discussion of the main aim and related questions, together with the rationale for undertaking this study. All of these discussions provide an understanding of how and why this study was conceptualised. Some discussion of the South African media landscape to contextualise the experiences of the *Mail & Guardian* (*M&G)*, the focus of the case study, is also undertaken in this chapter.

1.1. Introduction

This thesis examines the *M&G*'s transition to online publishing in a world in which digital publishing is now the norm. The study looks at themes such as innovation, mis-/disinformation, and the *M&G*'s conceptualisation of its audiences as it transitioned to digital. This is preceded by a history of the *M&G* and its organisational attitude and approach to new technologies. Finally, the study uses the findings from earlier chapters which are compared and contrasted with what is taught in a journalism curriculum

[1] *News24* is arguably South Africa's biggest news organisation. The news24.com website introduced its paywall on 8 August, 2020, (*News24*, 2020).

at a major South African university to identify areas of synergy and dissonance between the industry and the teaching of journalism at postgraduate level as the craft of journalism itself changes its shape.

Historically, the press in South Africa found itself on one or other side of Apartheid (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991; Trabold, 2018) with a distinctly left-leaning press[2] contrasted with what was considered the mainstream or the right. These days, the left is hardly discernible with the few print publications that remain, sitting in the middle to right of the political spectrum. The post-apartheid media landscape is a complex one, with little to no alliances between publications. This, I would suggest, is primarily due to the absence of a common enemy such as Apartheid during the pre-1994 period. The cutthroat economy in which the media operates, and dwindling sales and ad revenue means that there are no friends in the South African media landscape, only enemies or, more correctly, competitors, (Daniels, 2020). Where once newspapers would report sympathetically about the misfortunes of their competitors, they do so now almost gleefully (Trabold, 2018). The consequence is a deeply fragmented media landscape with players simply unable to grasp that their common enemy is their imminent obsolescence.

The introduction of new and social media technologies has pushed the practice of journalism to a crossroads where new and legacy media platforms and practices meet, with no discernible roadmap for a successful and sustainable future (Sol Plaatje Institute for Media Leadership, 2009). This is not a problem particular to South Africa though; it is a global one. While it may seem reductionist to point to digital technologies as the sole cause for this lack of direction, these technologies are, for the most part, responsible for the changes in how contemporary journalism is practiced, a view shared by media theorists Hassan and Thomas (2006). The lens of social constructivism is used as a theoretical approach to better assess the impact of technology on the practice of journalism and is explained in greater detail in Chapter Three.

While these Internet-based technologies, or new or digital media, point to the potential for increased diversity of content in a broader spectrum of media forms, they also represent the greatest threat to print journalism and the practice of journalism in general.[3] Koos Bekker, former CEO of multinational media company Naspers, wrote in 2012: "This new technology (Internet) is undermining the advertising revenue on which print depends. As social media, mobile and multiscreen media enter the mainstream, allowing for reading and interacting with content, advertisers have shifted revenue spending to these digital technologies" (Government Communication and Information System, 2012:18)[4]. The craft of

[2] These included the *Sunday Express*, the *Rand Daily Mail*, the *Weekly Mail* and the *New Nation* (Trabold, 2018).
[3] Declining print circulation figures are the order of the day in South Africa as the regular of analysis of Gill Moodie points to – see www.grubstreet.co.za for more. In this article, in particular, (http://grubstreet.co.za/2014/08/21/few-places-to-hide-seven-big-circulation-trends-in-sa-newspapers/), Moodie points to the ubiquity of the words, "declining circulation," in quarterly reports from the ABC.
[4] There is a certain irony to Bekker's words as his company *Media24* is home to the country's digital publishing giant, news24.com.

journalism finds itself in a battle for survival in fighting off the onslaught of misinformation, reduced newsroom staff, plunging sales and scarce ad spend which threaten its future (*The Media Online,* 2020).

"Shifting from a traditional print or broadcasting culture that has had predetermined journalistic roles, professional norms, and routines for decades to a convergence culture where distinct boundaries and categories have blurred or vanished is a major challenge" (Menke *et al*., 2016:1). Here, Menke et al (2016), describe quite succinctly how this new ecosystem, seemingly driven by technology, is influencing journalism. Not only have the boundaries between different categories of journalism been blurred (Menke *et al*., 2016), but as Chakrabarti *et al.,* (2018) show us, there is little to distinguish between professional journalistic content and mis-/disinformation, leading to yet another onslaught on the credibility of the media. Journalists are no longer the custodian of information flows in society; and within this new media milieu, their roles are not challenged but effectively delegitimised.

In her study of the current state of affairs in South African newsrooms *State of the Newsroom 2013: Disruptions and Transitions*, Daniels notes that "the circulation of daily print newspapers has fallen by an average of 5.5% annually since 2008" (2014:2)[5]. She adds that "the digital-first trend occurred against a background of a slow but steady decrease in daily newspaper sales, as well as dwindling advertising for print" (ibid:35). Dahlgren (1996:60) notes that "journalistic institutions, specifically news organisations, within the various mass media, have all seen cyberspace as a crucial dimension for their future". Despite this acknowledgement of the key role of digital platforms, the newspaper industry continues to struggle with these online strategies, which, to date in South Africa, lack viable business models. It is still fairly common to see references to digital strategies within newsrooms described as 'experimentations' rather than 'models' (Ryfe, 2009; Singer, 2004a; 2004b). This is no different in South Africa where the word 'innovation' has entered the lexicon of journalism and discussions about its future.

While studies of this nature have been undertaken abroad (Singer, 2004a; Ryfe, 2009; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009; van den Bulck & Tambuyzer, 2013), few appear to exist in South Africa which is the primary motivation for this project. The move to digital and social first strategies has opened the practice of print journalism, along with broadcast and radio journalism, to new ways of storytelling, a new discourse, new workflows and ultimately new skills and ways of doing journalism. In embracing all things new, it seems appropriate to reach for a new understanding of what constitutes 'journalism'? What is journalism in a contemporary South African context? While the future of journalism has been considered by many others abroad (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Stephens, 2014), it is undertaken at an

[5] *Marklives.com* reported that the circulation figures for the year-end 2016 showed the same general and steady decline, see http://www.marklives.com/2017/02/abc-analysis-q4-2016-the-biggest-circulating-newspapers-in-sa/ Downloaded on 15 March 2017. In particular, "daily newspapers: down to 1 213 424, compared to 1 360 172 for the previous corresponding period".

African level in a two ways. First is as a call for revisionism in journalism studies to move away from dominant Western perspectives in studies on local African journalism (Chuma, 2010; Mabweazara, 2014; Banda, 2010). The second is from a (disconnected) theoretical vantage point with little practical application or relevance to specific newsrooms on the continent (Anderson *et al.*, 2014). This study aims to understand how journalism, characterised by practices and habits formed over the history of the *M&G*, is now practiced within a milieu of constant change, technological disruption and uncertainty thereby making a contribution to the discussion of the future of journalism on the continent.

In her paper, '*Making sense of innovation'*, Sandra Evans (2016:1) examines previous studies of technology and journalism, making the observation that studies of this kind tend to focus "on the role of technology in relation to the production and distribution of … or on technological innovations". She adds that "while this technological approach is valuable for examining journalism practices, it does not address the question of how organizational and social contexts influence innovation". This study aims to explore these factors in examining how journalism practice shifted within the *M&G* over the course of its history.

The process of convergence, described as a process of "coming together" through digitalisation (McQuail, 2005:551), has brought together technologically distinct forms of media and practices which blur the lines between the roles of individuals within a newsroom. Similarly, Hanitzsch writes in Berkowitz (2011:33), that "international journalism research has produced much evidence in support of the view that the onward march of globalisation coincides with a convergence in journalistic orientations and practices." In a study of the changes in journalism practice wrought by new technologies in Nigeria, Olajide Talabi (2011:5) writes that: "Armed with easy-to-use web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information; and it's doing just that on the internet."

This is a critical observation which points to a fundamental shift in the role of the audience as part of the production of news, a shift which remains exclusive to the online space. While these studies show international trends in the re-shaping of journalism practice as a result of convergence, they need to be applied to the South African context with caution. Local audiences and their media consumption habits are markedly different to those from other contexts. For example, the cost of data remains prohibitively high for a significant majority in the country.[6] In addition, publishers are unable to find ways to monetise online content and have been reluctant to abandon their legacy media products which remain a strong source of advertising income. The latter approach remains a factor in limiting digital journalism

[6]See Mabweazara, 2014. South Africa is reported to have the second highest data contract prices among seven countries, namely Brazil, Russia, India, China, Kenya and Australia, according conducted by research company Traffic in 2016. See http://www.fin24.com/Tech/Multimedia/data-prices-how-sa-compares-to-the-rest-of-the-world-20160930 for more.

offerings, as personnel and resources are stretched to producing journalism for both online and print publications.

South African newsroom shifts have reflected global shifts in so far as convergence is concerned. A study of the impact of convergence on newsroom practices at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) found that "as multiskilling has increasingly taken hold in newsrooms, aided by technological developments … the debate about the impact on journalists' skills and working practices has gathered momentum" (Wallace, 2013:00). Wallace uses the term 'multiskilling' to describe the changes in journalism practice brought about by "production convergence" or the "trend towards news reporting in more than one medium in formerly single-media organisations" (Wallace, 2013:00). What is clear, is that the media milieu is rapidly changing and journalists, who are themselves news workers, are part and parcel of this change.

A 2014 internal review by the *New York Times* (NYT), which sought to evaluate the organisation's own perceptions of the move to digital-first, was critical of its status as the 'gold standard' in digital transitions ascribed to the institution by news organisations addressing convergence (NYT Innovation Report, 2014[7]). One of the key issues raised by the report is the need for a "news strategy team," or a team which is able to oversee the implementation of innovation and also gauge its success. The need for such a team is an indication of the changes evident in the newsroom which can no longer measure its success against sales and circulation alone (these two things being the traditional yardstick of success of a print newspaper). Instead, the technologies used in delivering news to audiences need constant monitoring and evaluation, not just in terms of consumption but in terms of engagement between the news producer and the consumer. The move to establish a news strategy team by the *NYT* also recognises the importance of the closer integration between organisational-level proposals with "desk-level experiments" (NYT Innovation Report, 2014:6). It is telling that even with all the oft-lauded success of the *New York Times*, the organisation recognises the importance of bringing journalists at "desk-level" closer to the centre of innovation in the digital milieu. This move is hugely symbolic of the kinds of shifts that the move to digital has wrought on the practice of journalism.

1.1.1. Social media in the newsroom

Perhaps the most obvious and significant change in contemporary journalism practice is the growth and ubiquity of social media platforms as tools, platforms of dissemination and applications for the creation of content. The widespread use of social media platforms in society has hastened the idea of the audience as co-producer of content (Gillmor, 2004). This was a previously unheard of conceptualisation

[7] Refer to http://www.scribd.com/doc/224332847/NYT-Innovation-Report-2014.

of the audience and certainly not one that was possible with the production of a print newspaper (Gillmor, 2004).

Furthermore, the use of social media through publishing on sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or even *Instagram* by journalists, means that traditional levels of sub-editing are circumvented in these new spaces for disseminating news. Additionally, the cycle of producing news for a print deadline has been turned on its head by the shift to digital, which demands round-the-clock content production (Berkowitz, 2011:53). While these changes may seem innocuous, the ways in which these changes are operationalised by journalists in the course of their workday in a South African newsrooms remain under-researched. This is one of the ways this study contributes to the way in which a digital transition is understood within a South African context. This will be done by examining how the *M&G* is using social media to extend the reach of its journalism, and to engage with audiences in building a new relationship between the consumers and the producers of journalism.

Social media in South Africa continues to see growth since its introduction, with Facebook subscriptions reaching 13-million users in 2016. Twitter saw an increase of 12% from 6,6 million to 7,4 million users in the same year, while YouTube grew by 15% from 7,2 million to 8,28 million users[8]. The 2014 *State of the Newsroom* report (Daniels, 2015a:43), a study of South African media, showed that "the use of social media has increased in the following ways ... as a source of news, as another outlet or "platform" for reporters, to project reporters' personal brands, and for newsrooms to market their stories and brands." The study also confirmed that of the 12 newsrooms surveyed, most "had policies in place governing social media and the use thereof in editorial" (Daniels, 2014a:45). The activities and policies related to social media show a fundamental shift in the distribution of news, previously excluded from the realm of the responsibilities of the journalist. The use of social media at the *M&G* is explored in Chapter Six, which focuses on mis-/disinformation. This study looks at whether the *M&G*, in the midst of a global pandemic, is breaking out of its print workflow to use social media for activities like fact-checking, a crucial component of the practice of journalism today (Chakrabarti *et al*, 2018).

1.2. Aims of the study

This research critically assesses the ways the *M&G*, as the sum of all its parts, journalists included, has managed its digital transition over the course of its history, dating back to 1985. In addition, the research aims to understand how journalism practice is changing within a South African context, and how this relates to what is taught at a university-level journalism department in the country. Given the disruption

[8] These statistics are sourced from the 2016 Social Media Landscape Report, conducted by World Wide Worx (www.worldwideworx.com). The 2016 report can be accessed here: http://www.worldwideworx.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SA-Social-Media-Landscape-2016-Executive-summary.pdf

brought about by online tools and digital technologies to print-oriented newsrooms, this project hopes to understand and analyse whether the same can be said of contemporary journalists who are expected to operate in an environment characterised by ongoing change, re-organisation and constant experimentation. The theoretical approach of the sociology of news production guides this research, while the theory of social constructivism frames the study. The theoretical framework is discussed further in Chapter Two.

This study is concerned with the "socialisation" of journalists as outlined by Singer (2004b:838), who explains that new technologies and the process of convergence (explained later) all have an impact on the shaping of the journalist as a news worker, while Singer (2004b), is concerned with the impact of new routines and rituals associated with the digital space, this study is focused on how journalists at the *M&G* practice journalism within a news production environment that has multiple publishing platforms and, as a result, multidimensional demands on journalists. Additionally, as Gillmor (2006), points out, the contemporary journalist also has to contend with the scenario that every person with a smart phone is a potential news producer. The *M&G* is a relatively small newsroom in comparison to larger spaces and more well-resourced newsrooms in South Africa like Times Media (now known as Arena Holdings) or Independent Media, and, as a result, faces significantly more pressure to perform and to ensure strong circulation numbers.

The sociological approach is the chosen theoretical framework for this study and in particular, the sociology of news production which posits that news is made through rituals, routines and social relationships within a newsroom (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). Additionally, I have made use of the theory of social constructivism, also known as the social constructivism of technology (Winner, 1993), which argues that the interplay between social actors and technology is not unidirectional and that people shape technologies and their uses as much technology shapes human activities. A discussion of the theoretical approaches is undertaken in greater detail in the next chapter.

1.3. Main research question

The key question of the study shapes the trajectory of the study within its theoretical framework and through the use of the chosen methodologies. The key question in this study is how is journalism practice negotiated at the *M&G* with its digital- and social- first strategies in relation to its print publication?

1.3.1. Sub-questions

Sub-questions are questions that are linked to the main/key question and help to provide a structure to the study. The sub-questions that I will be looking at in this study are:

- How were the digital and social first strategies of the *M&G* conceptualised and deployed over the last 20 years, and in response to what factors?
- How did the organisation react or reshape itself to these strategies and, in particular, what happened to the print newspaper as a result of these strategies?
- How does what I teach in Journalism honours at Wits University match the practice at the *M&G* – are we behind the digital game, in tandem, or ahead in our teaching practices?

1.4. Rationale for this study

The contemporary state of journalism is characterised by an air of doom and gloom and its future, by uncertainty. As a journalism educator working alongside the industry, this state of things is concerning for me in terms of what I teach young and aspiring journalists. There are also very real concerns about the future viability of my programme at university-level given the rapidly shrinking number of opportunities for journalism graduates.

The move to digital for print journalists has meant more than just publishing on a website. It has changed the ways in which news is sourced, produced, distributed and by whom. It has also impacted the skills needed to produce the news and has affected the way in which journalists are expected to interact with news consumers who are closer to the centre of production than ever before, a move mediated by social media. But most critically, the shift to digital has upended traditional revenue models that have sustained the news industry for generations.

Digital publishing and the use of social media have not only impacted the role of the news worker within a news organisation but also the role of the audience in the way they consume news, react to it, change it and ultimately also produce it themselves. This symbiotic relationship has become the trend in recent times through so-called membership revenue models which increasingly seek to bring the consumer closer to the production of content in order to stimulate financial support for the organisation. The case study of the *M&G* will allow the researcher to look at what the role of the audience is in the space of the *M&G*; what is the *M&G* doing to court its audiences in order to stimulate the financial support it needs to stay afloat.

To state that the working life of a print journalist has changed dramatically in the last 20 years may seem an obvious statement (Kaiser, 2014), yet it is necessary to explain this in more detail. The routine of print deadlines provided a somewhat predictable schedule and clear list of roles or functions for a print journalist (Schudson, 1989; Reese, 2016). For the most part, once copy is handed to a sub-editor's desk, the journalist or the reporter would move onto the next story. Within the digital space, however, the print journalist is now confronted with a multiplicity of roles and functions previously performed by other individuals in the newsroom or not performed by a news organisation at all. These include,

among many others, the production of content in new media formats not normally associated with print journalism such as audio, photos or video; the uploading of various kinds of content to digital platforms; the ongoing use of social media; and so on (Kaiser, 2014). The area which remains under-researched within a South African context is that which critically examines how the practice of journalism within the context of the transition to digital where these new roles and responsibilities play out, has changed and this is a gap this study tries to fill.

Up until the COVID-19 pandemic struck South Africa in 2020, the local print newspaper industry had not experienced the closure of any major print title due to the digital transition. Mabweazara (2014:20) writes that,

> The South African newspaper industry has not been immune to the forces that have been putting its global counterparts under immense pressure. A tough economic climate, lack of advertising revenue, declining readership and a steady rise in Internet penetration rate makes it increasingly difficult for newspapers to remain competitive.

In 2020 though, particularly after the South African national lockdown started in March, the print industry experienced an unprecedented level of devastation (Rumney, 2020). While this discussion is continued later in this chapter, what needs to be said at this point is that the abrupt expectation to pivot to digital publishing that many newsrooms now face in South Africa makes a case study like this one more critical as it provides insight into an organisation that is transitioning from print to digital.

Ryfe (2009:197) writes that even though news organisations "are engaging in great experimentation … researchers know very little about how some journalists are processing these changes." This study builds on previous studies of the *M&G* by looking at how the organisation is managing the digital transition while maintaining its print edition. In this way, this study focuses on Ryfe's (2009) point and tries to capture how the journalists at the *M&G* are handling the organisation's digital transition. The first study of the impact of a digital-first strategy on journalists at the *M&G* was conducted in 2007 when Van Noort (2007) looked at the reporters' and editors' attitudes towards newsroom convergence and on cultural resistance against change. The study, though, does not substantively explore the changes that subsequently happened in the day-to-day work practices of the journalists who remain with the organisation over the next seven years, during which time the organisation reconfigured its approaches to its digital and social media offerings. This study provides an analysis of these changes through a focus on the individuals and their relationship with their audiences, rather than on the structural mechanics of the organisation or its business models.

Another digital-focused study, one done by Marenet Jordaan (2012), examined the professional use of social media at the *M&G* and at the Afrikaans-language daily newspaper *Rapport*. The research probed whether the increased use of social media, in particular *Facebook* and *Twitter*, by journalists "influences

the processes and cultures of news selection and presentation at the organisation," (Jordaan, 2012:3). This particular study though focussed on the structural processes of news production rather than on the practices of the journalists producing content at the *M&G*. So in short, there is work in the context of the *M&G*'s digital transitions that speaks to how journalists are processing change amid the transition and this study makes a contribution in this way.

At the time of writing in 2020, the *M&G* embraces cross-platform publishing by focusing on web-based content production as specific trajectories within its digital and social first strategies. This multi-pronged focus is particularly unique among newspapers that have gone online in South Africa, and is yet another motivation for this study. One of the consequences of this research is the production of a historical record of the transition from print to digital within an organisation that continues to embrace the changes spurred on by new technologies. Given the fleeting nature of the memory of the worldwide web - the platform where these changes are played out - this historical narrative is useful for future studies of the *M&G*. Indeed, it is also useful more broadly for the South African newspaper industry as it faces significant re-invention in the move to digital.

Finally, this project is closely connected with my own work in teaching digital journalism in a department of journalism at a South African university[9]. This study is part of an attempt to understand how to teach a craft that is under constant reinvention. To compare what is taught and what is operationalised in a newsroom, I turn to the method of autoethnography which is the basis of what is an original and personalised contribution to knowledge in the area of digital disruption in journalism practice.

1.5. Methods in the study

Methodologically, the study employs a number of qualitative methods to answer the key and sub-questions of the study, some of which have already been alluded to. Semi-structured interviews, the case study method, thematic content analysis, ethnography and autoethnography of how the transition to digital at the *M&G* happened over the course of its history, are used to engage with the topic from different vantage points and through the use of different data sets.

Semi-structured interviews, (find the interview schedule in Appendix 3 on page 213), with a selection of current and former staff members of the *M&G* will provide insights into their understanding of the digital and social first strategies at the organisation. I spoke with former editors, Irwin Manoim, Nic Dawes, Chris Roper and Khadija Patel. I also spoke with other individuals, many of whom I have not named in the study to ensure their anonymity, who fulfilled roles such as social media editor, technology

[9] At the time of writing in 2020, I work at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg: www.wits.ac.za.

developer, section editor, all of whom were also desk-level journalists at some point. Their interview responses were supplemented by newspaper reports of what they or others had said in the press about the digital transition at the *M&G.* Taken together, these two data sets paint a picture of how the *M&G* has managed its digital transition and innovation over the course of its history.

The case study method will ensure that the project is focused on a single organisation but is able to provide findings that can be extended to other similar cases. The choice of methodologies, and further discussion of each and their relevance to this study, along with why and how they are deployed, are included in Chapter Three.

The methods of ethnography and autoethnography are also undertaken in this study. The newsroom ethnography, which generates the data used in Chapter Seven, is a practice that has fallen out of favour with newsroom sociologists (Cottle, 2007). However, I have used it here as a way of providing a more specific experience of a particular newsroom as a way of avoiding often generalised theoretical perspectives in journalism studies (Cottle, 2000). Cottle (2003:4) writes that there is "an unexplored and under-theorised 'middle ground' of organisational structures and workplace structures." This research, through the use of newsroom ethnography which Cottle (2000; 2007) advocates the use of, sheds light on the daily operations and news cycle at the *M&G*. As Cottle (2007:5), writes, "Participant observation (or ethnography), goes behind the scenes of media output to help reveal the complex of forces, constraints and conventions that shape the selections and silences of media output". The informal narrative style and thick description that characterises research using these two approaches is immediately discernible in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight, as distinct from the formal, academic tone and style of the rest of the study.

1.6. Background to the study

The *M&G* has been at the forefront of digital- and social-first strategy deployment among media organisations in South Africa[10]. It was the first to embark on such a strategy signified by the launch of its website (mg.co.za) over twenty years ago in 1994. The organisation continues to reshape these strategies as new digital and social technologies emerge. These are examined more closely in Chapter Five which focuses on the history of the *M&G* and, in particular, its experimentation with technology over the course of its history along with some of its digital- and social-first strategies.

[10] While the *M&G* was the first online newspaper in 1994 together with *News24*, many other organisations were testing the digital waters. TMG, (currently known as Arena Holdings), in its iteration as Johnnic, had launched *reporter.co.*za, a very-short-lived citizen journalism initiative (*The Herald*, 2006) while media portal woza.co.za was launched by private individuals in 1996. Publisher Branko Brkic launched "the country's first iPad newspaper, *iMaverick*," in August 2011 (Harber, 2011), while the *M&G* launched its own iPad edition a year later (bandwidthblog.com, 2012).

The continued adoption of new technologies and, in some instances, innovation in technologies, is re-shaping the work of journalists who have to regularly integrate the use of these technologies into the practice of their craft. "Success in the online environment is dependent on reporters becoming platform-agnostic[11]. Human resources systems are consequently being reworked to reflect this new philosophy, and editorial staff are being encouraged to work for a brand instead of a medium" (Sol Plaatje Institute for Media Leadership, 2009:28). This study, through the case study of the *M&G*, shows that platform agnostism is still a long way off and that journalists at the *M&G* are still quite focused on the print newspaper with the digital platforms very far from their minds and their daily practices.

Since a number of news organisations in South Africa remain at the nascent stages of digital- and social-first strategy development, this study hopes to provide insights into how journalism is practiced in the transition to digital- and social-first newsrooms.[12] In his book on the early history of the *M&G*, co-founder of the newspaper Irwin Manoim (1996:135), wrote that in 1990, "The one area where the old do-it-yourself spirit of the *Weekly Mail* remained, was technology". It is this approach to technology in the *M&G* newsroom that is the departure point for this study which sought to understand if the culture of innovation that Manoim spoke about, persisted, and had any significant impact on the way journalists at the *M&G* do their work in present day.

In 2006, reflecting on what he called the "dot com boom," journalist Hilton Tarrant wrote that "this dream of getting audiences big enough to rival the other mass media (such as television and print) died abruptly," (*The Citizen*, 2006). Tarrant points out that 2006 seems to have brought with it renewed enthusiasm for the online space but it is telling that more than a decade later, media companies continue to grapple with the same problem: how to monetise online publishing? This research is not concerned with the aspect of monetisation though and, instead, is interested in how journalism has changed and shifted in the time that media companies have tackled the monetisation conundrum. What do journalists do differently now that the imperative to make a profit is so intrinsically connected to the practice of their craft? This is an under-explored question within the South African media landscape and is one of the reasons for this research topic.

It is hoped that the findings of this project will provide an understanding of the changes that journalism has undergone within the South African context, possibly providing a refreshed conceptualisation of what a contemporary South African journalist is expected to be able to do. In her summary of what

[11] Daniels (2015:31) writes that "Platform agnosticism means that people want news on different platforms". The term is appropriated here to refer to the production of news for various platforms.

[12] 'Digital-first' is a term usually seen as antithetical to 'legacy media' which refers to print, television and radio among others. A 'digital-first' strategy involves making story-by-story decisions about where and in what form a story is constructed and published, what the workflow of such decisions are and also the strategy around the social media publication or "pushing" of such stories via social media. A social-first strategy involves decisions around the publication of news on social media platforms before any other platforms and also includes thinking around the forms in which this news is published.

typified the state of the newsroom in South Africa in 2015, Daniels wrote (2015b:59), that the newsrooms are:

- Hugely pressured environments;
- Confusing and messy;
- The political landscape is threatening;
- Technologically, the shifts are seismic;
- The traditional models of making journalism are outdated;
- The new issues to grapple with are innovation, sustainability and brand;
- Mobile and social media are centre stage;
- Change is the new signifier;
- The identity of journalism has changed;
- This is the beginning of the end of how it was.

While this study does not address all these issues, many of them crop up in the course of the discussion that follows, thereby confirming Daniels' characterisation of the contemporary South African mainstream newsroom. Ultimately, the study aims to understand and answer the broader question of: how has the *M*&G managed its digital transition? In doing so, it captures a historical snapshot of what can be considered a defining moment in the South African print media industry as its players confront, respond to, and transform in relation to the challenges posed by digital and social media technologies.

1.6.1. The South African media landscape

South Africa's media landscape[13] has historically found itself framed by the political context of the country. But this is no longer the case and media players are no longer distinguished from one another by which side of the Apartheid state they positioned themselves on. Democracy and the end of Apartheid, achieved in 1994, had a levelling impact on the South African media industry, by removing the political line in the sand. This landscape is murkier now, fraught with internal struggles to survive and amplified by external ones like the fight for credibility and relevance. So wrote Jakes Gerwel in the forward to Hadland's 'Changing the Fourth Estate' (Hadland, 2005:5):

> The new generation of journalists in South Africa faces a very different world to the one encountered by their forbears. It is a world of converging technologies and transglobal forces. It is a world in which journalists will be required to understand complex developments and convey their meaning using a variety of platforms in the shortest period of time.

[13] It is important to note at this point, that discussions about journalism and the media industry in this study focuses on the print media sector in South Africa as that is the context within which the case study, the *M&G*, is located.

The South African journalism and media landscape in the last decade is characterised by the struggle to find a viable financial model coupled with the rise in the use of social media applications which has uprooted the media's centrality as the source of news and information in society. A reading of the last few years' *State of the Newsroom* reports (Daniels, 2014a; Daniels, 2015; Finlay, 2017; Finlay, 2018) paints a bleak outlook for the media and journalism industry in the immediate future. "The overlap between online and print news media is great: few online-only organisations exist, though they compete fiercely for audiences with the theoretically much-better resourced online outlets of the legacy media organisations." writes Rumney (2020:5), of the South African media landscape in 2020. The decline in print sales has dealt a devastating blow to the newspaper and magazine spaces in the country while newsroom staffing complements have shrunk.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating for journalism and media industries globally. In South Africa, "The pandemic may prove the tipping point for digital migration of news, and at the same time see the loss of jobs in journalism and in the supply chain as well as diminishing the amount of news and shrinking the diversity of the news during the looming Covid-induced global depression," (Rumney, 2020:11).

The impact of the cannibalisation of news content by social media platforms globally has had an equally devastating impact on news producers in South Africa. A 2018 report on sustainability in the media industry in the country found that the increasing dominance of online platforms Google and Facebook generates an outrageous amount of online revenue, none of which reaches local news producers (Dugmore, 2018).

In its annual snapshot of the media landscape in the country, the 2018 *State of the Newsroom Report* (Finlay, 2019) highlights issues such as job losses, juniorisation, media freedom clampdowns and ailing business models as some of the features of journalism in the previous year. The report also points to an escalation in threats against journalists, especially from the political elite (Finlay, 2019:16). A new element to these threats was that of cyberbullying of female journalists in particular (*Mail & Guardian*, March 2019), made possible by widespread use of social media platforms. On the positive side, however, the country remains stronger than most in terms of its regulations to facilitate and protect media freedom, finding itself at number 13 out of 180 countries ranked by *Reporters without Borders* (*Mail & Guardian*, April 2019).

1.6.2. Without data, there is no way

Journalism in South Africa finds itself caught up in the transition to digital publishing but without the enabling access to universal and affordable broadband Internet, a factor critical to the success of journalism online. It stands to reason then that if journalism is to profit from online distribution

channels, the cost of access to those channels needs to be less prohibitive. This lack of widespread universal access provides an extraneous challenge to the future of journalism as it moves online in South Africa. According to the 2015 South African General Household survey (Statistics South Africa, 2016:5), "Half of South African households (53,5%) had at least one member who used the Internet either at home, workplace, place of study, or Internet cafés,". While the figure is a significant improvement on previous years, data costs for these households is prohibitively high making access to journalism produced for digital spaces inaccessible.

Five years ago, media scholar Hayes Mabweazara (2014:37) wrote, "No South African newspaper to date has closed their print in favour of an online (web) version." Mabweazara was writing in a pre-Covid context of course and in the time of Covid-19 in South Africa, the industry is messy and the outlook dire. A report commissioned by Sanef (South African National Editors' Forum) (Rumney, 2020:3) to reflect the situation on the ground in South African newsrooms during the pandemic said:

> The first and most visible casualty was the magazine industry with the closure of two magazine publishers with the loss of 97 jobs at the one publisher and up to 250 at the other. Away from the limelight, small, independent, hyperlocal print publications were also ravaged. This was in the first phase of the lockdown as small publishers were unable to access emergency funding, resulting in the loss of an estimated 300 to 400 journalistic jobs. Workers at three of the so-called Big 4[14] print media companies were forced to take salary cuts of up to 45% and temporary lay-offs have been widely implemented.

The report (Rumney, 2020:3) also pointed to a global trend reflected in the South African context: "The massive surge in traffic to credible online news sources. Traffic to news websites increased by 72% in March." It is an oxymoron in print newspaper terms but the increase in the need for good information and the decline in the availability of this good information lays bare the conundrum that newspapers are facing.

A number of titles remain in the South African media landscape as testament to the lingering hold of print on the South Africa imagination. In addition, digital-first publication The *Daily Maverick* took the unimaginable step of launching a print newspaper known as *Maverick 168* in the midst of the global pandemic in August 2020, distributed via a grocery chain on weekends (*Daily Maverick*, 2020). This thesis does not consider the economics of a digital transition but assumes that any decision to grow sales in a news organisation critically depends on the relationship between the supplier and the consumer; in this case, the journalist and the 'reader'.

[14] The Big 4 media companies in the country are Independent Media, Arena Holdings (formerly TimesMedia), Caxton and *Media24*.

The unique context of the South African media landscape means that journalists and journalism educators are not able to abandon "traditional" print practices. Instead, they have to accommodate two skills sets that allow them to produce news for many platforms at any given time. This gives rise to the multi-faceted journalist that the journalism programme at Wits University has been developing over the last eight years. This is the kind of journalist who is able to fit into any kind of newsroom in South Africa.

The struggle for a viable business model for digital newspapers dominates discussions regarding a newspaper's transition online. Initial interview data suggests that the *M&G* has never really operated in a profit-making scenario, so the transition to digital was not been hampered by the need to stay in the black. This provides a unique case study of an organisation that experimented with technology and, in the process, has reconfigured how it practiced journalism over time.

1.7. Teaching journalism in 2020

A strong motivation for this study comes from my role as a journalism educator at Wits University in Johannesburg over the past seven years. Barbie Zelizer, in her book *Taking Journalism Seriously*, writes that the "social map" for how journalism is conceptualised is formed through the work of two groups. "For journalism, that social map, has two referent points, journalists and journalism scholars" (Zelizer, 2004:6). I am of the latter group and what I teach in journalism practice at tertiary education level is directly linked to my understanding of journalism as it is practiced in the South African media space. Through my worker as a journalism educator, as Zelizer (2004), posits, the concept and practice of journalism is formed, not just in the abstract but also in the minds of the students who are studying the subject in order to practice the craft.

Methodologically, this personal narrative contribution to the study is done using the autoethnography method which is discussed in Chapter Three. I joined Wits Journalism in 2012 as a lecturer, supporting the then coordinator of the fulltime career-entry honours programme. At the time, I filled the position of the New and Social Media lecturer, a newly created role intended to build the capacity of student journalists to fit into professional newsrooms that were operating between print and digital and therefore in need of graduates able to produce content for a variety of platforms. The *Wits Vuvuzela* newspaper, the primary teaching tool at Wits Journalism, of which I am the editor, ended its print production at the end of 2019. As of 2020, this newspaper is a digital-first publication. The fulltime honours in journalism programme at Wits University uses a teaching hospital method of instruction, which, as a pedagogical approach, is addressed in Chapter Two as part of the literature review.

My arrival at Wits Journalism in 2012 coincided with the departure of the online production person who had performed the function of maintaining the *Wits Vuvuzela* social media accounts on Facebook and

Twitter, along with a Flickr account, and was responsible for uploading content produced for the newspaper together with the student journalists. At the time, Facebook and Twitter had taken root in South Africa as the go-to social media platforms. When social media platforms or apps show up on annual user analysis research like South Africa's *WorldWideWorx* survey, it generally means that they are significant players in the digital space. In 2012, at the time of my arrival in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom, *WorldWideWorx* reported that close to 5.33-million South Africans were Facebook users while Twitter had 2.43-million users (Brand South Africa, 2012).

In 2012, *Wits Vuvuzela* was pushing content to these platforms, but not publishing to them. This difference reflects the change in production from 2012 to 2020. The newspaper's social media platforms, which currently include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, are seen as spaces where some of the paper's audiences are to be found, many of whom are exclusive to those platforms. Today, the students produce content that is customised for those platforms and, in many instances, this content is not cross published across the platforms. This is an indication of a successful transition to digital storytelling within this teaching hospital. Today, the Wits Honours in Journalism programme is predicated on a single philosophy: Teach the journalism students how to teach themselves. This logic is linked to the departure point for this study; nothing remains the same in journalism apart from the fundamentals of journalism (the fundamentals of journalism are explored further in Chapter Two).

Over time, the workflow of the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom has changed its shape and a routinely changing curriculum is taught within a framework of the following broad principles:

- That journalism is about multimedia and that writing is the foundation of storytelling, regardless of which form we use to reach our audiences.
- The student journalists are responsible for the online content including the social media accounts of *Wits Vuvuzela* as this is a crucial part of their training.
- Every individual has to engage in the active use of online tools.
- An awareness and framing of the practice of journalism in line with the stipulations of the South Africa Press Code.
- Fact-checking is not a special part of journalism done by experts in this area but is a normal part of the practice of journalism in the production of all types of content.

In the last eight years, I have noted a steady increase in the number of intern requests for graduates of the honours in journalism programme at Wits University. From those requests appears a pattern which reflects the ebbs and flows of the journalism industry in South Africa. From 2013 onwards, my students were sought for their writing skills, an indication that newspaper and text content was still in vogue. Around 2015, that shifted to writing for social media. In the last two years, the emphasis is firmly on

video skills and, given the decline in television-related jobs, I can surmise that these requests are primarily for social media platforms.

The successful shifts in the curriculum and the training of the student journalists is clear from the increase in employment opportunities for these graduates in local newsrooms which include *City Press*, *The Star*, *Reuters Africa*, *News24* and *Bloomberg*, together with public relations and communications companies. But, perhaps the greatest success of the programme is the fact that it sets trends for how journalism should be practiced and does not merely reflect what is happening in the industry. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight.

1.8. Conclusion

This introductory chapter outlined the study which follows. It set out the rationale for the study along with its aims and key questions. Sub-questions were formulated to guide the study, and give it structure and a focus. The meta-theoretical approach of newsroom sociology was introduced in this chapter as the main lens through which the study is undertaken. Additionally, this chapter introduced, in broad strokes, the qualitative research methodologies used, together with the key theories and literature which are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: *Theoretical framework and literature review*

2.1. Introduction

This research is undertaken using a sociological approach and through the use of a model of online journalism, along with the social constructivism of technology to examine how the *M&G*, the case study, has handled its digital transition. This chapter aims to achieve three things: first, to set out the theoretical lens through which study is undertaken; second, to explain the choice of theories which directly relate to the study; and third, examine the literature which explain the key concepts that are used to frame the analysis of this study.

The study adopts a sociological approach, and within the framework of this meta-theoretical approach, deploys the theory of sociology of news production (used interchangeably with the sociology of journalism), together with the theory of social constructivism (Winner, 1993), and a model of online journalism gleaned from the work of a number of scholars, (Lievrouw & Livingston, 2002; Pavlik, 2000; Quinn, 2005; Van Dijk, 2006; Bosch, 2010). The chapter starts with a discussion of the function of theory in the field of journalism studies.

2.1.1. Journalism studies as a field

A significant part of journalism studies is dedicated to answering the question: Is journalism studies a field? (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019). The relentless pursuit of this question is motivated by the need to set out, without ambiguity, what the key theoretical approaches are that define the study of journalism. But, to date, an answer to this question about theoretical approaches in journalism studies does not have a definitive answer. Instead, as Steensen and Ahva (2015) argue, journalism studies is beset by its multidisciplinary nature and the consequent range of theoretical approaches arising from the various disciplines that journalism finds itself in. Steensen and Ahva (2015:3) write that: "On the one hand, there is a wish to develop a shared understanding of journalism studies as a discipline, but on the other hand, the discipline is seen to be best served by a multitude of theoretical perspectives." Their argument draws on their comparative, longitudinal analysis of work published in two academic journals, *Journalism Studies* and *Journalism—Theory, Practice and Criticism* over a 13-year period starting in 2000. "In journalism studies, the structural framework has come into place … but a shared academic culture with distinct theories and methodologies is more difficult to pinpoint precisely because of the multidisciplinarity of the field" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019:40). This research has, therefore, compiled its own toolbox of theoretical approaches which provide direction to the aims of the study.

2.2. Theory and its place in research

Research uses theory in different ways, but ultimately theoretical approaches shape a study and delineate its boundaries such that a study remains focused on its aims and is able to achieve these (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019:39). Broadly speaking, research projects can produce theory through an examination of empirical data or research, like this one, can test a theory, looking for its strengths and weaknesses in particular social circumstances (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019:40). This study takes the latter deductive approach of using a case study and related data to test theory. This study uses the social constructivism of technology theory, which springs from the sociological approach, in trying to understand the interplay between technology and journalists, as social actors, in shaping journalism practices within the *Mail & Guardian (M&G)* newsroom in Johannesburg, South Africa.

2.2.1. The sociological approach to journalism studies

The sociological approach is considered as one of four waves in journalism studies by Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2019:5). They write that the approach found favour in the 1970s and 1980s, only to be replaced by the international comparative wave of journalism studies, which represents the current wave of journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2019:5). The latter, they argue, is distinguished by an erosion of western hegemony in journalism studies and characterised by the rise of non-western scholarship in international academic spaces like journals and conferences.

This global comparative wave incorporates studies about "the ways journalists and other social actors negotiate the meaning, legitimacy and boundaries of journalism through professional and public discourse" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019:7). "Another trend is the increased emphasis on practices over other, more traditional aspects such as journalists' values and perceptions" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019:7). The fourth wave represents a critical reflection of journalism and journalism studies and, in many ways, is a critique of the established ways of thinking about and doing journalism (Steensen & Ahva, 2015).

The third wave, the sociological wave, "shifted to a critical engagement with journalism's conventions and routines, professional and occupational ideologies and cultures, interpretive communities, and to concepts related to news texts, such as framing, storytelling and narrative, as well as to the growing importance of the popular in the news" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009:6). Using Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch's historical topology of the theoretical turns in journalism studies, this study locates itself in the traditions of the third and fourth waves, as the elements of these waves of inquiry are not considered mutually exclusive. This study approaches the research questions from a sociological standpoint, but also engages with questions around the de-westernisation of journalism studies, the conceptualisation of the audience vis-à-vis journalism organisations, and even a shifting of the lens of

journalism studies away from its preoccupation with one ideal-typical journalist working in one type of space - the newsroom, among others. In this way, this study makes a contribution to "the empirical lacuna in African journalism research (which) has given space to utopian and speculative arguments on how new digital technologies are (re)defining African journalism practice," as identified by Mabweazara (2014).

2.2.1.1. Defining the sociology of media or journalism

The theoretical framework of the sociology of news production is used in this study as a lens through which the shifts in journalism practice at the *Mail & Guardian* over the course of its history are examined. Reese (2016) traces the origins of this theoretical approach, also referred to as the sociology of media or journalism, to the 1960s and 70s during which time a selection of studies coalesced to form the basis of the approach[15]. By definition, the sociology of news production, "seeks to unpack the practices, values, organisational routines, ideas and concepts by which journalism constructs the world," (Siapera & Veglis, 2012:10). This study is concerned with the shifts in organisational practice at the *M&G,* with the aim of trying to understand how it has managed its digital transitions. The focus on the *M&G* as an organisation and on its journalists in relation to the digital transition efforts of the organisation, make the sociology of news production appropriate to use.

The sociology of news production treats journalism as a cultural practice in which news is the product which results from the practice of the craft. It is through this practice of producing content[16] over time that journalists come to a set of defining characteristics of their craft itself. Deuze (2005:444) sees journalism as an ideology instead of a cultural practice and argues that this ideology is the result of "the consolidation of a consensual occupational ideology among journalists in different parts of the world"[17].

The context, the individuals, the ideologies of the individuals, their relationships inside and outside their organisations, the organisational structures, and the interplay between these various elements during the production of news, are all the subject of sociological[18] enquiries which is at the heart of the theory of the sociology of news production (Dickinson, 2007; Deuze, 2005; Siapera & Veglis, 2012; Schudson, 2003; Cottle, 2003). This approach is appropriate for answering questions raised in this study which seek to understand the shifts that have occurred within the *M&G* newsroom as it embraced digital

[15] See Reese (2016), for a broader explanation of the roots of the sociology of news approach.
[16] The word "content" is preferred over "news" in this study as it is broader and accounts for types of media products beyond hard news.
[17] Deuze (2005:445) defines an ideology as "a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group, including-but not limited to-the general process of the production of meanings and ideas (within that group)".
[18] As Reese says, "theories of journalism provide explanatory frameworks for understanding a complex combination of social practice, product and institutional arrangement," (2016:1). Zelizer (2004:46) defines sociology as a field which "studies the long-term patterns of institutional stability and change, with a concern for the demonstrated impact of the past on the present". See also Croteau and Hoynes, 2003: 3-31.

technologies and platforms over the course of its history. Additionally, and, critically for this study, the sociology of news production guides research into journalism practice matters such as news values, newsroom organisation, ideology and rituals, among many others (Zelizer, 2004).

In *Taking Journalism Seriously: News and the Academy,* Zelizer (2004:80) makes a case for not using sociology to interrogate journalism as she believes the approach: "reduced journalists to one kind of actor in one kind of environment". McNair (1998:3), though, notes the value of the approach in that it looks at "those features of social life and organisation which shape influence and constrain its (journalism's) form and content". Reese and Shoemaker (2016:396), in trying to avoid the one-dimensional approach to sociology of news production as flagged by Zelizer (2004), introduced a model which looks at news production through a number of different, multi-level interactions, a model that they call "the hierarchy of influences". The model looks at the interplay of different levels of media work inclusive of the individual, routines, organisational, social institutions, and the social system. In doing so, they thereby offer a greater social context to journalism than sociology of news through the ethnographic method.

A critical issue that crops up in the use of the sociology of news production in this study is that the approach tends to rely on ethnography as methodological approach. A study of this nature, which probes the history of the *Mail & Guardian,* cannot, therefore, rely on observation alone. As such, other methods such as case study, interviews, thematic content analysis and autoethnography are used for more substantial findings. These methods are discussed in greater detail the next chapter.

2.2.1.2. Social constructivism or the social construction of technology

The social construction of technology or social constructivism is a theoretical framework which emerges from the sociological approach, and which provides the primary theoretical instrument for this study[19]. A privileging of the role of technology in shaping their social use falls under the technological determinist approach, which is taken to be the antithesis of social constructivism. The determinist approach posits, in the context of this study, that the shape of contemporary journalism practice is a response to the particular features of new media technologies. Flowing from this line of thinking would be the consequence that technologies used by journalists in the production of news are not altered or shaped through this use (Dahlgren, 1996; Anderson et al., 2014)[20]. Social constructivism, though, argues

[19] Pinch and Bijker (1984) are credited with the contemporary conceptualisation of the social construction of technology. In their 1984 paper entitled: *The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other,* they wrote that social constructivism as used in the sciences, was also relevant to studies about technologies.

[20] See Winner, 1993, for a critical discussion of the social construction of technology.

for what is referred to as ‘interpretative flexibility’ in the use of technology (Winner, 1993:366).

2.2.1.3. Key concepts in social constructivism

I have relied on Pinch and Bijlker's (1984) conception of social constructivism as it accounts for a variety of concepts including people, environments, and technology in the social shaping of technology. In the context of a newsroom study such as this one, Pinch and Bijlker's (1984), conceptualisation of social constructivism account for the various parts and processes of a newsroom which contribute to the social shaping of technologies in that newsroom. Pinch and Bijlker (1984), describe four related constructs which demonstrate the operation of the social construction of technology, and which are useful for interrogating how technology and journalism operate together.

The relevant social group

The relevant social group is one of four key concepts in the social constructivist approach. In short, the relevant social group is a group of people who share a similar and identifiable set of meanings in relation to an artefact or a technology. In the instance of this study, the relevant social group is the journalists of the *M&G* during the periods under examination (Klein & Kleinman, 2002:29). Journalists throughout the literature on this subject are acknowledged, almost singularly, as a whole, self-determining group of individuals whose collective actions have come to determine the characteristics of journalism.

Wider context

The "wider context" refers to the sociocultural and political context within which technology is developed. This concept is useful to this study as it accounts for the broader influences on the way in which technology can be used within a newsroom. For example, while a social media platform can be used to provide more personal commentary by a journalist, the organisational policies governing social media may prevent this type of use by the journalist. These organisational policies may be seen as part of the wider context.

Flexibility

This concept “suggests that technology design is an open process that can produce different outcomes depending on the social circumstances of development” (Klein and Kleinman, 2002:29). This concept has a constructivist outlook and makes space for the human influence over the development of new technology and its ultimate usage among a relevant social group.

Closure and stabilisation

This concept allows for conflict in the process of developing a technology (Klein and Kleinman, 2002:30). It also argues that the conflict in the design process of a technology continues until there is agreement or a resolution. Within a newsroom, these agreements may take the form of policies, guidelines, workflows or even unwritten but widely acknowledged or accepted rules and regulations.

2.3. About technological determinism

Technological determinism is "the belief that technologies have an overwhelming and inevitable power to drive human actions and social change" (Lievrouw & Livingston, 2006:21). Initial impact studies focusing on the Internet as a new technology and its relationship with journalism tended towards the deterministic approach (Siapera & Veglis, 2012:6). The theory is perhaps best summed up by the title of the first chapter of Marshall McLuhan's famous book: Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man21. Penned in 1964, the opening chapter is titled: The Medium is the Message, a term which has come to symbolise the idea that technology wields enormous influence over society and that this influence is uni-directional. The theory, though, does not account for the actions of individuals or society as a group, either through their use of the technology or in shaping these technologies. Indeed, it also fails to account for their uses in specific contexts.

Örnebring (2010) writes that studies have shown that journalists tend to over-emphasise the role of technology in changing the practice of journalism for two reasons[22]. Firstly, he says technology is very closely integrated with the practice of journalism. And secondly, "the technological paradigm for explaining change in journalism has deep historical roots" (Örnebring, 2010:57). Örnebring's critique of these tendencies to over-emphasise the role of technology in the work and lives of journalists is valid, and points to the need to re-examine technological determinism in journalism studies. The use of ethnography in this study as a way of concentrating on the specific experiences of journalists in a space like the *M&G*, is one way of avoiding a determinist reading of the interplay of digital technologies in a newsroom and its journalists (Ryfe, 2009; Cottle, 2007).

Winner (1993:366) writes that researchers "must pay attention to the variety of interpretations of what a particular technological entity in a process of development means and how people act in different ways to achieve their purposes within that process." This quote both describes the social constructivist approach and justifies its use in this study. This study focuses on a newsroom, the case study, the individuals within it, and their use of the technology that makes online journalism possible. In referring to online or digital journalism as a technology, I use Bijker, Hughes and Pinch's (1993:4) definition of technology which can refer to one or all of the following: (1) physical objects or artefacts; (2) the

[21] Downloaded from http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/mcluhan.mediummessage.pdf, 2014.
[22] See also Pavlik (2000) for more about the role of technology in shaping the practice of journalism.

knowledge people have or what they know; and (3) the activities that people engage in such as the production of artefacts in themselves.

Social constructivism is a critique of technological determinism and as a theory in itself, ensures that the user of technology, in this case the journalist, is ascribed a measure of individual agency that is otherwise overlooked by determinists. Social constructivism emphasises that the "relationship between technology and society is genuinely an *interaction; a recursive process ...”* (Heap *et al.*, 1995:15). Social constructivism cautions against a one-sided view of the relationship between technology and society, and, therefore, of journalism itself - a view which undermines the role of the individual or of groups in the relationship.

Even in defining the term “new media”, researchers tend to focus on the technological features of the technologies, mostly hinged on the Internet, which set them apart from legacy or traditional media forms (Lievrouw & Livingston, 2006:20). These ‘features” include “convergence” or inter-operability of technologies on a number of different devices. Lievrouw and Livingston (2006:23), in trying to operationalise a less determinist understanding of the term, define “new media” as “information and communications technologies and their associated social context”. This includes artefacts and devices for communication, communications activities or practices and the “the social arrangements or organisations that form around the devices and practices” (Lievrouw & Livingston, 2006:23).

In the literature on online or digital journalism, the theory of technological determinism is most clearly expressed through the concept of convergence. Convergence is popularly understood as the “coming together of technologies” and is a key component of what makes online journalism possible. Bardoel and Deuze (2001:92) add a cautionary note to their otherwise deterministic arguments, writing: “it must be stressed here that technology in itself cannot be seen as the determining factor in defining what professional convergence and overall change in journalism means.” Bardoel and Deuze (2001) and Pavlik (2000) represent determinist approaches to studies of technology in relation to journalism, while more recent bodies of work advocate for a social constructivist stance (Boczkowski, 2004; Hermans, Vergeer & Pleijter, 2009). This research relies on the work of social constructivists, as this theoretical approach provides the space to account for the variety of ways in which users make use of technology through interpretative flexibility. Rather than taking the view that technology shapes the practice of journalism, this research argues that changes in the practice of journalism are negotiated through the use of new technologies within the social context of the production of news, that of the newsroom of the *M&G* and among its staff.

2.4. Literature review

The literature review examines specific concepts referred to throughout this study to demonstrate how they are understood and used. A literature review is intended to capture as wide a body of knowledge as there is related to the topic under scrutiny. This review has categorised the literature relevant to the study under the following broad headings for functional reasons: defining journalism; the features of new media; definitions of online journalism; and what is understood by digital- and social-first strategies.

2.4.1. Defining Journalism

In order to understand how the practice of journalism has shifted in recent times, or even assess whether such a shift has occurred within the framework of this study, it is necessary to examine how journalism itself is defined[23]. Deuze (2005:455) writes that "a rethinking of journalism and the professional identity of journalists is necessary not so much because there is something wrong with the profession, but rather because it is essential in order to maintain a conceptually coherent understanding of what journalism is in an increasingly complex and liquid modern society". In later work, Deuze (2017:1) contends that "journalism is transitioning from a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices". This study probes these ideas by observing the newsroom practices of the *M&G* and by comparing content from the print newspaper and the social media platforms of the organisation in order to understand how the *M&G* is managing its digital transition and what journalistic practices are involved in the course of this transition.

The definition of journalism is often debated in the public domain given the vast and varied sources of news, and what or who purports to be news or a news producer today. For the purposes of this study though, the question has to be answered from an intellectual perspective through an examination of normative definitions of the term. How journalism is defined, should ideally determine the qualities, values, standards and practices that are followed by the people practicing the craft. Deuze (2005:444) writes that:

> In decades of journalism studies, scholars refer to the journalists' professionalisation process as a distinctly ideological development, as the emerging ideological development served to continuously refine and reproduce a consensus about who was a 'real' journalist, and what (parts of) news media at any time would be considered examples of 'real' journalism.

[23] In questioning whether journalism can be referred to as a profession, Pihl-Thingvad writes (2014:2): "In the academic debate about whether journalism qualifies as a profession on the basis of such criteria, it is generally agreed that journalism meets most, but not all of the important criteria for a classic profession". Reese and Shoemaker (1996:88), take a more cynical view in arguing that journalism does not strictly meet the requirements to qualify as a profession and that "to be a journalist requires only that someone hire you".

The term “occupational ideology” is used regularly in research unpacking what journalism is (Lauk, 2009; Deuze, 2011), with consensus among some researchers that the definitions and characteristics of journalism emerge from the work experience of the journalists themselves. In other words, the profession of journalism, what it entails and how it is defined are shaped by the people who undertake the work of producing journalism, the journalists themselves. Critical to this understanding is the subtext that ideology forms over a protracted period of time (Lauk, 2009) and that the journalist comes to adopt this ideology through a process of socialisation (Singer, 2004b:841).

2.4.2. Features of new media

In moving towards a functional definition of online journalism in relation to journalism (which is taken to mean journalism produced for legacy platforms such as television, radio and in print), we need to examine the features of new media. These features form the foundation of a model of online journalism which is discussed later in this chapter. These features are what distinguishes content produced for online or for digital platforms from content produced for legacy media.

In defining new media in their seminal work, *The Handbook of New Media*, Lievrouw and Livingston (2006:1), write that

> New media have not replaced older media any more than broadcasting replaced print in the mid-twentieth century. Rather, people's information and communications environments have become ever more individualised and commodified, integrating print, audio, still and moving images, broadcasting, telecommunications, computing, and other modes and channels of communication and information sharing.

While appearing to be a rather simple amalgamation of all sorts of media platforms, new media, through the process of convergence, results in a new media format which is characterised by distinct features. In relation to this study on the *M&G’s* transition from print to digital, these features shape the way news is consumed, interacted with and shared, which, consequentially, impacts how journalists produce the news for online consumption. I look at these features below by starting with a discussion of convergence.

2.4.2.1. Understanding convergence

Convergence, is the merging of legacy technologies such that they become interoperable. This coming together in the space of media and communication results in what is commonly understood as

multimedia or a mixed modality of content delivery, which is the end result of the news work of many contemporary journalists.

The literature addressing convergence in relation to the practice of journalism can be separated into three broad categories, namely the convergence of technologies; convergence of skills; and the convergence between media producers and media consumers (Quinn, 2005). This study does not probe the convergence in technologies which is accepted as a norm in contemporary South Africa society but instead focuses on the under-researched areas of convergence in skills and the convergence between media producers and consumers or audiences within the context of the *M&G* newsroom.

The defining features of the new format that result from convergence, as identified by a number of new media theorists, are multimedia, interactivity and hypertextuality (Lievrouw & Livingston, 2002; Pavlik, 2000; Quinn, 2005; Van Dijk, 2006; Bosch, 2010). These three features have a direct impact on the way online journalism is functionally understood and, therefore, a discussion of each is undertaken below. A discussion of the process of convergence in technologies is also undertaken below as the process is useful in understanding the blurring of boundaries between technologies and practices related to it.

2.4.2.2. The emergence of the multimedia format through convergence

Convergence in media technologies gives rise to multimedia content or content that is a blend of a number of formerly distinct media formats like video, audio and photography. The term itself is used interchangeably with "new media" (van Dijk 2006:7). Williams (2003:227) refers to the information society as the result of this process of convergence; while within the context of a newsroom, Deuze (2004:140) defines convergence as “cooperation and collaboration between formerly distinct media newsrooms and other parts of the modern media company”.

Deuze (2005:452), writes that the processes of convergence directly contributed to a shift from the concept of a journalist as “individualistic” to that of a group player as the role of the journalist has shifted from producing copy for a paper to ensuring that the same copy has an extended shelf life in the online publishing space. Being forced to work more closely with other parts of the newsroom in order to publish and engage in online spaces, has, according to Deuze (2005:452), led to “tensions” among the professionals themselves. These tensions are compounded by a lack of skills, complications with producing content in what is today a hostile environment to conventional newsrooms and significant competition for positions in an ever-shrinking industry (Singer, 2004a). The newsroom ethnography of the *M&G* in Chapter Eight shows some of these tensions as journalists, by and large, continue to focus

on the print newspaper despite the expectation to contribute to the digital publishing needs of the organisation.

Multimedia was originally used to describe the format that resulted from the process of convergence but now, some 20 years after the mainstreaming of the Internet, convergence is barely distinguishable from what came before it, the word multimedia hangs in the air rather uncomfortably. There is very little clarity with regards to the best description of what the term is meant to refer to or even of its appropriateness in some discussions. Nonetheless, "multimedia" is still used, and will be used in this study, as denotative of what results from the production of online journalism.

Singer (2004b:839) interprets convergence differently by moving away from the technical processes that often characterise it and, in so doing, she acknowledges the impact of the process on the work of journalists. She focuses instead on the interpersonal relationships between journalists - who themselves are specialised in individual legacy media formats - and shows how the interactions (convergence) between the practices of these individuals act as a "catalyst for the “resocialisation” of print journalists" (2004:838). This study makes use of Singer's (2004b), approach to defining convergence in the context of the newsroom and also accepts Vobič's (2011) extension of this definition. Vobič (2011:3), argues that a definition of convergence should extend not only to the technologies and staff but also the "spaces between formerly distinct editorial teams of print, television and online media."

This thesis argues, that in addition to the definitions of Singer (2004b) and Vobič (2011), conceptualisations of convergence must include the convergence between the producer of journalism and the consumer of journalism and the future of journalism cannot but include this aspect of social convergence. Social media platforms and widespread access to them, has shifted the boundaries between these two groups although it remains to be seen to what end. Dan Gillmor (2004), makes a case for the idea of the prosumer – the consumer that also produces media in various ways. Indeed, studies and research about multimedia and online journalism are usually done from the perspective of, or with a focus on, the journalist and often do not account for the consumer who also participates in production through interactivity and social media use. Deuze (2005:454) fills this lacuna by offering the following: “Work on new media and journalism signals increased interactivity and a further blurring of the hierarchical relationships between producers and users of news as the main characteristics of the changes digitalisation and convergence bring to conceptualising journalism.” This study looks for examples of this in the transition of the *M&G* to digital and probes the ways in which the organisation is reimagining its relationship with its audiences.

The ubiquity of digital technology and cheaper costs of going online has fostered the concept of ambient journalism which is facilitated by convergence in various technologies, and refers to the idea that journalism is available around the clock to the consumer, facilitated by more portable information and communications devices like the mobile phone. Ambient news, though, means that traditional news

schedules have little meaning in a context where being part of the online conversation means never being able to plug out (Hermida, 2010). This is an important feature of online journalism brought about by the convergence of technologies as it seriously impacts on traditional concepts of newsrooms deadlines and workflows which have always been rigidly and narrowly defined over time.

The concept of ambient news has far-reaching implications for the way in which journalists do their work, not just in terms of the time but in terms of the actual production of content. A print journalist, for example, would have sent their copy to an editing desk at which point they see the end of their influence over copy. A journalist working in a contemporary environment, even if this is still primarily a print-based newsroom, is now expected to follow through on digitising their content and then pushing it further via social media. These processes also mean that a journalist, who in the past may have worked entirely on their own, now has to work more collaboratively with other sections of the newsroom in order to see their copy through the newer steps in the workflow.

2.4.2.3. Interactivity and hypertextuality

Interactivity, which Van Dijk (2006:8) sees as one of the defining features of new media, "is a sequence of action and reaction." Using the example of a piece of text-based journalism, action may refer to the reading of the article and the use of hyperlinks to supplement or augment what is in the article itself. The reaction is that the piece is changed from its intended reading to a new reading by the user who has interacted with it using the technology of the Internet. In explaining interactivity, Lievrouw and Livingston (2006:7) write that the interaction facilitated by new media is distinct from that which was possible via mass media. But even in acknowledging that new media is interactive, McMillan (in Lievrouw & Livingston, 2006:205) warns, as Deuze (2005:451) does with multimedia, that "interactivity means different things to different people."

Interactivity within the context of this study is understood to refer to the engagements between a news producer or a journalist at the *M&G* and the consumers of their content via the different platforms used for publication. The way in which this interactivity is understood or operationalised by these journalists in this study helps us to understand that there is no universal understanding of what interactivity means in the context of the practice of journalism. "In its simplest form, interactivity has been defined as the extent to which users are allowed to participate in the modification of media contents and forms in real time" (Siapera & Veglis, 2012:6).

Flowing from this idea of interactivity, though, is the critical question of how journalists engage with consumers of their content. While seemingly innocuous at first, this question impacts on how journalism is defined. In a world of digital technology which facilitates social media networks, consumers and

producers of news are in closer contact with one another than ever before. This contact has fundamental consequences for the way in which a journalist practices their craft and, ultimately, for how news is produced, as well as for the feedback that the journalist receives from the consumer of that news. A form of journalism that accounts for the closer interaction of the journalist and the consumer is better characterised as public journalism rather than liberal journalism. Robinson (in Berkowitz, 2011:162) takes the view that the increased involvement of consumers in the process of producing the news has the effect of "the industry also (perhaps unwittingly), undermining its own role as a societal institution whose jurisdiction has been over life's facts".

Hypertext which is the technology making hypertextuality "is generally understood as a computer-based group of text in different semiological forms intertwined via associated linkages" (Vobič, 2013:1). Hypertext, the language of the worldwide web, the public face of the Internet, fundamentally alters the way in which media content is received and makes interactivity possible. The technology of hypertext is the essential difference between online platforms and legacy mass media platforms. Hypertext makes the seamless transitions between individually distinct media formats possible. The concepts of convergence, hypertextuality, interactivity and multimedia are all key concepts in understanding the *M&G's* digital transition as these mark the starting point of the differences between print journalism and online journalism.

2.4.3. Defining online/digital journalism

A significant problem in writing about the shift away from print to digital platforms is the difficulty in finding a generally acceptable term for "new" or contemporary forms of journalism practice. The terms used to define the practice of producing news for the online space range from online journalism, digital journalism, convergence journalism (Quinn, 2005), multimedia journalism to cyber-journalism. And while these terms all appear to describe the process of producing journalistic content for Internet-hosted platforms, they never seem to mean exactly the same thing to those using them[24]. For the purposes of this research though, the term 'online journalism' will be used to refer to the process of producing journalistic content for online and/or digital platforms[25]. Bardoel and Deuze (2001:92) describe online journalism as the "fourth kind of journalism," while Anderson, Bell and Shirky (2014:13) propose the term "post-industrial journalism". This involves a restructuring in journalism practice that:

[24] Deuze, (2011:23), points out the conundrum of the label for this new form of journalism is shown through the confusion in the teaching of multimedia: "The disparity of approaches and models of teaching and researching multimedia reveals one thing at least; multimedia means different things to different people".
[25] Bockowski and Mitchelstein, (in Boczkowski and Anderson (eds) (2017), provide an instructive assessment of how the history of online journalism has been treated in journalism studies.

> Will mean rethinking every organisational aspect of news production – increased openness to partnerships; increased reliance on publicly available data; increased use of individuals, crowds and machines to produce raw material, even increased reliance on machines to produce output. (Anderson, Bell & Shirky, 2012:13)

This study understands the defining characteristics of online journalism in terms of the six characteristics identified by Malik and Shapiro[26] (in Franklin & Eldridge II, 2016: 19). Their six characteristics, outlined below, are seen as ways in which online journalism is distinct from legacy media or what they refer to as analogue media (Franklin & Eldridge II, 2016:18):

- *Interactive*, which is taken to mean a new relationship between the producers of media and the consumers of media.
- *Unfinished* refers to the possibility of endlessly adding, changing or reworking content produced for online. This is clearly not possible for content produced for a print newspaper, for example.
- *Long-lasting* refers to the seemingly endless shelf-life of Internet content especially given that the content can exist on multiple platforms simultaneously
- *Global* refers to the lack of physical limitations that legacy media, like a newspaper, are bound by.
- *Personal* refers to the conversational tone that they see as definitive of communications online.
- *Unsiloed* describes the lack of boundaries on the Internet, which means that traditional journalism competitors are now operating side by side and in conjunction with one another online.

These characteristics are used in this study to understand how the *M&G* has managed its digital transitions and what changes, if any, this has had on the practice of journalism at the organisation.

2.5. Social context and the de-westernisation of journalism studies

It is important to stress that focusing on the social context of the use of new technologies in reshaping journalism practice is part of the process of de-westernising journalism studies. Mabweazara (2015:108) writes, "We should, therefore, emphasise sensitivity to context—using established Western theories with close attention to the uniqueness of the conditions in which African journalists operate". This study does exactly this by making use of social constructivism as developed in a western context, and using

[26] Malik and Shapiro (Franklin and Eldridge II, 2016:19), use the term 'digital journalism' instead of 'online journalism' which is the preferred term in this study.

it within a local context with a heightened awareness of the peculiarities of this context. To question the applicability of a theory developed in a western context, is to look for bias against an African context either in the development of the theory or its application. I agree with Mabweazara who writes that "… the application and appropriateness of a theory should be based on its relevance rather than its geographical or socio-cultural origins" (2015:118). I would add that there is enough flexibility in the application of theory to a study to remain critical of its appropriateness to any context. There is less flexibility in applying conclusions reached after the deployment of a theory to a study given that the data results from socially constructed context and is, therefore, very specific to that context.

Zelizer writes that "what many of us (in journalism studies), study accounts for only a small part of the material that is contemporary journalism" (2004:6). This is a crucial point to bear in mind in this study which relies on this limited scholarship. A study such as this, though, extends the limitations of existing scholarship by focusing and emphasising the features of the local context which may be congruent or not with western case studies. "For as the practices, forms, and technologies for news gathering and news presentation increase in variety, demeanour, and number, the existing body of scholarly material shrinks in relevance" (Zelizer, 2004:6).

It would be remiss to ignore global debates on the decolonisation or de-westernisation of knowledge and its relevance to journalism studies. This is especially critical to this study, which is conducted in the global south on a case study that is borne of this geographic and cultural context. In the time of movements like #RhodesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter, it is incumbent on academic scholars to interrogate their own work, ideas and impact. I am mindful of the use of theoretical perspectives like social constructivism and a model of online journalism which were developed in the west and imported to the global south. But, I believe, as Mabweazara does, that discarding this knowledge would be too simplistic and instead, it should be used with careful introspection that questions their relevance at all times.

Mabweazara (2014:106), a Zimbabwean scholar, writes that,

> Radical calls to develop new theories as well as to de-Westernise contemporary journalism studies through exclusively deploying "home-grown" concepts … are not necessarily always viable. Rather, there is more to gain from appropriating traditional theories and identifying possible synergies between the "old", predominantly Western approaches, and the "new digital phenomena", and weaving out of that dialogue, approaches that are not radically different but are in tune with the uniqueness of African experiences.

The approach taken by Mabweazara (in De Beer *et al*., 2017:176) suggests that there is use in working off established theoretical constructs instead of trying to reinvent the wheel. This is important as journalism in South Africa has not developed in a bubble, the ideals of journalism practice stem from a

western notion of the craft, and the practices are linked. Wallace Chuma, reminds us that often key theoretical concepts are developed in the West, and that:

> Journalism training and journalism practice in Africa, as we know them today, are products of the continent's encounter with Europe. The earliest newspapers on the continent, from the Cape Colony to Egypt, were colonial projects. Journalism practice at these newspapers was all about promoting the ideals and interests of the white settlers and European culture. Local African communities were not considered as audiences (2010:15).

Chuma adds that, "Post-independence Africa – and indeed much of the formerly colonised global South – has remained intellectually dependent on the North for explanatory frameworks for a range of disciplines and fields of study in academe, media and journalism studies being one of them" (2010:15). Chuma (2010:16) agrees with Mabweazara that these Western paradigms must be interrogated for relevance, "Western paradigms which do not pay sufficient attention to such realities need to be domesticated if they are to be applied at all in media teaching and learning". Part of this process is recognising the inherent biases in these paradigms and addressing them for the local context. Mabweazara (2015:118) writes, "Collectively, they provide a wide-ranging research setting that enables us to see the adoption and use of new digital technologies by African journalists as shaped by multiple elements within the social structure in which their professional routines unfold".

Chuma (2010) flags the problem of an uncritical reliance on a western framework for journalism and journalism studies. "In Anglophone Africa, the Anglo-Saxon character of media training is illustrated most prominently by the uncontested, taken-for-granted use of English as a medium of journalism instruction. The impression is created that journalism teaching (and consequently practice) is essentially an English language affair" (Chuma, 2010:16). This bias, he argues, excludes potential students who do not excel in English as a language and has the effect of marginalising the use of African languages in the media. A consequence of this is the lack of engagement from a scholarly perspective about the media and journalism produced in non-English languages.

> With the exception of radio, African languages have a marginal presence in the media. In Zimbabwe, only two local language newspapers exist, almost three decades after the attainment of independence. And, to make matters worse, the two papers do not practice the "professional" model of informative and analytical journalism, but a sordid brand of tabloid journalism, creating the impression that local Shona and Ndebele languages are only good in newspapers when they describe the bizarre and the macabre. (Chuma, 2010:16).

Deuze, writing in 2001, almost a decade before the decolonisation debate entered the journalism education in African contexts space, said of journalism education in the context of the west, that "Perhaps this suggests that to educate journalism students in the ideal-typical way only further 'disables'

them to deal with the crucial and unfortunately highly politicized debates the profession find itself when confronted with the realities of diversity and multiculturalism in the news, on the workplace, and in society" (2001:12). Deuze (2001) and Chuma (2010) are arguing in these cases for a shift away from the consensually established ideal-typical conceptualisations of what journalism is, how it should be practiced, and who its custodians are; points which underpin the inquiry in this study.

2.6. Other limitations in journalism studies

In this section, I briefly describe some of my concerns with the established body of literature in journalism studies through the work of others who have reflected on the same. There is a bias in journalism studies through its focus on an ideal-typical journalist working in hard news in print newspapers that must be acknowledged (Zelizer, 2004). This is likely because of the teleology in the history of journalistic technologies where print came first. Dahlgren (in Zelizer, 2004:6) points out that journalism scholarship as a body of work has at its core, a focus on the production of 'hard news', ignoring all other forms of news or potential forms of news. A focus on one kind of journalist dominates research in journalism studies. "Research tends to overlook particular categories of news workers. It predominantly charts the professional cultures of privileged full-time news reporters over casualized, multi-skilled, and free-lance journalists, to mention just a few neglected categories," write Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009:12).

Deuze and Witschge (2017:169) tell us that a focus on the newsroom as a site of journalism practice dominates journalism studies: "The newsroom was the site to be a journalist, to be recognized as such, and scholars validated this process by pursuing empirical approaches dedicated to newsrooms and the news work therein." Atton and Mabweazara (2011:668), in their overview of research into new media and journalism in Africa, observe that "research has largely lacked theoretical and empirical grounding in terms of examining how African mainstream journalists are forging new ways to practise their profession in the light of technological changes in their newsrooms." Ogola adds to this point by writing that:

> The way technologies are adopted and adapted in Africa is therefore irreducible to such neat categories as old and new – the 'new' in new media here does not necessarily refer to the technology, but also to the novel ways in which it is used. African journalism has creatively and proactively appropriated a range of new media technologies so fundamentally that they have become an inalienable part of the continent's journalism (Ogola, 2015:98).

This, for me, is where the de-westernisation of journalism studies must happen. There must be a new lens through which journalism studies on the African continent is undertaken, one which does not assume that journalism cannot flourish without the tools or the idealised spaces that are assumed to

produce quality journalism[27]. We need to heed the concerns about inherent biases in journalism studies and it is hoped that this thesis achieves this.

But, in being mindful of the hegemonic influence of western epistemologies, we also need to resist the urge to map out a continent-wide approach that is also generalised across countries that are vastly dissimilar. This study heeds Mabweazara's (2014:108) warning that, "One must, therefore, avoid the "reductive assumption that African countries, and the myriad array of cultures, religions and languages, can be prescriptively reduced to homogenous sets of continent-wide social and cultural [practices]". In other words, calls for de-westernisation of journalism studies should not default to the assumption that there is an *African* approach to research on the continent. The variety of experiences, the diversity in the cultures and the disparity in access to technology makes the telling of a single African journalism story impossible.

While the concerns about the de-westernisation of journalism raised are not problematic in themselves, they are concerning in terms of what they exclude as part of the way forward. They exclude practices of journalism outside of newsrooms and in other forms other than hard news and, in many instances, outside of a print newspaper newsroom. Deuze and Witschge (2017:177), in a paper called *Beyond Journalism*, push for a reimagining of journalism studies beyond the obvious limitations of scholarly work which has defined journalism in the past:

> *Beyond journalism* is an approach to journalism that considers it as a dynamic object of study. It points at the permanent instability inside the news industry as well as the structural and structured nature of people committing acts of journalism outside of it. Beyond journalism does not only exclude a 'hard' definition of the profession as a relatively contained entity with distinct boundaries but also a 'soft' definition of a range of practices by a multitude of actors that in various ways contribute to its social relevance.

A newsroom ethnography coupled with an autoethnography which reflects on my teaching of journalism at a university in South Africa is this study's contribution to a de-westernisation of journalism studies by providing a description and analysis of a case study within the social context of South Africa.

[27] Ogola and Rodny-Gumede write (in Anderson, Ogola and Williams (eds), 2013:227), that "while the very idea of quality (journalism) often assumes a universal understanding, that position is potentially misleading, for we can arguably conceive of it as contextually relative and generally contingent upon the factors against which it is measured,". In other words, quality journalism should be measured within the contextual framework in which it is produced.

2.7. The audience and the Internet as the public sphere

German philosopher Jurgen Habermas famously theorised the concept of the public sphere which refers to –

> The space of civil society between state institutions and citizens. In democratic societies, it should provide a more or less autonomous and open arena for public debate and the formation of public opinion along pluralistic lines, (Christians *et al*., 2009:8).

To put it another way, the ideal of the Habermasian public sphere is the aim of democracy which itself is founded on the inclusion of all persons and a plurality of voices. Of course, this idealism is not without criticism, as the theory overlooks the social realities of inequality and political power. But, the relevance of this ideal to this study is in the notion of the mass access to communications technologies, which the Internet is said to facilitate.

Online publishing, convergence and the technology of hypertext are facilitating the blurring of the boundaries between media producers and consumers ostensibly making the production of journalism content more participatory and by consequence, more democratic. But, there are flaws to this logic in that access to the Internet and its tools remain disparate among countries, among citizens inside countries, and in terms of technological literacy and language. In South Africa, global media research company Datareportal.com (2020), reported that internet penetration had reached 62% in January 2020 while social media penetration was at 37% at the same time.

This reality of the digital divide reflects the well-established critique of the Habermasian public sphere that the theory ignored the structural realities of many people who would simply never be able to access this discursive space (Christians *et al*., 2009:8). These discussions are relevant to this study which looks at how the *M&G* approaches its relationship with its consumers in an online environment.

2.7.1. Gillmor's '*We, the media*'[28]

One of the major contributions to understanding audiences in online journalism in the last two decades has come from former technology writer turned academic, Dan Gillmor. His book, *We the media* (2004), challenged the mainstream media's exclusive claim to the production of journalism in the early 2000s, arguing instead that some, not all, audiences are actively participating in the production of news. But, in calling the latter 'participatory journalism', Gillmor sustains the distinction between the work produced by journalists and that produced by non-journalists. Gillmor's book builds a narrative of what he calls 'personal journalism,' which, through the technology of the World Wide Web and the Internet,

[28] While Gillmor's book (2004) is titled '*We, the media*', he uses the term 'we media' to refer to personal journalism.

manifested in online blogs or weblogs as they were originally called. With the web, Gillmor writes, "just about anyone could own a digital printing press, and have worldwide distribution" (2004:13). Jay Rosen (2006) defines Gillmor's 'former audience' as,

> ... the audience are those who *were* on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another— and who *today* are not in a situation like that *at all.*

At the heart of *We the media*, is the idea that the former audience, former consumers of news, are now also producers. This is owed primarily to the digital tools at hand, which have not only revolutionised the news industry through convergence but also broke big media's hold on journalism. "The lines will blur between producers and consumers, changing the role of both in ways we're only beginning to grasp," he writes (Gillmor, 2004:xxiv). Gillmor's book (2004 is predicated on the impact of technology, the ability of technology to drive change, a purely determinist approach. It is this access to technologies which has changed how journalists do journalism. At the same time, it has also given the impression that more people are able do the job of the journalist.

> It boils down to this. In the past 150 years, we've essentially had two distinct means of communication: one-to-many (books, newspapers, radio, and TV), and one-to-one (letters, telegraphs, and telephone. The Internet, for the first time, gives us many-to-many and few-to-few communications. This has vast implications for the former audiences and for the production of news because the differences between the two are becoming harder to distinguish. (Gillmor, 2004:26)

If we accept that the Gutenberg press made information more accessible, then it could be said that the Internet has made the production of information more accessible[29]. As explored in Chapter Seven, this information is not necessarily sound, scientific or acceptable, but is clearly available in startling abundance.[30] A simple question arises from Gillmor's assertion: if the audience is part of the process of creating their own news, what happens to the media who not only want to create it for them but also sell it to them? In essence, the media needs to show their audiences, also known as their consumers, that there is a need for their services. They need to highlight the importance of the construction of news, the act of journalism, thereby establishing a demand which appears to be steadily on the decline. And

[29] See Eisenstein (1979) for more on the cultural revolution wrought by the development of the technology of the printing press.

[30] Notably, Berger (2011:710) argues that the act of producing of media, which is random in itself, is not enough to regard a consumer as a producer. In 2020, some nine years after Berger's contribution, the kinds of media and information produced and circulated, and the ease with which this content is produced with common mobile phones even, by people outside of journalism, has far outstripped what was available then. I contend that while valid then, this assertion no longer holds true.

so, a new sociological description about the production of news comes into play – one which has to account for what the audiences want and need. One that has to move away from a singular focus of what the public interest is as interpreted by journalists and leans more towards what interests the public, as expressed by them, by the content they produce and circulate. In short, the sociological interpretation of news production cannot focus on the journalist alone, it has to bring the audience sharply into focus in this process.[31]

A new description for journalism which takes account of the changing role of the audience is that of Pasti and Ramaprasad (2018:51), who argue that how we think of the audience itself should change:

> One should think primarily of the audience as a public, which can be considered as a particular sphere of ideas in which individuals who are particularly switched on to what becomes visible in the scene of a public space take a stance or commit to some collective cause. Unlike an audience, therefore, the public is constituted, albeit provisionally, of a collective subject and may diffract or diversify around different experiences. Therefore, there are many publics.

The idea of multiple publics committed to various causes is one that I return to later in the discussion about contemporary membership models in Chapter Five.

2.7.2. 'The construction of the event is not exclusively the domain of professional journalism'[32]

While Gillmor (2006) argues that there is a very thin line between 'us' and 'them' in looking at the distinction between media producers and media consumers. I would argue that the line is clearer when a distinction is made between what constitutes information and what is seen as journalism, a particular type of information. Information can be generated and sullied in many ways. Journalism, if produced according to the basic principles of journalism, cannot be. Pasti and Ramaprasad (2018:49) write that "news making practices around the world have changed significantly in past years, mostly as a result of the rise of new digital technologies. These have enabled greater citizen participation at the same time as they have generated from Silicon Valley an interest in news making as a strategic tool for profit making," These interests have manifested in online and social media applications like Google, Facebook and Twitter, which have become heavy hitters in the world of online publishing. Pasti and Ramaprasad (2018:49) add that:

> On the user front, the ability of these initiatives to generate content, co-produce journalism, and interact more directly with journalists has created opportunities for journalistic production to

[31] As explored in Chapter Seven, media literacy is also a critical part of the new role of journalism in championing the cause against disinformation and misinformation. This is where, I believe, journalism, as a profession, will establish its relevance once again.

[32] Pasti and Ramaprasad, 2018:50.

> be more transparent, more closely linked with audiences, and more responsive to citizens' news agendas. In other words, the news is moving away from its old markets, and the traditional press could be losing its agenda-setting power.

But while these Internet-based applications have had the effect of democratising access to information, their role in the media industry has been to decimate the field by pulling audiences away from news sites through their sheer numbers. Their facilitation in sharing the news through social networks has undercut the various revenue generation models which monetise the content produced by newsrooms.

2.7.3. "Parajournalists" and the loss of journalistic sources

In addition to the altered relationships of the various publics and former audiences with media producers, are a group of people Schudson refers to as 'parajournalists' – a label he uses to describe the spin doctors, the marketing people, the PR (public relations) persons, and the information officers (2003:3).

> The loss of monopoly over the profession also means that journalism is no longer the province of journalists alone; new specialists from the field of technology (software engineers), and art (web designers) as well as narrow profile experts from different disciplines have arrived, as has digital news. They bring new audiences to the media, audiences that skilled marketers work to keep and increase. (Pasti & Ramaprasad, 2018:11)

The parajournalists are those who previously turned to journalists and newspapers to get their messages across to the mass audience. These people now have access to a communications tool in the Internet enabling them to cut out the journalist as the conduit of news and information. With the Internet, much of the information disseminated by these professionals is made available via their websites, their social media channels, and even directly through their personal social media accounts. So, in some ways, journalists have not only lost their audiences, they have lost most of their sources too.

The impact of the loss of sources to newspapers has had a greater impact than is immediately obvious and can be linked to the present-day financial crisis in the media industry. In 2012, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) had done away with the requirement that listed companies publish their full and detailed results in two newspapers, wrote Anton Harber in the *Business Day* (*Business Day*, 2012). This resulted in a loss of some R150 million of the advertising that newspapers were getting at that stage. The simple reason for this move was that it was cheaper and easier to publish directly to the internet (*Business Day*, 2012). Such was the impact of the mainstreaming of the Internet in South Africa, that by 2013 significant retrenchments were reported across most big media newsrooms around the country (Daniels, 2014a). The challenge to the industry in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic can be directly

attributed to the loss in advertising revenue (Rumney, 2020). This is not a scenario that is likely to change and the immediate challenge to the media industry is to rethink its strategies which removes eliminates the reliance on advertising revenue in the media industry.

2.7.4. Web 2.0: From consumer to prosumer

The beginning of the World Wide Web was considered to be Web 1.0, though not referred to as such. It was a top-down approach to content production and dissemination that was generally in the hands of the early adopters of internet technology. The early 2000s in the history of the Internet is referred to as Web 2.0, a name given to the iteration of the World Wide Web in which user-focused media applications took root. Initially this occurred as an economic imperative to exponentially grow the user base of the web but later as social networking tools (Flew, 2014:13). The start of Web 2.0 is essentially the time the audience gained prominence and journalism floundered.

The interactive nature of the web meant a new role for audiences in the production and dissemination of media content. Mabweazara (2014:44), writes that, "audiences who until recently were imaginary figures in the minds of journalists, now clearly manifest themselves online in various forms, including commenting directly to stories, writing on blogs attached to news websites and generally challenging the journalist as the sole 'all-knowing' purveyor of information". Mabweazara (2014) was writing at a time when UGC (user-generated content), in the form of comments on news websites, was seen as the most prudent mechanism for interactivity.[33] However, the mechanism has fallen into disfavour owing to abuse and trolling by users, not only of journalists and their companies but also of other users. What used to be a space that ideally represented a digital public sphere is now either subject to moderation, regulation or does not exist at all.

Academic Terry Flew explains that among the many features of Web 2.0 was the rise of social media along with the "rhetoric of participation" (2014:16). In media spaces, the participatory nature and potential of Web 2.0 made possible through social media applications and other tools meant a dramatic shift in how information was produced and distributed. One of the knee-jerk reactions to this shift within the South African media context was through the deployment of blogging platforms. These were used to draw in contributions from the once-passive now active audience representing the first incarnation of Journalism 2.0. Audiences of established media were now not just able to consume their media via digital platforms, the horizontal structure facilitated by the World Wide Web and other internet

[33] In fact, such was the appetite for UGC as comments, that Mabweazara (2014:48), reflecting on a number of writers in the field, refers to the comments as "one of the most pragmatic and influential attributes of the online era".

applications meant that they could engage with media in ways never possible before. More than that, they theoretically possessed the ability to create the very same media content.

2.8. The state of journalism education in South Africa

This section speaks to the autoethnography in Chapter Eight which is written from my perspective as a journalism educator. Chapter Eight itself is concerned with one of the sub-questions of this thesis: How does what I teach in Journalism honours at Wits University match the practice at the *M&G* - are we behind the game, in tandem, or ahead in our teaching practices? To this end, I have included here a brief discussion of the state of journalism education in South Africa today.

"Most universities in South Africa have a department of media studies or offer some sort of journalism training. The most of these are the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, the University of the Universtity of the Witwatersrand (Wits University), Stellenbosch University and the University of KwaZulu-Natal," according to the recent study, *Mapping Journalism Training Centres in sub-Saharan* Africa, (Finlay, 2020). This is in addition to the offerings at TVET (Training, Vocational Education and Training College) colleges like Boston Media House and FrayCollege, making the journalism education sector in the country significantly widespread.

Journalism education as it exists in South Africa today is in many ways linked to the 2002 Sanef skills audit which identified the juniorisation of the newsroom and the lack of training for younger journalists as key factors in the declining quality of the news. There has not been a national journalism skills audit since this report. The audit report, seems to have ignited a flurry of solution-based intellectual reponses. Some of these were captured in a special edition of Equid Novi, a local journalism studies journal, titled: " Journalism education and training at the crossroads" (2002). Deuze (in Deuze, Boyd-Barrett, Claassen, Diederichs, Tyler Eastman, Jordaan, Louw, Newsom, Quinn, Rabe, Steenveld, Stevenson, van Rooyen, Wasserman, Williams, 2002:90), writing in the special edition said, in response to the Sanef skills audit, that:

> Journalism education, in other words, is gearing up to face a tough challenge: keeping the best practices of teaching context and practical skills courses on the one hand, and including cultural and critical reflective didactics on the other. This is not the traditional theory versus skills debate of old – this is definitely something 'new'.

The *Mapping Journalism Training Centres report* (Finlay, 2020), indicates that the most prominent institutions in the country are combining some practical work with theory work to meet the demands of the industry. Wits University, and Wits Journalism, in particular, is no different. The curricula developed for its various academic levels are intended to respond to key issues and needs of the industry.

This is in line with the thinking of Deuze and Witschge (2017:169), who write that, “The scholarly consensus on professional routines that make up newswork in newsrooms has been consolidated in journalism education where such routines become fixed elements in the coursework for print, broadcast, and online sequences". Put simply, Deuze an Witschge (2017), argue that whatever the profession of journalism agrees on as the fundamentals of journalism is what manifests in the curricula of journalism education as taught at institutions of higher learning. In this way, the journalism industry has set the tone for what is taught in journalism schools across the country.

2.9. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the theories and literature that frame this study of the *M&G* and its digital transition. The theory helps to consolidate various parts of a study together. Together with the methodology, the theoretical framework provides the foundation along with the structure of a research project. The study is, on a meta-theoretical level, framed by the sociological approach to journalism studies. In terms of a key theoretical approach, social constructivism is employed to understand and describe the findings of this study. This theory, as developed by Pinch and Bijker (1984), is chosen as it makes space to account for individual agency in the social shaping in the use of technology. In this context, I use the word “technology”, as defined by Bijker, Hughes and Pinch (1993:4), who refer to physical objects or artefacts, the knowledge that people have, or the activities that people engage in the production of artefacts themselves.

Online journalism is made possible by the features of new media. That is, interactivity, multimedia, hypertextuality and convergence. In terms of these features, I use the definition of interactivity as developed by Siapera and Veglis (2012), who argue that interactivity is the process of user engagement with media content. For an understanding of convergence, I have privileged the work of Singer (2004b), Deuze (2004) and Vobič (2011), all of whom take the definition of convergence beyond its technicist roots. They extend the definition to the relationships between staff in newsrooms and the skills involved in newsrooms.

In defining online journalism, which is a key concept in this study, I rely on the characteristics identified by Malik and Shapiro in Franklin and Eldridge II (2016) to understand what the digital transition of the *M&G* should, as a starting point, involve. All of these discussions are framed within a concern for the de-westernisation of journalism studies and a contribution to the field of local empirical data on a South African newsroom. Here, the work of both Chuma (2010) and Mabweazara (2014) are drawn on. Both writers argue for a sensitivity to the local context and the development of a localised perspective of journalism practice. The next chapter discusses the various methods used in this study to ensure that the aims of the study are achieved.

Chapter Three: *Research methodologies*

3.1. Introduction

Research methodologies help to order and structure the practice of conducting research, which has the potential to be chaotic and disorganised. Methodologies provide frameworks within which research is conducted, focusing the inquiry on key questions while eliminating the tangential ones which have the potential to detract from the main aims of the inquiry itself. A multi-pronged methodological approach has been used in this study. This was required because of the aims of this study to probe the conceptualisation and implementation of a digital strategy at the *M&G*; the shifts in the relationship between the paper and its audiences; the organisation's approach to mis- and disinformation; and the alignment between journalism practice at the *M&G* and what is taught at Wits University's journalism department. Chapters One and Two have set out the scope of this study and its theoretical orientation. This chapter extends the discussion about the conceptualisation of this research project by describing the methodologies that have been chosen and the ways in which they are used in this study to answer the key and sub-questions of the study.

The case study method is the primary methodological approach and is supplemented by the interview method, thematic content analysis of primary and secondary data analysis, along with autoethnography and ethnography. These approaches collectively, fall under the broad category of qualitative research methodologies.

3.2. Qualitative research methods

"The core property of qualitative research is that it examines the way people make sense out of their own concrete real-life experiences *in their own minds* and *in their own words"* (Cropley, 2019:5). In short then, the qualitative mode of analysis is preferred since a quantitative approach, which relies on numerical quantification or statistical interpretation, is not appropriate to a study framed within the theoretical approach of social constructivism.

The theoretical framing of this study focuses on the interplay between individuals within a news organisation, and the interaction of individual actors with new technologies in the process of producing news, all of which are driven by social interactions which cannot be quantified. This study will be conducted through the use of five methodological approaches which form part of the qualitative trajectory of research methods.

Definitions of qualitative analysis vary from scholar to scholar. However, some consistent features among these variations, according to Bruhn Jensen (2002:236), include the concept of meaning, that meaning should be studied in its "naturalistic contexts" and that the researcher is seen as an "interpretative subject". By ‘meaning’, Bruhn Jensen refers to the idea that "human agents experience both their ordinary lives and extraordinary events as meaningful" - it is this meaning which is the focus of a qualitative study and which distinguishes it from a quantitative approach (Bruhn Jensen, 2002:236).

This qualitative approach is relevant to this study of the *M&G*’s changing newsroom practices in the conceptualisation and deployment of its digital strategy because the practices are shaped and defined by the news workers in the process of producing news. These practices are the result of the way journalists make sense (make meaning) of their work in the course of doing journalism. This study makes use of the case study method, along with interviews, thematic content analysis of primary and secondary material, ethnography and autoethnography. The next section focuses on a more detailed discussion of the chosen research methods and includes an explanation of their appropriateness to the research design. The discussion also highlights their challenges and shortcomings where appropriate.

3.2.1 Triangulation of methods

The use of a variety of methods such as those used in this study does not in itself constitute a 'mixed methods' approach, which is generally taken to signify the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods - even though some of the documents under scrutiny includes quantitative data (Cresswell, 2003:99). Instead, the term 'triangulation' is used to describe the process of using a multi-pronged method of analysis that allows for stronger research results. Berg writes that "by combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements," (1995:4). Triangulation, according to Berg (1995:5):

> … is restricted to the use of multiple data gathering techniques (usually three) to investigate the same phenomenon ... the important feature of triangulation is not the simple combination of different kinds of data, but the attempt to relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each.

The use of the case study method together with interviews, thematic content analysis of primary and secondary data, and with autoethnography and ethnography have yielded rich data that were analysed together in this study.

3.2.2. Steps in planning a qualitative research project

Bruhn Jensen (2002:237) writes that three stages should be followed in designing a research project within a qualitative framework, namely strategy, tactics and techniques. The *strategy* portion of planning involves "a general plan for entering a particular social setting, and for establishing means of communication and points of observation which may generate relevant evidence. Strategy builds a particular set of social relations between researchers and informants in a designated time and space" (Bruhn Jensen, 2002: 237). The strategy for this study was to use a case study method to provide a site of analysis for the topic. In addition, the case study would facilitate access to individuals who would be able to assist the collection of data through observation, interviews, and the supply of primary sources such a strategy documents or organisational policies. In this vein then, I reached out to the (now former) editor of the *M&G* to arrange access to the newsroom itself. This process was steered by my institution's ethics process which required express consent for my visits to the *M&G* newsroom.

As part of the strategy in data gathering, I also reached out to individuals who had been involved in the move to digital or in some part of the business that involved new media technologies over the course of the organisation's history. These individuals, like Irwin Manoim, Chris Roper and Tanya Pampalone, had played various roles in the organisation. The study deliberately avoided talking to the former editors alone, as this would have likely yielded a management-level reflection.

One of the possible shortcomings of the research in terms of the strategy is the lack of racial diversity in voices reflected in this thesis. The individuals I spoke to did represent a certain demographic in the main, but I was careful not to engineer diversity by seeking out individuals who provided greater demographic balance but may not have been relevant to the study. Overall, the lack of diversity in some parts of the thesis is reflective of the context of newsrooms, and of those who had influence on innovation and those who did not. This is important to include in a study that is aware of its context. The interview method is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

In terms of the *tactics* aspect of research planning, Bruhn Jensen (2002:237) writes that this refers to "attempts by the researcher to anticipate and pre-structure, to varying degrees, the social interactions which will yield evidence. A case in point is the definition of people to be interviewed". To this end, and together with the interviewees, this study also made use of ethnography to observe the daily workflow in the *M&G* newsroom, against which the interviews are correlated.

The final step in qualitative research design is referred to as *techniques* (Bruhn Jensen, 2002). These aspects of research design "are the concrete means of interacting with and documenting the field" (Bruhn Jensen 2002:238). The *techniques* in this study involve the specific methods that will be used in the course of the study, namely case study, interviews, thematic content analysis, ethnography and autoethnography which are examined more closely below.

3.2.3. The case study method

The case study method is the main research method as it is the method around which all other methods used in this study, pivot. The case study method is used, "normally to arrive at descriptions and typologies which have implications for other, or larger, social systems" (Bruhn Jensen, 2002:239). The case study approach to research "asks the basic question 'what is going on here?' before trying to account for it" (Somekh & Lewin, 2011:55). The case study method is meant to surface lessons or patterns from experience and, in this regard, it is an appropriate method for this study. The *M&G*[34] as a small, independent newsroom in South Africa is the case study used to find and apply lessons from its digital transition to other such organisations going through the same process in the country. It is important, however, to note the shortcomings of a case study method.

In the United States and in many other English-speaking countries across the globe, the *New York Times* (*NYT)* is used as an exemplar of a successful model of online journalism. Anderson, Bell and Shirky are more than correct in pointing out that while the *New York Times* is a "source of much interesting experimentation – data visualisations, novel partnerships, integration of blogs" and so on, the organisation remains in a "category of one" (Anderson *et al*., 2014:17). What they mean by this is that the *NYT* is streaks ahead of its competitors, remains unmatched even remotely, and so any comparison is likely to be a case of comparing apples with bananas. The same can be said of the case of the *M&G* in South Africa. While the study noted the particular circumstances of the *M&G,* it could be argued that the lessons in digital transition from a smaller newsroom more suited to experimentation and innovation are likely to yield useful information for larger or similar organisations going through the same. The study notes Mabweazara's point that, "even with regions on the African continent, including individual countries, newsrooms' adoption of new digital technologies are enormously varied and far from being homogenous" (2015:7). Mabweazara is particularly concerned with the lack of nuance in research about media and journalism on the continent and with the generalisation of findings across countries on the continent. This research notes this concern and addresses the point throughout study.

3.2.3.1 The research period

The research period was intended to be from the founding of the paper in 1984 to before the appointment of Khadija Patel in 2017. However, because of delays in conducting the research[35], and changes in the South African media landscape from 2017 to 2020, the study incorporated this period as well. The fundamental changes in the journalism industry during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic were too

[34] The *M&G* is the only case study in this project. *Wits Vuvuzela,* which is discussed in Chapter Eight is not another case study but forms part of the relection which emerges through the deployment of the autoethnographic method.

[35] These were due to my personal circumstances.

drastic and significant not to include in this study. This though, accounts for the speed and the unpredictability with digital which, I would argue, requires a flexible and dynamic approach in research.

3.2.3.2 The *M&G* as the case study

In 1994, "the *Mail & Guardian Online* became the first internet-based news publication in Africa" (mg.co.za, 2013). Notably the *M&G Online* was launched as means to circumvent the publishing limitations of the once-weekly print edition of the newspaper, thereby allowing the organisation to break news as it happened during the course of the week. Through this approach, the *M&G Online* maintained a somewhat separate identity to that of its print counterpart. The newspaper's move to a digital-first strategy roughly six years later makes it an obvious candidate for a study of this nature. This is because of its lengthy background (which in digital terms is rather short) with a distinct digital presence and a firm commitment to digital-first publishing in 2010. There is a history here that needs consideration within a South African context in terms of digital journalism, and this is what makes the *M&G* a relevant case study for this research.

The *M&G* seems to be an obvious case study for this research as the organisation is a small to medium-sized establishment[36], independent of the major news companies in the country and has, as this study shows, traditionally been a space of innovation and experimentation. In early 2020, the newspaper appealed to its reader-base for assistance in raising funds to sustain the organisation. In the midst of its financial crisis in 2020, former deputy editor of the *M&G* Beauregard Tromp wrote:

> From the founding of the paper in 1985 and the introduction of the then-revolutionary idea of desktop publishing to launching the first online news publication in Africa in 1994, the M&G's early adoption of technological advances has been integral to its success. What went wrong between then and now is a story that has more answers than column inches allow. (Tromp, 2020).

That the *M&G* has shown significant signs of innovation and experimentation is clear. However, as this thesis shows, maintaining a print newspaper while attempting to transition to an online publication has hampered the latter process. The case study then demonstrates what lessons can be learned from the experience of the *M&G* which is scalable to other news organisations that find themselves in the same situation.

[36] The *M&G* staffing complement was reportedly just 60 in 2016 and has been reducing in numbers since then (*New Frame*, 2019).

The shifts in journalism practice, as this study will show, are also due to factors not encompassed by traditional pressures on the media, namely economic and political imperatives, but are related to the roles of the journalist and the audience that have their roots in normative theories of the media (Christians *et al*., 2009). Within the contemporary media environment, online journalism practice is heavily predicated on reinvented conceptualisations of the audience and a new vision of their roles in media consumption and media production (Gillmor, 2006). This points to a more engaged model of journalism in which the practice of mainstream journalism is inextricably linked to the behaviours of audiences who consume media products.

This study is timely as it examines the kinds of changes digital news production and distribution have wrought on the journalists and the newsrooms that make news in South Africa through the case study of the *M&G*. While these shifts are becoming more obvious, what is less clear is how individual newsrooms accommodate these changes. Whether they initiate change and what impact these changes have on the practice of journalists in those newsrooms. I am emphasising the specificity of the individual newsroom here as I am cognisant of the critique of scholars like Deuze and Witschge (2017), who argue for nuance in how journalism practice is represented. This is particularly the case, as argued by Chuma (2010) and Mabweazara (2015) that journalism studies must turn its gaze from western modalities and find ways of expressing what journalism is and how it operates from a global south perspective. To achieve a de-westernisation of this study and to provide the nuance of how the case study and its newsroom operates, the methodology of ethnography is used.

3.2.4. Ethnography

The ethnographic approach, an observational method, provides space for nuance in the way journalism studies are conducted. The latter, for the most part, studies newsrooms by looking at the outcome of journalism, as discussed further in Chapter Six. Cottle (2007) writes that, ethnography:

> … goes behind the scenes of media output to help reveal the complex of forces, constraints and conventions that shape the selections and silences of media output. Too often critics of the media make an illicit leap from a critical reading of media content to inferences about the motivations or explanations accounting for this output and, on this basis, quite often 'get it wrong.

Cottle (2000) uses the example of how a newsroom conceives of its audiences and says that it is only through an ethnography that questions about these conceptualisations can be answered substantively. In many cases, as Cottle (2007) argues, these ethnographies demonstrate that newsrooms do have a concept of who their audiences are despite the literature claiming otherwise.

In calling for a greater use of ethnography in journalism studies, Cottle (2007) makes an argument for grounded theory, or theoretical findings that spring from an analysis of the empirical data. However, in using ethnography in this chapter, I attempt to confirm the findings in the previous chapters of this study. These findings are already theoretically framed through the specificity in empirical data that is found through the ethnographic method. This study is also cognisant of Dickinson's (2007) distinction between a sociology of journalism versus a sociology of journalists. The latter yields an understanding of how news workers operate within the expectations of a newsroom and within the constraints of what journalism is supposed to be. It is for this reason that this study, methodologically, focuses not just on the managers within the *M&G* newsroom. Instead, it also includes other members of staff like journalists who are not necessarily part of the machinery of making the organisation function according to one ideal-type of a newsroom in a South African context.

Newsroom ethnographies are rarely found in the South African context. Where they do exist, they tend to focus on the same limited sample of newsrooms. Of the ones that I am aware of, Van Noort (2007) undertook what she called an 'observation' of the *M&G* newsroom in 2007; Jordaan (2012) conducted an ethnographic study of *Netwerk24* in 2018 for her doctoral study, while she had previously observed the newsrooms of *Rapport* and the *M&G* in 2012 as part of her study on social media use in South African newsrooms. Nyathi and Garman (2016), used an ethnographic study at community newspaper *Grocott's Mail* as part of their study on citizen journalism. The lack of a diversity of local newsroom ethnographies results in the kinds of generalisations which Mabweazara (2015) points out are then taken to typify the experiences of all journalists operating on the African continent, showing a lack of sensitivity to context. The irony of this critique is that this study focuses on one of the same sample of newsrooms. However, it is hoped that raising this point here will encourage other researchers to diversify the sample of South African newsroom ethnographies.

The ethnography in this chapter expands on previous ethnographies conducted on the *M&G* (Van Noort, 2007; Jordaan, 2012), in that it is an observation conducted under a very different, financially-constrained and challenging context for the organisation as it attempts, once again, to transition online. This ethnography focuses on this new attempt at digital transition and takes the form of a thick description to reflect what was observed. To being with, the chapter takes a brief look at the South African media landscape in 2020 to establish the context within which the *M&G* newsroom is operating and the local context of journalism practice.

3.2.5. The interview method

Interviewing is a commonplace social science research method as the "best way to find out what people think about something is to ask them" (Bruhn Jensen, 2002:240). Interviews help to provide texture to a research narrative by infusing the study with the voice of the individuals who are interviewed.

Interviews with editors, as managers of newsrooms, and journalists, as news workers, will yield some of the most crucial data of this study. This is because the news workers themselves relate their experience of the transition to a digital- and social-first newsroom that currently exists at the *M&G*.

Interviews with managers contribute an understanding of the organisational expectations of those journalists who had little to do with the formulation of these new strategies and yet were expected to implement them in their day-to-day operations. Interviews with reporters have helped to shape ideas around the reception of these strategies and the implementation of them in the day-to-day practice of journalism or news work.

But, as Bruhn Jensen (2002:240) points out, the researcher must always be wary of the possibility that "people do not always say what they think or mean what they say". It is crucial then to carefully triangulate the findings from interviews with other methods in order to validate the findings from this process. An analysis of published material and ethnographic data read together with interviews and the use of the case study, will provide greater validity to the research findings than the use of any of the methods by themselves. As Bechhofer and Paterson (2000:57) point out, “triangulation of data rests on the simple idea that several observations of datum, a single piece of data, are better than one."

The interviewing method, while seemingly straight-forward, can be undertaken in a variety of ways. For an effective use of the method, though, it is important to outline what form these interviews will take. This research makes use of the semi-structured, face-to-face, interview style which involves some degree of structured and formalised questions with room for a little digression from the questions themselves. Berg (1989:33) refers to this type of interview as the "semi-standardised" interview and describes it as:

> The implementation of predetermined questions and/or special topics. These questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewers are ... permitted (in fact expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardised questions.

Furthermore, where interviewees were not available to be interviewed face-to-face, a structured questionnaire was sent to them via email. This was designed in such a way so as to allow them to comment beyond the formalised questions (Bruhn Jensen, 2002:215).

The individuals interviewed for this study ranged from editors to reporters and even those journalists involved in sub-editing or production. These groupings include present employees who are recent additions to the organisations, present employees who have a long-standing history with the organisation and some who left the organisation along the way. In addition, the list of interviewees includes managers, editors, and also individuals who have moved out of the organisation owing to a

(perceived) lack of skills and to the ongoing shrinking in staff numbers as resources have dried up. As such, the interview sample in this study can be considered as "representative of one or more social or cultural categories" (Bruhn Jensen, 2002:240). In the view of the researcher, their comments and input could be seen as reflective of the group with which they are associated. Of course, validation of the findings through the use of archival data and other research data happen throughout the research process. These interviews, as discussed later, will add value to the discussions around roles and skills of journalists within a digital- and social-first news organisation.

The interviews I conducted for this study contributed to the narratives in Chapter Four, the history of the *M&G* chapter, along with Chapter Eight, the autoethnographic chapter. For Chapter Four, I deployed interview responses from Irwin Manoim, one of the co-founders of the *M&G,* about the early days of the organisation's predecessor, the *Weekly Mail*. Chris Roper assisted me with questions about the digital transition of the organisation under the editorship of Nicholas Dawes.

3.2.6. Autoethnography

One of the most original contributions of this thesis is the use of autoethnography to contrast the findings of this study about the transition to digital at the *M&G* with what is taught at one of the country's foremost journalism schools, Wits Journalism. "Autoethnography is a qualitative method—it offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people" write Adams *et al*. (2015:21).

The autoethnography method is used to achieve one of the aims of the study, which is to understand how what I teach at Wits Journalism links to what is happening in the journalism industry through the digital transition at the *M&G*. A large part of the motivation for this study is the need to understand better what is expected of practicing journalists in the current South African media landscape. The aim is to reformulate and reconfigure what I teach to the career-entry journalism students during their year of studying journalism at Wits University.

In order to infuse my voice about my experience in teaching journalism into this study, I therefore turned to the autoethnographic method. As the name implies, autoethnography is linked to the better known and more widely used method of ethnography, which is a "study which that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation" (Babbie, 2004:289). "If our task as researchers, as social scientists, is to study the social lives of humans, then we cannot relegate elements of human lives or experiences to the periphery, nor can we bracket out the ways our lives and experiences are intertwined with our research projects and participants" writes Carolyn Ellis in *Autoethnography* (Adams *et al*., 2015:8). While this infusion of self into academic research could be dismissed as largely unscientific, the focus of this research and the changes in journalism practice - which are traditionally

understood to be formed through experiences - means that reflecting on my own experiences of how the teaching of this practice has changed over the years, is a natural fit for this study.

My personal narrative in this instance is limited to my reflection of how the Honours journalism curriculum has changed in the years since I joined Wits Journalism in 2012. To this end, I have attempted to provide a factual narrative through a pedagogical lens. Declaring this background to the narrative results is an attempt at transparency, but I remain aware that this narrative is the result of my own teaching, experiences and ideas which may have become coloured or even dulled through time (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

After initially being concerned about my ability to maintain a critical distance from my narrative, I accept that the methodology demands an honest and unadulterated narrative, but with introspection at every step of the process. “However, as a method, mode of representation, and way of life, doing autoethnography and being an auto ethnographer requires researchers to foreground research and representational concerns throughout every step of the research and representation process” (Adams *et al.*, 2015:19). To this end, I forced myself to introspect and remain critical of my own reflections throughout the process of constructing the narrative.

3.2.7. Thematic content analysis

This thesis relies on a substantial amount of newspaper articles and second sources like books, academic articles and studies that have focused on the *M&G*. In addition, there are the interviews and ethnography. In order to bring these data sets together, thematic content analysis is used as the tool of analysis. Cresswell (2003:187) argues that the value of these kinds of data sets is that they "enable the researcher to obtain the language and words of participants". In this undertaking, this ensures that a there is a clear understanding of the discourse used by journalists relative to the official strategies developed by the management of the organisation. Bruhn Jensen (2002:243) writes that the value of documents is that it is not data 'made' by the researcher, as would be the case in an interview, but rather data that is 'found'. He argues (2002:243), that this means that the data is therefore "relatively naturalistic or unobtrusive". The various data generated by the methods employed in this study are synergised for themes or patterns which then direct the findings in this study.

3.3. Ethics approval

As part of the process of conducting this study, I was required to apply for ethical clearance from my institution, Wits University. I should have done so at the start of the study in 2014 but the ethics clearance process did not seem to apply to studies that started in that year. I subsequently applied for

ethics approval once it was brought to my attention that I was expected to, by my supervisor. I was granted an ethics acknowledgement[37] in December 2020, which can be found in Appendix 3.

3.4. Conclusion

Taken together, the research methodologies and the theoretical approaches have yielded substantive findings to the key question and the sub-questions related to the transition of the *M&G* to digital. The central method is the case study of the *M&G,* which provides the site of this study.

The interview method is used to elicit responses from individuals who have been or who are involved in the digital transition of the organisation. These responses are read in conjunction with data gleaned through the ethnographic method and other data such as newspaper articles. In this way, there is a triangulation of methods to yield more valid findings. I have also used a method that has fallen out of favour with journalism studies scholars, that of autoethnography. The use of this method allowed me to achieve one of the aims of this study and also allowed me to infuse my voice as the researcher in the research itself.

[37] The ethics approval number is R14/49 and the protocol number is H20/11/03.

Chapter Four: *Going digital at the Mail & Guardian*

4.1. Introduction

The history of the *M&G* is presented in this chapter in two parts. The first, from 1985 to 2002, is framed within a discussion of the alternative press in South Africa as defined by Tomaselli and Louw (2001). The second part, which starts with the new leadership of Trevor Ncube in 2002, is framed within a discussion of the features of online journalism as developed by Malik and Shapiro (in Franklin & Eldridge II, 2016). This historical chapter highlights instances of innovation through a largely discursive approach to the history of the founding of the organisation within the context of the alternative press in South Africa.

I argue in this chapter that the *M&G* has not shed it alternative press (organisational) cloak, because of this, it has struggled with redefining itself and taking the necessary bold and innovative steps to establish itself as a sustainable contemporary newsroom. In short, this chapter argues that the *M&G* has retained an alternative press culture in how it sees itself despite the changes in its financial situations and its shift to mainstream news publishing. To this end, a brief discussion of the history and characteristics of the alternative press in South Africa is undertaken in this chapter.

4.2. "Our imperative was to be different"[38]

The birth of the *M&G* (or the *Weekly Mail* as it was known for eight years after its launch in 1985) and its online version many years later, could not have happened in more disparate circumstances (Manoim, 1996). The print newspaper, originally founded as the *Weekly Mail* by a group of retrenched journalists in 1985, came to life in a year of South Africa's history characterised by widespread anti-apartheid protests and heavy repression of the media under a partial state of emergency (Manoim, 1996:27; Trabold, 2006).[39] These developments were par for the course in a country known, at the time, for the oppression and subjugation of the majority of its people (Tyson, 1993; Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007). At the other end of the historical spectrum, the online *M&G*, the first online newspaper in Africa, was

[38] This quote by former *Weekly Mail* editor, Anton Harber, in the 2010 book, *25 Years of the Mail & Guardian*, perfectly characterises the beginnings of the newspaper in the 1980s (De Waal, 2010:48). It refers to the trend of having a parliamentary correspondent, which the paper bucked in favour of more grassroots reporting, a move in keeping with the paper's outlook as the alternative press rather than the mainstream.

[39] The partial state of emergency of 1985 is widely acknowledged as the beginning of the end for Apartheid in South Africa. The state of the country and its international relations could get no worse in 1985 and the state of emergency was a desperate act of trying to hold the system together through many clampdowns, including that of the media. A full state of emergency was subsequently declared on 20 July 1985.

launched in 1994. This was the year symbolic of the birth of democracy in South Africa, which brought with it unprecedented levels of press freedom to match individual political freedoms (Louw, 2014).

4.2.1. A shoestring budget

The 1980s was a decade of upheaval and turbulence in South Africa (Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007:382), but of the kind that ultimately moved the country to its present democratic state. The Apartheid system, extensively documented from various vantage points, clamped down on press freedom to maintain its control over the flow of information and ideas inside and outside the country's borders (Trabold, 2006; Krog, 2002; Lloyd, 2013; Trabold, 2018:22).

> The emergency regulations armed the government with a number of authoritarian measures to block the free flow of information on politically sensitive issues and to muzzle dissenting voices, making the latter half of the 1980s the bleakest years in the annals of press freedom in South Africa. (Adhikari, 2014:1)

On 14 June 1985, the *Weekly Mail* was launched in a small pink office, which had previously served as a hairdressing salon in Kenroydon Building at 25 Melle Street in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. This was a mere six weeks after the closure of the *Rand Daily Mail* (*RDM*) newspaper and a round of retrenchments at the *Sunday Express* (Manoim, 1996:14)[40] leaving the *Weekly Mail* founders, Anton Harber and Irwin Manoim out of work[41]. Harber and Manoim conceptualised the new paper and drove the fundraising efforts for its establishment. Both men pooled their retrenchment packages as seed money for the new newspaper and became its first editors ahead of its first edition on 14 June 1985 (Manoim, 1996:5). "He (Harber) did the public end of it and I did the back-end of it. He did the news gathering and I put the newspaper together."[42] Nineteen-eighty-five was a year that saw heavy state-repression of the media with regulations in place to control what was written and what was visually depicted[43]. The *Weekly Mail* could not have chosen a more tumultuous time in which to launch and proceeded to put out edition after edition not really knowing if it would be their last.

The newspaper paid its registration fee of R5 000 as required by the Newspaper and Imprint Act, which allowed it to operate as a newspaper (Manoim, 1996:12). The registration of the *Weekly Mail,* like every other newspaper in the country, happened under intense scrutiny from the State's security police who

[40] The *Rand Daily Mail* was replaced soon after its closure by the *Business Day* (Manoim, 1996:11).
[41] Harber was employed at the *RDM* as a political reporter and Manoim was assistant editor at the *Sunday Express.*
[42] Manoim also wrote in his book that it was a coin-toss which determined who would be editor and who would be manager of the publication, (1996:8). As the coin fell, Harber at 26 became the editor and Manoim, just four years older, its manager.
[43] Refer to Jackson (1993: 128-158) for a narrative of the impact on the media during the state of emergency in South Africa. Jackson refers to the regulations in place during this time as "without parallel in South Africa's history" (Jackson, 1993:137).

paid close attention to the copy produced[44] (Phelan, 1987:39). Despite the statutory regulations hindering the development of independent, anti-apartheid media, the paper saw an average circulation of between 12-15 000 in its first year of operation (Phelan, 1987:39). The history of the *Weekly Mail* is not complete without mentioning the shoestring budget that the paper was built on. It was the severance pay of both Harber and Manoim that provided the R50 000 seed money that started the *M&G* (Tyson, 1993:326). A company was formed and shares, at R 1000 each, were sold to whomever would entertain the idea and ideals of the new publication and its tiny team (Manoim, 1996). The team reached out to prominent and influential left-leaning South Africans through the networks of people involved in the setup of the paper. A month before launch in June 1985, the company had managed to raise R40 000 it was far from what is needed to start a paper and it was the innovative approach to technology that made it possible for the paper to launch and stay in production (Manoim, 1996:13).

4.2.2. The desktop publishing revolution

"The paper was run on a shoestring but made possible by the revolution in "desktop publishing" of the 1980s" (*Mail & Guardian,* 2019). This revolution came courtesy of a rather mundane piece of contemporary technology, the laser printer. In 1985, Manoim made use of the laser printer, a new technology at the time, which was not only cheaper to use but could also be connected to a number of computers to create a rudimentary network (Manoim, 1996:22). Securing the laser printer from Holland, the *Weekly Mail* became the "first example of desktop publishing in this country, several years before the concept was given a name" (Manoim, 1996: 22). Manoim recounts how he discovered the technology of the printer and its potential for producing a newspaper:

> One lunchtime, I am browsing the stacks at CNA when I chance upon a magazine cover announcing an amazing new device, the Apple laser printer … Laser printers may one day eliminate the need for expensive typesetting equipment, darkrooms, chemicals and skilled technicians, says the magazine. And it occurs to me, make it possible for people with almost no money to produce a newspaper. (De Waal, 2010:71).

Manoim, together with others who were interested in starting a newspaper, bought an Apple McIntosh XL for R11 000 and an Apple Laserwriter for R17 000 in 1985 (De Waal, 2010:72). "Only one man at Apple South Africa had heard of the machine, but he had not seen it, and did not expect to see one for months" (De Waal, 2010:72). The acquisition of the printer, which came at a fraction of the cost of conventional printing equipment at the time, was not an ideal solution to the needs of *The Weekly Mail;*

[44] A body known as the Directorate of Media Relations was responsible for ensuring newspaper compliance with the relevant regulation (Jackson, 1993:138). Trabold's new book details how the staff of *The Weekly Mail* tried to push the envelope as much as they could in order to publish what they wanted under the State of Emergency (2018).

but, Manoim figured out a solution that while not efficient, was somewhat effective. “In the end, I discovered that acceptable text could be produced by printing everything three times larger than needed, then reducing it to normal size on an ordinary office photocopying machine. And then pasting all the pieces together in a paper mosaic. It was a ridiculous way to produce a newspaper. But that’s how we typeset *The Weekly Mail* for the next ten years” (De Waal, 2019:72). As ridiculous as it may have seemed, this way of producing the *Weekly Mail* points to a culture of innovation and improvisation to the circumstances that would otherwise have prevented the printing of the paper.

So integral was the machinery to the needs of the organisation that the paper was printed for many years using the two typefaces available on it, which ultimately determined the look and feel of the *Weekly Mail* for most of its existence. According to De Waal, the *M&G* newsroom finally acquired an A3 printer sometime between 1993 and 1995, which also changed the way production was done (2019, interview). De Waal (2019, interview) added that the new printer enabled sub-editors to edit the copy while it was being laid out, which meant a whole new set of skills for sub-editors. However, also meant greater efficiency in the way the newsroom workflow was structured.

When Apple South Africa shut its doors in September 1985 as sanctions against the country intensified in the wake of the states of emergency, the *Weekly Mail* acquired some abandoned Apple equipment, ostensibly until time came for them to be returned, which never happened (De Waal, 2010: 72). This stock comprised primarily of a bunch of very basic Macintosh computers which were used for a number of years in the *Weekly Mail* newsroom. Through his tinkering with the technology, Manoim developed a basic network between the Macintosh computers in the Braamfontein offices and the recently acquired laser printer[45]. Manoim’s use of available technologies outside of their intended uses confirms Pinch and Bijlker’s (1984) concept of interpretative flexibility, which accounts for a variety of uses by individuals of technological artefacts. Manoim writes that “in the back room … a newspaper was being produced without benefit of a single item of conventional newspaper equipment” (1996:17). It was within this low-tech and cash-strapped environment that the visions of a self-described "technical godfather” became possible (Manoim, 1996:2; Tomaselli & Louw, 1991)[46]. Manoim was a cobbler of what was at his disposal, even referring to himself and the *Weekly Mail* team as “… cheapskates. But we were inventive cheapskates. We managed to do, with very little, things other people only managed to do with a great deal” (De Waal, 2010:71). This approach is in keeping with alternative press culture,

[45] Manoim writes that the alternative press publications *New Nation* and *South* modelled their systems on that which he had developed for *The Weekly Mail* (1996:23).
[46] Manoim refers to himself as “an evangelist for alternative publishing technologies,” (1996:22). In an opinion piece in 1990, journalist and former *Sunday Express* colleague of Manoim’s, Ameen Akhalwaya refers to him as “one of the wunderkinds of newspaper design in SA” (*Post Natal*, 1990).

which forced its adherents to make do very little under difficult circumstances to find solutions to newsroom problems (Atton, 1999).

Manoim (1996:18) writes that, "At the *Weekly Mail*, I managed to create a rather crude approximation of the same system for R30 000. It was the first example in this country – and perhaps the world – of a newspaper using a technique that, much later, was given the name 'desktop publishing". Gillmor (2004:9) writes that,

> … It was desktop publishing where the potential for journalism became clearest. A series of inventions in the mid-1980s brought the medium into its new era. Suddenly, with an Apple MacIntosh and a laser printer, one could easily and cheaply create and lay out a publication. Big publishing didn't disappear – it adapted by using the technology to lower costs – but the entry level moved down to small groups and even individuals, a stunning liberation from the past.

Tomaselli and Louw (1991) suggest that one of many factors that allowed a start-up like *The Weekly Mail* to take off in the mid-80s was the availability of new and cheaper technologies. "By the mid-1980s the next technological leap in media production was about to begin, a leap which was to leave the guild press floundering in expensive and cumbersome hot-metal ... The appearance of *The Weekly Mail* on the streets demonstrated the possibilities of cheap, high-tech newspaper production - and issued in a new era of desk-top publishing," (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991:144).

4.3. The 'media terrorists'[47]: The alternative press in South Africa

> *No wonder the Weekly Mail seemed so alien. It favoured one-person-one-vote, the release of Nelson Mandela, peace talks with the ANC, an end to capital punishment, and programmes for reconstruction and national health. To white readers in 1985 those were scandalously left-wing opinions. (Manoim, 1996:27)*

History remembers the *Weekly Mail* as part of the country's alternative press (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991; Trabold, 2018; *Daily Maverick*, 2017). This section undertakes a brief discussion of the salient features of the alternative press in the 1980s in South Africa, defined by Tomaselli and Louw (1991). They suggest that there are four points to consider when categorising a publication as alternative to the mainstream (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991:24):

- That it is not driven by profit or commercial interests.

[47] The term 'media terrorists' was used by the Minister of Home Affairs and Communications in 1987, Stoffel Botha to refer to the alternative press in the country. He also said, "Freedom of expression will not be allowed to such an extent that it fosters chaos and revolt in South Africa," (South Africa History Online, 2019).

- That the purpose of the publication is 'advocacy' in many ways, to fulfil a role in the resistance (against Apartheid).
- That it views the mainstream press as inadequate in representing the majority of South Africans.
- That it is aimed at an audience of which a significant proportion is black.

In all but the last point, the *Weekly Mail* fitted neatly into the category of the alternative press in South Africa. This is because it had no prospects of making any serious profit in its initial years; it saw its purpose as challenging the political status quo; and was vocal of the inadequacies of the mainstream press to take on this same purpose. The alternative press in Apartheid South Africa typically championed the cause of the politically and socially marginalised. At the time, *The Weekly Mail* was establishing itself, "Johannesburg's *New Nation* in 1986, Cape Town's South, and Durban's *New African* in 1988," formed the major players in the alternative press (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991:9).

The anti-Apartheid stance of the paper was clear, at least in the first couple of years of its existence. Former *Weekly Mail* journalist Sefako Nyaka, quoted in Trabold (2018:37), said that he, "went to work at the *Weekly Mail* because I believed that this is one way in which I could help, together with other people, in pursuing a just dispensation for this country." This political stance is the reason that Trabold characterises the *Weekly Mail* as part of the 'opposition press' and not just the alternative press (2018:27). Trabold argues that the term alternative press suggests an alternative to reality when, in fact, papers like the *Weekly Mail* were reporting what was the reality in South Africa. This point is taken but I have chosen to use the term 'alternative press' to denote an alternative to the mainstream press at the time and not to social realities.

The alternative press in South Africa was characterised by its independence from all of the bigger companies which controlled the media at the time. Co-founder Harber, quoted in De Waal (2010:48), reflects that 'independence' to a newspaper means different things at different times. At first, it was an independence from the state machinery, but in later years this meant "financial independence, for that was what would shape our survival and allow us to operate freely". Tomaselli and Louw argued that *The Weekly Mail* belonged more specifically to the independent social democrat press which aimed to remain financially independent from capitalist interests and "they remained independent of specific political movements," despite their support for the broader democratic project of the alternative press (1991:12). When Trevor Ncube bought the *M&G* in 2002, he commented that, "The content of the paper was world-class, but the culture was like that of an NGO – it was living on handouts," (De Waal, 2010:6). This culture, according to Atton, is distinctive of the alternative press. In his characterisation of the alternative press, Atton (1999:53) writes that, "The espousal by the alternative press of anti-commercial methods is still found today, as a deliberate choice on the part of such publications to demonstrate their practical commitment to their political strategy - one that is against capitalism and

managerialism". Ncube's assessment of the *M&G* newsroom culture in 2002 was indicative of the lingering alternative press culture of the *M&G* which has always been less about profit making and more about the causes it dedicated itself to. In many ways, this represents the 'independence' strand of alternative media that Tomaselli and Louw (1991), point to, as this thesis shows, this lack of concern with the financial imperative has cost the organisation dearly.

The independence factor also meant that a variety of opinions could be represented in the *Weekly Mail* newspaper without conflict. "If two writers vehemently disagreed with each other over a new play, film or exhibition, they were given the space to thrash out their differences in the paper. We were shameless show-offs, but this freedom to experiment generally paid off in quality what it lacked in modesty" (Manoim, 1996:37).

The alternative press in Apartheid South Africa typically championed the cause of the politically and socially marginalised. At the time the *Weekly Mail* was establishing itself, "Johannesburg's *New Nation* in 1986, Cape Town's *South*, and Durban's *New African* in 1988," formed the major players in the alternative press (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991:9). "Lauded later by jailed and exiled leaders like Nelson Mandela, the 'alternatives' gave the government a hard time as it sought to impose stringent censorship on political reporting," (*Post Natal*, 1990). In contemporary South Africa, the cause of the marginalised is the cause of those maligned in the mainstream media, that of the refugee, of the homosexual, of the environmentally aware, of the poor, and so on. But curiously, while the *Weekly Mail* reported on the marginalised, it was not as effective at reaching them, thus, making the start-up a bit of an anomaly as far as the alternative press went. So in terms of Tomaselli and Louw's (1991) characterisation of the alternative press, the *Weekly Mail* audience was not predominantly Black and therefore the paper was not strictly speaking, alternative in this sense.

The *Weekly Mail* deliberately aimed not only at a Black audience but a white liberal one too in the hope of challenging the status quo through all types of people who were committed to doing so. A survey conducted by the paper in 1986 to identify its audience, came up with results that were surprising to the proprietors. "… typical *Weekly Mail* readers of the mid-eighties had not set out to become wealthy – they wanted to do interesting jobs instead – but they had somehow become comfortably off" (Manoim, 1996:44). This information, along with other demographic information, including the fact that most *Weekly Mail* readers had one or two university degrees, makes it reasonable to surmise that the readership of the *Weekly Mail* in its formative years were not Black.

The 1986 survey did not ask the race of the *Weekly Mail* readers as a matter of principle since it seemed an affront to do so in the political climate of the 1980s in South Africa, according to Manoim (1996:47). But, as he goes on to add, the question became increasingly important as the *Weekly Mail* had every intention of reaching a Black South African audience.

> … readers did not know what to make of the *Weekly Mail*. It chose its news by significance rather than colour, which meant that more often than not there was a black face on the front page. That alone guaranteed that most whites leafing through the newspaper stands at the local café barely saw it. Most blacks had a similar reaction; the sober style of the paper, the small headlines and long articles simply felt 'too white'. (Manoim, 1996:28)

The question of the racial makeup of the *Weekly Mail's* readers was eventually raised in the 1990s and the answer was that, "… two out of five readers were black, and they earned the same salaries as their white counterparts" (Manoim, 1996:47). The question of the audience and their role in the *Weekly Mail* and later on of the *M&G*, is explored in greater detail in Chapter Five as the study considered the relationship between the newspaper and its audience. Tomaselli and Louw (2001) characterised the *Weekly Mail* as a part of the left-commercial press, a sub-category of the alternative press. In plain terms, the *Weekly Mail* was alternative in its content but not in the audiences it reached, despite its best intentions. This legacy has persisted with Anderson *et al*., (2014:254) writing that the "English only register and the quality of writing – often conceptual, argumentative and even academic at times – could not be described as easily accessible to all South Africa. Thus, betraying yet again, its professed identity as an alternative newspaper according to the definition of Tomaselli and Louw (1991).

In the period after 1994, when South Africa achieved democracy and the anti-apartheid struggle had officially ended, Harber told journalist Ruda Landman (2018:43) about the change in the journalism practiced at the *M&G*:

> Completely different, which is why when that period ended and everything fell away overnight in 1990 – we were caught like deer in the headlights. That transition from being activist journalists to being journalists in a democracy was maybe the most difficult time, because we had to relearn everything we did, and of course it was a time of enormous financial difficulty and pressure as well.

That time of financial difficulty never ended for the *Weekly Mail* even in its guise as the *M&G*. It is possible, as Atton (1999) posits, that as an alternative press publication, the organisation was strongly anti-commercial.

4.4. The *Daily Mail* debacle

The *Weekly Mail*'s experimental nature could be witnessed in its pivot to mainstream press from alternative media which came just four years after it was established with the launch of a daily edition of the paper. The *Daily Mail* newspaper made its first appearance on 20 June 1990 and lasted a mere 11 weeks until its closure on 4 September 1990 (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991:13; *The Star*, 1990). A

Financial Mail report (1990), announcing the launch of the *Daily Mail* took the view that the market for daily newspapers was "saturated" and advertising expenditure was effectively declining, making the plans of the *Daily Mail* management rather short-sighted. The same report cited a *Times Media* cost analysis which showed that the *Weekly Mail* was losing around R400 000 a year (*Financial Mail*, 1990). The management of the *Weekly Mail* appeared to believe that going daily was one way of boosting their revenue through increased advertising. "They were keen to go daily, they were expanding the staff ... that project lasted (two) months and then collapsed," said former journalist Shaun De Waal (De Waal, interview, 2019). However, *The Star* newspaper spoke to senior members of the largest advertising firms in the country during the week of the *Daily Mail's* launch about the prospects for this new entrant into the market (*The Star*, 1990:17). The general consensus was that the newspaper's area of distribution was oversubscribed and it was not likely that there was going to be an increase in the audience in the daily morning segment that the *Daily Mail* was operating in (*The Star*, 1990:17). The financial fallout was significant and such was the level of desperation to rescue the situation that Harber confirmed, as reported in the *Citizen* newspaper, that "a *Daily Mail* staff member had had informal discussions with the ANC, 'as all options were being looked into'" (*The Citizen*, 1990).

At the time of *The Daily Mail's* launch, journalist Ameen Akhalwaya, a contributor to the *Weekly Mail*, penned an opinion piece that was heavily critical of the move (*Post Natal*, 1990). He questioned whether the new publication could also be considered part of the alternative press, as its weekly predecessor had been:

> We are still alternative in the sense that we distance ourselves from the major newspaper groups and ally ourselves with the smaller papers. We also distance ourselves politically and financially from the major groups," pointing to the *Daily Mail*'s new focus on funding and advertising as a break away from the fundamentals of the alternative press (*Post Natal*, 1990).

"How did he react to the view that the *Daily Mail* was a "yuppie paper"? Many of our readers are professionals, many are young. They cover the whole spectrum. I'd be disappointed if we were read only by yuppies," said Harber (*Post Natal*, 1990). The *Daily Mail* venture was clearly an attempt to cater to a mainstream audience outside of the alternative, leftist, progressive, audience that had supported the *Weekly Mail* from its inception more as a move to diversify its revenue base instead of its political angle.

The *Daily Mail* venture ended as prematurely as it had started, reverting to a weekly publication without having secured the sales it had hoped for (*The Star*, 1990). Speaking to *The Star* newspaper at the time, co-editor Harber said, "The purpose would be a retreat to base, to enable us to build up our flagship publication and to ensure that this country has a strong, outspoken and independent voice" (*The Star*, 1990). Forty staff members lost their jobs in the wake of the *Daily Mail's* closure, with the remaining 73 moving to the *Weekly Mail* team (*The Star*, 1990). *The Star* wrote on the day of the *Daily Mail's* last

edition that staff were only going to be told on that day if they were to be retained (1990:3). *The Star* reported the day after the closure that "there were tearful scenes in the newsroom when the final orders came through" (*The Star*, 1990). Harber told *The Star* that a special fund "is to be created to assist members of staff who cannot find jobs immediately" (*The Star*, 1990). Harber later referred to the *Daily Mail* as "a speculative venture" (*The Star*, 1990), but it was an expensive venture for the *Weekly Mail.*

4.5. The *Weekly Mail* becomes the *Mail & Guardian*

The failed *Daily Mail* project was followed about 18 months later by yet another attempt at raising money for the cash-strapped *Weekly Mail*. The 28 February 1992 edition of the *Weekly Mail* announced a partnership with the UK's *Guardian* newspaper. The *Weekly Mail* was to carry the 32-page international edition known as the *Guardian Weekly* from 9 April 1992. *The Guardian*, founded in 1821 in the UK, is funded through the Scott Trust which was set up after the death of owner and former editor, Charles Scott in 1932 (Rusbridger, 2018:18; Mody, 2014:76). The Scott family set up the trust in 1936 and it has been used to fund the *Guardian* and the *Observer* newspapers through the Guardian Media Group (GMP) ever since.

The world news section of the *Weekly Mail* was replaced by copy provided by the *Guardian* newspaper based in Manchester at the time. It was, as far as this research shows, the first syndication of international copy by a local newspaper in this way. The 29 July 1993 edition of the *Weekly Mail* announced the amalgamation of the two papers with a new masthead that still endures in some form in the mast head of the *M&G* at the time of writing in 2020. From this point on, the paper was renamed the *Weekly Mail & Guardian.* The partnership with the Guardian effectively ended the *Weekly Mail*'s independence and its ability to consider itself part of the alternative press of South Africa as described by Tomaselli and Louw (1991).

The package deal with the *Weekly Mail* was the start of a longer and more involved relationship between the Guardian and the *Weekly Mail* that ultimately allowed the latter to stay afloat. This partnership started a process which would eventually lead to renaming of the *Weekly Mail* to the *Mail & Guardian* to acknowledge the majority stake of the GMP in the *Weekly Mail (Mail & Guardian,* 2019). The *Guardian* sent their copy to the *Weekly Mail* for local publishing but carried the local printing costs. The cover price for the bundle remained unchanged at R2,50 (*Finance Week*, 1992:20). Adviser to the *Weekly Mail* at the time of the partnership, Terry Levenberg, told *Finance Week* that he "hopes the move will remove perceptions in the market of the *WM* as a focused, radical, left-wing publication" (*Finance Week*, 1992:20). The attempt to move away from its alternative press veneer was no clearer than through this statement, and the decision of the organisation to partner with the *Guardian.*

On 10 June 1993, the *Guardian* announced a redesign of *The Weekly Mail* "to bring it more in line with the British paper's daily edition" (*Mail & Guardian*, 10 June 1993).

> In 1993, a deal was done with the *Guardian Weekly*. We had originally done a deal with them to carry the *Guardian Weekly* – a southern African edition within the paper. And this was like an add-on, an extra you could get with the then *Weekly Mail*. That didn't last very long, it was decided that it would be a much better idea, partly because the *Guardian* would give us some money, that it would be printed with the paper, (De Waal, 2019).

The deal, while focused on the declining technology of the newspaper at the time, did put a Band aid on the *M&G*'s enduring cash-flow problem but did little to conceptualise a digital strategy for the organisation. This is especially surprising given that a digital transition was taking shape at the *Guardian*. "In 1993 some journalists began to be dimly aware of something clunkily referred to as the 'information superhighway' but few had ever had reason to see it in action. At the start of 1995 only 491 newspapers were online worldwide," writes former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger (2019) of what was happening globally in online journalism at the same time. The *M&G* website was one of those having launched in 1995 but the lack of a dedicated strategy to growing the website coupled with the fact that mainstream Internet usage was still a long way off Europe and the USA (*Fin24*, 2016), meant that the *M&G* was never able to grow its online journalism offering significantly. The guardian.co.uk launched in 1999 and is today considered one of the big successes in online journalism.

The Guardian became the majority shareholder by increasing its stake to 62% in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian* in 1998 (Mody, 2014:76). This was reduced to 10% in 2002 at which point, the GMP "sold an 87.5 per cent majority holding to black Zimbabwean publisher and entrepreneur, Trevor Ncube, of Newtrust Company Botswana Limited" (Mody, 2014:76) which marked a determined move to digital at the *M&G*.

The *Weekly Mail* paper, in its early years, was distributed by its staff, who tried to get the paper to the front doors of as many of its readers as possible (Manoim, 1996). Some of the copies were sent abroad via the postal system, which increasingly became too expensive to be profitable (Manoim, 1996). It was technology which once again provided a solution to this cost-related barrier to distribution. Through a connection between the *Weekly Mail's* Bruce Cohen and computer science lecturer Phillip Machanick, Manoim found himself in contact with a group of students who would later become the founders of pioneering South Africa's Internet service provision company Internet Solutions (IS) (De Waal, 2010:72). This group provided a digital solution to the postal system dilemma, allowing the newspaper in text format to be distributed via email, which, according to Manoim, "turned a major loss into a small profit" (De Waal, 2010:76). It was an innovative solution to a problem created by an old technology, and it epitomises Pinch and Bijker's (1984) interpretive flexibility at play. It is a clear example of innovative use of technology to solve a problem for which the technology was not intended. Tomaselli

and Louw's (1991) description of the essential features of alternative media is instructive here too as the use of technology to solve problems cheaply is a feature of the alternative press in South Africa.

On March 25, 1994, Machanick (1994a) posted a message to an internet newsgroup with the subject line: "*Weekly Mail* on the net", announcing the availability of the email version (text-only) of the newspaper. "To all those who sent me mail about interest in the internet version of the *Weekly Mail*: you should receive a personal response from Bruce Cohen. For a week, to see what interest there is, they are offering a free issue by ftp or e-mail", wrote Machanick (1994a). A couple of months later, in August 1994, Machanick (1994b) posted another message to the newsgroup announcing the launch of the *M&G Online forum*: "The forum, which is a simple multiple e-mail service, will enable subscribers interested in discussing issues and stories in the "*Mail*" to communicate with one another, send letters to the editor etc.". The forum was the *M&G's* first instance of online audience engagement or interactivity (Van Dijk, 2006), allowing users to talk to one another. The digital or electronic offerings during this period were extended through an online searchable database of the email editions. This was developed by Steve Song, a visitor from Canada who was assisting the South African NGO network called Sangonet, at the time. The *M&G Forum* lasted a remarkable 15 years until 19 June, 2009.

4.6. 'The early Internet was not for techno-sissies'[48]

The *M&G*'s early foray onto the worldwide web started with Manoim, the co-founder who was the *Weekly Mail's* technical maverick and, as it turned out, digital champion in the *M&G* newsroom later on. The *M&G* went live with its website in 1995 through a subsidiary company called the *eM&G* (*Electronic Mail & Guardian*) headed by Manoim and former *M&G* news editor Bruce Cohen (De Waal, 2010:76)[49]. South Africa had connected to the Internet just four years earlier through its national academic network Uninet. Corporate South Africa went online in 1992 with a number of commercial '.za' registrations (Balliah, 2004). The domain name mg.co.za, which remains in use today, was registered on 2 August 1995 (Barrett, n.d.)[50]. "Bruce (Cohen) had been news editor at that point but Irwin (Manoim), was quite clear that we needed to get a foot into the new digital world and he was right. We did it before anyone else but it's not like we made millions out of it, we should have but we didn't," said De Waal (2019, interview). As De Waal (2019, interview) points out, the *M&G* was South Africa's first news website preceding even news24.com, which launched in October 1998.

[48] This is a quote from Irwin Manoim who went on to add that, "It wasn't just bewildering; it was hostile. Technical skill was essential, an appetite for obscure commands helped, and most important was patience, buckets full of it" (De Waal, 2010:76).

[49] The first newspaper to go online globally was the American publication *Columbus Dispatch* in 1980. The publication was founded in 1871 in Ohio. See Poynter's New Media Timeline for more: https://www.poynter.org/archive/2004/new-media-timeline-1980/

[50] Notably the register also shows that Naspers registered its domain name ns.co.za practically at the same time.

The intentions of the *M&G's* subsidiary company were bold and not short on a vision. At the time, Cohen said "A key feature of the *M&G*'s Internet service will be its interactivity with the "hard-copy" version of the paper. "We'll be constantly enhancing the editorial coverage of the paper with additional information, including original source material, on our Internet site" (*Mail & Guardian*, 1995). The paper announced its new division, *eM&G*, calling on the technical buzzwords of the day for its launch. "The *Mail & Guardian,* the most 'wired' newspaper in Africa, has launched a new media division to strengthen its electronic publishing programme" (*Mail & Guardian*, 1995). "The new division, *eM&G*, will be focused on expanding the *M&G's* Internet profile, developing specialised electronic services to harness the publishing opportunities presented by the internet" (*Mail & Guardian*, 1995)[51]. This statement points to an understanding within the organisation of what the essentials of online journalism were, namely interactivity, multimedia and hypertextuality (Lievrouw and Livingston, 2002; Pavlik, 2000; Van Dijk, 2006; Quinn, 2005). Additionally, the new division demonstrates that the *M&G* was way ahead of the rest of the industry in terms of online journalism.

At the time, the *M&G*, at ten years old, appeared to be moving towards a clearly defined and diversified digital strategy which included the electronic version of the weekly paper, the searchable online archive, a supplement called *PC Review Online*[52] edited by Manoim, and the *M&G Forum.* This multi-pronged digital strategy embraced the hypertextuality and interactivity of the online publishing space and recognised that audiences or users were now part of the business of journalism. But, the strategy of the new division also seemed to operate in a silo, eschewing the convergence in skills between the different groups of individuals in the newsroom (Quinn, 2005).

The new online division did little to disrupt the established newsroom print workflows and operated alongside the print newsroom's operations instead of as one integrated newsroom. Copy for the website was gleaned from copy for the Friday newspaper. "We began doing what no other South African newspaper website had done … we wrote our own articles, and produced a publication entirely distinct from the print edition, updated 18 hours a day," writes Manoim of the *M&G's* first web articles (De Waal, 2010:76). It is this distinction between the *M&G* in print and online which has persisted to this day, and which has caused the *M&G* to falter in all its attempts at a digital transition. In short, the convergence in newsroom skills among individuals (Singer, 2004b), and between the various groups of people inside the *M&G* newsroom (Vobič, 2011) has failed to happen while the convergence in technologies continued to happen organically.

By 1997, Cohen had moved on to head up *MWeb*, the newly-launched Internet arm of the Multichoice business. A short while later, the *eM&G* announced that it had sold a controlling stake of 65% to *MWeb*,

[51] American newspapers led the way in electronic publishing with many, including the New York Times, offering full-text digitised versions in the early eighties (Poynter, 2004).
[52] *PC Review* was launched in 1992 soon after the *Weekly Mail/Guardian* package deal was launched.

a deal that brought little to the *M&G* apart from a seemingly endless battle to buy back the shares held by *MWeb*. Cohen was glowing of the deal and its potential, telling the *Weekly M&G* at the time that the plans included "the development of a 24-hour news operation" (*Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1997), showing an appreciation for the concept of ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010), and the need for the *M&G* to take the lead in this space.

Commenting on the deal with *MWeb*, Manoim, the editor of the *eM&G*, said it "will give us the support to take Internet reporting to new levels of professionalism, offering reporting and entertainment that's delivered faster than radio, but with a range as broad as a national newspaper," (*Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1997). There were early successes for the *eM&G*, which by 1997 was reporting 2,4 million unique website hits[53]. "Independent audits of various on-line newspapers have shown that the *eM&G* outstrips its closest competitors by more than four times" (*Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1997). By 1997, the *M&G* had established itself as a leader in online journalism with a remarkable online audience but the organisation itself had not converged in the sense that the print newspaper still operated separately from the online part of the organisation.

4.7. Media inquiry into allegations of racism 1998

Literature about the alternative press in South Africa like that from Trabold (2018) and Tomaselli and Louw (1991) tend to lean towards the hagiographic in that there is rarely critique of the organisations or of the individuals who made up these organisations or their practices (Atton, 2008). Atton (2008:214), calls this the "celebratory approach" in studies of alternative media. Instead, there is a focus on their counter-hegemonic stance against Apartheid, a recognised evil in which anything against it was assumed to be ideologically sound and, therefore, more acceptable than the mainstream or mass media (Atton, 2008). In 1998, this approach to the *M&G* was rattled when accusations against journalists at the *M&G* and *The Sunday Times* gave rise to an inquiry overseen by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC).

> Two black professional bodies, the Black Lawyers Association, and the Association of Black Accountants of South Africa requested that the SAHRC conduct an investigation into two newspapers, the *Mail & Guardian* and *The Sunday Times*, for alleged violations of fundamental rights of black people'. Their main complaint in the case of the *M&G* was that its corruption investigations unfairly targeted black professionals. (Glaser, 2000:374).

[53] This may have something to do with the decline in the consumption of print newspapers that happened during this time in South Africa. According to Hadland (2007:11), between June 1994 and December 1995 "people stopped buying newspapers", adding that newspaper circulation dropped by 11%.

The inquiry was led by lawyer Barney Pityana and included Jerry Nkeli, Margaret Legum, Charlotte McClain and veteran journalist Joe Thloloe (SAHRC, 2000). The inquiry kicked off in 1998 and culminated in a 100-page report released in August 2000. "Its terms of reference … called for research into the 'handling of race and incidence of racism' in the media, as well into the causes and impact of media racism, and to make recommendations" (Glaser, 2000:374). An independent researcher was contracted to do preliminary research into the allegations; and independent monitoring organisation, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP), was tasked with additional research. The latter released their report, *The News in Black and White: An investigation into racial stereotyping in the media* ahead of the final inquiry report (MMA, 1999). The MMP report (MMA, 1999:57) said that:

> It is doubtful whether any of the major media are intent on any form of racist brainwashing. However, the values and attitudes common in our society are no strangers to those who staff the news media and it is often only when stereotyping and prejudicial reporting is pointed out that the media become aware of the patterns which they have established.

The back and forth over the media's reluctance to participate in this inquiry, citing media freedom concerns, is a demonstration of the lack of context that I point to earlier in the histories of the alternative press in the country. The inquiry was just four years after the dawn of democracy in South Africa and two years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to uncover apartheid atrocities and provide some social justice to its victims (Krog, 2002)[54]. Then-editor, Phillip van Niekerk, along with political editor Howard Barrell represented the *M&G* at the inquiry (SAHRC, 2000). In his submission, van Niekerk (2000:256) wrote: "First, "racist" is the most provocative insult that can be levelled against my colleagues and me. I was summoned before this commission and accused of racism on the basis of very insubstantial evidence, and this smear has been allowed to stand for 18 months". Van Niekerk's submission focused on the content produced by the organisation and its work, as this was the basis of the hearings. There was no discussion of the makeup of the organisation or any possible structural issues regarding the organisation raised or considered problematic.

The MMP report (MMA, 1999:57) found that "it has become clear that stereotypical representations of race are unfortunately still common in the media. The monitoring and analysis have suggested that the conventional notions of news, of Africa and the legacy of apartheid era ideologies and discourses all functioned to produce some harmful portrayals of both black and white people". The inquiry found that racism exists in the media, without singling out individual newsrooms (Glaser, 2000:376; SAHRC, 2000:89). The inquiry (SAHRC, 2000:90) also drew attention to structural and institutional racism despite its lack of interrogation of the composition of newsrooms at the time. "Generally speaking, we

[54]A reading of Krog's *The Country of my Skull* (2002), is enough to convince anyone that an inquiry into racism in the South African media was necessary and should not have been resisted.

have found no evidence of the mainstream media indulging in blatant advocacy of racial hatred or incitement to racial violence. We have found much evidence of condemnation of hate speech. We have also found, increasingly, appropriate reporting of race crimes in our country" (SAHRC, 2000:90).

The 2013 *State of the Newsroom* report (Daniels, 2013), raised the issue of race and transformation at the *M&G*. Deputy editor Rapule Tabane was quoted as saying that he, "felt race was "a big challenge at the top". He was the only black male senior office bearer" (Daniels, 2013:27). Daniels added that, "He was referring to online editor, Chris Roper, executive editor Tanya Pampalone and Editor-in-chief Nic Dawes, (2013:27). Rapule believed the demographic makeup of the leadership of the organisation was mainly due to the history of the paper, 'its white liberal background'". Daniels noted in the 2013 report that "the subs-desk on the newspaper was more than 80% white, as were the section heads" (2013:28).

The matter of the race demographics in South African newsrooms is raised here as a way of demonstrating the lack of context to journalism studies on alternative media in South Africa. The internal politics around race and related issues are not captured in critical media studies of the alternative press of South Africa which has tended to focus on the anti-Apartheid or progressive politics of the press (Atton, 2008).

4.8. An African owner with a continental and digital outlook

Zimbabwean entrepreneur Trevor Ncube acquired the *M&G* from the *Guardian* in 2002 (Ncube, 2017). The *M&G* was in a difficult financial position and was bleeding money amid a strained print newspaper context in which going digital seemed to be the answer. "When I took over, it was a turbulent time. Infighting was rife, particularly between the editorial department and the management. Morale was low, and the company was losing an average of R12-million a year," said Ncube (De Waal, 2010:6). He also revealed that before his acquisition, the company was sitting with a loss of R15 million (*Politicsweb*, 2017).

When Ncube bought the *M&G* in 2002, he was unequivocal about the online business, which he had acquired back from *MWeb* (*Politicsweb*, 2017). He noted:

> We had to undo the mess of the online division. Because of the way it had begun in the late 1990s and subsequent developments, it was 65% owned by the competition (*MWeb*). Our growth was obstructed at every turn. The shareholding agreement was so onerous I'm surprised we could even send an email without obtaining *MWeb*'s permission. (De Waal, 2010:7)

The irony of Ncube's assessment was that a year before his acquisition in 2002, the *M&G* had been voted one of the world's top 175 websites by Forbes.com.

Ncube reflected that his initial impression of the organisational structure was that "editorial called all the shots and the business unit was practically non-existent" (De Waal 2010:6). Ncube's assessment is congruent with the *M&G*'s report in 1990, that the revenue of the paper was based on 25% advertising and 75% editorial (Akhalwaya, 1990). It is also in line with an earlier assertion in this thesis that the paper retained its alternative press outlook through most of its existence and in terms of this outlook, making a profit was less important than the imagined ideological cause behind the product (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991).

Between 2003 and 2005, under Ncube's watch, the *M&G Online* had three dedicated staff members who uploaded content from the Friday paper. This group included a general manager, a sub-editor and chief sub-editor (Mody, 2014:76). The late Matthew Buckland, a digital entrepreneur, joined the organisation in 2001 as the head of the online division, replacing Manoim in that role. At the time, the online editor's position "meant everything from being responsible for the content on the site to being the main tech liaison, to looking after the commercials on the site," (Buckland, 2019:30). But the division itself and the separate staffing complement was yet again a two-pronged publishing strategy which pivoted around the print newspaper. It was certainly the kind of strategy that encouraged convergence between the various editorial teams in the newsroom that would have encouraged the "resocialisation" of the journalists in terms of their practices (Singer, 2004b:838).

Despite the focus on digital-first, Ncube trimmed the organisational structure by eliminating all business units that he believed were not germane to the newspaper itself, which he referred to as the "core product" (De Waal, 2010:6). De Waal (2019, interview) noted that this strategy was quite ironic, as it was Ncube who embarked on a pan-African project through *M&G Africa*, a new business initiative that was not quite close to the *M&G* newspaper at the time. Describing Ncube as a man who broke his own rules, De Waal (2019, interview) pointed out that while Ncube was cutting back on units within the organisation for financial reasons, he was also promoting the *M&G Africa* business "which was very expensive and made no money".

The pan-African experiment was an expensive and wasteful exercise for the organisation and left the *M&G* in serious financial difficulties a year after its launch. "Bad business decisions at the cash-strapped *Mail & Guardian* have led to the newspaper's biggest round of retrenchments yet, leaving the future of one of South Africa's oldest independent newspapers in the balance" (*Timeslive*, 2015). The report went on to blame the *M&G Africa* experiment, along with Ncube's focus on digital, as the reasons for the dire financial situation (*Timeslive*, 2015). "Consultants have recommended that he (Ncube) cut his multimedia team and the unit responsible for uploading content onto iPads" (*Timeslive*, 2015). The makings of an online journalism organisation were there, but the lack of convergence between various part of the journalism practice at the *M&G* was part of the reason that individual roles related to specific platforms were being cut (Quinn, 2005). This reinforces Quinn (2005) and Singer's (2004), description

of convergence that it is not just about the technologies but about the skills among the individuals in the organisation.

Perhaps the most decisive push to a digital-first newsroom at the *M&G* came with the appointment of Nic Dawes as editor-in-chief in June 2009, who, together with Chris Roper, were committed to the digital and social first transition of the organisation. In a piece written on the occasion of his departure from the organisation, Dawes wrote, (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013):

> At the *M&G* we are insistent that digital forms of news gathering, engagement and delivery are not a threat to our relevance and our commercial survival. On the contrary, they are crucial to ensuring both. Social media allows us not just to hear our audience but also to make it part of the news process. The web means we are no longer bidding for attention once a week in a dying market; instead we have become one of the largest news sites in the country, going toe-to-toe on an hourly basis with companies an order of magnitude larger. Powerful new technology, from data and video to HTML5 and tablets, is enriching our journalism and we are doing better work in print too as a result.

Dawes appointed Roper as the online editor shortly after his own appointment in 2009 and together they set about moving the organisation to a digital-first organisation. In 2011, Roper told *Bizcommunity* (2011a), about a redesign of the website in order to make full use of digital and social media tools. But, he admitted, "the tricky bit is having a weekly newspaper and a 24-hour website - and when you publish what. So it's a constantly evolving thing," (Bizcommunity, 2011a). The quote points to the conundrum that is at the heart of the *M&G*'s digital and social first problems - the inability to manage both the print newspaper and the digital platforms concurrently. At the time, Roper said that the digital team of the *M&G* compromised 14 editorial persons along five technical specialists. Compared with the team of 2020, this 2011 digital team was far better resourced than ever in the organisation's history. The *State of the Newsroom* report (Daniels, 2014:37) said that the *M&G* announced its "digital-first" strategy to its staff in March 2012.

> The company was a truly hybrid publisher and had experienced significant growth in its digital audience over the past few years with a 60% growth in audience for *M&G Online*, a 2000% growth in audience from mobile and an 81% growth in its overall publisher audience over the past year alone," read a press release from the *M&G*.

The *M&G* publisher at the time, Anastacia Martin, explained the concept behind the digital-first strategy, "We use websites, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, portals and associated digital applications to reach our audiences, anywhere and at all times," (Daniels, 2014:37). Martin added, (Daniels, 2014:28),

that the *M&G* would try and reach audiences through whatever tools were available, “be they audio-visual stories, podcasts, original stories or aggregated content. Our readers are in print but as we now provide rich media too, we talk about audience as we reach them through both visual and auditory channels”.

The digital-first move for the organisation was publicly announced in August 2013, shortly after Roper was appointed editor-in-chief, (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013d). But it came at the cost of retrenchments which was an indication that the company was not doing as well as it had in previous years. Roper said in a statement, "that transforming a legacy print business into a digital media business required a total re-engineering of resources and staff. This necessitated retraining and repurposing of people, as well as a re-evaluation of business goals," (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013d).

In 2015, Roper introduced a convergence strategy to the organisation, writing that, "The days of separate digital, commercial and editorial strategies, working in isolation, are over. The strategy is a converged strategy, and the component parts cannot exist without the whole", (Roper, email communications, 2020). Roper's (ibid), strategy was a digital-first one and not a print-first one:

> The strategy is made up of three parts: A) Digital (which includes technology and advertising platforms), B) Commercial (which speaks to what’s necessary to execute the strategy), and C) Editorial (which outlines how our content products will build audience, create products that provide revenue-generating opportunities, and further build the *M&G* brand).

Roper's strategy was a clear move towards converging the *M&G* newsroom which meant many things including:

- the development of a membership club which would build a relationship with the audience of the *M&G*;
- Improve analytical information to improve the organisation's overview of its audiences;
- a reworking of the sub-editing department to "allow for greater quality and control of original digital content," (Roper, email communications, 2020).

Less than three months later, Roper resigned from the *M&G* and was replaced by Verashni Pillay[55] in October 2015 (*Marklives.com*, 2015). On the occasion of Roper's departure, *M&G* CEO Hoosain Karjieker (*Mail & Guardian*, 2015), wrote of Roper's impact as editor, “This resulted in the successful convergence of all editorial processes to form a fully fledged, multiplatform newsroom that now forms the cornerstone of our future digital ambitions. As Chapter Seven shows in its narrative of the current

[55] Pillay had worked as a reporter for the organisation under Roper's editorship and later became an associate editor, (*Business Tech*, 2015).

way in which the *M&G* operates, Roper's intentions to shift the *M&G* to a fully converged, digital-first newsroom were not realised and somewhere along the line, the digital transition of the organisation fell by the wayside once again.

4.8.1. Elsewhere in online journalism in South Africa

The *M&G* was the first publication to go online in South Africa in 1994, as noted earlier in this thesis. Afrikaans publication *Beeld* followed three years later with ebeeld.com which in itself was an example of the innovation and experimentation in the newspaper world within South Africa. Arrie Roussouw writes (in Hadland, 2005:215) about the early days of going online, when he and Jan Taljaard set up the www.ebeeld.com website:

> We were true pioneers. The two of us did everything from designing and creating the website, linking it to the FTP server at the head office in Cape Town, populating it with English content – mainly tapped from the newswires – and eventually setting up a network of freelancers to translate Afrikaans news reports from *Beeld, Die Burger* and *Volksblad* into English.

Roussouw and Taljaard's work eventually took them to *Media24,* where they formed part of the team that devised the Internet strategy for media company Naspers.

News24.com, currently the continent's biggest online news organisation, launched in October 1998. Roussouw became its first publisher.

> Within one year of its launch, *News24* became the biggest news website in the country – and today still holds that position. The winning strategy was, and still is, to employ seasoned print journalists to run the operation. They are skilled in producing accurate and quality content at breakneck speed and compete against gruelling deadlines – a quality you don't often find outside the newspaper trade and that gave *News24* its competitive edge, (Hadland, 2005:215)

4.9. Conclusion

This chapter focused on a history of the *M&G* from its initial launch as the *Weekly Mail* in 1985 to the launch of its digital-first strategy in 2012. This chapter is divided into two sections, the first of which focuses on the *M&G* prior to the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994 as part of the alternative press in this country. These roots within the alternative press as defined by Tomaselli and Louw (1991), and as opposition press (Trabold, 2019), set up a culture for the organisation that has persisted to this day. This culture of the alternative press means that the organisation was unable to focus on the business

of journalism without feeling like it was betraying the standards of journalism itself and because of this, the *M&G* looked to digital strategies without interrogating the journalism it produces.

This chapter emphasised how the *Weekly Mail* and the *M&G* were ahead of their time for a while in terms of a digital shift. The second part of the history is framed with the features of online journalism, which were used to show how the *M&G* had theoretically set out on the path of online journalism but has consistently been distracted by the print newspaper which has remained at the core of the organisation's strategy. In this way, this chapter has shown that convergence within a newsroom is possible as outlined by Quinn (2005), had not been achieved at the *M&G*. A split in the online unit, division or staff from the rest of the organisation happened early on in the organisation's digital history and it is this separation that has prevented convergence in its various forms as described by Singer, (2004); Williams, (2003); and Deuze, (2004), from happening in the organisation.

Chapter Five: *From the periphery to the centre; the shifting role of the audience in journalism*

> *Call them newsmakers. Call them sources. Call them the subjects-and sometimes, in their view, the unwilling victims-of journalism. But however we describe them, we must all recognise that the rules for newsmakers, not just journalists, have changed, thanks to everyone's ability to make the news.* (Gillmor, 2004:45)

5.1. Introduction

Like books and their readers, journalism and its audiences go hand in hand. Journalism is intrinsically about whom content is produced for. But, as this chapter intends to show, this relationship of the media as producer and the audience as consumer has changed to the extent that the newly configured relationship has fundamentally altered how journalism is practised and consequently how it is defined.

While the process of defining journalism can still be viewed through a sociological lens as described by Schudson (2003), a new definition has to account for the fact that the vertical relationship between journalists and their audiences no longer exist. In its place is a flat, horizontal structure[56] which has eroded the privilege of the journalist over news and information production. In short, defining journalism is no longer just about what journalists do in relation to what they think audiences want, it is about what journalists do in relation to what audiences are demanding. It must be said though, that while this relationship remains the ideal of how journalism should operate, South African newsrooms are yet to fully embrace the idea.

The question considered in this chapter is how the *M&G* has adapted to the changing relationship between the media and its audience. The chapter looks the *M&G's* shifting relationship with its audiences over the last 35 years, and asks how the *M&G,* as the case study in this thesis, has imagined and realised its relationship with its audiences over the course of its own history and as it navigates the digital publishing space.

This chapter considers the shifting role of the audience vis-à-vis the producers of journalism. It uses the Habermasian public sphere, the concept of citizen journalism, and Gillmor's reconceptualization of the audience to examine the *M&G*'s relationship with its audience.

[56] The nature of this structure in the production of journalism needs closer interrogation but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

5.2. Web 2.0 and the rise of the user in production

The widespread ability to create news beyond the newsroom and outside the realm of journalism was made possible by the features of Web 2.0 (as discussed in Chapter Two). These features made the concept of citizen journalism possible and are a signifier of the radical shift in the relationship between media producers and their consumers. Citizen journalism was one of the media buzzwords of the early 2000s and was often touted as the digital equivalent of the grassroots, alternative or community print media of earlier times (Mutsvairo, 2016b). Citizen journalism is also seen as a form of participatory journalism which was made possible by the technology of the internet[57] as it brought various forms of media together through the process referred to as convergence, as expressed by Deuze (2005:451). Interestingly, in South Africa, as this chapter shows, citizen journalism was largely driven by established organisations looking to co-opt the work of non-journalists as a way of providing eyewitness-type reporting in an ambient news[58] ecosystem.

5.2.1 Online journalism as engaged journalism

A key characteristic of online journalism as outlined by Van Dijk (2006) is that of interactivity, which he understands to mean the ability of the audience to engage with content produced by media producers. The idea of interactivity is extended by Siapera and Veglis (2012), to refer to the ability of the audience to manipulate content and to participate in its production. The latter implies a closer relationship between those who are seen to be the producers of content, in this case, the journalists, and those who are seen to consume the content, or the audience. As such, news content is produced within the framework of an imagined relationship between the journalist and the audience (Berkowitz, 2011:157). This is a move that Jeff Jarvis (in Reese & Shoemaker, 2016:394) refers to as "networked journalism"[59]. "The network captures the blurring of lines between professional and citizen, and between one organisation and another, as they develop more collaborative partnerships across digital platforms" (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016:394).

In this vein, Deuze (2005:451) writes that "new media technologies challenge one of the most fundamental 'truths' in journalism, namely: the professional journalist is the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world". This shift to a closer relationship with the audience results

[57] The digital divide that persists in South African society remains a stumbling block to true participatory journalism.

[58] Hermida wrote in 2010 of the availability of news via platforms in more public spaces. Since then, news has become more ambient or available all the time in multiple forms via a number of devices, as a result of the connected mobile phone loaded with information sharing social media applications (2010). Hermida also distinguishes between ambient news, which is news produced by professional journalists and available all the time in any place, and ambient journalism, which is journalism produced by journalists and non-journalists alike (2010). Citizen journalism falls into the latter category.

[59] See also Mutsvairo, 2016b.

in a more participatory or engaged form of journalism that print newspaper is structurally incapable of facilitating. The closer relationship between the producers and the consumers of media content has also shifted the nature of online journalism, which a number of authors refer to as more "multicultural" (Deuze, 2011:26; Mutsvairo, 2016b).

Participatory or public journalism would ordinarily be seen as more democratic and, therefore, more desirable, (Mutsvairo, 2016b). However, this shift in the nature of journalism is not immune to criticism. For one thing, online media organisations are embroiled in a crisis of truth as fake news, disinformation, misinformation and propaganda now operate in the same media space as established news organisations. This shows once again, a convergence in information in the multimedia space of the Internet. In a print-only environment, a newspaper's masthead was a clear indicator of the authenticity of information and of facts. But this hold on the truth has evaporated in a digital space populated by diverse content purporting to be journalism.

5.2.2. The public interest versus what the public is interested in

A clear example of this realignment in the relationship between the producer and the consumer is in the hierarchy of news, which places politics at the heart of news, underpinned by the media's own belief that this is in the public interest. This thinking is not driven by the realities of the average person on the street. In a way, the media imposes its sense of civic responsibility on audiences that may not still share this same sense of responsibility. The politics-first approach in how news is ranked has also been criticised for being out of touch with what audiences want.

If the media were really responsive to what the public is interested in, the sad reality is that this politics-first news approach would disappear. Gillmor (2006) calls the hierarchies of importance according to which the media still operates, "an industrial age model … it still works to some degree, but it's less and less effective". "Amid a veritable deluge of public information, people - especially the young - exhibit a declining interest in the content of newspapers, newsmagazines, and the 'serious' news presented on television" (Schudson, 2003:74)[60]. But, Schudson (2003:176) is also quick to show that these audiences are not just turning away from news consumption, many are turning to other news sources which proliferate on the Internet. Schudson argues in line with the Habermasian theory that encouraging more people to consume the news not only achieves the profit imperative of news producers, it also encourages more people to be engaged in public life. This engagement in public life is critical to functioning socio-economic and political systems which cannot be left unchecked. It is also through this engagement that the will of the people is exercised. But, as he adds, "News and news

[60] While the decline in news consumption is often assumed to be a problem of the millennial generation and those that follow, Schudson argues that the decline of young people's interest in the news has been in steady decline since the 1960s (2003:175).

organisations exist even where democracy does not" (Schudson, 2003:197). This means that the availability of news in any given country does not guarantee public participation. "News has little to do with political democracy unless the state includes or tolerates a degree of self-government and criticism of state power" (Schudson, 2003:197). The point here is that what most of us in the journalism field accept as a natural hierarchy of things in news production is not necessarily the case, and can be and should be adapted for contemporary audience needs.

McNair points to the work of cultural theorists like Stuart Hall, whose work on the sociology of journalism demonstrated how the media "structure the range of public voices in a hierarchy of legitimation that is a product of the dominant value system" (1998:26). McNair distinguishes between what he calls the dominance paradigm and the competition paradigm in describing the two models of the social role of journalism.

The competitive paradigm characterises the role of the media within a liberal pluralist framework, which is congruent with the normative theory of the media. This paradigm assumes an equality among the public in advanced capitalist societies in whose interest the journalist acts. "In this model the journalistic media are also watchdogs, comprising in their collective function a 'fourth estate': an independent institutional source of political and cultural power which monitors and scrutinises the actions of the powerful in other spheres" (McNair, 1998:19-20). In this paradigm, journalists are the facilitators of the public sphere, which McNair (1998:21), describes as "communally accessible communicative spaces in which information, ideas and opinions can be debated and exchanged as a precondition for rational collective decision-making".

5.3. The *M&G* turns to citizen journalism and blogging

From the mid-2000s, the *M&G* was saying all the right things when it came to the digital transition. However, from that point to the present day, the organisation has lagged behind industry peers in its attempts to transition to digital. In November 2007, the general manager of digital at the *M&G*, Matthew Buckland, presented the organisation's digital strategy to a session at the IFRA (The World Association of News Publishers) in Dublin. In the presentation, he described his understanding of Web 2.0, which was to "get closer to the reader, create community" (Buckland, 2007b).

The approach to digital at the organisation at the time, it would seem from this presentation, was to deploy a multi-brand approach which was made possible by the technology of the internet. "Our web 2.0 projects blog strategy - amatomu.com (regional blog aggregator) - Amagama.com (blog hosting) - thoughtleader.co.za (blog/media hybrid) Also... - newsinphotos.co.za - Facebook apps & Facebook groups (and... podcasts; social bookmarking, RSS etc.)" read one of the slides in the presentation (Buckland, 2008). At the heart of all of this was a focus on the audience, which Buckland addressed in

a 2008 presentation on citizen media which was actually years ahead of similar discussions in the broader industry. Buckland identified four key principles which he believed were the key to making user analytics data, which he called "intelligence", work for an organisation. These included:

- Consistent gatekeeping to ensure a high quality of UGC (user generated content);
- Segmentation of the audience to identify users of quality who would be allowed to comment or contribute;
- Focus on quality content;
- Collaborate with citizen media which includes sharing traffic and ad revenue data (Buckland, 2008).

The *M&G* embarked on an online real estate[61] splurge in 2007, setting up a number of sites for the co-option of user-generated content or UGC. What follows is a description of these various initiatives and how the organisation attempted to engage the audience in line with digital news media trends of the time, which were congruent with the digital strategy of the *M&G.*

5.3.1. *Thought Leader*

Thought Leader was launched by the *M&G* in 2007 as a platform for bloggers with relatively high public profile. Unlike the various other digital experiments of the *M&G* at the time, *Thought Leader* was clearly branded as part of the *M&G* stable. The concept of *Thought Leader* was a precursor to ideas which led to the development of the *Daily Maverick* in its early iterations. That is, an online space for opinion and commentary, with a news angle at times, but certainly not journalism in the accepted, normative sense.

The idea, it appears, was to harness the power of the personal journalist to build the brand of the *M&G*. *Thought Leader* co-founder Matthew Buckland wrote (2007a) that:

> It (*Thought Leader*) aims to be a place where *M&G* journalists, columnists and other writers, commentators, intellectuals and opinion makers across various industries and political spectrums meet. But it's not only a platform for some of the country's established writers and personalities but also home to some of the country's up-and-coming writers.

In a presentation about convergence in the media, Buckland (2007e), said that in the two weeks since its launch, the site had attracted 65 contributors, published 300 articles and amassed 500 comments, a serious uptake of the platform in the still nascent South African digital space. None of this brought in

[61] The term 'online real estate' here is used to describe the domain names and blogs which were created and set up.

any revenue to the *M&G*, but Buckland believed the blog's value was in extending the reach of the *M&G* brand. The blogging space in South Africa in 2007 was quite expansive in terms of UGC sites, with reportedly 17 000 individual blogs in existence by 2007. However, they were limited in activity with only 4 000-5 000 people actively blogging (*Mail & Guardian*, 2007).

Anderson *et al*., (2014:254) include the *M&G's Thought Leader* under the banner of citizen journalism. In reality, the site was a move in a completely different direction for media in South Africa. *Thought Leader* continues to operate today, in what can be considered a solid run for an online site. Buckland (2007a) called *Thought Leader* an 'editorial blog', insisting that given that the platform was very closely aligned with the *M&G*, it had to pass through regular editorial processes. This also entailed passing through the filter of the first online editor of the blog, Riaan Wolmarans. Buckland (2007a) described the site as containing "UGC from a select, closed network of users" with full editorial control by the *M&G* team which included sub-editing of submitted content.

Some of the better *Thought Leader* content made it into the weekly newspaper under the *Thought Leader* banner, which filled up space in the paper but did not add to the business itself. The emphasis on quality content and influential people, though, was a marketing gimmick aimed at deepening perceptions about the paper and the audiences it was reaching out to. Buckland (2007a), added that the option to reach out to contributors not as columnists but as bloggers was deliberate as it gave them a feeling of being invited and, therefore, special. "Build audience by making influential people part of your site; as leaders in their fields, they bring their networks to you".

5.3.2. The *Amatomu* and *Amagama* blogging experiments

Buckland (2007a) also pointed out that the *Thought Leader* blog was one of three strands in the *M&G's* blogging strategy. *Amatomu* and *Amagama* being the other two. *Amatomu* and *Amagama* were loosely affiliated to the *M&G. Amagama* seems to have shown no relationship to the *M&G*, apart from an email address to report abusive comments which was linked to the main mg.co.za domain. *Amagama* ran like the listservs and chatrooms of the early Internet; a community posting their content and then talking to each other about that content and other matters. The site shut down in May 2009. Buckland described the site as much like an ISP or internet service provider, providing the space but not meddling in the content until a problem was flagged by a user (Buckland, 2007e).

Amatomu, on the other hand, was a blog aggregator, calling itself the "South African blogosphere." It contained some advertising for the *M&G* on its site along with the masthead of the *M&G* online in the

footer of the homepage, clearly linking the two sites together[62]. Buckland described this site as a portal for local blogs with the service of providing analytics to the blogosphere contributors (Buckland, 2007e).

Apart from this, the blogs ran independently from the *M&G* and it is not clear how running these two entities would have benefitted the core product of the *M&G* newspaper or its online version. In his presentation to IFRA, Buckland (2007b) commented on the high number of daily page impressions for the *Amatomu* site, some 350 000, but gave no indication of how this was linked to the business of the *M&G*. And, it appears from his comments elsewhere, that the blogs were intended as a marketing gimmick for the newspaper, although he did not show how the one benefitted the other. It seems to have been a missed opportunity to capitalise on the gains of these blogs to build a solid and dedicated online audience for the M&G but operating as separate entities and not a converged, meant that the *M&G*'s digital transition lost momentum.

5.3.3. Other *M&G* online experiments

Another initiative by the *M&G* digital team in 2007 was newsinphotos.co.za - a site that featured the best of the *M&G's* photography but also invited readers to submit their own shots[63]. This site was clearly branded as an *M&G* product and consisted of numerous links back to the core product, the mg.co.za homepage.

The *Voices of Africa* site (voicesofafrica.co.za) launched in 2013 to host stories from African contributors about everyday life on the continent. The site closed in September 2015, but seems to have hosted more content from wire services than original content from local contributors. As with many of the blogs hosted by the *M&G* since 2007, the content on voicesofafrica.co.za was not monetised in any way and the audiences came from the people who were themselves contributors. In essence, they had conceptualised echo chambers even before social media made this concept popular.

All of these initiatives were ahead of their time in that the *M&G,* through the efforts of individuals like Buckland, was trying to facilitate more user interaction between journalists and the audiences themselves using available technologies of the time; to bring the audiences closer to the centre of the organisation, and to push the audiences towards a more open space for the exchange of ideas and information, achieving some of the interactivity and hypertextuality expected in online journalism

[62] Both amatomu.com and amagama.com are no longer operational. All information used in this section was found through snapshots of individual pages taken at various times by the Internet archive, *Wayback Machine:* https://web.archive.org/

[63] The publicly available domain name registries show that the domains for amatomu.com, amagama.com, thoughtleader.co.za and newsinphotos.co.za were all created between January and March 2007, (see whois.com and whois.co.za).

(Lievrouw and Livingston, 2002; Van Dijk, 2006; Quinn, 2005). These aims were ultimately facilitated by social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. They were also more user-friendly and cheaper in that they were freely accessible third party platforms that could be harnessed by journalism practitioners to reach and engage with their audiences. But, as history shows us, these platforms have also come to represent the greatest threat to the future of journalism itself, an important discussion but outside of the scope of this thesis.

5.3.4. Citizen journalism experiments in South Africa

It is worth reflecting at this point to look at two of the country's most significant citizen journalism initiatives, *reporter.co.z*a and *Lindaba Ziyafika.* It should be said that in using the term 'citizen journalism' as one expression of user-generated content, I am guided by Berger's (2011:710) explanation of it:

> Not every act of journalism, however, defines a person as being a 'journalist' in terms of ongoing or significant identity … Citizen journalism, thus, should be defined as journalism done by persons whose status is not that of hired hands in a media enterprise, but who are outsiders that are nevertheless engaged in the sustained generation of journalism. This may be news or commentary, visual and/or audio, and entertaining to a greater or lesser extent, but it is still a form of journalism.

This is an important point from Berger (2011), as it helps is to understand that journalism should not be confined to a newsroom with professionals alone. Recognising that journalism can happen in many spaces and produced by groups or individuals not considered to be professional journalism helps us to rethink the journalism of the future.

5.3.4.1. *Reporter.co.za*

Reporter.co.za was an initiative of Johnnic Communications or Johncom (in 2020 Arena Holdings but better known as the Times Media Group or TMG), that was started in 2005 and ended a few months later despite a commitment of some 20 dedicated journalists to the effort. By early 2006, it was reported that the site had already attracted "3 845 citizen journos publishing about 25 news stories per day on topics including crime, sport and tips and features," at R30 a published story. Matthew Buckland, (*Memburn.com*, 2006a), who reported these figures, was clear about the site's potential and its pitfalls: "What better way to get scoops and stories than to invite the public submit them? But it also means sifting through reams of rubbish before you strike gold". The site apparently attracted close to 6 000

contributions over its two year existence (Anderson *et al*., 2014:252). Its demise came from a lack of subscribers, which ultimately meant the site could not be monetised through advertising (Motylska, 2014:79-80).

5.3.4.2. *Lindaba Ziyafika*

The *Lindaba Ziyafika*[64] project was aligned to the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies (JMS) in the Eastern Cape, and ran from 2008 to 2013. It was generously funded by a Knight Foundation 'news challenge' grant (Anderson *et al*., 2014:255). The project was a structured initiative of JMS and included hands-on training of the participants before they engaged in any news production activities. In this way, *Iindaba Ziyafika* was not an organic citizen journalism initiative but more of an academic project.

The contributors, recruited from the local township, a low-income area and a media desert in many ways, were trained by students and staff of the journalism school to "systemically re-tool a group of peoples' set of communication choices, by giving them sustainable skills. This means not just a 'once-off' training of school children, but changing the culture in schools, by creating, firstly, school-based media, and dialogues between learners and parents and teachers" wrote Berger (2011:722). This was unlike *reporter.co.za,* where the contributors, regardless of whether they had journalism training or not, worked on their own away from the gatekeepers who were the journalists and sub-editors in the newsroom. Instead, the *Iindaba Ziyafika* contributors worked alongside professional journalists in a so-called professional-amateur partnership that was part of the deliberate attempt at producing journalistic content of a high standard (Nyati & Garman, 2016:104). The project ended in 2013, at the end of the grant cycle.

What the experiences of citizen journalism initiatives like *reporter.co.za* and *Iindaba Ziyafika* show us is that audiences communicate news and information differently to how professionalised journalists do, particularly in terms of the style and content. Indeed, what the audience talks about when they participate in the production of UGC is remarkably different in many ways also (Berger 2011; Nyathi & Garman, 2016; Motylska, 2014). These projects, and others like them, should serve as a springboard for the journalism industry and scholarship to understand the meaning of journalism.

[64] The name translates to 'the news is coming' which became the domain name for the project, thenewsiscoming.ru.ac.za

5.4. Audiences and revenue models

One of the biggest and most critical shifts in the relationship between newspapers and their audiences is in the financial relationship between the two. From 'selling' its audiences to advertisers, newspapers now have to turn directly to these audiences for their direct contribution to the revenue of a publication. In short, what used to be the cover price of a print newspaper has become the largest source of revenue for newspapers. But, online, in the absence of a print edition, and in a space where 'news' is abundantly available from a number of sources, the question of how to generate a revenue from direct sales to audiences is the critical, and still unanswered, question. Over the two decades of digital transitions, models to address this altered relationship have ranged from paywalls, to subscriptions and now the membership model. This section starts with a brief look at the New York Times, which deployed a significantly successful digital revenue model. I then look at what I consider to be South Africa's first membership model, that of the *Weekly Mail* Society which was established in 1985. This will follow with a look at a contemporary example of a membership model through the case of South Africa's *Daily Maverick.*

5.4.1. The *New York Times* model and its audiences

One of news organisations that seems to have mastered this shifting relationship between the newspaper and its audiences is the 169-year-old *New York Times* (*NYT*). It announced in January 2020 that it had reached the 5 million subscriber mark. "According to a statement from chief executive Mark Thompson, the Times passed its goal of $800 million of annual digital revenue a year ahead of schedule, double the amount from 2015. The newspaper has 3.4 million 'core news subscriptions," and 900,000 print subscribers,' the statement said" (Japan Times, 2020).

The revenue model of the *NYT* is subscription-based for both its print and online versions. Interestingly, the publication also offers subscriptions to specific types of lifestyle content which has proven to be significantly financially. In 2020, the *NYT* "has some 600,000 subscribers to its crossword service and 300,000 for its cooking content" (Japan Times, 2020). This diversification of the business of the *NYT* is an acknowledgement of the varied needs of the audiences and an understanding that the paper has more to offer than its usual news hierarchy.

In a presentation to the International News Media Association, *NYT* CEO Mark Thompson, the man credited with the digital growth of the publication, said that the *NYT* capitalises on its quality content through its subscription model (Seale, 2020). In recognising this value, the publication has invested in growing its newsroom of journalists (adding 300 more journalists during Thompson's eight year stint), rather than reducing it which bucks the trend of shrinking newsrooms seen in South Africa. Thompson's perspective is that by growing the newsroom, the *NYT* is able to find audiences whose

needs are not going to be met by smaller, inadequate news organisations. These needs are not just in news but are cognisant of the varied needs and wants of the Times' audiences: "We're producing tons of stories a day, plus there are these pockets of unexploited value in lifestyle, in relationships, in fashion, in business, in tech," said Thompson (Seale, 2020). The *NYT* is still focussed on selling its content. This is different to the selling of experiences or events that membership models are trying to do.

5.4.2. Members are money

Membership models are just another way of generating revenue for a news organisation. However, there are fundamental differences between this model and, for example, a subscription model. As this thesis will show, present-day membership models work in a similar way to the *Weekly Mail* Society of 1985. They do this by attempting to bring audiences closer to the centre of the organisation by not just giving of their money but also their time and expertise. At the heart of a membership model is a cause to which supporters donate - not a product that they buy. What is meant by this is that membership models seek to leverage support for the news product by appealing to the moral and social conscience of its potential audiences.

The Tow Centre for Digital Journalism (Hansen & Goligoski, 2018) provide a definition of the three types of audience revenue models as a useful departure point for this discussion:

- A **donation** model encourages audiences to give their time or money to an institution in support of a common cause or common values. Donation conveys a charitable relationship.
- A **subscription** model requires audiences to pay money to get access to a product or service. Subscription conveys a transactional relationship.
- A **membership** model invites audiences to give their time, money, connections, professional expertise, distribution to their networks, and/or ideas to support a cause they believe in. Membership in its "thick" version represents a two-way knowledge exchange between journalists and members. You might think of membership as a more committed relationship that is robust and active.

Membership models can the current popular choice as far as journalism revenue models go (Thefix.media). As media organisations grapple with ailing relevance and almost non-existent online advertising revenues, their future is entirely dependent on audiences who need convincing of the relevance of the newspaper on a daily basis.

In order to understand the relationship that the *M&G* currently has with its audiences, it is useful to revert to the formation of the *Weekly Mail* Society, established as a means to bring the audience closer to the centre of the production process. The motivation behind the *Weekly Mail* Society, as explained in Chapter One, was two-fold. One was to distribute the newspaper to a closed group of people in order to skirt the relevant laws governing the production and dissemination of such newspapers. Second was to raise capital for the publication of the *Weekly Mail* at its very beginning. When one examines the membership models of today, the *Weekly Mail* Society is a typical example, although decades ahead of its time.

Membership models are another version of subscription models but with one key difference, the understanding that the model is not just about making money. Instead, it is about making audiences feel like they are closer to the production of the newspaper in order to secure their financial support, but also to act as a network within which the brand is lauded and trusted. Membership models, like those used by South Africa's *Daily Maverick,* are still in their infancy but bear a strong resemblance to the *Weekly Mail* Society of the 1980s.

5.4.2.1. The *Weekly Mail* Society as a membership model of the 1980s

The *Weekly Mail* Society appeared to be the only structure of its kind in the South African newspaper industry in the 1980s. "The point was that all members of the society would pay a membership fee, initially, in return for which they would receive, posted free of charge in a plain brown envelope, the society's weekly newsletter," writes Manoim (1996:7). He adds that, "There were some vague ideas that the society might offer members discounts on books or arrange events like book fairs …" (1996:7). The society went further than contemporary membership models,[65] though, in that it had a constitution which paved the way for the members themselves to elect an editorial board for the organisation (Manoim, 1996:7).

"The core of the society would be a group called the Founder Subscribers, who were people willing to show their commitment by buying two-year subscriptions at R180. If enough people signed up as Founder Subscribers, we would raise sufficient money to proceed. If we failed to raise enough money, we would return the subscription money," read a pamphlet developed by the *Weekly Mail* team which they distributed to their networks (Manoim, 1996: 11). This distribution to a known network[66] also

[65] Explained further in Chapter Five.
[66] The network included an association with the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and anti-apartheid organisation, the Black Sash (Manoim, 1996:20).

meant that the *Weekly Mail* would attract a like-minded reader and subscriber. This was a move which ultimately worked against their intentions to attract a diverse audience as described in Chapter One.

The organisation's editorial board functioned as a marketing tool. Acknowledging that neither he nor Harber were particularly well known and lacked a significant public persona, Manoim writes that they realised there was a need to bring public figures to give the paper some credibility and weight. "So we invented an 'editorial board'" (Manoim, 1996:20). The late Patrick Laurence and political analyst Steven Friedman, both formerly of the *RDM,* constituted the first editorial board of the *Weekly Mail,* which also included representatives of the *Weekly Mail* Society.

The editorial board was to be an experiment in reader participation. The board met once a week for about six weeks to go through the previous edition in order to prepare for the next but proved unsustainable as the members were unable to spare that time on a regular basis. "… the burden upon people with full-time jobs soon became too great; many of the stories readers suggested were simply beyond our means … Reader participation evaporated. (Manoim, 1996:20)

That the board's role was eviscerated over time is not the main point here. What is significant and noteworthy is that in 1980s, the *Weekly Mail* was piloting a model of reader participation, engagement and subscription which seems only to have appeared with the process of convergence among other media players in the mid-2000s.

Manoim also reflects on the close proximity of the readers of the *Weekly Mail* to the staff of the publication which meant that there was constant and direct feedback between the producers and the readers of the paper when they found themselves at the same watering hole. "On any weekend in the mid-eighties, a sizeable portion of the *Weekly Mail's* readership were to be found crammed shoulder to shoulder in Jameson's[67]. So were the *Weekly Mail's* staff; this was the only newspaper whose readers could complain personally to the editors, because they were bound to be sitting at the next table" (Manoim, 1996:31). This, in my view, was a form of interaction and engagement between the producers of the paper and those who consumed it. Modern day membership models strive to achieve the same albeit in a digital space.

Gibson writes that, "The *Weekly Mail* quickly established a reputation for vigorous investigation, perceptive writing and liberal inclinations" (2007:186)[68]. It is this independence and depth of analysis that has come to define what the *M&G* is about. This is a newsroom that continues to see itself as the paper for the better educated who are looking for more than your run-of-the-mill daily news report.

[67] Jameson's pub was located on Commissioner Street in the Johannesburg central business district and was known for attracting a racially mixed clientele, even at the height of apartheid.

[68] Tomaselli and Louw refer to a 1986 survey which showed that of the capitalist press in South Africa, "*Weekly Mail* was read by virtually every editor and news editor of English conservative-liberal newspapers in South Africa," (1991:188).

Gibson suggests that these ideals were congruent with that of the *RDM*, albeit "an editorial formula deemed by SAAN's old management to be economic suicide" (2007:186). But, the *Weekly Mail* had a particular audience in mind, driven in part by the personalities and politics of the people involved in its development.

Marilyn Honikman, the *Weekly Mail's* first advertising manager, wrote about the demographics of the paper's readers in its first year. "I phoned the *Sunday Times'*s ad department to inquire how many readers they had with post-graduate degrees and discovered we had more! A count of the foreign university libraries that subscribed to The *Weekly Mail* turned up to 252" (De Waal, 2010:52).

5.4.2.2. Eventing to bring the audience closer to the centre

The *Weekly Mail* also had a public facing side that readily engaged with its readership and supporters through events. On the occasion of its first birthday in June 1986, the paper hosted a heated but much publicised debate between Cyril Ramaphosa in his capacity as the general-secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and Harry Oppenheimer, a symbol of big capital at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg (Manoim, 1996:52). Harber reflected that the event was an attempt to do something to highlight the role of the media and both men, coming from opposite sides of the political and economic tracks, were asked to speak about press freedom (Harber, 2017).

The *Weekly Mail* created a series of "book weeks" which hosted seminars, presentations and engagements with authors. It coexisted with four annual book supplements in the paper fashioned along the *New York Times* Book Review. "What was astonishing about Book Week was that in an age of consumerist barbarism, it managed to pack theatres at both the Market (theatre) in Johannesburg and the Baxter (theatre) in Cape Town" (Manoim, 1996:100). De Waal, a long standing books editors for the *Weekly Mail* said, "I think it was a very good thing to do because I think it got us a lot of, and kept us, a lot of readers who were sort in the academic space or at least had one foot in the academic space. And that was kind of our core readership," pointing to the targeted readership between the editorial decisions and events of the *Weekly Mail* (De Waal, 2019).

The *M&G* Society held events in order to bring its audience closer to the centre of the organisation. This is the same interactivity that is needed in the present day to get audiences to support the producers of journalism. The newspaper relied on individuals and their generosity to fund the start-up as it got on its feet and the owners quickly realised that courting the audience was a way to sell the product. The same idea exists today as newspapers vie for limited audiences and court them in order to bring them closer to the organisation.

The current *M&G* strategy includes the holding or staging of events as part of its marketing and publicity strategy. These events range from discussions and conferences on issues pertinent to the South African political and economic landscape. For example, a conference on the National Health Insurance which aimed to bring "government, private and public healthcare sector, professionals, consultants, academia and civil society to come together to engage, identify ways and find solutions to ensure the success of what is South Africa's biggest healthcare reform system" (Quicket, 2019).

In December 2018, the paper hosted a comedy evening at a popular hotspot in Johannesburg Melrose Arch with popular local comedians. The event, which I attended, was packed to capacity despite the admission charge. It started with a John Oliver-esque comedy exchange between one of the comedic hosts and the editor at the time, Khadija Patel. It was a laboured exchange but a look around the room showed that the demographic of the audience of the *M&G* had changed from the white middle class audience of the 1980's.

5.4.2.3. A membership model in 2020: South Africa's *Daily Maverick*

In South Africa, the *Daily Maverick (DM)* an independent, daily online news publication which started off as an opinion and news analysis blog in 2009, has embarked on a membership model which, in the absence of real figures, has resulted in significant growth at the organisation if their senior hires are anything to go by.[69]

Founded in 2009, the *DM* (dailymaverick.co.za), through its editor Branko Brkic and publisher Styli Charambolous, has publicly engaged with the idea of a membership model as a key revenue model and is the first news organisation in the country to implement the model. The organisation relies on a mix of revenue streams which includes a membership model, donations, funding and investments. As an independent media house, the *Daily Maverick* is a direct competitor of the *M&G* and its experiences with these various models are useful to measure the efforts of the *M&G*.[70] Like the UK's *Guardian*, the *Daily Maverick* retains its stance that news content should remain free for all audiences to consume. So, instead of locking away content, the *DM* has locked away access to features like comments, events and engagements with its staff through its membership scheme called *Maverick Insider*.

[69] The *DM* team now counts some heavy hitters in the South African journalism space as part of their stable. This includes former deputy editor of the *Financial Mail*, Sikonathi Mantshantsha, former *Business Day* and *Financial Mail* editor Bruce Cohen, award-winning cartoonist Zapiro and award-winning investigative journalist Pieter-Louis Myburgh, along with former *M&G* and *City Press* editor Ferial Haffajee.

[70] This section draws on secondary material published about the *Daily Maverick's* experiences along with my notes from a workshop I attended run by the *Daily Maverick* in Cape Town on 26 and 27 November 2018 during which the lessons from the experience was shared by senior members of the DM team.

"*Maverick Insider* is about more than just supporting quality, independent journalism financially and keeping it accessible for all readers. It's also about building a community with our loyal readers who want to share in unique experiences and help us write this new chapter of *Daily Maverick*" (*Daily Maverick*, 2020). "The top reason driving readers to become members was the ability to engage with DM journalists … audience engagement is a fairly new addition to the world of media practices, and for *Daily Maverick*, it has already yielded great results beyond the economic ones" (Beighton, Cardoc-Davies & Walters, 2019:300).

The argument here is that now more than ever, newspapers like the *Daily Maverick* are silo'ing their readers and audiences based on their (readers') ability to afford the rewards and offerings made to them behind the membership gate. Instead of diversifying the audience, membership models are the news industry's equivalent of book clubs, a group of like-minded individuals seemingly connected through a common worldview. And, by rewarding those audiences with greater disposable incomes, the *DM* is moving further away from the ideal of a Habermasian public sphere. The newspaper has also taken the bold move of printing a newspaper which was launched in August 2020 at the height of Covid-19 pandemic, a time that has come to signify a crisis in the print media (Rumney 2020). The publication of *Maverick 168*, as the paper is known, is the first ever print newspaper to be launched by a historically digital-first operation in South Africa (*Daily Maverick*, 2020).

5.5. Conclusion

The Habermasian public sphere theory, when applied to journalism produced for online publication, would have us believe that the Internet and its spaces are accessible to all people and their ideas. The work of Daniels in Mutsvairo (ed. 2016a), shows us that this is not the case. In addition, what I have tried to show in relation to the notion of the digital space as a public sphere, is that revenue models, whatever they are, are segmenting audiences even further and engendering social inequalities in their access to the news. This is worrying if we consider the words of former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger who wrote: "Bad information was everywhere. Good information was increasingly for smaller elites" (2019:xvii). The *M&G* has lost momentum in its efforts to bring the audience closer to the centre of the organisation, one of the key ways to build a revenue base based on a membership model or some configuration of it. In this way, the *M&G* has not embraced the ideal of a Habermasian public sphere in which a plurality of voices can find a space through engagement and interaction facilitated by a quality online journalistic product.

Chapter Six: *Going online where information meets disinformation*

6.1. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with what is, in 2020, considered one of the biggest threats to journalism outside of financial sustainability, that of misinformation/disinformation. Mis-/disinformation are not new phenomena, but, in the last few years, the concepts have become an essential part of any discussion about journalism. This is because social media platforms allow for the proliferation of what is commonly referred to as 'fake news' (Tandoc *et al*., 2017:138; Wasserman, 2017:3, Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:11). In this chapter, I argue that 'fake news' is seen from inside journalism as an external problem. While content produced by journalists which can be considered 'fake news' exists and is acknowledged as a contributing factor to the erosion of trust in the relationship between the media and its consumers, considerations of the problem of poor journalism stop short of using the label 'fake news' to describe the problem.

This discussion is undertaken in relation to a selected few mistakes and mishaps made by the *M&G,* which have contributed to a decline in trust by audiences, a crucial factor in building a viable online product. If 'fake news' is a cause of a decline in trust in the media, then we must look at journalism's contribution to this problem. This chapter argues that instances of journalistic mishaps which are received by audiences as 'fake news' seriously jeopardise a successful online transition. Chakrabarti *et al*., (2018:31) write that in the course of their study of 'fake news' in Nigeria and Kenya, they "discovered a number of instances of legitimate journalistic organisations publishing what is inarguably fake news".

Methodologically, the chapter uses rulings by the South African Press Council on cases involving the *M&G* to show that the organisation produces what Wardle calls "problematic content" (2017). These transgressions of the South African Press Code allow me to drop the problematic content produced by the organisation into the various misinformation/disinformation categories developed by Tandoc *et al*., (2017) and Wardle (2017).

The chapter makes use of the typology of misinformation/disinformation developed by Claire Wardle (2017), which is used to gauge where, along the spectrum of 'fake news', the journalistic mishaps and mistakes of the *M&G* fall. In short, Wardle developed three prongs of analysis: Types of content; motivation for their creation; and means of dissemination. These are useful in assessing whether the *M&G* is guilty of producing misinformation, how these are disseminated, and to what end. In addition, I argue that a model of online journalism which focuses on hypertextuality, interactivity and multimedia has to have misinformation/disinformation within its purview as an essential element of the interactivity between producers and audiences in future conceptualisations of journalism.

The chapter then turns to the *M&G* reporting of Covid-19 in South Africa over a two-week period. It looks at the organisation's website, print newspaper and the social media postings to see how it has tackled mis-/disinformation during this pandemic. This is done after a discussion of the Covid-19 related regulations passed by the South African government to tackle the scourge of 'fake news' and its potentially harmful impact on the country's public health response to the pandemic. This discussion makes use of a comparative content analysis between the various forms of content produced by the organisation. To start with, though, this chapter looks at what information disorder is and how Wardle's typology of 'fake news' helps us to establish nuance in the use of the term.

6.2. What is information disorder and 'fake news'?

Information disorder refers to the chaos that unfolds in a space of unfettered and unrestrained information flows which is facilitated by the technology of the Internet. Both Wardle and Derakhshan (2017:12) and Chakrabarti *et al.*, (2018:6) argue that this chaos results from a deluge of information that each individual is confronted with on a daily basis and the inability to process that information effectively. Within this new information ecosystem, information comes not only from traditional producers like the media, but information also comes from individuals who have the ability to produce and publish content through their ever-present mobile phones.

Wardle's (2017) contribution to "understanding the misinformation ecosystem," breaks down the latter into seven types of mis-/disinformation:

- Satire
- Misleading content
- Imposter content
- Fabricated content
- False connection
- False context
- Manipulated content

In understanding 'fake news, Wardle (2017) argues that we need to understand the types of 'fake news', along with the reasons for their creation, and the ways in which the content is shared.

Critically for this study, Wardle's typology (2017) makes room for problematic content that arises from journalistic spaces through the use of the term, "poor journalism." This is journalism that is seen to be the motivation behind content that is misleading, provides a false context or establishes a false connection (Wardle, 2017). Given the lack of more deliberate motivations like provocation or

profiteering, the term "poor journalism" lends itself to a more sympathetic response to the problem of misinformation that arises from journalism.

6.2.1 The problem of clickbait

An example of the clear disconnect between discussions of fake news and its relationship with journalism is through the concept of clickbait journalism. Within a journalistic context, a clickbait headline is seen to be a strategic move to increase clicks to a story. However, on the other end of the spectrum, the approach within the context of 'fake news' is problematised. A clickbait headline, "tempts the reader to click on the link to the story. But the name is used pejoratively to describe headlines which are sensationalised, turn out to be adverts or are simply misleading" (BBC.com, 2015). The problem of the misleading headline is mitigated by the intention of the producer: clicks in the case of journalism makes the headline a little more acceptable, while 'fake news' is not. In terms of Wardle's (2017) typology of fake news though, clickbait headlining is a form of poor journalism.

In his work on the problem of 'fake news' in a South African context, Wasserman (2017:13) writes that,

> Through a process of journalistic 'boundary work' and 'paradigm repair', mainstream journalism has responded to 'fake news' in a way that ostracises external threats, pathologises internal failures and reinstates the epistemological framework of the status quo rather than embarking on a critical self-reflection on the reasons why 'fake news' might gain traction.

In other words, journalism in South Africa does not recognise that it contributes to the problem of 'fake news'. This study suggests that the reasons for this stems from the ideal-typical conceptualisation of journalism, which has at its heart truth-telling and fact-checking, but this falls outside the scope of this discussion. A 2017 study of the proliferation of "misinformation/disinformation" in South Africa found that the problem was not as widespread in the country as in other parts of the world (Finlay, 2018). The study was undertaken by a group of journalism students at Wits University:

> Their assignments ranged widely, including: interviews with editors and writers who had been victims of social media-inspired attacks; an automated survey of hundreds of news websites in search of "faked" information; an interview with a self-confessed news "faker"; an investigation of the relationship between misinformation/disinformation and xenophobia; and a look into misinformation/disinformation and right-wing white racism. There were also examinations of what the "mainstream" news media were doing to counteract disinformation. (Finlay, 2018:10).

The findings of the report linked the problem of mis-/disinformation, in its current iteration, to the technology of the Internet. "What distinguishes the current surge in misinformation/disinformation from previous experiences is the extraordinary ease and rapidity with which information can be disseminated and shared globally over the internet, by anonymous individuals who need no expensive equipment or intensive training," (Finlay, 2018:10). There is, unsurprisingly, no discussion of how journalism itself contributes to the problem of 'fake news'.

6.2.2. Demystifying the term 'fake news'

The term 'fake news', for reasons explained below, is a contentious one. Chakrabarti *et al*., (2018:11) write that they prefer to use the term 'fake news', as it is "the term that the ordinary citizen uses to refer to the entire spectrum of incorrect or misleading information (and more) is - for good or for bad - 'fake news'". Wardle and Derakhshan (2017:5) write that they choose not to use the term 'fake news', as it has been weaponised by politicians who wish to discredit news organisations that are seen to be critical of them[71.] In addition, they write the term is "woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of information pollution" (2017:5). Instead, Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017:5) conceptual framework of information disorder seeks to provide a more nuanced description of all that seems to fall under the singular banner of 'fake news'. This framework identifies 3 different types of 'fake news':

- Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant.
- Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.
- Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:5)

Tandoc *et al.*, (2017) also offer a typology of 'fake news' based on their analysis of published scholarly articles over a 13-year period. They suggest that the term 'fake news' can be distilled into the following types: News satire; news parody; news fabrication; photo manipulation; advertising and public relations; and propaganda. If we accept that the term 'fake news' that is popularly bandied about represent all sorts of things in the public domain, then we cannot walk away from the fact that one of the forms of 'fake news', which Wardle (2017) refers to as "poor journalism", has a significantly damaging impact on journalism. That impact is the obvious decline in media credibility and trust. Chakrabarti *et al*., (2018:8) argue that what is missing from studies about 'fake news', such as that offered by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), is a focus on the "ordinary citizen" and their responsibilities with the disinformation ecosystem. While this discussion on individual responsibility is not the focus of this chapter, Chakrabarti *et al.* (2018) help to emphasise the point that what constitutes 'fake news'

[71] The term was infamously co-opted by US President Donald Trump to refer to news media organisations and the reporting he found to be disagreeable. See Lee (2018) for a fuller description of how Trump weaponised the word "fake news" to discredit credible news organisations like the *New York Times*.

in the minds of ordinary citizens is relevant. Conducted in Nigeria and Kenya, Chakrabarti *et al.*'s (2018:20) study shows us that in the minds of ordinary citizens, "the definition of news becoming expansive and all encompassing, anything that is of importance to the consumer is now considered news." Consequentially, these audiences do not have a very nuanced definition of the term 'fake news'. It covers all types of misleading news from sport to politics, and indeed covers all forms of misinformation. This is a critical point, as it shows that audiences are not able to distinguish between different types of mis-/disinformation or mal-information (Wardle, 2017). As Chakrabarti *et al.*, (2018:6) write, "Misleading headlines from the mainstream media, or taking short-cuts for verification when rushing to publish, are further blurring the lines between legitimate journalism and out and out misinformation".

In accepting this point, we have to accept that when an organisation like the *M&G*, an established media organisation with a legacy of producing quality journalism, makes mistakes, the consumer perceives these as 'fake news'. Thus, effectively eroding the credibility of the organisation and trust in its journalists. Tandoc *et al.*, (2017:150) explain this further by writing that, "While news is constructed by journalists, it seems that fake news is co-constructed by the audience, for its fakeness depends a lot on whether the audience perceives the fake as real. Without this complete process of deception, fake news remains a work of fiction. It is when audiences mistake it as real news that fake news is able to play with journalism's legitimacy." What Tandoc *et al.*, (2017) point to is it the critical role of the audience in the perception of fake news as real and it is in this process that the credibility of journalism is affected.

Mis-/disinformation as a phenomenon does not feature in conventional normative media theories which have guided studies of the media for decades[72.] Instead, mis-/disinformation, in its incarnations as propaganda and satire, amongst other forms, is seen as a problem operating outside of the gates of the established mainstream media. The reason for this is that the old world information order placed the media in a position of privilege; the media was at the top occupying a cherished and revered position as the purveyor of truth, of sound information, of all that society needed to know in order to operate as a society. Technology, in particular communication technologies and social networking, has upended this information hierarchy to the extent that the media are just one part of the information ecosystem and the gates have fallen away.[73] Inside this bubble, the media is faced with the reality that the former audience are prosumers (consumers of media who also produce content), and that the bubble contains

[72] Refer to Christians *et al.* (2009) for an example. Where new media technologies are mentioned, traditional conceptualisations of the media (and its role and responsibilities) refer to them as enablers, as positive, democratising tools. There is no consideration of the negative impact apart from mentions of citizen journalism as a threat to the privileged position of the press.

[73] See Mutsvairo (2016a), for a discussion of how the media is potentially democratised through the proliferation of mobile phones in Africa.

individuals and organisations who are not only hacking away at media credibility but also at the concept of truth itself.[74]

6.3. The impact of 'poor journalism' on media credibility – the inquiry into media ethics in South Africa

One of the ways in which we see the impact of fake news on trust and credibility is through the media ethics and credibility inquiry in South Africa. The inquiry was launched in South Africa in 2019, after a scandal involving incorrect and misleading reporting from 114-year old publication the *Sunday Times* (Sanef, 2019). To explain briefly, the Sunday publication had run a series of explosive stories on police killings, the South African Revenue Services (SARS), and the deportation of Zimbabwean people, all of which were later found to be false. The editor at the time, Bongani Siqoko (*Sunday Times*, 2018), in an apology for the stories, claimed that the paper and its journalists had been "manipulated by those with ulterior motives," and said that the organisation had "made mistakes".

The case of the *Sunday Times* reporting and its retractions was not just about the mistakes the paper had made with the stories, it opened a can of worms about the people, the journalists who produce the news and their motivations in producing particular stories (*Sunday Times*, 2018). The *M&G* did not mince its words about the *Sunday Times* saga, and referred to the problematic stories as "fake news" when the *M&G* ran the headline 'NOT the news. More damage expected in *Sunday Times* fake news fallout', on 15 October 2018 (*M&G*, 2018). In an editorial in 2019, the *M&G* referred to the case of the *Sunday Times*, but ascribed what they previously called "fake news" to pressures on shrinking newsrooms.

> We have responded with panic. We regularly copy and paste press releases and publish them under a journalist's name, or as the work of "staff reporter". Do not trust this work. Punish us for doing this. We then rush to cover things that are trending on social media, even if only a fraction of the population is on a platform like Twitter. Instead of reporters who are invested in a topic, we ask reporters to know a little bit about everything. (*Mail & Guardian*, 2019)

It seems that the narrative of those inside journalism and those on the outside about 'fake news' differ, as the latter see the former as part of the problem. The problem is compounded online as Chakrabarti *et al*., (2018) argue that within a "context of blurring of all kinds of 'news' … anything that arrives digitally has the potential to be considered fake news".

[74] Wasserman (2017:13) suggests that "the responses by the South African journalistic to 'paid Twitter' and 'fake news' websites have served to do boundary work … that is, it has served to support distinctions between members of the mainstream journalistic interpretative community and those that fall outside of this community".

The *Sunday Time*s retractions gave rise to questions about media credibility in the country, which, coupled with declining newspaper sales (Marklives.com, 2018), gave rise to an urgency to confront declining media credibility in South Africa. Media academic Ylva Rodny-Gumede (*M&G*, 2018) wrote that -

> Amid the rise of 'fake news' globally and following the recent revelations about "media capture," and the manipulation of journalists by less than credible sources, as exemplified by the *Sunday Times* saga, there have been calls for a commission of inquiry. This is to restore the public's trust in the news media by establishing what has gone wrong and what to do to strengthen ethics.

The South African National Editors Forum, or Sanef, launched an independent media enquiry on 24 June 2019 (Sanef, 2019). As part of the motivation for the three-person inquiry, "Sanef noted that trust in journalism has become eroded in the era of fake news and misinformation, as well as journalists sometimes backing certain political factions, which has muddied the waters by tainting the whole industry" (Sanef, 2019). The aim of the inquiry was to fix the problems in South African journalism "so that alliances between us and the public can be built" (Sanef, 2019). At the time of writing this chapter, the inquiry had concluded its submissions process and the release of the final report was imminent.

Regardless of the types of 'fake news' identified by researchers like Wardle (2017) and Tandoc *et al*., (2017), Wasserman (2017:12) cautions that,

> The concept of 'fake news' is so imprecise as to be of very little analytical use unless accompanied with specifications. Furthermore, these outputs have to be read against the particularities of the local context in order to establish the ways in which 'fake news' relate to the role and place of journalism in a given society and the political and economic dynamics with which it interacts.

It is for this point that I suggest that 'fake news' in South Africa must be understood within a local context, from the perspective of the people who ultimately interact with it and label it as such, the ordinary citizen. This is supported by Wasserman (2017:12), who writes that:

> 'Fake news' in South Africa has to be read against the background of broader questions about the relationship between journalism and audiences in the country, in particular the distance between mainstream media and the large sections of the population that continue to experience social and economic marginalisation.

In the next sections of this chapter, I examine the work of the *M&G* in two parts. Firstly, in terms of the complaints to the South African Press Council which reflect both audience dissatisfaction with the quality of work produced by the organisation and some of the themes that I found through an

examination of these complaints about the work produced. This section also uses the case of an article about two politicians for which the organisation had to publicly apologise and resulted in the editor ultimately resigning. Secondly, I look at the work done by the organisation to tackle 'fake news' proactively as a result of the concerns raised by regulations aimed at shutting down 'fake news' about Covid-19 in South Africa.

6.4. The *M&G* under the Ombud's microscope

The section looked at three years' worth of press ombud rulings, a total of 16, on complaints against the *M&G*:

- 2019: 4 (with 3 appeal hearings)
- 2018: 10 (with 2 appeal hearings)
- 2017: 2 (with 1 appeal hearing)

This three-year period was chosen as it was preceded in January 2016 by a damaging incident involving a story that can only be classified as 'fake news'. Given the fallout from the story, discussed below, it could be expected that the publication would be a little more circumspect with its journalism going forward.

6.4.1. Mmusi Maimane/F W De Klerk - the story that never happened

The controversial story (see Appendix 1 on page 226) involved two prominent members of the political space in the country, then leader of the Democratic Alliance (the official opposition in the country) Mmusi Maimane, and the last president of the country before the democratic elections in South Africa FW De Klerk. Based on the input of unnamed sources, the story claimed that the DA leader was receiving leadership lessons from the former president. The story was written by Verashni Pillay, the editor of the *M&G* at the time, and Nelly Shamase, another *M&G* reporter on 29 January 2016 (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016a). The two politicians at the centre of the story refuted its claims almost immediately through public statements and, despite this, were met with a response by the publication that it was sticking by its story (*EWN*, 2016; *IOL*, 2016). It was about three weeks later that the *M&G* apologised for the story which remains online today (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016b).

The response from the editor, which includes her apology, is important to record here:

> The front-page summary and headline overstated the analysis on page 3: "Educating Mmusi: Is FW tutoring him?" It also may have misled readers and fell short of the Press Code. We did not ask the FW de Klerk Foundation (on De Klerk's behalf) the questions we should have, given

> the angle of the lead story and we also approached them too late. We did ask the DAs spokesperson for response to the allegations that were made in the article. But accept that the question asked was not sufficient in the circumstances.
>
> In addition, because of miscommunication between the journalists working on the story, right of reply was not offered to four people listed in the "Who is in the brains trust?" article on page 4: Jonathan Moakes, James Selfe, Tony Leon and Geordin Hill -Lewis. We should also have told our readers that the main reporter on the story, Nelly Shamase, left the DA under acrimonious circumstances ((*Mail & Guardian*, 2016b).[75]

In Wardle's typology of fake news, the *M&G's* Maimane/De Klerk article (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016a), is clearly misinformation as it, through the admission of the editor herself, misled readers. And, it did not give enough time to the individuals who were the focus of the story to comment on the story, and even when those individuals were approached, the questions were not in line with what was eventually reported. In addition, the co-author's proximity to the individuals in the story was dubious and unacceptable by standards of journalism ethics. The fact that Shamase's relationship with the political party to which Maimane belongs was not disclosed seems part of the forgery around this story[76]. The latter leads to questions about the intention or motivation of the person who created the story, which Wardle argues is a critical question to ask when examining 'fake news' (2017). However, this component of the discussion is never raised or explored by the newspaper. The question is also not answered in the apology given by the editor (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016b).

However, as pointed out earlier, journalism organisations have a tendency to look to justify these serious and clear cases of misinformation by shifting the focus away from the individuals who produce the content. The editor's apology and explanation are prefaced with, "The story was rushed" (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016b). In the aftermath of a debacle such as the Maimane/De Klerk article in 2016 (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016a), it could be expected that the *M&G* would be extra cautious in its reporting in the years to come. In the section below, I look at the complaints made to the Press Council of South African (the industry's independent self-regulation mechanism) in line with the Press Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media, also called the Press Code (Press Council of South Africa, 2020a).

[75] Verashni Pillay resigned in September 2016, ostensibly to join the *Huffington Post* as it was set to launch in South Africa later that year (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016). She was replaced a month later by Khadija Patel hailed from her online start-up publication, the *Daily Vox* (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016).
[76] Pillay admitted in her editorial that, "We should have also told our readers that the main reporter on the story, Nella Shamase, had left the DA under acrimonous circumstances", (*News24.com*, 2016).

6.4.2. Press Council complaints against the *M&G* (2017-2019)

The Press Code of South Africa only applies to member-subscribers to the Press Council of South Africa, which describes itself as an "independent co-regulatory mechanism set up by the print and online media to provide impartial, expeditious and cost-effective adjudication to settle disputes between newspapers, magazines and online publications, on the one hand, and members of the public, on the other, over the editorial content of publications" (Press Council, 2020b). Complaints from the public are handled by the public advocate whose responsibility it is to either settle a matter him/herself, to dismiss a matter in terms of the processes in place, or to escalate a matter to the Press Ombud in the instance of a lack of resolution between the various parties. It is the ombud which renders rulings. The decisions of the public advocate are not captured on the website of the Press Council (presscouncil.org.za), so it is not possible from this public domain to determine whether there were more complaints against the *M&G* than those examined for the purposes of this discussion.

Given that there are an unequal number of cases over the three-year period, I focused on five cases from 2018 which seemed to have been an extraordinary year in terms of complaints against the *M&G*. This spike in complaints is difficult to explain. 2018 was a significant news year in the history of the country, with the Gupta State capture at the centre of the country's attention, along with the change in the state presidency from Jacob Zuma to Cyril Ramaphosa. The circulation figures of the *M&G* remained relatively stable over the course of 2018, with noticeable but relatively slight decreases over the first three quarters and an increase towards the end of the year (see Table 1 below).

TABLE 1: Print circulation figures of the *M&G* in 2018 (www.bizcommunity.com):

Q1:	Q2:	Q3:	Q4:
26 945	24 026	23,052	25 834

The cases that were chosen for this discussion are as follows (the date in brackets is the date of the ombud's ruling and not the publication date):

- Ruling 1: Pule Mabe vs *Mail & Guardian* (9 August 2018) (Press Council of South Africa, 2018a).
- Ruling 2: Sonke Gender Justice vs *Mail & Guardian* (27 August, 2018) (Press Council of South Africa, 2018b).
- Ruling 3: Minister Ayanda Dlodlo vs *Mail & Guardian* (25 September 2018) (Press Council of South Africa, 2018c).
- Ruling 4*:* National Homebuilders Registration Council vs *Mail & Guardian* (16 November 2018) (Press Council of South Africa, 2018d).

- Ruling 5: Afriforum vs *Mail & Guardian (*6 December 2018) (Press Council of South Africa, 2018e).

In four instances, rulings 2-5, the *M&G* was found guilty of transgressing the South African Press Code in some parts of the complaint and was cleared of any wrongdoing in other parts. In Ruling 1, the organisation was reprimanded "for inaccurately stating as fact" a number of times in the article (Press Council of South Africa, 2018a). An observation that emerges from the titles of the complaints is that they emanate from highly placed individuals in South Africa or large organisations. This is important, as it speaks to the kinds of individuals and organisations that closely scrutinise the news media and who are holding the media to account in terms of the news produced. It also possibly tells us that unless these issues with the content are challenged by the people directly affected by them, the information is received as factual and credible by the rest of the readership.

The facts of ruling 3 (Press Council of South Africa, 2018c), was, for this research, the most difficult one to understand in terms of the journalism practiced at the *M&G* as the central figure in the story, Ayanda Dlodlo, a South African minister, was simply not given a right of reply, one of the fundamentals of good journalism practice. This was exactly the same problem with the reporting on the Maimane/De Klerk story (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016). The *M&G* argued in the Dlodlo case that it had relied on a number of other credible sources to say what they believed Dlodlo would have said and subsequently did say, in order to write the story with the necessary checks and balances in place. The ombud found the *M&G* guilty of wrongdoing, but did not sanction the paper because they had, subsequent to the publication of the original article, given Dlodlo space to reflect her views. In terms of Wardle's typology, this infringement by the *M&G* would again fall under poor journalism, as the lack of a right of reply functions in journalism to achieve balance in storytelling.

In four of the cases, complaints were made about the headlines or the sub-headings and the accuracy of these. Wardle (2017) considers these to be instances where there is misplaced context. I would suggest that these instances arise from a distributed production process –a production process where the writer of the story is not the same person who writes the sub-headings or the headlines. Thus, lending to a scenario where misplaced context can easily happen. Using Deuze (2005), who has argued that a journalist working in a digital, converged newsroom, should have moved from an individualistic mode of working to a more collaborative one. In the instance of the *M&G*, the problem of misplaced context through headlines and sub-headlines are indicative of a newsroom that continues to operate in silos and not in a collaborative workflow that should typify a convergence space.

In terms of redressing these transgressions, the *M&G* is clear in acknowledging their mistakes and correcting them. One of the notable mechanisms that the *M&G* uses to track its own corrections and

clarifications is a page dedicated to recording all of the issues it has addresses[77]. In addition, the website includes a tag for "press-ombudsman", which is a mechanism that allows the user to quickly filter all articles which have been adjudicated by the ombud and have required a correction, apology or both. These two mechanisms are tools of a digital publishing space that are used for transparency and engagement with audiences, a critical part of going online and engaging with audiences as described by Van Dijk (2006), and Lievrouw and Livingston (2006).

6.5. An onslaught on 'fake news' in the time of Covid-19

In this section of this chapter on mis-/disinformation, I turn to the problem of 'fake news' in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, an unprecedented time in the country's history not only in terms of public health but also in terms of the government' response to fake news. The national government's response to the pandemic started in March 2020, through the operationalisation of the National State of Disaster Act, on 15 March, 2020. As part of the package of regulations rolled out under the national state of disaster, misinformation pertaining to the virus and the disease was criminalised.

> In terms of Regulation 11(5) any person who publishes any statement, through any medium, including social media, with the intention to deceive any other person about COVID-19; the infection status of any person; or any measure taken by the Government to address COVID-19, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine or imprisonment. (Truter, 2020)

The regulation made all creators and sharers of such content responsible for it as part of an attempt to clamp down on misinformation around the pandemic, which could have the impact of hampering efforts against it (Truter, 2020).

"We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic" said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at a conference in Munich on 15 February, 2020 (Zarocostas, 2020). 'Infodemic' is a term born out of the Covid-19 pandemic to illustrate the dangers of misinformation and disinformation to public health efforts to combat the spread of the virus. Without discussing the regulations in detail, it is important to point out for the purposes of this chapter that the impact of misinformation and disinformation is made clear through this regulation and the need to deal with it equally significant. What is implied through this regulation is the need for quality information which, traditionally, one would expect to come through established media organisations like as the *M&G.*

The *M&G* ran an article showing that "less than four in 10 people trust the news" (*Mail & Guardian*, 2020). This despite the fact that overall news consumption seems to have peaked beyond expected

[77] See https://mg.co.za/corrections-and-clarifications/

levels during the pandemic (*Mail & Guardian*, 2020; Reuters Institute, 2020). The Reuters Digital News report (Reuters Institute, 2020) also added that:

> Journalists no longer control access to information, while greater reliance on social media and other platforms give people access to a wider range of sources and 'alternative facts', some of which are at odds with official advice, misleading, or simply false.

It is common in the literature on 'fake news' to find that the traditional producers of journalism are not seen as part of the problem but as recipients of the consequences of the problem. In other words, 'fake news' impacts journalism but the latter is never the subject of an inquiry of how much they contribute to the problem. This chapter looks at this conundrum by examining some of the misinformation/disinformation instances that the *M&G* has found itself embroiled in, and argues that these instances simply erode the little trust between an organisation like the *M&G* and the people who consume its services.

6.5.1. The *M&G*'s response to misinformation/disinformation

While technology is seen as a disruptor of traditional means of making money, and as a positive tool for the practice of journalism, misinformation/disinformation remains, as far as journalists are concerned, an issue outside of the practice of journalism itself. I refer to fact-checking in this part of the discussion as separate and distinct from the normal practices of verification that journalists consider to be part of their daily, sub-conscious routines. Fact-checking is the deliberate act of verifying information or content that can be suspected to be misinformation/disinformation. I also use the model of online journalism, which includes hypertextuality, multimedia and interactivity, to discuss the missed opportunities of the *M&G* in tackling mis-/dis-information as it remained focused on its print edition.

Adeyemi Obalanege, writing in Friedrichsen and Kamalipour (2017) in his study of the professional journalism practice of journalists in Nigeria, makes no reference to misinformation/disinformation as a potential threat or opportunity for journalists in that country. Technology, which has driven the rise of misinformation/disinformation, is mentioned in his study but he writes, "journalists … are quick to point out that internet technology do not pose a threat to their traditional role in society, rather it has enhanced the quality of news being produced" (Obalanege in Friedrichsen & Kamalipour, 2017:358).

In the case of the *M&G,* their engagement with misinformation/disinformation lags behind other South African news organisations who make use of other publishing platforms like Facebook and Twitter for extended dissemination of their content. In line with Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) suggestion that media should be active participants in the debunking of mis- and disinformation, the *M&G* website (www.mg.co.za) was observed over the period 28 February to 12 March 2020, for articles or posts

which address mis-/disinformation around the Covid-19 pandemic. The two print editions under examination during this time were the 28 February and 6 March editions, along with the website and the social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, over the same period of time.

The *M&G*'s Covid-19 offerings stuck to the organisation's distinctive long form feature pieces typical of its print newspaper. The website provided no additional breaking news articles apart from those linked to the Friday newspaper. What we can see from the *M&G*'s Covid-19 articles and social media posts over the two-week period under observation is that the organisation does not see fact-checking as part of its role and responsibilities as the content does not actively tackle false or misleading information. This could be viewed as a short-sighted and a missed opportunity, as the technology which the *M&G*'s digital ambitions rely on make it far easier and less onerous to engage in fact-checking. For example, the sharing of content from the continent's largest fact-checking organisation, Africa Check, is freely available and accessible to all newsrooms in the country. A quick look at the Africa Check collection of fact-checking articles around Covid-19 which it has organised into six categories[78], demonstrates that fact-checking is a critical part of sound journalism (Africa Check, 2020). The *M&G*'s approach to journalism confirms Deuze's (2008) assertion that journalists still cling to their traditional professional role identities instead of reconfiguring these (Friedrichsen & Kamalipour, 2017). In a chapter on the use of social media as a source by South African political journalists, Rodny-Gumede and Hyde-Clarke (in Mabweazara *et al*., 2014), show that the use of social media in newsrooms is widespread. But, I would argue, this usage does not extend to finding and tackling misinformation/disinformation head on in the case of *M&G* journalists. Rodny-Gumede and Hyde-Clarke also add that:

> It seems safe to say that the usage of social media sources is increasing in the mainstream news media in South Africa, and although these kinds of sources might be more difficult to verify, the same journalistic practices of verifying and cross-checking information apply (in Mabweazara *et al*., 2014:118)

Yet the social media platforms are not used by *M&G* journalists to debunk false and misleading information as part of their daily journalism practice.

The *M&G's* Twitter and Facebook accounts have a significant follower base, with over a million on the former and close to 500 000 on the latter giving the organisation significant audience reach. But, the publication rarely veers from its sharing of links to its articles. As a result, there is a little to no audience engagement. I refer to these platforms as these are spaces in which fact-checking can take place. After

[78] The categories are "cures and prevention," "hoaxes, half-truths and scams," "manipulated or out of context," "videos, images and articles," "conspiracy theories, origins and predictions," "the odd and the bizarre," and "things that are actually true (but you thought they weren't". The content in these categories relates to material in high circulation on social media platforms, chat groups and quotes as reported in the media.

all, these are the platforms that put publishing in the hands of all audience members and makes it possible for misinformation/disinformation to circulate with ease.

The most innovative component of the *M&G* Covid-19 coverage was the use of a live blog (https://mg.co.za/article/2020-03-09-live-blog-coronavirus-updates/) on the website. A live blog refers to a content page that is updated throughout a live event much like a scoreboard in sports game. The *M&G* blog, set up on 9 March, contained snippets of information related to press conferences, speeches and documents without a clear synthesis of the material to make it understandable to the reader. The blog initially started by reporting on some of the positive cases identified by the NICD and then went onto live report (blog) a Department of Health ministerial briefing. There was no attempt to use this somewhat interactive feature to identify, tackle or correct any mis- or disinformation. This, despite the potential of it to do exactly that without disrupting the current setup of the website as a space for articles contained in the print newspaper. The blog consisted of a questions tool which allowed users to leave their comments or to ask questions of the editorial team. During the period under observation, there were eight comments and one attracted the attention of the administrator who said that the question raised by the user would be forwarded to the relevant journalists. It is not clear how this comment was dealt with.

In a February 2018 article on the *M&G* website entitled: '*Misinformation/disinformation: Censorship's no solution'*, the authors, Madeleine de Cock Buning and Miguel Poiares Maduro write that "misinformation/disinformation undermines trust in all forms of media and reinforces the view that it is impossible to discern fact from fiction. When people don't know what to believe, journalists' ability to police the powerful is weakened" (*Mail & Guardian*, 2018). They argued against any form of online censorship of information and, instead, suggest that "platform companies (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), should cooperate with schools, civil society groups and news organisations to strengthen public media literacy, to distinguish misinformation/disinformation from real" (*Mail & Guardian*, 2018).

This call to social media platforms to take responsibility is not new. In the last few weeks of coronavirus coverage, a number of tech giants including Facebook, Twitter and Google have banded together to tackle misinformation/disinformation and information related to the global pandemic. "We're helping millions of people stay connected while also jointly combating fraud and misinformation about the virus, elevating authoritative content on our platforms, and sharing critical updates in coordination with government health care agencies around the world" (*TheVerge.com*, 2020). It is curious, though, that while major tech companies are taking this stand, an established news organisation like the *M&G* is not seeing this battle as part of their responsibilities, despite journalism's focus on truth-telling.

In the case of Covid-19, the media as fact-checkers are also put in the middle of the war on mis-/disinformation through the criminalisation of the sharing of fake-content in South Africa. The South African government's criminalisation of mis-/disinformation related to the pandemic has meant that the

media becomes something of a watchdog for the state. Wassermann (2017:8), in his discussion of the role of mis-/disinformation in state capture in South Africa, reaches much the same conclusion: “The South African media finds itself in the middle of fierce political contestations. The media is not only the platform upon which these battles are being fought out, but it has been drawn in to the fights to such an extent that it can be seen as one of the contestants in its own right.”

6.6. The information disorder and the war on journalists

Social media and the internet have not just brought audiences closer, it has facilitated a digital onslaught on journalists by people who disagree with the journalism produced (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:11). This discussion is undertaken here as it may explain the reluctance of some journalists, including those at the *M&G*, to make use of social media platforms. Mis-/disinformation has become weaponised, to use the *lingua franca*, against journalists in what appears to be an anti-truth campaign (*Mail & Guardian*, 2017). In his book, *We, the media,* Dan Gillmor (2004:46) writes that there are three points that newsmakers need to note as journalism changes its shape:

1. Probes into the lives of newsmakers are no longer the preserve of the media alone, “outsiders” can do this also.
2. Insiders are part of the conversation.
3. “What gushes forth can take on a life of its own, even if it’s not true”.

This is certainly true of the war on journalists. Social media makes it possible for personal narratives of individuals to be constructed very quickly online; for these to be disseminated quickly and easily; and for the content to take on a life of its own. The cases of senior South African journalists, Ranjeni Munusamy and Ferial Haffajee, are examples of this. Munusamy, a political journalist, as a result of false and misleading information shared by political party leader Julius Malema, was subjected to online abuse to the extent that she deactivated her Twitter account. "I’ve been called a witch, a c**t, a snake, an achaar-eating bitch and a street girl, was told to 'go hang' and have been accused of being a racist. I have also been told I should be 'f**ked in the arse to be taught a lesson'", Munusamy was quoted as saying (*Times Live,* 2018). According to Wardle’s typology of ‘fake news’ (2017), the content used against Munusamy was for political influence intended to provoke a reaction and took the form of fabricated content.

Haffajee, the first woman editor of the *M&G*, was one of the many journalists vilified during the Gupta state capture period[79], when she was smeared as a journalist pursing the agenda of so-called ‘white

[79] The Gupta family are Indian nationals who were involved in widespread corruption involved high-ranking members of the South African government, including former president Jacob Zuma, to the extent that the saga has been characterised in the local media as ‘state capture’. They left South Africa in 2016.

monopoly capitalists' (*Huffington Post UK*, 2017). It must be said that the campaign against Haffajee was part of a more orchestrated propaganda effort which was eventually unmasked to be the work of UK PR firm Bell Pottinger on behalf of its client, the Gupta brothers. Her experience of Twitter as a space for mis- and disinformation went beyond the Bell Pottinger attacks. Haffajee wrote, " … I learnt that women get attacked viciously by Twitter mobs who turn your gender, age and marital status into ticking time bombs when you write what they don't like" (*Huffington Post UK*, 2017).

The comments sections on websites were once the spaces where these kinds of mis- and disinformation would have found a home. It was precisely because of this kind of feedback that the online comments fields were closed. As a feature of online interaction for the newspaper, this closure represented a move back to the passive newspaper (Van Dijk, 2006). Online comments were the simplest form of user engagement and provided, at least in theory, a manifestation of the new relationship between the user and the producer of media content. When online comments found a new home on social media, they were unfortunately not moderated by a site administrator or subject to approval. They were easy to publish and even easier to share or 'like'. On the face of it, social media platforms should provide excellent spaces for collaborative or engaged journalism, journalism that is produced by producers and audiences together. And, in South Africa, it is clear that news consumers are quick to turn to social media to discuss specific articles, to give their input sometimes constructively, oftentimes not, to 'engage' with journalists, editors and publications directly.

At times, this engagement went too far and results in the kind of online trolling or cyber bullying discussed above. This represents a new dimension to the misinformation/disinformation ecosystem, one in which journalists have to defend themselves and their right to do journalism, and not just the content they produce. But, the war on journalism and on truth-telling has yet another sinister enemy to consider. The technology of the so-called 'fourth industrial revolution', characterised by artificial intelligence, which is behind the rise of what are known as 'bots'. On Twitter, for example, a "bot is a type of software that controls a Twitter account and can autonomously perform actions such as tweeting, re-tweeting, liking, following, unfollowing, and direct messaging" (*Mail & Guardian*, 2019). These bots help to amplify messages in the echo-chambers that social media platforms are and, given that these spaces are now considered alternative media ecosystems, their impact cannot be underestimated as their role.

6.7. Conclusion

This chapter makes three findings based on the discussion about 'fake news' and journalism. Firstly, there is a need for a more engaged discussion about the relationship between trust in the media, which is shown to be a critical component of media success online, and what is more often than not termed

‘mistakes’ or ‘transgressions’ from the South African Press Code in the practice of journalism. The latter, as this chapter has shown, amounts to a form of mis-/disinformation according to Wardle’s typology of ‘fake news’ (2017) and has a damaging impact on trust in the media. The *M&G* has engaged in several instances of mis-/disinformation, but these instances are not treated with the same kind of introspection and seriousness that is afforded to other forms of ‘fake news’ produced by those outside the boundaries of what is considered to be professional journalism. Through the example of the *M&G*, and its own reaction to what was clearly a ‘fake news’ story about Maimane/De Klerk, we see Wasserman’s (2017) contention is confirmed: journalists tend to treat the issue of ‘fake news’ as a problem that exists outside the boundaries of professional journalism. It seems imperative to me, that rebuilding trust in the media is a critical part of sustaining a media organisation. If consumers trust your work, they are more likely to pay for it.

Secondly, this chapters shows, through the transgressions of the South African Press Code by the *M&G* that the organisation is guilty of producing misleading content, as described by Wardle (2017) as a form of misinformation/disinformation. In the case of the *M&G* though, given its emphasis on a weekly print newspaper, the pressures of online publication are not present and imposing. This means that the production of this misleading content cannot, as Wardle suggests, be linked directly to the time demands of online journalism in the case of the *M&G*. Instead, I conclude that this problematic content results more accurately from what Wardle refers to as “poor journalism”, resulting in misleading content or false contexts. Wasserman (2017), directs us to think about the problem of ‘fake news’ in terms of the local context within which it happens and in terms of the relationship between journalists and audiences. I would suggest that in the case of the *M&G*, today, the declining readership may possibly be due to the erosion of trust of the audience in the journalism produced by the publication.

Finally, this chapter shows that the *M&G* is not an active participant in journalism’s pushback against mis-/disinformation despite the organisation's access to digital tools which make it possible to produce content independently of that produced for the print newspaper. In the period under observation and with a focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, this chapter has shown that the *M&G* does not debunk fake news as part of its journalism. This despite Wasserman’s (2017), assertion that the media in South Africa have been drawn into the battle for truth but also see the problem of mis-/disinformation as a problem that exists outside of the boundaries of journalism itself.

Chapter Seven: *A digital transition in name only*

7.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the newsroom practices at the *M&G* as it moves into another iteration of its digital strategy in a desperate attempt to sustain itself.[80] This chapter tries to understand what the *M&G* is doing differently as a small, independent news organisation looking to transition digitally. The chapter is based, in part, on my time in the *M&G* newsroom in January 2020, and constitutes an ethnography of the newsroom in that respect. Parts of the chapter relies on interviews, while some other parts are based on a comparative analysis of the print newspaper, the online version and social media content produced during that same week. This mixed-methods approach was undertaken directly due to the Covid-19 pandemic which prevented any further newsroom ethnography in 2020. Approached holistically, the data generated using these various methods paints a picture of how the *M&G* newsroom operated in 2020[81].

The chapter is framed by the work of Singer (2004b), who writes that the occupational ideology of journalists happens through a process of socialisation over a period of time. The concept of online journalism, which involves the idea of convergence put forward by Van Dijk (2006) and the characteristics of online journalism developed by Lievrouw and Livingston (2006), are used to benchmark what the key features of a digitised newsroom should be. At the same time, bearing in mind, as Mavhunga and Mabweazara (in Mabweazara *et al*., 2014:3) write, "that there is no absolute agreement about what this concept or practice (online journalism), is" but we can use the consensually agreed to salient features of journalism online as described by Quinn (2005).

7.2. Newsroom ethnography as a method in journalism studies

Scholarship on journalism in South Africa has largely ignored the methodology of newsroom ethnography, which is used in this chapter in the sociological tradition of research. The ethnography presented below is framed within the concept of online journalism, which helps to provide a benchmark for what should be happening in terms of the transition to digital. Ethnography as a method and its lack

[80] I had originally intended to interview the editor of the *M&G*, Khadija Patel, about the workflow and newsroom processes on 8 May 8 2020 at 12:30 via video conferencing but received a cancellation of the meeting from her personal assistant, Sewela Mamphiswana, just an hour prior to the meeting. It was shortly thereafter that I discovered a tweet from Patel sent at 10:40am on the same day announcing her resignation from the *M&G*. It was some four minutes later that the deputy editor of the *M&G*, Beauregard Tromp, announced his resignation from the paper. Sipho Kings, the news editor, was subsequently appointed the acting editor. I was subsequently able to interview Patel on 22 May 22 2020 via a video call.

[81] As mentioned in the methodology chapter, this chapter and the next, take on narrative style and tone owing to the use of ethnography and autoethnography.

of use in South African journalism studies means that the space of newsroom ethnographies is dominated by a western perspective. Without local ethnographies that demonstrate similarities or differences, there is the assumption of sameness and there is a lack of nuance in how journalists are doing journalism within a local context. As Mabweazara (2015) writes, there are resulting assumptions like the narrative of the digital divide which then colours the impressions of what is happening in African newsrooms. Even within western scholarship in journalism studies, scholars like Cottle (2000; 2007) call for a "new wave" of newsroom ethnographies to account for changes in journalism in conjunction with digitalisation.

7.3. The context: a journalism jobs bloodbath in 2020

"This is not a good story to tell. The effect of the lockdown announced on 23 March 2020, and attendant regulations, has had a devastating effect on the established media," read the executive summary of the research into the South African media landscape in the aftermath of the devastating impact of the covid-19 pandemic (Rumney, 2020:3). The report, commissioned by SANEF, goes on to detail rampant job losses, retrenchments and closures of magazine titles owing to the lockdown, which effectively limited distribution channels and resulted in drastic declines in advertising revenue.

In the independent publishing space, the report quoted the then head of the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP), Carol Mohlala, who "estimates that 300 to 400 journalists' jobs have been lost as small, mostly black-owned independent newspapers, often serving indigenous-language groups in far-flung rural areas, have closed and a further 700 jobs in the value chain lost" (Rumney, 2020:10). The AIP is an umbrella body for independent, grassroots, print publishers in South Africa who operate outside of the large media companies.

The *M&G*, in the midst of this milieu, was not spared from the devastation of job losses. An editorial on 26 March 2020, just three days after the South African president Cyril Ramaphosa announced the national lockdown due to the spread of the coronavirus, indicated that the newspaper was in financial distress (*M&G*, 2020). The editorial (*M&G*, 2020), was candid about the state of affairs at the organisation:

As the country went first into a state of disaster and then a 21-day lockdown, we have had advertisers — which contribute about 70% to our revenue — cancel their campaigns. Our live events — which make up roughly 20% of our income — have come to an abrupt halt. This week has been one of the worst we have ever experienced in contemporary times. Right now, our income will not adequately cover the cost of producing the *M&G*.

The *M&G*'s experiences during the lockdown reflected the general state of journalism and the media industry in South Africa (Rumney, 2020)[82]. The ethnography of the *M&G* newsroom was undertaken earlier in the year when Covid-19 had not yet reached South Africa but when the decline of the print media industry was already underway.

7.4. Setting the scene: a reflection about the ethnographic experience

I arrived at the *M&G* offices on Monday 20 January 2020, laptop in hand to make notes during the course of the day, and was met by Sewela Mamphiswana, who is the personal assistant to the editor and the archivist for the organisation. The office, hereafter referred to as the '*M&G* newsroom', is located in Milpark, in the aptly-named Metal Box building, a tall, grey and rather soulless-looking Johannesburg city structure. The *M&G* had moved to this spot from the trendy base of Rosebank in April 2019, but this Milpark location is close to where the first offices of the newspaper were, in Melle Street, Braamfontein.

7.4.1. The physical arrangement of the newsroom

The generous space of the *M&G* newsroom was enclosed by walls of glass lending an enviable view of the Milpark suburb. The main hubs of the open-plan newsroom were flanked in the corners by the glass offices of the CEO and the editor. There was an easy flow of foot traffic through the newsroom and any demarcations in the space was not done through the use of walls but through furniture which allowed an easy mingling of staff of all levels. There was, however, one part of the U-shaped newsroom which was quite isolated from the central hub. This section, I later found out, was the sales part of the business and was distinctly separated from the rest of the newsroom. My initial observations in the newsroom were that the section editors were always mingling with the journalists and checking in with them on the progress of their stories. At one end of one of the newsroom was another glass-encased room with a boardroom table in the centre. In it, on that Monday morning, were some familiar faces and others new to me.

[82] The situation was also not exclusive to South Africa. In Australia, global media mogul Rupert Murdoch announced the closure of 60 newspaper titles in Australia alone, (*Asia Times*, 2020).
[74] Regional and local newspaper titles would move online exclusively and another 36 would be closed altogether (BBC, 2020). The Pew Research Centre reported that, "U.S. newspaper circulation fell in 2018 to its lowest level since 1940," (Grieco, 2020).

7.4.2. The lay of the newsroom

Khadija Patel, the editor at the time, had invited me to join a diary meeting[83] and I had arrived before 9am on a Monday morning, in order to prepare for this. I assumed that the meeting taking place inside the boardroom was the diary meeting but it was a management meeting that preceded the diary meeting. The editor and deputy editor, Beauregard Tromp, left the management meeting and headed out into the newsroom to congratulate various members of the team on the lastest edition.

I have known both the editor and deputy editor professionally prior, and am glad to have the deputy editor head in my direction after what seems to have a tense management team meeting. He was pleased to tell me that he had a desk ready for me to use among the staff. My workspace ended up being close to the window and across from a colleague who also works at Wits Journalism, Kevin Davie. It was awkward to be seated among the staff and it is a feeling that I had to deal with very quickly as my own awkwardness and nothing more. The staff in close proximity to me greeted me with welcoming smiles and, as I had later found out, the editors had communicated the details of my visit to the entire newsroom in December 2019. While the *M&G* has been the subject of numerous studies over the years and is used to being probed and prodded by strangers, I was quite aware that the individuals who come and go as staff within the organisation, may not be.

I was, though, very aware of the gaze of some of the journalists who are more self-aware of a breach of confidentiality and privacy in the course of their work which can sometimes be quite sensitive. Only two journalists spoke to me directly and asked what I was doing in the newsroom, with one assuming correctly that I was a newsroom observer. The editor has previously told me that the journalists in the *M&G* newsroom are quite used to visitors and especially researchers. An older staff member approached to me and said that I looked familiar and asked about my by-line. I explained that the familiarity likely came from my association with the Standard Bank Sikuvile Awards[84] where I was a judge and had visited the *M&G* newsroom in Rosebank in 2017 to talk about the awards. Most of the staff that moved through the newsroom during the course of the day did not appear too concerned by my presence in the newsroom and went about their work as they presumably normally would. But, beyond that there was no particular concern with me or my presence - which I put down to a perceived close association with the editors.

My lack of experience in a professional newsroom, which meant that I was not socialised in the same way as the journalists in this newsroom were, meant that I was more acutely aware of the particularities of the journalists in this newsroom. I would also like to think that the lack of socialisation which Singer

[83] A diary meeting, also known as a news conference, is the meeting of the journalists in a newsroom to discuss story ideas and set a diary for the publication.
[84] The Standard Bank Sikuvile Awards are held annually and recognises excellence in journalism in South Africa. The awards are sponsored by Standard Bank and hosted by the PDMSA (Print and Digital Media South Africa).

(2004b) refers to, means that I have greater critical distance from the people being observed, which is both necessary and valuable in sound qualitative research.

The *M&G* newsroom was a noisy newsroom, the kind that I am used to at *Wits Vuvuzela*. Phone calls and conversations are for all to hear and there are very few hushed voices (except for those that are naturally quieter). There were times that I observed groups of people working together, consulting at each other's desks and engaging with each other. There were also frequent discussions about news stories carried by other publications or broadcasters, or about a particular public figure or character in the news.

There seemed to be few dedicated workstations apart from those for the senior editors and the design team who are fixed to their workstations on the basis of the technology they need access to. The editorial staff seemed to find a workspace wherever they could. There was only a two-person digital team at the *M&G* during my visit and they had their own workspaces, separate from one another but among the rest of the staff.

My second morning in the newsroom was a little easier for me as I was able to walk in and find my place quickly. I recognised the voices of two of the men chatting quite boisterously in the sales section of the newsroom. And because I recognised the voices, I was also unsettled by the reactions of some of the staff to those voices. The voices were of a member of the board, who is a representative of the new owners of the *M&G,* the New-York-based non-profit that focuses on media development around the world, and the other was of the *M&G* accountant. I had an exchange with the deputy editor about the presence of a member of the board in the newsroom in what seemed to be a very personal interaction with the accountant, and there were many expletives in the few words that he used to explain how he felt about it. Newsrooms are traditionally the sites of journalism practice or so the theory tells you but in actual fact, a newsroom is enrobed within a business space that has finance experts and those who are experienced in media management – these would form part of the convergence of skills that is necessary in the spaces of journalists and despite the need to work more closely with finance and marketing staff in a converged space, these spaces in the *M&G* newsroom remained quite separated. Decisions about which platforms to use and why, about leveraging the power of social media for more engagement and even about choosing a content management system that is able to facilitate various forms of electronic transactions can only be made by a team that works more collaboratively and in a converged manner.

7.5. The place of online journalism in the *M&G* workflow

The news conference or diary meeting at the *M&G* took place on a Monday at 11am and was hosted in an amphitheatre-styled social space behind the desks of the design team. The section editors attended

the conference, instead of the entire newsroom. I found it difficult to remain an observer, because I am accustomed to steering the flow of the news conferences at *Wits Vuvuzela,* and at this one, I was forced to keep my comments to myself. I had to remind myself routinely that I was a passive observer at the *M&G* news conference and not a participant observer.

Traditional journalism ethnographies focus on the construction of news (Cottle, 2000; 2007). However, I was in the *M&G* newsroom to focus on habits and processes in the way technology is used to disseminate journalism on digital platforms in order to stimulate the consumption of journalism on those platforms. One of the things I noted during my visit to the *M&G* newsroom was that the staff are constantly on their phones through this news conference – to share information or to quote something. There is an ongoing engagement with content on the phone, with a few staff members holding a copy of the previous week's newspaper as the post-mortem begins.

The newsroom weekly diary meeting is started by the news editor on a Friday and is managed on a Google Doc through a mobile app called *Slack. Slack* is a seven-year-old business communications and information management tool which is popular in newsrooms worldwide. Patel tells me that *Slack* is used for the team to communicate with one another and to manage their diaries (Patel, 2020, interview). It is this Google Doc and its entries that steer the news conference.

The news conference starts with a digital report card, which Patel (2020, interview), describes:

> When we sit down on Mondays, we will figure what we are doing digitally but that is something new that we've been doing for the last four months where we would have someone from the digital team actually tell us how many visitors have we been averaging over the last day, what have people read, what's the bounce rate been like, what's working, what's not. (Patel, 2020, interview).

In the news conference I attended on 20 January, 2020, the online editor reported the online publication stats to those participating in the news conference. It is not clear to me whether this information was communicated to the rest of the newsroom given that not everyone attended the news conference. There was some discussion about the stories that did really well in terms of online hits and a short discussion on pushing these popular a little more on social media, but no discussion about the reasons for why the stories performed well to start with. Understanding why a particular story does well online is, in my opinion, a critical part of shifting a newsroom culture and makes the staff understand the needs of the readers/consumers. A discussion about why readers are choosing to read some stories over others, helps the newsroom staff to understand what they should focus on. This is a more engaged form of journalism that does not require additional resources or detailed audience analysis.

One of the insights of the online editor was that, "On weekends, people are reading investigations and politics." This comment, while innocuous at first, should have had the effect of stimulate ideas about driving up access visibility and access to these kinds of stories on the weekends. There was little discussion of these matters though and no strategy around the data was discussed which made the reporting of the statistics and the insights of the web team rather superfluous in the context of the news conference.

During the news conference, the online editor reported that a story on a relative of Jabu Mabuza[85] receiving a contract with Eskom performed really well in terms of hits on the website. The story had appeared on page four of the newspaper the week before. It was the deputy editor who suggested that the story be run again on the website but "to rework the story with a different headline and new photo to refresh the story" (Patel, 2020). The story remained on the landing page of the website till the end of the week which demonstrated strategic thinking on the part of the editor and deputy editor about the website and meeting the needs of its readers.

According to Patel (2020, interview), the diary remains fairly "fluid" throughout the week. "I basically want fresh copy on the website at least every morning and then again at 12'o'clock and then 3'o'clock. So then I would have to look at the diary and then prioritise what goes where". Despite Patel's intentions, my observation of the news conference shows that it was, at the time of writing in 2020, a print-focused news conference. There is an assumption that all stories pitched will end up in the paper, space permitting. It is only the more digitally-engaged individuals who mention the website. There is no intervention from the two-person digital team to prioritise any content for the website. The photo for the front page of the Friday print edition is talked about and debated a little, as is the focus of the edition itself, but there is no such discussion for the website.

One example that doesn't conform to that trend, however, is one of the senior journalists, who is one of the few who is independently active on social media, comments that the Isabel Dos Santos[86] story is so big internationally "so something will go up today, (online)". The same journalist also suggests using social media to ask readers for more information about a church that journalists were having difficulty accessing. It is clear to me that this individual is far more digitally savvy, but also more willing to try to use digital tools to find other ways of doing good quality journalism.

There is no discussion of platforms and which to prioritise from any of the other section editors. It is simply assumed that the content being pitched at the diary meeting will end up in the paper; so,

[85] Jabu Mabuza is a prominent South African businessman who was a former chairperson of the State-owned enterprise, Eskom.
[86] Isabel Dos Santos is a controversial figure in Angola. She is the daughter of former President José Eduardo dos Santos and is considered one of the richest women in Africa and is regularly embroiled in dubious business dealings.

ultimately the concept of breaking news does not exist in the *M&G* newsroom. It is likely that this is because the paper sees itself as a more in-depth news analysis publication, with breaking news falling outside of its scope. During the week under analysis, though, the online site ran two news stories related to the Neil Aggett enquiry which was taking place on a day to day basis and could not possibly have waited for the end of the week.

It is clear from the news conference and the discussions in the newsroom itself that the journalists here are fully immersed in their specialist areas. It is what I miss in a student newsroom, with younger journalists, who have not had the benefit of time, experience and wider reading to develop a stronger framework of reference for the stories they write or produce. There is a discussion that brings in what other newspapers have covered and how they have covered it and why the *M&G* does it this way or that. This is clearly framing at play, which accounts for how the ideology of a newsroom filters through the organisation and its many parts.

7.6. Filing and walking away

The *M&G* journalists file their stories to the *Slack* channel when the story is ready. This is when the editing process begins, which Patel (2020, interview) describes as "collaborative". This is because the editing process involves back and forth engagement between the journalist and the section head as the story is refined and prepared for sub-editing. This collaboration is done virtually, though, through the *Slack* channel. Once ready, the story moves into a production channel in *Slack* with instructions about publishing. "And there will be an instruction there that, for example, if this is a news story that needs to be published immediately, there will be a note saying this has to be prioritised for subbing right now" says Patel (2020, interview). Patel adds that the notes in *Slack* are key to ensuring that a story moves quickly through the production process, as some journalists are still stuck to working for longer periods on a single story, a process she refers to as "ponderous" and links to the print newspaper workflow. It is clear from this comment that the print newspaper, and its production process, still dominate the operations of the *M&G* newsroom. The journalists are used to working at a slower pace but as I argue later, this pace is not necessarily incongruent with online publishing.

Patel describes the weekly news diary as "fluid" (Patel, 2020, interview). "Sometimes I would be looking through *Slack* and I see a piece that's gone through and we haven't actually prioritised for digital and I would think to myself that this would work really, really well right now. And then we would get it for online." says Patel as she describes how stories can sometimes move to online first (2020, interview). The use of a digital collaboration and scheduling tool like *Slack,* and rethinking which platforms should be privileged when it comes to the news diary, are signs of a digitally-converged newsroom. But these elements seem to be the exception rather than the norm in the *M&G* newsroom

and is driven by individuals rather than the team as a whole, as the analysis of the print edition in comparison to the online platforms shows later.

But is it not an easy thing to achieve, to get the staff of the *M&G* as a whole to see digital as an equally valuable product. In his ethnography of an American newsroom within the context of newsroom shifts in 2005, researcher David Ryfe wrote,

> If the question then is how reporters are processing efforts to transform their industry, my work suggests the beginnings of an answer: they are resistant and even resentful of what they see as encroachments onto their professional turf (Ryfe, 2009:199).

Ryfe (2009), argues that journalists identify themselves by their practices and any change in that practice impacts on their identity which is difficult to achieve. An anecdote shared by Patel about having to cut a political story from the newspaper as there was no space for it, demonstrates Ryfe's point:

> "I said, that's okay, we'll use it online, and I remember the politics editor at the time responding as though I was punishing him. That if it didn't make it into the paper, then it was not good enough" (Patel, 2020, Interview).

Patel (2020, interview) says that trying to change how the journalists viewed digital publishing has been part of the challenge of transitioning to digital. "So that was the big cultural shift to adopt, to actually show people that listen, we're journalists and we want people to read our work. Look at how many more people read us online, the potential for actually influencing the conversation is much greater online than it is in print, that's just the way the world is working" (Patel, 2020, interview). The deputy online editor puts the problem more bluntly, "I don't think reporters are serious about the online". An external consultant who had been assisting the organisation with its digital strategy since November 2019, also recognised the issue: "It is difficult to convince people to take ownership of the paper" (2020, observation notes).

This ownership seems to end when a story is filed and sent to the sub-editor. From the point that the sub-editors take over the production of a story, a journalist is no longer closely involved. What is to be expected in terms of the features of online journalism, according to Van Dijk (2006) and Lievrouw and Livingston (2006), is not seen as part of the responsibilities of the journalist but of the production team alone. From the news conference I had attended, it is clear that the two person digital team is trying to get the staff to own their stories and to take the digital publishing component of the business more seriously in order to achieve a converged newsroom.

7.7. The *M&G* audience in the digital transition

In the week that I was at the *M&G* newsroom, an inquest into the death of trade unionist Neil Aggett had begun in Johannesburg. Aggett had died in police detention in 1982, but his family were convinced his death was not by suicide as reported but should be attributed to the hands of the police. The story was certainly a big one countrywide, and in the *M&G* newsroom it attracted a lot of attention.

"Neil Aggett is a name familiar to a lot of our readership," was a comment by the editor that caught my attention. I had assumed that the *M&G* under the editorships of Verashni Pillay and now Khadija Patel had set itself on a course to diversify its readership from the 1980's liberal activist demographic. Perhaps I was wrong to assume this, but the content of a more pan-Africanist, youthful and alternative nature certainly pointed in that direction. The editor was right though as it was a 2012 article by former *M&G* journalist Drew Forrest about the death of Neil Aggett[87] that drew the most attention as it was shared on the *M&G*'s Twitter account during the course of the week.

When I asked the deputy online editor who the newspaper's demographic is, he said "Not too sure about who the audience is. In my head, it is people who are over 35" (2020, observation notes). There is little from the news conference that I had attended that speaks to the presence of the *M&G* audience in the minds of the journalists. Even the analytics presented by the digital editor is not demographic or even device or platform specific enough to start to shape who the digital audience is. This conceptualisation of the *M&G* audience appears to be hitched to what the audience of the *M&G* has always assumed to be.

7.8. The fine print in going digital

I asked Khadija Patel why the print newspaper remains so central in the organisation. "The paper still accounts for the majority of the revenue. As much as we would have liked to have been a digital only publication, the *M&G* as it currently exists would not be able to sustain itself on digital revenue alone" (Patel, 2020, interview). She adds that subscriptions sit at about half of the 7 000 subscribers needed to sustain the organisation and this is where the print paper is critical in terms of the advertising revenue that it generates.

In media interviews running up to her resignation in May 2020, Patel appealed to the public for their support through digital subscriptions; and she often repeated the message that if the *M&G* was not able to produce its newspaper, the *M&G* as we know it will cease to exist. Her belief in the print newspaper is clear when she told me, "I do believe that some form of the *M&G* will continue to exist in print

[87]Aggett was a medical doctor and trade unionist who died in detention in 1982 (see https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/dr-neil-hudson-aggett). His story would have resonated with the early audiences and supporters of the *Weekly Mail*, which is what Patel was alluding to.

especially because it has a very niche audience that still appreciates print in some way so there will always be, even if it goes down to 5000 people in South Africa, who will still go and buy the *M&G* on a Friday," (Patel, 2020, interview). While I recognise the sentiment attached to the print newspaper, the reality is that the digital transition of the *M&G* remains on the periphery.

The *M&G* newspaper is a paper known for its investigative journalism and in-depth reporting (Jordaan, 2012:24). It is a newspaper that has built its reputation on independent, quality journalism grounded in the legacy of the *Weekly Mail*. The time it takes to produce journalism of this depth is not associated with digital publishing as the latter demands news quickly and more often. I would argue, though, that the link between a digital platform and the speedy production of content is an imagined one. There is absolutely nothing stopping the *M&G* from investing more time in producing in-depth content for its online platforms. There is no requirement that for online journalism sites to flourish, they have to produce breaking news on the minute, every minute. That information is delivered online faster has not changed the speed at which it is consumed and it certainly has not changed the speed at which it is produced. What the *M&G* has as its greatest value proposition is its quality journalism and this need not end with the demise of the print newspaper. Seven thousand subscribers in a population of 56 million is a drop in the ocean and certainly achievable with a newly reconfigured relationship between the publication and its audiences.

7.9. The social media question?

Mabweazara *et al.*, (2014: 35) write that in South Africa, "The major proportion of online use is apportioned to social networks such as Twitter and Facebook," instead of news websites which reach a sliver of the online news consumption audiences. While there is a growing dissatisfaction with the cannibalisation of news content by these social media platforms without paying for it, the point to be made here is that social media sites are effortlessly reaching audiences which newspapers need to access in order to be sustainable. Yet, in the case of the *M&G*, this social media usage is largely absent demonstrating a lack of engagement not only with its audiences but with the tools of online journalism.

In a 2011 study which included the *M&G* newsroom, Jordaan wrote that while the use of social media was actively encouraged, "the ethnographic research showed that social media rarely featured in editorial news conferences" (Mabweazara, 2014:29). This was my experience of the *M&G* news conference on 20 January, 2020. From an analysis of the newspaper and its online version in the week from 17 to 23 January, the *M&G* posted, on average, one individual article to Twitter and Facebook per day. The posts were not customised for each platform, or amended in any way, to the extent that they would be attractive to the audience's specific to those platforms. This is problematic, as it shows a lack of a diversified content management strategy which is content-specific. In plain terms, this means that the content posted online by the *M&G* did not make full use of online tools like multimedia or social

media engagement to augment its offerings in any way. The approach of simply posting the same content from the newspaper to the online platforms shows that the *M&G* assumes that the audience of the paper is the same audience as that of the website and the social media accounts. It is also a missed opportunity to drive up digital subscriptions by using Facebook, Twitter and even Instagram to showcase the work of the organisation to non-subscribers without offering articles for free.

It is interesting to note that the story which had done really well on the website in terms of visits to the website during the week of my visit, was the one on the female relative of South African businessman Jabu Mabuza and her dealings with embattled state-owned enterprise, Eskom (*M&G*, 2020). The story attracted significant engagement on Facebook with 162 comments and 242 shares. In comparison, and in the same week, every other story-related post to the *M&G* Facebook page averaged a handful of comments and even fewer shares. Yet, the newspaper provided no additional material, produced no new content and did not engage with any of the comments on the Facebook post linking to the Mabuza-relative story. This is an example of journalism that is not making use of the features of the online platform and instead is practiced in line with the expectations of a print newspaper.

The *M&G* has relied on agency photographers and one multimedia staff member. In the week under review, only one story, that of three siblings that perished in a fire, had a short social media video which was viewed nearly 1000 times on one day. The photographs used in the publication and on its online platforms can be described as generally dull and unenticing to the reader. They are mostly generics that can be used across a number of different stories once paid for. They are not in any way particularly intriguing so as to attract a click-through. The in-house graphics are stronger but also tend towards generics such as profile images. This is a serious shortcoming for the organisation in terms of its social media accounts which rely on dynamic, current and engaging visual content for the most part. This, again, shows the emphasis of the organisation on its print newspaper, which is a text-intensive product by nature and does not have the visual or interactive element that is required in online journalism.

The social media reach of the *M&G* is not insubstantial, with close to 500 000 Facebook followers and over a million followers on Twitter. The engagement, however, which I am gauging through RTs (re-tweets) and post shares, is relatively low. This may be because of the paywall on the *M&G* site which leaks a certain number of articles before expecting a payment of some sort. Another possible reason is that the posts lack the visual engagement needed to grab the attention of a social media user and, in this respect, is simply failing to stand out from the crowd. “So unfortunately, I would have liked to have told you that the journalists take an active role in actually sharing their stories but most of them don’t. One of my mantras was ‘think beyond the story’ and your job is not over once your story is filed. But that is a difficult cultural shift”, Patel tells me when I ask about the social media usage in the newsroom (2020, interview).

Patel explains that when she arrived at the *M&G* in 2016, there was an expectation that every journalist would "file at least one tweet for their story" which was in response to the digital team making mistakes in their repackaging of print stories for social media. "It is unfair to expect the digital desk (digital team), to have read every story and to have the nuance of every story to be able to come up with a great tweet or Facebook post fir every story. There was a lot of grumbling about it as well," Patel adds (Patel, 2020). But instead of insisting on the journalists taking responsibility for this aspect of the job, the organisation has moved to use an automation tool which lightens the load for the digital team. "We have since moved to a system called Echo Box – funded by SAMIP. "It takes the actual toil of actual scheduling for social media. It scrapes pieces and finds its own tags" Patel says (Patel, 2020).

The two-person digital team are also expected to stimulate discussion on the social media channels. "We don't want our social channels to be like dry. There is the expectation that our social channels should be more conversational. That it should have a voice and people should be able to relate to it," says Patel (2020, interview). She admits though that, "We don't do it consistently enough in my opinion and much of it is due to the fact that they are just two people and that it is a full job in itself," (2020, interview). Discussion of this sort could also be stimulated by the journalists themselves, but there is little use of social media by the journalists to push their own stories and engage with audiences.

7.10. The subs' desk as a space for a digital transformation

The sub-editors at the *M&G* are older individuals than the average age of the staff of the *M&G* which I would guess to be around 30, whose vast experience is tipped heavily on the side of print. When I spoke to one of the sub-editors about her availability for an interview, she indicated that there were some days of the week which are definitely quieter than others in terms of sub-editing. This is simply because the organisation still operates along a print workflow. As such, Tuesday, a day journalists are refining their stories with their section heads, is a quieter day for a sub-editor.

On my second day in the newsroom, I watched an interaction between one of the subs and the deputy online editor which is worth reflecting on. The sub approached the deputy online editor, and was quite irate and agitated. She, the sub, says to him, "Can you get online and make a couple of corrections?" I watch this interaction go on for a while as the deputy online editor logs onto the site, accesses the site and proceeds to follow the directions of the sub in correcting parts of a story that had been published the day before. I found out later that an un-subbed version had somehow been published online, presenting a potentially damaging situation. The interaction eventually leads to frustration, as the deputy online editor isn't able to follow all the instructions he's being given. Eventually, the sub decides that she will sub it herself on the backend with the young man watching closely.

I spoke to the deputy online editor about this later. He said that the problem came in when a story was filed in *Slack* and was sub-edited by the online editor instead of the sub-editor. I sensed some discomfort about the issue so I did not push him any further, but it is seemed that there is a 'turf war' regarding ownership over the copy. The online editor sometimes subs copy for online as it is easier and quicker for her to do so rather than wait for a sub to look at the copy before the online editor publishes the content online.

Patel says that there are two sub-editing processes in operation at the *M&G* at the moment, one for print and one for online. The print production process works with Adobe InCopy and InDesign which integrate with the sub-editing software WoodWing. The online process uses WordPress as the sub-editing platform. "This is where the flaw in the workflow still exists because we basically now have two sub CMS's as we have always have had" Patel says (2020, interview). She adds, The plan was for us, by the end of this year, to rid ourselves of WoodWing entirely and have a central system – so all subbing is happening in one place. So it's basically trying to figure out that if we have all the subbing happening in WordPress then getting a plugin that will feed that copy to InDesign". The one benefit of the pandemic lockdown is that the staff have had to work remotely, and the sub-editors have been forced to work with Google Docs to sub-edit from their homes, thus, pushing the two editing processes closer together. But while these are closer together, the separation of the sub-editing processes is a serious stumbling block to convergence in the *M&G* newsroom. The two processes indicate that the separation of the newsroom into print and online divisions, or sections, persists, and without the implementation of a clear digital strategy, will remain.

7.11. The functional differences of online journalism

There is no style difference between the online and print versions, but there are functional differences which are those things that make online journalism different to print journalism, according to Patel (2020, interview). The journalists add tags themselves for online content, but all other elements like hyperlinks, visuals, multimedia, general layout and presentation are left to the two-person online team. I asked the deputy online editor what more he expected of the journalists in the newsroom, and he said: "Better presented stories that thinks about the audience experience instead of just the story. In addition, thinking about the navigation and the architecture," (2020, observation notes). These are simple elements of online journalism that change the user experience. I was surprised to hear this insight from a young man who says he had no previous experience in managing a CMS prior to joining the *M&G* at the end of 2019, and yet not see it in seasoned journalists.

Patel says, "When I got to the *M&G* there was still a culture of the digital desk doing the fast news and that was a completely different workflow and that was a completely different workflow and completely different structures and the quality of the two was very different" (2020, interview). While this was the

intention, the impact has been that there is now a split between the production processes which result in the newspaper and the digital sites. It seems that the sub-editors are the ones who could bring a continuity between the various types of content produced but, as it stands, the workflow is fragmented and still stratified according to platforms.

The layout of the *M&G* stories online is a reflection of their appearance in the paper. The online team's primary function comes to light on a Thursday evening when they schedule all the content from the paper onto the website. I matched the articles that appeared in the paper on 17 January 2020 to their online publication dates. Of the 25 articles I had looked at, one was not published online and only three were published on dates other than Friday 17 January. Most of the *M&G*'s content is not time-bound but they are publishing - dumping - all of their valuable content onto their website on one day. It is a waste of content that can be published across the week as fresh content and that the online team can spend more time promoting on social media. And, on many days during the week when the website requires 'fresh content' as the editor calls it, the organisation is pulling in content from wire news agencies or partner sites like *The Conversation*.

Deuze writes (in Mabweazara *et al*., 2014:4) that -

> Online journalism can be functionally differentiated from other kinds of journalism by using its technological component as a determining factor. The online journalist has to make decisions as to which media format or formats best convey a certain story (multimediality), consider options for the public to respond, interact or even customize certain stories (interactivity), and think about ways to connect the story to other stories, archives, resources … through hyperlinks (hypertextuality). This is the ideal-typical form of online journalism, as professed by an increasing number of professionals and academics worldwide.

These are the essentials of online journalism that was not widespread in the *M&G* newsroom at the time of writing in 2020. This is despite the intention by the then editor, Patel, to push for more convergence.

Patel (2020, interview) says that,

> Last year September, there was another intervention that we (the *M&G* newsroom), made where I decided that the paper ultimately becomes a curation of what we have published online, because we have to think about, we have limited resources, we want to ensure that we are delivering a quality product online, we believe that our future lies in the subscription model and we need to be able to deliver good work to our subscribers online so that then became a system where we basically would drip feed stories through the week into digital. Some of those stories would still make it into the paper, some of them might not but it was a cultural change that had to happen.

This clear articulation of a digitally-focused transition by Patel but my newsroom observation showed that this was not happening. There were only eight additional pieces that were exclusive to the website, with four being comment or opinion pieces which clearly shows a privileging of the newspaper over the website. The articles published to the website from the print newspaper are not changed in style to suit the online platforms, and are not enhanced to make use of the features of online publishing. In 90% of the articles I had looked at, there were no functional differences, like the use of hyperlinks, which would make use of the features of new media technologies. A clever and creative use of hyperlinks in individual articles can improve a site's bounce rate by capitalising on the reader's tendency to use hypertext to move from page to page. Using hyperlinks to link to other content on the same website, ensures that a reader remains on the site longer thereby reducing the bounce rate, the measurement of how long a reader remains on a site. This is a simple mechanism to ensure a reader stays on a site longer. The longer a reader is on a site, the more attractive a site becomes to an online advertiser. In not attending to these functional differences, the *M&G*, by Deuze's (in Mabweazara, 2014), definition, is not practising online journalism. It is practicing print journalism that is posted online.

7.12. Moving to a new CMS and a new digital strategy

On the Monday that I was in the newsroom, the external consultant was there to run WordPress training, which was to include sub-editors and news editors. The *M&G*'s old CMS (content-management system) was broken and through a process of introspection, together with consultants, the organisation had made the decision to move to the more popularly used WordPress CMS. I observed the consultant's interaction with the staff after the news conference had come to an end. He was asking people to make themselves available for training during the course of the day. Most indicated that they had no time to do it, which left the consultant a little flustered. He told me later that this was part of the difficulty in transitioning to digital, the general unwillingness of the staff to commit to a digital process.

The consultant, had been contracted by the South African Media Innovation Fund (SAMIP[88]) to assist the *M&G* with their digital strategy development in November 2019. The consultant was brought in to train the staff along with the online editor on the new CMS, as well as to help the organisation figure out its digital way forward as per the grant agreement with SAMIP. The old CMS had been developed in 2012 by former head of technology at the *M&G* Jason Norwood Young through his start-up, 10Layer, which had also built the CMS for the *Daily Maverick*[89]. The new WordPress CMS went live in the week

[88] SAMIP is a South African-based project focused on developing the media innovation space in the country. The project is funded by the Media Development and Investment Fund (MDIF), a non-profit dedicated to the support of independent media globally. MDIF are now the majority shareholders of the *M&G*.

[89] In an interview about building the *M&G* CMS, Jason Norwood-Young said, "It's very important that the system fits into the newsroom workflows …Technology should never dictate the workflow – it should always complement it" (ITWeb, 2012).

of my visit to the *M&G* newsroom and part of the consultant's responsibilities were to train the staff on the use of the new CMS.

The *M&G* site developer, according to the consultant, lived in Durban and was not proficient in WordPress development (customisation), which an organisation like the *M&G* required to make the CMS responsive to its particular needs. Part of this need, according to the consultant, was to make the new site "become a business" and, according to Patel (2020, interview), to make the workflow faster. The consultant said he intended to train the staff using the digital champion models, entailed separating the staff into separate groups with a digital champion in each groups. These are individuals whose enthusiasm for digital change is likely to infect the rest of the group. The consultant said his approach to devising a digital strategy for the organisation was framed by design thinking. This is an approach which puts users (in this case, the audience of the *M&G*), at the centre of any process, allowing the designer to tackle and unpack traditional challenges and finding innovative solutions to address them. One of the simplest changes the consultant said he intended to roll out was a weekly newsletter.

I asked about the strategy of keeping the website running while the changes to the backend were made. The consultant said that it was imperative to deploy the new CMS as quickly as possible "in order to be a catalyst for changing the newsroom", especially at the start of the new year (2020, observation notes). This comment points to the intractability of the journalists who, despite numerous interventions in the *M&G* newsroom, have not allowed a digital workflow to take root. In my view, though, this is not their fault alone. The presence of the newspaper, which is resource intensive and demands a significant time commitment from the staff, also made it impossible to allow a new socialisation to happen.

The consultant recognised the need for audience development and that the social media aspect of the newsroom would flow from a clear process of audience development. Ultimately, the consultant believed that fixing the tech at the heart of the *M&G* site would allow the business to "look at revenue opportunities". Once the site and its subscription tools were fixed, the consultant said the organisation would look to run various analytic tools to better understand user behaviour. As for his projections for success, the consultant was clear that there was a "need for a digital person to drive the process of integration of the digital into the newsroom". Organisationally, these digital champions can be seen to be indispensable to shifting cultures within print-focused news organisations looking to transition to digital. Despite these ideas and moves to make digital changes, the external consultant driving these was not involved in discussions about the newspaper and its place in the *M&G* newsroom.

7. 13. Conclusion

In two separate instances, Cottle argued for a renewed use of newsroom ethnographies to diversify the pool of ideas about journalism practice (2000; 2007). He (Cottle 2000; 2007) motivated for the use of

ethnography in order to provide nuance in journalism studies which can be characterised by generalised conclusions and unable to account for the specific contexts of newsrooms and how their journalists are operating. This chapter makes use of the ethnographic method not only to add to the limited body of newsroom ethnographies in South Africa but also to triangulate findings that emerge through other data sets including interview data, newspaper articles and social media content.

The most significant finding of this chapter is that the journalists at the *M&G* remain tied to practices which are anchored to a print newspaper. These practices, which are what some scholars call the "occupational ideology" of journalists, are formed through their experiences (Lauk, 2009; Deuze, 2011) or, as Singer (2004b), puts it, through their socialisation in the newsroom. In order to change these ideologies, journalists have to experience a different way of doing things. This is what I would call an ideological disruption that, unless imposed, will not shift the habits and rituals of a print-focused newsroom regardless of its stated intentions to shift to digital.

The *M&G*'s physical news conference was still taking place once a week at the time of writing. There was no active use of social media tools to push the content produced by the organisation or the journalists themselves. The fact that the journalists see the end of their responsibilities to the content produced when they file their stories is an indication of the lack of a digital cultural shift in the newsroom. In addition, the weekly reporting of digital analytics and discussions about these statistics are happening without the entire newsroom staff and only with section heads. This means that the majority of the *M&G* newsroom staff are not part of these discussions, when they themselves should form part of the re-socialisation process. In speaking to the editor at the time, the chasm between the strategy and the practice is obvious in the *M&G* newsroom is obvious. Patel, like a few others, are digital champions but these champions cannot change the trajectory of the print-focused newsroom, if the entire team is not behind them and the digital strategy.

As Mabweazara *et al*., (2014:1), write, "the Internet and associated digital technologies are no longer just basic tools for the practice of traditional journalism. Rather they have become an integral part of the profession, and indeed, forms of online or digital journalism are thriving on this continent." This point is an important one to make as Mabweazara *et al*., (2014:1) argue, there is a tendency to assume that journalism on the African continent is characterised by a lack of access to digital tools when this, in fact, is not true in many instances. It is clear from my observations in the *M&G* newsroom that access to digital tools is not a prohibitive factor in the shift to digital. It is more the reluctance or as Ryfe (2009), calls it, 'resistance', to the need to use those tools in order to move the organisation to digital that characterises the *M&G* newsroom.

At the time of writing, the *M&G* was unable to monetise a digital product. A significant reason for this is that they have not created the space or provided the resources to shift cultures of its newsroom, its journalists nor its readers, in order to carve out a new relationship between the two. It is in this

relationship that the ability to monetise their products lie. The *M&G* has also struggled with a technological strategy and its implementation in its newsroom. Beyond the presence of people like Irwin Manoim, Matthew Buckland and Chris Roper, among others, the *M&G* has not had a focused digital champion in the newsroom for some time. This has impacted the organisation significantly as it hobbled from one technology to the next on a trial and error basis. Patel is not shy to admit to this problem during our interview, "We've been slow and sluggish in getting subscriptions because of our technology issues therefore print had to pay the bills" (Patel, 2020, interview). In some ways, though, I would argue that it is the legacy of Manoim, in testing things out in the early days of new media technologies in South Africa, often on a shoestring budget, that has lingered in the newsroom. There has never been a prioritising of the digital product and the attitude to technology has remained experimental but no fundamental.

The crux of this chapter's findings is that the *M&G* is not practising online journalism in a dedicated and committed way and remains a long way off from being a digital and social first publication. What it is doing is another guise of the repackaging of print-based content for online, which was once referred to as the process of 'shovelling' content. The organisation is unlikely to shift this cultural ideology without a drastic intervention in the processes and practices as they currently exist. And, that is not likely to happen unless the paper ceases to be the centre of the organisation's operation. More could be done to get journalists to push their stories online. There is a clear disconnect between what the online team does in relation to the rest of the journalists. In addition, there is no add-on tools or facilities to the content loaded to the site from the newspaper. The digital champions who understand the value of online in driving online traffic through a vibrant website a few and far between in the *M&G* newsroom and with the focus on the print newspaper, this *M&G* newsroom is unlikely to successfully shift to a digital publication.

Chapter Eight: *It's the end of journalism as we know it*

8.1. Introduction

This chapter is an autoethnography of myself as a teacher of journalism in the time of a serious decline in the journalism profession and industry, hastened, in part, by the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a time of seismic shifts and equally perilous uncertainty, in the global and local journalism industry. This autoethnography is carried out in order to answer one of the sub-questions of this study: "How does what I teach in journalism honours at Wits University match journalism practice at the *M&G?*

The aim of this chapter is to understand how shifts in journalism practice as evidenced by the case study of the *M&G* are reflected in what is taught at tertiary level, specifically at a South African university. This chapter does not attempt to draw a comparison between the student newspaper, *Wits Vuvuzela*, the teaching tool at Wits Journalism, and commercial publication, the *M&G* as these operate under vastly different circumstances. The *Wits Vuvuzela* is not a case study in this chapter, instead it forms part of the reflection required by the autoethnographic method.

It will also aim to understand what, if anything, needs to change.[90] The chapter also considers the question of who (the journalism industry or the journalism education institution) should determine the shape and course of journalism education now that the industry, which has always taken the lead, finds is in a state of seemingly perpetual crisis.

This chapter uses the approach of Deuze and Witschge (2017), who argue for a new trajectory in journalism studies, one that accounts for the lack of coherence in how the practice of journalism is defined or conceptualised in contemporary society. They argue that the newsroom-centricity of journalism studies research (which has formed a significant part of the literature used in this study), has rendered an inaccurate characterisation of the practice of journalism. This is mostly because these studies ignore the fact that journalism is happening, and has always happened, in spaces outside of the ideal-typical newsroom. The argument of Deuze and Witschge (2017), is critical to this chapter as they add that, "The scholarly consensus on professional routines that make up newswork in newsrooms has been consolidated in journalism education where such routines become fixed elements in the coursework for print, broadcast, and online sequences (Deuze & Witschge, 2017:169). In other words,

[90] It is important to point out that the pool of journalists in South Africa, across the spectrum of the news media, is divided into those who have a formal education in journalism and those who don't. It is not within the purview of this study to compare these two groups, but it needs saying that not all journalists in South Africa are formally trained and even fewer have a tertiary education in journalism. I would hesitate to give a number or a percentage that reflects the split, so this comment is anecdotal based on my interaction with journalists in newsrooms and with those that come to study at Wits Journalism in the mid-career programme.

journalism education is built on what is understood to be professional practice as it happens in newsrooms.

In the current professional identity dissonance in the journalism industry, Deuze and Witschge argue that journalism educators respond in one of two ways. One is to clamour to hold all the parts together which invariably results in "impressive handbooks, canonical anthologies, readers, and companion volumes (and corresponding special issues of scholarly journals and conferences)" (2017:166). A second response, they write (Deuze & Witschge, 2017:166), is to embrace the chaos which:

> … Proves to be an often exciting and bewildering experience, leading to a wide variety of studies and conceptualizations of journalism in a post-industrial era, often featuring particularistic work on emerging genres, formats, and types of journalism.

Deuze and Witschge's (2017:177), conceptualisation of how we should think about journalism going forward is used in this chapter as a lens through which the analysis that follows takes place:

> Journalism takes place in increasingly networked settings, in formal as well as informal contexts, involving a wide range of actors and actants in various instances of both paid and free labour … covering news in real-time across multiplying platforms, often in competition or collaboration with publics.

The chapter also uses the ideas of Banda *et al*., (2007) and Ogola (2015), who argue that journalism education taught on the African continent must shift its gaze from western modalities in order to truly respond to the needs of African people. This is congruent with the work of Mabweazara (2014) and Chuma (2010), both of whom argue for a localisation of African journalism studies perspectives and theoretical lenses, and whose work frames this study. A critique of the teaching hospital[91], leaning significantly on Mensing and Ryfe (2013), is undertaken as part of this chapter, as I reflect on my experiences in using this model to teach journalism at Wits University.

8.2. The autoethnographic approach

Autoethnography as a method is detailed in Chapter Three, which describes and justifies the variety of methods used in this study. Autoethnography is undertaken here as it is the appropriate instrument to connect the findings from the study of the digital transition at the *M&G*, an established, commercial, independent newsroom in South Africa, with the teaching of journalism at a recognised department of journalism at one of the biggest academic institutions in the country.

[91] The teaching hospital model of teaching rests on the idea that the student learns by doing. It takes its lead from medicine where doctors-to-be are trained in hospitals alongside professionals to apply the knowledge learned from books and in lectures (Newton, 2013).

It is critical to point out, that this chapter is not a comparison between the two newsrooms but rather a reflection of what has been found about the *M&G*'s digital transition through this study and what I have experienced in the transition of the *Wits Vuvuzela* to a digital-only publication. An autoethnography is, in part, a reflection of one's personal experiences but more critically, in academic research, involves the linking of these experiences and reflections to hooks within a broader framework of social and political issues, amongst others[92] (Adams *et al.*, 2015). This approach makes space for me, as the researcher, to infuse this study with my voice and, in so doing, provide a first-person narrative of the teaching of journalism at a South African university. I consider this use of autoethnography as a legitimate way of reflecting on a localised experience and context-specific analysis of journalism education that is called for in a study of journalism in a South African and African context (Banda, 2007).

8.3. Background to Wits Journalism

The Wits Journalism department was established in 2001,[93] and Anton Harber, the co-founder of the *Weekly Mail* and former editor of the *M&G*, took up the externally- funded Caxton Chair in Journalism as the first head of department (*The Citizen*, 2001) shortly thereafter. The department was initially started as a postgraduate offering through the Wits Faculty of Humanities Graduate Studies centre, under the coordination of media scholar Eve Bertelsen (*Mail & Guardian*, 2000:7). At the time, the professional training component of the department was provided by Johannesburg-based training organisation, the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ), and included "feature and hard-news writing; ethics; writing for print and writing for the electronic media[94]; media and the law" (Daniels, 2000:7).

Harber's appointment to the department brought his experience in print newspaper experience amassed during his time at the *Weekly Mail* and the *M&G* to Wits University. The first employees of the department included Lesley Cowling, Irwin Manoim, Jo-Anne Richards, Franz Kruger and Hugh

[92] This chapter is being written under various levels of lockdown (March-August 2020) in South Africa where my employer, Wits University, has deployed 'emergency remote teaching,' as students and staff are largely expected to remain homebound. As the coordinator of the Career-Entry programme at Wits Journalism, the most practical programme offered by Wits Journalism, I have had to pivot to a purely digital operation in terms of what and how I teach on a daily basis.

[93] Wits University was a late arrival to the journalism education party in South Africa. Du Toit and De Beer write that, "The first journalism education programme was established in 1959 at the University of Potchefstroom (now North-West University), and the second four years later at Unisa," (2010:13) Communications departments with elements of journalism teaching were established at the University of Johannesburg (formerly the Rand Afrikaans University), and the University of the Free State in the 1970s (Du Toit & De Beer, 2010:13).

[94] The "writing for the electronic media" component was explained later in the article as "computer-assisted journalism, and computer assisted research", and not online journalism as it is currently understood, (Daniels, 2000:7).

Lewin, all of whom had gone through the *M&G* newsroom at some point in their careers.[95] Kruger, Cowling and Harber are still employed at Wits Journalism. I joined Wits Journalism on an initial six-month contract starting in February 2012 in the role as the 'online coordinator'.

8.3.1. The *Wits Vuvuzela* as a teaching hospital

The *Wits Vuvuzela* newspaper was established by the Wits Journalism department in 2004, as the site of experiential learning for students in the career-entry journalism honours programme. The programme runs at fourth year level, taking in no more than 24 students who work in a one-person-one-workstation newsroom[96]. The *Wits Vuvuzela* is a tool in the teaching hospital mould which Eric Newton (2012), describes as, "a model of learning-by-doing that includes college students, professors and professionals working together under one "digital roof" for the benefit of a community". In being a teaching hospital for journalism, the *Wits Vuvuzela* is meant to look to the industry, and to newsrooms like the *M&G*, for direction.

The print newspaper, known then as *Vuvuzela,* was launched three years after the host department of journalism and media studies itself had been established. The newspaper emerged as the teaching tool of the new department, partly in response to calls from the journalism industry through the Sanef audit of journalism skills for better training of journalists in South Africa (Steyn & De Beer, 2002; Cowling & Harber, 2005:247).[97] Deuze, in response to the Sanef audit, wrote that,

> The Sanef report among others calls for a renewed emphasis on 'life skills' on the level of communication, motivation, professionalization and ethical perception. It can be seen as a concerted effort to enhance the 'critical reflectiveness' of media practitioners, educating for thinking, or, in other words, the professionalization of journalism education to correspond with emerging trends in news work. (Deuze, 2002:92)

The problem of the lack of access to on-the-job or professional training as expressed in the Sanef audit, (Steyn & De Beer, 2002), has not disappeared in the South African media landscape. In the 2014 *State of the Newsroom* report, Daniels wrote of the decline in on-the-job training through mentorship and professional development: "A consistent theme from trainers was the need for more formal mentorships but concomitant to this was that senior journalists were too overloaded to provide this. Most journalists

[95] Information verified using the journalism.co.za snapshot from 8 June 2003, taken by the Google Wayback machine (web.archive.org).
[96] The *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom is located on the tenth floor of the Wits Arts Museum building in Braamfontein, on the border of the Johannesburg CBD, giving the students access to the heart of the country's most vibrant economic and political spaces.
[97] Rhodes University had acquired local Grahamstown community newspaper *Grocott's Mail* in 2003, "as its site of experiential learning for journalism students," (Garman, 2010:58).

interviewed – senior journalists with more than 10 years' experience – were asking for training to meet new-media requirements for the newsroom in transition, especially online journalism" (Daniels, 2014:64). The need for training is clear, and newsrooms lack the time and resources to provide this professional development which makes programmes like the career-entry honour degree at Wits University relevant still.

The *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom, was conceptualised in line with the experiences of the founding members of staff of Wits Journalism in 2004, all of whom had a long term association with the *M&G* in its early days.[98] In 2010, Cowling and Harber referred to the *Wits Vuvuzela* as a teaching tool producing work closely supervised by mentors, "which means that *Vuvuzela* is not a radical, experimental student publication (2010:249). The implication in this statement is that the teaching staff acted as a buffer against the radicalism of the students. Furthermore, that the staff were there to train according to consensually-accepted standards of international journalism practices. Harber told the *Citizen* newspaper in 2001, that, "We hope to put the industry and the academy on the same path," (*Citizen*, 2001). This chapter interprets this approach vis-à-vis my own teaching experience and knowledge of the *M&G* as gleaned through this study.

8.4. Joining Wits Journalism and shifting the *Wits Vuvuzela* to digital

I came to Wits Journalism never having been in a professional newsroom. Starting in 1996, I spent four years as a student journalist at *Dome Newspaper*, one of the country's oldest student newspapers based at my undergraduate alma mater, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, (UKZN). Between 1996 and 2001, I performed the roles of sub-editor, layout and production editor, and co-editor of the newspaper at different times. These skills in print production, which was cut-and-paste-based at that time, were happening at the same time that I was learning about the digital world through my academic experiences in the department of historical studies at UKZN which housed a programme on digital literacy. These dual, formal and informal, learning experiences prepared me for the the role at Wits Journalism, despite my lack of professional newsroom experience.

I initially fulfilled the role of the 'online coordinator' at Wits Journalism which involved assisting the students career-entry programme, to publish their work from the weekly print newspaper, the *Wits Vuvuzela*, on the online platform, www.witsvuvuzela.com, and for the two social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook. When I started at *Wits Vuvuzela*, the curriculum of the career-entry honours in journalism programme was focused on the production of the print newspaper. The mentors steered the

[98] And, as this study itself shows, the *M&G* was heavily influenced by western newsrooms such as the *Guardian* in the United Kingdom. When I arrived at Wits Journalism in 2012, even the *Wits Vuvuzela* style guide was modelled on that of the *M&G*.

direction of the newspaper in line with their impressions of what the industry needs were of new journalism graduates. The mentors are professionals who are employed by Wits Journalism to work closely with the student journalists to produce the publication.

8.4.1. A shifting curriculum towards a culture of online journalism

Over the last eight years, the culture of the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom has shifted from focus on the mentors' impression of the news agenda to that of the students'. Today, the teaching team works with the career-entry students act as pastoral mentors to the students in producing news that the latter finds newsworthy based on their experiences as students based in Johannesburg. The students now set the news agenda which changes from year to year depending on the particular group of students that constitute the class. This is a critical move towards recognising that newsrooms are reflective of the cultures of the people who inhabit them. Or, as Mabweazara puts it (2018:2), recognising that journalism is an "inherently contextually rooted profession". This is more difficult to achieve in a commercial newsroom like the *M&G*, where there are clear restrictions on the personalisation of the practice of journalism in line with professional boundaries.

I have tried to make space for the voice of the student in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newspaper without comprising independence and fairness as I recognise that within a South African community newsroom, the civic responsibilities and ideologies of the students cannot be separated from their work as student journalists. Banda *et al*., (2007:165), write that journalism education in South Africa, in the post-apartheid period, "has largely become driven by industrial and commercial imperatives, rather than by the more civic-minded and critical approach of a university-based education, resulting in a functionalist approach to learning – as 'training'." These attempts have not always worked as the diversity of students that come into the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom bring with them a multiplicity of life experiences rooted in vastly differing contexts, cultures and perspectives which are not always in harmony with one another. Often there are discouraging disagreements but making the space for open and transparent discussion of these differences, this thesis suggests, is critical in a newsroom of the future. This is not to say that a newsroom like the *M&G* can simply bend to the individual ideologies of its employees but that the journalism produced by these newsrooms, can possibly learn from the experiences of its journalists.

At the same time, I have tried to infuse a stronger culture of professional development in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom with firm deadlines, consequences like reshooting video or photographs that are not up to standard, and team responsibilities where each person's contribution is required to make the publication stronger. These measures are intended to give the students a taste of the expectations in a professional working environment. These requirements are not always met though, as students can be irresponsible with their time and commitments, (like some employees in any organisation), but by the

end of the year, the entire class has had a taste of what it is like to be in the workplace instead of just having the experience of being at a university.

8.4.2. Ending the print newspaper to enable a transition to digital

The *Wits Vuvuzela* newspaper was printed until the end of 2019, when I, as the coordinator and in line with my responsibility to oversee the curriculum development, decided that it there was no more room for its time- and resource-intensive production demands in the career-entry programme. Ending the run of the print newspaper was an unpopular move in a department filled with former print journalists but one which has set the newsroom on the path of online journalism that has flourished especially under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. A clear shortcoming of putting an end to the newspaper was that workers at the institution who don't often have access to disposable data would not be able to pick up the printed paper.

"The paper has grown into an eight-page, full-colour tabloid with advertisements, and is distributed free every Friday during term-time by the students themselves", wrote Cowling and Harber of the paper in its 6th year (2010:248). It is remarkable that the paper remained the centre of the programme despite pressures on the industry to pivot to digital. In many ways, the career-entry programme seemed rooted in the belief of many South African newsrooms like the *M&G* that the print newspaper held a special place in South African society. The centrality of the *Wits Vuvuzela* to the career-entry programme was representative of the beliefs of the individuals who drove the academic agenda of the journalism department and their long-formed attitudes about the ideal-typical shape and form of journalism. In other words, the *Wits Vuvuzela* print newspaper remained central to the programme for a long time because the staff of the department who oversaw the career-entry programme, believed that a print newspaper was critical to journalism education.

The work week in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom was developed around the Thursday 12pm deadline, which was when the paper was sent to the printer to ensure delivery the following morning. When I first joined the programme in 2012, I spent six months supporting the print publication in my role as the online coordinator when I was asked to take on the additional responsibility of the print coordinator. Combined with my online role, this was an opportunity to synergise the print newspaper and the website and to implement a new workflow incorporating both platforms instead of operating in silos.

At that point, in 2012 and 2013, the students were not required to have any individual social media accounts for assessment purposes. These platforms were still quite new in South Africa and the impact that these platforms were to have on journalism was not yet known. The newspaper's Facebook (www.facebook.com/witsvuvuzela) and Twitter (@witsvuvuzela) accounts were not closely integrated into the newsroom workflow. Initially, I managed the accounts personally, posting links to the social

media accounts, together with former students who were working in the department as interns. In all honesty, audience engagement and social media strategy were not things I was thinking about at that time. The website itself (*witsvuvuzela.com*) still had its comments sections open, which, at that point, was still the norm for online newspapers. The students were able to upload content, while I checked every single post for style, formatting and technical issues. In this way, the online production process mirrored the print production process in terms of close sub-editing. The comments section had to be monitored daily for profanity, abusive or hateful comments and this responsibility was given to the students and started them down the path of engaging with audiences.

8.4.3. Shifts in the journalism education curriculum

In 2012, the focus of the programme was on the writing of hard news and feature articles through the use of the weekly print newspaper. The workflow of this semi-professional newsroom was centred on production of the print newspaper. As part of the training in the honour's year, the student journalists were expected in 2012 to:

- Pitch stories in news conference on a Monday - these were stories they identified themselves;
- Research, write and sub-edit work during the course of the week;
- Take photographs for their stories;
- Design and lay out the weekly newspaper;
- Distribute the weekly newspaper across the campus.

The assessment criteria of the course is based on these responsibilities and tasks alone. The 2013 *State of the newsroom* report produced by Wits Journalism, based on a survey they had conducted, showed a significant need for re-skilling among working journalists, "particularly in the field of online journalism" (Daniels, 2013:vii). It was clear from the report that urgent training was needed to meet the demands of online publishing as it was developing across the globe. It was in the same year that I had started teaching a course called Online Journalism as a two-week block release certificate course to students from outside Wits Journalism, and some Masters' students from inside. The course was extremely popular with mid-career journalists who expressed a desire to upskill to online production. The aim of the course was to teach journalists how to think visually, to work within a multimedia workflow, and to make use of multimedia tools for storytelling. The Online Journalism course was my first attempt at journalism curriculum development and at conceptualising a multimedia workflow within a digital newsroom which integrated the online components with the print.

After teaching the Online Journalism course for the first time in 2013, I introduced an extension to production Thursdays in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom, expecting the student journalists to attend to the

online platforms for publishing and social media scheduling. This was one way of ensuring that the students were reposting content from the newspaper by adding web-based elements like hyperlinks, additional pictures, related links, different caption styles, and so on, to the stories for publishing over the course of the weekend. The publishing schedule had to be mapped out and, in this way, we started to pay attention to data analytics and asked questions about when readers consumed our content and what content was popular at different times in the week. A social media calendar started to take shape as the newsroom planned the publishing of the stories over the course of the Friday afternoon and into the weekend. We took care to do this only after the distribution of the newspaper at 12pm on all campuses, never before, as the fear of cannibalising the newspaper still loomed large. It was a messy process even though, on paper, it sounded like we were doing all the right things.

The career-entry degree has always, from its inception, consisted of five courses, four compulsory courses and one chosen from the options of television journalism, photography and radio journalism. Two of the compulsory courses, Journalism Practice A and B, focus on teaching the fundamentals of journalism and currently includes the following topics:

- Writing of hard news and features
- Journalism Ethics and the South African Press Code
- Media law
- Court reporting
- Reporting on children

These two courses are primarily practical in nature, and the students are trained in the use of cameras for videography and photography, the use of their phones for audio, basic HTML and CMS development, online layout and production, basic graphic design and the use of editing suites for multimedia. The biggest shortcoming of the curriculum is the limited amount of time in which it is delivered. The volume of work involved in this curriculum is delivered over an academic year which means an intense year of learning in which there is little room for specialisation. The consequence of this is that the programme produces generalists instead of specialists. The structure of the two journalism practice courses allows the coordinator to adjust the curriculum on an annual basis to remove components which are no longer relevant such a shorthand, and include those which becomes more useful to journalism education such as podcasting.

8.4.4. How the rant of a madman broke the print paper's hold on the newsroom

The shift to digital in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newspaper started in earnest in 2013, when Wits University was rocked by a sexual harassment scandal involving a number of lecturers. The matter started with a

Sunday Times exposé on its front page on 3 March 2013, about a Wits drama lecturer who was accused of sexual harassment by a number of students. The *Wits Vuvuzela* news conference the next morning focused on this story and considered how the *Sunday Times* could have gotten a story from our beat before we did. The team was resolute that they would dig deeper and 'add legs' to the story. The story grew, and by September that year, *Wits Vuvuzela* had exposed three other sex pests at Wits University, which led to a university-wide investigation, disciplinary action and dismissals. One of the more positive outcomes was the establishment of a separate entity to deal with gender-based violence cases at the institution.

The nationwide interest in the story sparked an increase in traffic to the *Wits Vuvuzela* website which did not feature as more than an added burden in the lives of the student journalists until that point. The paper was being published on a weekly basis but there were developments happening daily. I recall a particular moment which changed how the *Wits Vuvuzela* published news. The lecturer who been accused of sexual harassment by the *Sunday Times* called into the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom while we were busy producing the print newspaper on 30 May 2013. He wanted to give his side of the story. The journalist wrote the story and the team grappled with the ethics of putting out the story as it may come across as showing sympathy with the accused. Eventually we decided that, based on what he had said, (it was in many ways, the rant of a madman), the story would speak for itself.

The story was written up and was to lead the paper for the week. The newsroom in 2013 was still a space in which the strongest and hardest-hitting stories were saved for the print paper and only stories that did not make the cut for the paper, were published online first. It was at this point, that I pushed for the story to be published immediately on our website. I argued that the story had national traction and interest, and waiting for the paper which would only be distributed the day after could potentially affect our exclusive access to the story in that the accused may turn elsewhere. It was a defining moment, as the website was to scoop the print paper for the very first time. The student journalists agreed with me and we ran the story online first, a pivotal moment in the history of the *Wits Vuvuzela*.

The decision to publish to the website first was not determined by ideology, by newsroom culture, by habits or reader demands, it was based on the very nature of news in a digital environment and how we expected the news to perform on that platform. Breaking news could not wait for a weekly newspaper, as the story could quickly change. It was a turning point, as the *Wits Vuvuzela* website[99] had secured the lead story of the week, something that had never happened in the history of the newspaper. Unfortunately, this line of decision-making did not persist as the newsroom and its student journalists often settled back into their print–focused mindsets as the paper remained central to the weekly

[99] So popular was the reporting on the sexual harassment cases at Wits that at one point the witsvuvuzela.com server simply gave up due to the unprecedented high volumes of traffic on the site. To compensate, we published to our department's website in order to get the story out.

production cycle. In this way, it is understandable that the *M&G* has not been able to transition to digital easily, as the habits of journalists, even student journalists, are difficult to change.

That the *Wits Vuvuzela* was moving towards a more digital newsroom could not be expressed better than through the numbers. The site's traffic went from 66 500 in 2012 to 190 900 in 2013[100]. It was during 2015 that the online presence grew substantially, but not through the #FeesMustFall protests during which the newsroom effectively shut down[101]. The traffic on the site spiked through the exclusive coverage of controversial student leader Mcebo Dlamini who had lied that he was the son of one of the Sisulu brothers, a prominent South Africa political family. By this point in 2015, the *Wits Vuvuzela* student journalists were required to pitch specific online components to their print stories. The student journalists no longer assumed that a pitch would be in the format of text – the students were being trained to think visually and to tell different parts of their stories using multimedia. This shift in the curriculum had to be calculated and forced. If left to their own devices, the student journalists would simply have defaulted to the pitching and production of text-based stories.

The surge in traffic to over 600 000 hits on witsvuvuzela.com over the 7-month publishing period in 2013 remains unsurpassed. But, compared to the 66 500/year visits that the site had seen just three years earlier, it is clear that the shifts to online journalism has shown success in distributing the news produced to a larger audience. The lesson here was that shifting the newsroom culture of the *Wits Vuvuzela* from a print-focussed one to a digital newsroom required a high-level push in that direction, regularly and consistently. This is an ongoing project for someone who needs to act as the digital champion as even today, the student journalists choose text-based stories over multi-media ones as required for the website. As discussed in Chapter Seven, this push is not happening at the *M&G* and as such, the organisation finds itself in a difficult space where it continues to focus on a print publication with diminishing returns. As the editor of the *Wits Vuvuzela* and the coordinator of the career-entry honours programme, I did not need to persuade my students, I could simply, with the assistance of the teaching team, pivot to a new way of doing things of them and the newsroom followed. There was little choice among the staff and the student journalists of the *Wits Vuvuzela*, which is not the case among the staff of the *M&G* who still had the ability to push back against a digital transition. The ability to pivot to new ways of doing things at the *Wits Vuvuzela* is in itself, a significant cultural shift which allows innovation to happen when needed. This is more difficult to achieve in a commercial entity with fixed structures and a ideological orientation.

[100] These numbers are sourced from the WordPress Jetpack statistics available on the backend of witsvuvuzela.com.
[101] Many of the *Wits Vuvuzela* student journalists in the first year of the *#FeesMustFall* protests declared that they did not want to produce journalism for our department, for political reasons.

8.4.5. *Wits Vuvuzela* goes exclusively online

The #FeesMustFall protests dominated the news in South Africa in 2016. Universities across the countries were shut down for extended periods of time and many protestors found themselves behind bars if not injured through police-discharged rubber bullets and teargas. The career-entry programme suspended course operations in line with the university's directives, but the newsroom continued to cover the protests. As I had done the previous year, I gave the *Wits Vuvuzela* student journalist three options:

1. Continue as journalists and report on the protests for *Wits Vuvuzela;*
2. Exercise your right to protest but you cannot practice as a journalist at the same time;
3. Choose to stay away from campus and from the newsroom during the course of the protests.

It is worth saying that these options are peculiar to a student newsroom and would not be allowed in a professional newsroom like the *M&G* irrespective of how responsive the newsroom is to the needs of its journalists. The majority of the 2016 career-entry honours class choose the first option and the newsroom shifted to a decentralised newsroom dependent on WhatsApp to coordinate the movements of the journalists, provide backup support to one another, and to ensure the safety of the students who found themselves in protest scenarios for the first time in their lives.

It was during this protest that it became obvious that the website as a new technology had become outdated and could not keep up with the type of ambient news that Hermida (2010), had conceived of. We turned to our social media platforms for up to the minute reporting and visual storytelling. Facebook was used for daily, short reports, photos and photo-essays. Twitter was used for regular updates, along with live videos and photographs. The content produced for all of these platforms provided the notes for the end of day analysis or wrap-up.

I worked in the field with the students daily, ensuring that they were keeping themselves safe, taking photos alongside them, and sometimes for them if they needed a photographer. As much I relished the opportunity to work in the field with the students, the experience gave me invaluable insight into how news producers needed to have enough flexibility to deliver news to their audiences in the ways that the latter demands it. The arrangements that were put in place for the duration of these protests ensured that the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom was responsive to the demands of the time and place.

The flexibility to pivot quickly and still deliver quality content was only possible with a digitally-focused newsroom that has the space to adapt. The team eventually produced a paper towards the end of the protests which gave a space to a variety of views; understanding that in that moment, our readers wanted to hear from the individuals leading the protests or pushing back against them, and not from the journalists telling the story. The news agenda was entirely driven by the student journalists, while mentors were simply on hand to assist with production. The student journalists were able to put together

a paper that used their journalism skills to tell the stories they wanted to hear as students sympathetic to one or other side of the #FeesMustFall debate. This quick pivot to publishing on new platforms is appears not to be possible at the *M&G* given its focus on the print product as the core of its functions. On the one hand, its journalists are not trained to do it and on the other, the disruption to the newspaper's exclusive hold on the most important stories is seemingly difficult to break.

8.4.6. Shedding the chains of the paper for journalism to flourish

> *"Thinking digitally could save us. Yet two decades after the dawn of this new age, most journalists and journalism educators still resist it," (Newton, 2013).*

In January 2020, at a strategy meeting of the journalism department, I formally tabled a proposal to stop the publication of the print newspaper, and to shift completely to digital production[102]. The proposal had been brewing for two years. In 2018, for the first time, I cut back on the number of newspapers we were printing annually. This continued in 2019, but by the end of that year it became obvious that the print newspaper was preventing the students from focusing more on the various components of the course that were crammed in the little time we had. We were losing two to three days a week to production of a newspaper, learning newspaper production skills that the majority of the students would never use in their careers.

The reaction to this proposal was nothing short of disbelief and I found myself facing difficult questions about the direction I was taking the programme in. The reactions were, for me, indicative of a print-focused culture that found the use of new technologies in teaching journalism difficult to conceptualise. One of the common responses to my proposal was that "students need structure," which pointed to the inability to conceive of how journalism could possibly be taught through online or digital publishing. It also signalled to me a belief that journalism skills are fixed and established around the production of a print newspaper, with little room for innovation. The words of Newton (2012), spring to mind as I try to express this collective reaction. He writes (2012), that one of the perils of the teaching hospital model is that "faculty debates over all the details, including a too-literal view of the "teaching hospital" metaphor, can be used as an excuse to resist improvements". The truth is that I did not have the all the answers and every single day in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom is one of experimentation in one way or another. I must acknowledge that in the space of a commercial newsroom like the *M&G*, room for experimentation is seriouslu limited simply because of the financial imperative towards which the

[102] These meetings are held once or twice a year to re-align the various parts of the department with one another. They are sometimes held to talk through academic ideas and possibilities.

organisation has to work, which a student newsroom like the *Wits Vuvuzela* does not have to contend with.

My colleagues were warmer to the idea of introducing podcasting as a new focus in the curriculum this year, but remained resolute that it should not happen at the expense of the paper. As I had done every year, I take the insights and inputs from these meetings under consideration and couple that with what the industry is expecting from a Wits Journalism graduate, along with the experiences of the students in managing their workloads and learning effectively before determining the way forward. These decisions are then run past the career-entry teaching team which includes a full-time writing lecturer and a part-time multimedia mentor, before they become part of the new curriculum deployed in the new year. The print newspaper was not published in 2020, but the journalism of the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom has remained at a high standard and the teaching outcomes not affected in any way.

8.4.7. The current workflow in the newsroom

Over the last three years, the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom has steadily moved towards this point of being a purely digital newsroom. This section looks at the current workflow in the newsroom with reference to the arrangements at the *M&G* (which were explored in greater detail in the preceding chapter), and then moves onto a brief discussion of how the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom has adapted to life under lockdown conditions.

8.4.7.1 News conferences

The regular Monday news conferences herald the start of the week at *Wits Vuvuzela*. Since 2017, the Monday conference is followed by a second diary or production meeting on Wednesday mornings. This meeting was initially introduced to take stock of the stories that were being developed for the paper and to ensure that the team was on track to meet the needs of the space in the paper. However, this has shifted over time to become a second news conference for additional story ideas that appears later in the week. The *M&G* hosts one news conference a week with daily pitches going straight to their *Slack* channel, a more digital approach than the arrangements at *Wits Vuvuzela*. There is no second conference at the *M&G*, instead, there is a Wednesday afternoon production gathering which focuses exclusively on the production of the newspaper.

At the *Wits Vuvuzela*, the students work closely with their assigned mentors on the stories that they produce in a specific week. They also work alongside each other, engaging in peer-to-peer learning which is facilitated by the physical space of the newsroom. Without the pressure of the print newspaper production process, Wednesdays to Fridays are used for teaching and learning of a variety of skills.

8.4.7.2 Online production

The *Wits Vuvuzela* student journalists are individually responsible for producing their own layout on the official website based on the organisation's style guide. Lecturers are the only ones allowed to publish content, ensuring that there is oversight of all the material published. This mechanism of having the students upload their own content ensures that there is continuous learning about this aspect of the workflow. In addition, each student feels a sense of ownership over the publication.

At the *M&G,* the two-person online team is solely responsible for posting content on the official website. There is little to no ownership of the website (as compared to the print paper) by the staff outside of the two online editors and a handful of digitally-savvy staff who feel a responsibility for making the digital project work at the *M&G.* The *M&G*'s journalism is driven by specialists in specific areas and who are not always skilled in the demands of online journalism. This is a difficult scenario to shift as these journalists are already over-burdened with the demands of their specific roles. In this case, it makes sense to have a team dedicated to the online project. Additionally, the production of the *M&G* paper has always been the preserve of a team of designers who were specialists in the area. This culture has persisted even thought the *M&G* has attempted to move all of its staff towards a more converged newsroom.

8.4.7.3 The social media component of the online workflow

The *Wits Vuvuzela* production team changes on a weekly basis to ensure that each student is exposed to various roles and responsibilities in the newsroom. There is a social media editor as part of this weekly production team who is responsible for managing all the social media accounts in a given week. I cannot recall in which year this change was made, but it was about six to seven years ago. This is because it did not make any sense for a lecturer to be handling these accounts, effectively depriving the student journalists of a valuable learning experience.

The social media editor works with the photo and video editor for additional content. However, their primary responsibility is to ensure the content is pushed (distributed via social media for a wider reach) via the various social media channels with the understanding that this is what is needed to drive traffic to the website. All of the students are taught how to manage the social media accounts, how to craft website-based content for the platforms, how to handle engagement, and how to create content specifically for these platforms. All students are also expected to make regularly use of their own Twitter accounts as part of building their by-lines, which I have talked about elsewhere in this thesis.

The *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom publishes to multiple online platforms. These are the spaces where the publication's audiences are primarily found: Facebook and Twitter. A significant amount of traffic to the website (witsvuvuzela.com) comes from these sources. For example, in April 2020, the website attracted 61 000 unique hits, with a sixth of this traffic coming from the two social media platforms. These stats do not account for the actual engagement via the two platforms, which is equally significant. At present, we are producing more content that is tailored for social media, like shorter videos that go directly to Twitter or Facebook, and in some cases, Instagram.

M&G journalists are not required to use social media actively to increase traffic to the website, and most just do not do it as shown in Chapter Seven. This responsibility falls to the two-person online team whereas this function is devolved among the entire student staffing complement of the *Wits Vuvuzela*. In a commercial newsroom like the *M&G*, these responsibilites represent a significant change in the job description of each journalist while in a student newsroom, it counts towards their course worl. These is the obvious difference between the two newsrooms. It seems counter-intuitive to expect individuals not closely connected to a story to push it on social media as is the case at the *M&G* but this culture can only change with clear expectations that social media is part of the responsibilities of each staff member or journalist.

8.4.7.4. A converged workflow

If convergence is taken to mean the coming together of technologies (McQuail, 2005), the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom has achieved this through the integration of its website with the various social media platforms. Analytics, which gives us information about how articles are performing online or via social media, now play a small part in the weekly news conference. The social media editor for the week gives an overview of where we are for the week in terms of likes, shares, follows and comments, and how that has changed from the week before. The class discusses the possible reasons for these changes – what worked and what did not, with the aim of improving the social media engagement. In short, the *Wits Vuvuzela* social media stats are an intrinsic part of the weekly production process. However, I do believe that the role of analytics in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom needs more focus and the outcomes of our weekly discussions need a clear operational plan. This means delivering more of what has worked in a given week as a way of responding to the needs of our audience. The depth of the reporting on the analytics depends on the student presenting the information in a given week. At times, there are students who are invested in the process and do a thorough job of gathering and reporting the statistics. Then there are students who are not particularly interested in this aspect of the work, and so the information is limited. While this is regrettable, the inclusion of analytics in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom discussion is a positive step in the right direction and can only be improved.

The student journalists maintain a web-based portfolio as the primary site for their published work for assessment purposes. This practice was introduced in 2014 to teach the students how to build WordPress sites from scratch and to customise them to individual specification. The *Wits Vuvuzela* website is built on the WordPress CMS, so the students are able to learn web management through their own sites. These portfolios act as online CVs, and are valued by potential employers, based on the feedback I have received from editors.

In 2017, my colleague introduced a pitch form which includes questions around platform and outputs. This was done to encourage the students to think visually and to plan their multimedia components at the very outset. In 2012, during the early years of my involvement in the department, the students pitched text pieces with multimedia story as a nice-to-have. Now, the students pitch their stories based on which platform tells the story best. This, for me, is the biggest shift I have seen in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom. The *M&G* news pitches still focus on the story which is assumed to be for the newspaper. It is up to the individual desk *M&G* editors or the editor to decide whether a story should be published to the website ahead of the print edition – this determination is usually based on time and not on the importance of the story. There are individuals in the organisation who drive multimedia thinking in the news conference and this seems to be a positive start towards convergence of the *M&G* newsroom.

8.4.7.5. A digitally-focused journalism curriculum

Students in the career-entry programme are taught at the very outset that they are building their by-lines through their work at *Wits Vuvuzela*. The publication functions not only as a teaching hospital, but in the digital space, the publication functions as a tool to build the reputations of the student journalists before they move into the world of professional work. The curriculum is structured to teach journalism but to also give the student journalists a year of journalism experience through which they build a reputation for themselves.

These strong by-lines are not just for journalism but are part of the growing significance of social media in the information economy. For the first time in 2020, the *Wits Vuvuzela* students were given a class on building their online brands by a brand specialist and were required to create a *LinkedIn* profile as part of their course requirements. In addition, they were taught how to develop a one-page CV. These may seem out of place in a journalism curriculum, but we are focused on the need to ensure that our graduates are able to conduct themselves professionally and to start thinking about opportunities outside of a newsroom. As newsrooms lay off fulltime journalists in favour of casualisation, the *Wits Vuvuzela* needs to address skills for its journalists to operate as freelancers. This is a gap in the curriculum that needs to be addressed.

8.4.8. Reflections on the future of the teaching hospital model in journalism education

Mensing and Ryfe (2013:26), argue that the teaching hospital "metaphor is embedded in a conceptualization of journalism and of democracy that is unravelling". This is congruent with arguments put forward by Deuze and Witschge (2017), that frames this chapter – that the conceptualisation of journalism is flawed for many reasons, and the future of it must account for the many spaces in which journalism is produced and the many different types of individuals who produce it. I agree with these arguments within the current context of uncertainty and upheaval in the journalism industry. It is for this reason that I consider the future of the teaching hospital in journalism in this section of the chapter.

Nicolas Lemann, a former head of Columbia Journalism, wrote in 2009 that, "journalism schools ought to explore, and are already exploring, the possibility of becoming significant producers of original news reporting to make up for the loss of the reporting that economically devastated news organizations can no longer afford." Lemann's article, which appeared on the *Chronical of Higher Education* website, is often cited as the origins of the teaching hospital for journalism model. His argument, though, had little to with giving students practical experience in what they were learning about and more to do with responding to a hyper-local news lacuna.

My experiences at *Wits Vuvuzela* over the last eight years, attempting to run a newsroom that does not generate any significant income within the university space, has been a resource-intensive endeavour which ultimately links the training of students to one site of journalism production, that of the newsroom. The reality, though, is that many of the graduates of my programme are finding their roles in spaces outside of traditional newsrooms. I would suggest that Covid-19 is not an extinction-level event for journalism, but it may be for the traditional and conventional newsroom. We, therefore, need to think very seriously about the relevance of a journalism education within this context. I do agree with Lemann, though, that, "Like teaching hospitals, journalism schools can provide essential services to their communities while they are educating their students" (2009).

Late in 2019, I presented a proposal to the staff of the journalism department, at a strategy meeting, to shift from an in-house teaching hospital to the model used in medical schools which places their students in local hospitals. The proposal was motivated by a question that I was mulling over: What are we teaching the students through this mimicking of a conventional newsroom which will sooner, rather than later, cease to exist in its current form? I made the proposal within the context of ever-shrinking resources, coupled with growing demands on the career-entry programme to teach more skills as the industry demanded. I was asking the department to consider a new teaching model that involves distributing the responsibilities of the teaching hospital to newsrooms around us in Johannesburg through a reconfiguration of the classroom/newsroom partnership that is already in existence.

The proposal would mean putting an end to the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom, and rather than training the students through this mechanism, that we train them through unpaid internships in local newsrooms. I did feel, and continue to feel, strongly that local newsrooms would readily accept unpaid interns for at least a year at a time, but this assumption has not been tested in any way. The teaching and assessment element of the programme would continue at Wits Journalism and the physical newsroom space would be repurposed as a teaching venue. My proposal was criticised for wanting to close the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom which is a strong brand and easily recognised, a valid reaction. However, I am hopeful that the matter will be revisited in light of additional financial constraints that are likely to affect higher education in the coming year.

Cowling and Harber (2005:252), wrote of the career-entry programme in 2004:

> Socialisation into the relatively idealistic journalistic work at *Vuvuzela* may also set students up for conflict when they are required to function in more commercialised environments. To avoid this pitfall, which we would argue lies at the heart of the practice vs. theory debate, requires that the *Vuvuzela* experience needs to contain that dimension of critical reflection that is usually the domain of media theory.

In 2020, I would add that it is imperative that this "critical reflection" is expected not only of the students of journalism but its teachers too.

8.5. Who sets the agenda in journalism education?

In this section of this chapter, I ask the question: Who sets the agenda for journalism education in South Africa? I suggest here that the time has come for journalism schools to stop looking to an industry in disarray for the lead as they have done in the past, but instead to take the lead in charting new directions in conjunction with the industry through experimentation and innovation in our 'teaching hospitals' wherever they are located. This argument is based on the suggestion by Deuze and Witschge (2017), that we need to move away from the cookie-cutter approach to journalism studies. This should be done by considering other spaces of journalism production and looking to other producers of journalism outside of the professionalised journalist.

8.5.1 How I determine the curriculum for the career-entry programme at Wits University

In my eight years of teaching journalism at Wits University, the direction of the curriculum for the career-entry programme represents the vision of the programme coordinator, my vision. The curriculum remained largely the same until 2013, when elements of online publishing were introduced. As I have said elsewhere in this chapter, the staff of the department make some input, particularly in terms of

proposed changes, but the heavy-lifting is left the coordinator, and the career-entry teaching team. Ultimately, though, this curriculum is a result of one person's vision.

As to where my vision as the coordinator takes shape, it takes shape through discussions with newsroom editors or section heads who employ with graduates of my programme; through feedback from former graduates; and from keeping my finger on the pulse of the industry through engagement with published material like the annual *State of the Newsroom* reports, news, analysis articles, and academic papers and presentations. I am also part of media organisations like the Health-e news organisation; *Newzroom Afrika*, a television news channel; and the South African National Editors Forum in various capacities. This gives me insight into the state of journalism in South Africa on an ongoing basis. More importantly, it gives me insights into the shifts and changes which demand a constant adjustment to the career-entry curriculum at Wits Journalism. As to whether this curriculum has any synergy with the curricula at other universities in South Africa, the answer is that I do not know. The reason for this is that there is no consensual journalism curriculum that is deployed across the country. Instead, there are fundamentals of journalism, which take their lead from the field of journalism which, if I had to look at other curricula, I would expect to find. These include journalism ethics, research, newsroom fundamentals, and writing.

8.5.2. Classroom/newsroom partnerships and a fit-for-purpose curriculum

"The responsibility for the quality of South Africa's journalists does not only lie with the training they get, but also with the employer … There must be more effective partnerships between these two main players. Only then will quality improve," writes Pedro Diedrichs (in Deuze et al., 2002:101). The *Wits Vuvuzela* has always maintained partnerships with industry players to not only support deserving students to study journalism, but also to ensure that the students are able to walk into six-month internships directly after graduation for a quick start in the industry. To date, we have maintained partnerships with *Reuters Africa*, *The Star*, *Bloomberg*, *CNBC*, *Primedia*, and *Media24*. This year, *Moneyweb* joined this group. Part of the six months paid internship is spent in the *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom, passing skills onto the new crop of students.

These newsroom/classroom partnerships are a source of insight for me as I design and redesign the curricula of the various courses that form part of the career-entry honours in journalism degree. Once a year, representatives from all of these organisations come to interview potential bursary recipients. It is during this time, that I hear from them about graduates and about their adaptability to the workplace. These discussions are candid and go a long way to ensuring that the curriculum is fit-for-purpose but of course, we cannot do everything in 9 months and not all the students come out of the programme equally competent.

The *Wits Vuvuzela* teaching hospital model is favoured by the industry, as it has been shown to be a better way of teaching, training and socialising students to be journalists. Susan Tyler Eastman, writing in Deuze *et al.*, (2002:105), says:

> We have all heard young people claim that 'they learned more in the first year on the job than they did in their whole educations! … But what they really mean is that the embarrassment of erring in front of editors, directors, producers, or whomever they report to, had a powerful and lasting impact. A boss's red pencil carries far more clout than a teacher. Although educators in colleges and universities cannot and should not use embarrassment as a teaching technique (or wield the immense power of salary and job cuts), public or even private shaming can be a mammothly motivating tool for young people when it first occurs.

The *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom attempts to give its student journalists some experience of the professional workspace and of close mentoring in order to practice journalism while they are learning about it.

8.5.3. The need for a consensual journalism curriculum

The 2014 *State of the Newsroom* report indicated that at the time, there were 13 journalism training centres across the spectrum of tertiary education in South Africa (Daniels, 2015:89).[103] Due to a shrinking industry, the competition to enrol some of the ever-declining pool of journalism students is intense.[104] This competition is amplified by the need to secure newsroom/classroom partnerships. These not only have significant reputational benefit to the organisation, but also ensure that internships are available to graduates of journalism programmes. I would suggest that this is a possible reason for the lack of collaboration on what journalism education should look like across journalism schools.

There is little to no collaboration among the journalism schools in the country apart from their assistance to each other for academic assessment[105]. This kind of collaboration would exist in academic symposia, conferences or even academic papers such as those that happened before the last decade. The *African Journalism Studies*, previously known as *Ecquid Novi,* published a special edition focusing on

[103] The 2014 State of the Newsroom listed these 13 departments (which may include communications or journalism, media studies or film and television or a combination of these) at the following institutions: Rhodes University, Wits University, North West University, Stellenbosch, Tshwane University of Technology, University of Johannesburg, University of Pretoria, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Unisa, University of Cape Town, University of Limpopo, Univen, and Zululand, (Daniels, 2015:89).

[104] My reflections on journalism schools in South Africa in this section should be read only within the context of my experience of teaching journalism at a university and should not be taken to reflect what may or may not be happening at other departments within universities.

[105] The university system in South Africa expects assessments to be moderated by academics external to one's institution to avoid bias in marking but also to provide an external view on a course, its aims, outcomes, and the fairness of the assessments within the framework of the outcomes.

journalism education in South Africa 25 years ago. The edition contained articles relating to broadcast journalism education to a shift to a transformation praxis in journalist studies. In 2009, about 35 journalism educators from around the country gathered at Rhodes University, to attend a colloquium that Banda (2010:18), in reflection, refers to as the Grahamstown consultation. One of the aims of the gathering was to "outline and propagate a shared agenda or identity for African journalism education within and without Africa" (Banda, 2006:1). Twenty years ago, the *Rhodes Journalism Review*, an annual publication of the school of journalism at Rhodes, published an edition sub-titled: *Journalism education in an age of radical change.* Of the 39 contributors, the academics hailed from only two of the 13 institutions referred to earlier, Rhodes and the University of Cape Town. These examples show that journalism education collaboration is limited to a few spaces and among a limited number of schools.

Each institution and its staff operate within their silo. The Sanef skills audit of 2002 had the effect of not just identifying those essential skills needed for the post-millennial newsroom, it also operationalised the teaching of these skills through the various journalism schools. At that time, what journalism needed was clear, and each journalism department responded accordingly. Right now, these needs are vague and the direction of journalism education in the country unclear. The problem is compounded by the declining number of jobs for graduates to fill in the industry.

Twenty years ago, when journalism in South Africa was flourishing, the Wits post-graduate journalism programme coordinator Eve Bertelsen said, "Courses in media and journalism are proliferating in universities all over the world because media is a growth area, and in general universities are under pressure to offer career·oriented focuses," (*Mail & Guardian*, 2000:7). A recent report on the state of the media during Covid-19 conducted earlier this year paints a very distressing picture for the future of journalism education at South African universities:

> The Covid-19 crisis has been devastating. The effect can be calculated in jobs lost – still difficult at this stage to ascertain with any certainty – and most importantly in the shrinking of the vital-for-society news ecosystem as the country and the world copes with an unprecedented economic decline. (Rumney, 2020:31)

I do not think that the lack of collaboration is necessarily a problem in that it gives rise to different approaches to journalism education, and produces graduates that do not fit an agreed-to mould. South Africa's intellectual space lacks entities like the American Tow Centre for Digital Journalism, the Knight Foundation or the Poynter Institute. All of these organisations are actively tracking trends, providing insight and analysis of local and international media, and offering thought-leadership which impacts on the industry and on journalism education. Where collaboration would be necessary, I would suggest, is in the decolonisation project, which requires a commitment from journalism educators across the country to give it the impetus its needs.

8.5.4. Is what I am doing working?

I judge the success of what I do through the opportunities extended to graduates of my programme after they leave my newsroom. It is simply not enough for universities to measure success on students' final results alone. In a country like South Africa, with significantly high youth unemployment, a university education has to be relevant enough to guarantee employment. In this respect, I consider the career-entry honours in journalism programme hugely successful. It takes an average of four months for most of the previous year's graduates to find employment or to move onto the next higher degree.

This statistic will shift drastically in 2021, as the number of opportunities in journalism shrinks. However, a positive outlook is that it remains to be seen where the graduates from the class of 2020 will find employment. This feedback will be crucial to how the curriculum will be reconfigured to ensure that it is catering for new, and possibly unseen, opportunities for journalism graduates. Increasingly, this feedback relates to the entrepreneurial pivot we have made in the programme. This means that there is less focus on life in a newsroom and more focus on the ways each individual wants to use the skills learned during the career-entry programme after graduating. This study suggests that this entrepreneurial approach to journalism training will ensure that some of our students consider growing media products at some point in their lives. Gillmor puts it best when he writes,

> Require all journalism students to understand business concepts, especially those relating to media. This is not just to cure the longstanding ignorance of business issues in the craft, but also to recognise that today's students will be among the people who develop tomorrow's journalism business models. (Gillmor, 2010:7).

This is not to say that there is no room for improvement. The next year to two are going to be critical in determining the future of journalism education. I would like to incorporate more data-focused teaching in the programme, along with business skills which are essential to entrepreneurs who are looking to fund and develop their endeavours.

An aspect of journalism education which is absent in the literature but which should form a key focus area in any journalism curriculum, is that of media literacy. Media literacy, in this infodemic that we currently find ourselves in, is not only essential to facilitating public health debates and discourse, it will also foster a need for good quality journalism. It is up to journalists to deploy media literacy in all that they do in order to ensure that audiences appreciate the need for journalism in the future.

8.6. Conclusion

This chapter used autoethnography to link my experiences of teaching journalism at university-level to some of the findings of this study which has used the *M&G* as a case study. I used the work of Deuze and Witschge (2017), who call for a new approach to understanding journalism, by looking away from the focal points of the traditional newsroom and professional journalists. I have framed this chapter within the work of Banda *et al*., (2007), Chuma (2010), and Mabweazara (2014), all of whom call for greater African perspectives, theoretical frameworks and ideas in journalism education.

A consideration that arises from the discussion in this chapter is around the future of the newsroom as the only site where professionalism can occur. I would suggest that the newsroom as we know it must be disentangled from the practice of journalism. Teaching journalism during the time of the pandemic has demonstrated that journalism can still take place outside of a resource-intensive, physical newsroom. This is something that media organisations must consider, as they look to producing journalism in a climate of rapidly declining revenues. The production of journalism need not be physically housed within a physical newsroom. A distributed newsroom has the potential to diversify the content produced by a news organisation, and the voices in that content. And this is part of the process of localising content and infusing journalism with aspects of the local context, which is much needed and often missing (Banda *et al*., 2007).

I disagree with the assertion of De Beer *et al*. (2017:181), who write that, "South African journalism training is often still at odds with the needs of the media industry, emphasizing the divorce between ivory-tower research and real-life challenges". The case of the *Wits Vuvuzela* and the career-entry programme at Wits Journalism disproves this assertion, and instead, shows us that a university programme can be far more experimental and cutting-edge than some of our industry counterparts. Gillmor (2010: 6), writes that,

> Journalism education, like the trade itself, has moved too slowly to change with the times. Yet there are signs of progress, and the educators, who used to lag far behind the practitioners, are catching up and even moving ahead on several fronts. If I ran a journalism school, I'd shake things up in a profound way.

In my approach to the curriculum of the career-entry programme, I tried to ensure that what is taught reflects what is happening in the industry but also looks beyond journalism to spaces like the media start-up space, corporates and government, where the skills taught in journalism, can be utilised.

The *Wits Vuvuzela* newsroom has become agile in its response to the needs of its audiences and to its student journalists. The student-run newsroom has moved to digital and represents a culture of innovative and experimental thinking which is more in line with an entrepreneurial journalism education than a conventional one. Mensing and Ryfe (2013:26) write in their pushback against the

teaching hospital model as out of touch with reality, that "Developing entrepreneurial education programs that instil more enterprise, flexibility and reflection among students and faculty could spur the creation of new forms of journalism and journalism organizations for the future". I believe that I am doing what Mensing and Ryfe (ibid), suggest is necessary to facilitate better and more adaptable journalism graduates.

If there is a tension in journalism education, it is between the needs of journalism teaching and the university system in which the training happens. The systems, the structures, the old ways of functioning within a university space, prohibit what needs to happen in a professional teaching space such as Wits Journalism. The innovation and experimentation that needs to happen within journalism does not sit well with the length of time it takes to change anything at universities. In 2012, Eric Newton reflected on the issue by pointing out that in that year, "Representatives from six foundations this summer wrote to the presidents at nearly 500 colleges in the United States, saying their journalism and mass communication education would get better if it could change faster" (Newton, 2012). This agility no longer applies to universities alone but to journalists and newsrooms also.

Chapter Nine: *Conclusion: A digital dream deferred*

9.1 Introduction

This study set out to understand how the South African independent newspaper, the *M&G*, has managed its digital and social first transition alongside its print newspaper. To this end, the study, framed within a social constructivist theoretical framework, made use of triangulation of methodologies to answer the key question: How is journalism practice negotiated at the *M&G* with its digital and social first strategies in tandem with its print publication?

The sub-questions which flowed from this, were:

- How were the digital- and social-first strategies of the *M&G* conceptualised, and deployed over the last 20 years, and in response to what factors?
- How did the organisation react or reshape itself to these strategies and in particular, what happened to the print newspaper?
- How does what I teach in Journalism Honours at Wits University match the practice at the *M&G* – are we behind the digital game, in tandem, or ahead in our teaching practices?

The multi-pronged methodological approach known as triangulation, (Cresswell, 2003), discussed in Chapter Three, proved crucial in completing this study in the time of the pandemic when access to resources and movement was severely restricted[106]. This conclusions chapter synthesises the findings of each of the preceding chapters with the key question of this study. It does this through a discussion below, which, for the most part, is thematically organised.

The *M&G* newspaper was established in 1984 as a weekly newspaper and, throughout its history, has shown notable moments of innovation and experimentation as detailed in Chapter Four. In using the *M&G* as the case study within the context of the South African journalism landscape, this study has provided an analysis of the changes in practice of journalism at a local newsroom within the South African context. Specifically, the study examined how the *M&G* has managed its digital transition[107] in

[106] I am convinced the multi-pronged methodological approach enabled a flexibility which proved crucial in this research as I was able to achieve the aims of the study without any serious or significant diversions.

[107] The irony of this study is that it is being completed in the time of the coronavirus pandemic, the scale of which has not been seen in recent human memory and the consequences of which throw the world as we know it into complete disarray. I sit at home as I write this, my institution in recess, my teaching suspended seemingly indefinitely, the country, like many others, in lockdown in a desperate attempt to stop the spread of the virus or to 'flatten the curve' to use lexicon of the disease. I write this here because, as a researcher, my conclusions have to be framed within the context of the site of research. The *M&G* is desperately trying to sustain itself. It has, in the last few weeks, gone out with a begging bowl in hand. While South Africa's other newsrooms have not done the same, in the face of the Covid-19 lockdown and the shuttering of businesses and public sector operations that

tandem with its print newspaper, a not uncommon scenario in the South Africa news publishing landscape.

9.1.1. Assumptions about the future of journalism

This study adopted the view that a digital and social first transition is a necessary and crucial step for any news organisation looking to cement its future. While I remained mindful of Mabweazara *et al*'s (2014:1), contention that studies of African online journalism have not captured "how African journalism has forged new ways of practice in the new media age", this study shows that despite access to the technologies that make online journalism possible, the *M&G*, a newsroom in Africa, has remained committed to its print newspaper despite its attempts to transition to digital and social first operations.

9.2 Main findings of the study

The findings of a study are the original contributions of a study. This study was conceptualised in order to offer a perspective on how a local news organisation has handled its digital transitions within the South African context in the hope that this could be applied beyond the case study, and could be used to reconceptualise journalism education in the country.

9.2.1 A bungled digital transition

The short answer to the key question, and the first major finding of this research, is that the *M&G* has bungled its digital and social first transition, quite simply, through its singular focus on the print newspaper. A small newsroom with limited resources, the *M&G* could not afford to do what many other news organisations do, run multiple publishing platforms simultaneously. The *M&G*'s current financial conundrum will not be easily remedied through its push for digital subscriptions as the organisation does not have a strong enough digital offering. By this I mean that the *M&G* does not engage in online journalism as it is understood and expected to be practiced, (Franklin and Eldridge II, 2016). As this conclusion is written in October 2020, the print newspaper remains the central product in the *M&G* stable and the way in which the online platforms of the organisation are used suggest a lack of deviation from a print-focused workflow. The digital offering which amounts to the mg.co.za website, a site dedicated to hosting material from the print newspaper without any additional digital offerings, and the

would normally provide the ad revenue that would keep print publications afloat, the situation that is still to unfold promises to be dire.

under-utilised social media platforms of the organisation, continue to play second fiddle to the print publication despite the clear decline of the latter globally[108].

9.2.2 Mis-/disinformation is a problem in journalism

Secondly, the study shows through the case of the *M&G*, that dis-/misinformation is happening within the spaces of professional journalism and needs to be seriously tackled as it impacts audience relationships with the media. This study shows that the *M&G* does not tackle mis-/disinformation head on and, as the case with journalists generally, (Wasserman, 2017), the problem is seen as outside the boundary of professional journalism. In other words, journalists do not acknowledge their role in the production of mis-/disinformation.

9.2.3. A new take on the teaching hospital model

Thirdly, the study makes a timely and valuable intervention to the conceptualisation of journalism education in South Africa, calling for a new take on the teaching hospital model of teaching journalism. The model of creating separate teaching hospitals or newsrooms at universities solidifies the divide between what is taught and what is practiced. In the case of Wits Journalism, where I teach, and the *M&G*, the case study in this thesis, the difference is stark and clear. I suggest that locating the teaching hospital space within local newsrooms will provide opportunity for synergy between the journalism curriculum and the craft. The placing of students in newsrooms to practice as they are taught will ease the transition from the university to the workplace.

9.2.4. Technology does not drive change, people do

This study shows that the *M&G* has had a culture of innovation and experimentation over the course of its history. However, in all of these instances, there was a digital champion driving that culture. For a long time in its history, this digital champion was co-founder Irwin Manoim. The unofficial role was then formalised into positions such as online editor or technology officer, which were then taken up by individuals like Matthew Buckland, Phillip Van Niekerk and Chris Roper. The importance of a digital champion is evidenced by the fact that the organisation's most significant digital push came under the editorship of Nicholas Dawes, himself a firm believer in the digital project, coupled with Chris Roper as the online editor. The digital trajectory for the organisation declined once Roper became editor, as

[108]"Not a single daily, weekly or weekend newspaper reported any numbers at all (not one!)," wrote media commentator, Herman Manson in his regular report on circulation figures, in August 2020, (2020). To date, no figures have been forthcoming from the Audit Bureau for Circulation (ABC) for South Africa - an ominous sign for the print newspaper industry in the country.

the role of online editor was changed from that of a strategic leadership position to that of an online content manager. Towards the end of 2019, the *M&G*, once again realising the need to drive its digital project forward, resorted to hiring a consultant who was meant to act as the digital champion. But is the organisation as a whole, resistant to change?

The clearest indication that the *M&G* is not immune to ideological change is in the fact that it has managed to transition from an anti-apartheid newspaper to one focused on democracy building and climate change since the fall of Apartheid. McNair, (1998:7), writes that the rise of particular beats like the environment is an indication of an ideological process at play in the development of journalism over time as these beats represent an alternative that has grown worldwide in prominence over time. McNair's assertion, when applied to the *M&G*, shows that the organisation can be responsive to the needs of audiences over time, but is really dependent on the individual/s driving that change and to the willingness of the staff to be part of that change. The latest pivot to climate change and an environment focus comes as a result of the current acting editor, Sipho Kings, who himself was an environment reporter. So instead of a digital champion, the *M&G* has an editorial champion who has managed to shift the editorial agenda.

9.2.5. Digital technologies do not change journalism, people do

Mabweazara *et al*., (2014:3) cautions us that, in an African context, studies about technology in newsrooms have been heavily influenced by the 'digital divide' narrative, a technology-driven narrative. This narrative posits that African newsrooms are technologically challenged and, therefore, unable to compete with better resourced American or European newsrooms in their use of digital technologies. The authors argue that this narrative prevents a nuanced reflection of the innovative use of digital technologies in African newsrooms which is what this study has tried to overcome. On face value, the *M&G* could be subjected to a digital-divide narrative, instead, as this shows, the newsroom has not struggled with a lack of access but a lack of will to transition to digital. The *M&G* newsroom, has over the course of its history, relied on individuals with a digital outlook to drive its digital transition. In the absence of these individuals at times, this digital transition has played second fiddle to the print newspaper. A major finding of this study is that while access to digital tools does exist at the *M&G* alongside a digital strategy, the will to shift the newsroom rests with the journalists and the journalism that they produce, does not. Singer (2004b) is correct in saying that ideology is spread through a newsroom through the process of socialisation but in the case of the *M&G*, the ideological stubbornness is emboldened through the process of socialisation. In other words, this study shows that even an ideology which is not in the best interests of the news organisation like the *M&G*, can be strengthened through socialisation. In this way, Singer's (2004b:838), definition of convergence falls apart when applied in this study as she argues that a sharing of new media (digital) skills as a form of

convergence has the potential to act as a "catalyst for the “resocialisation” of print journalists". This study shows that in the context of a news organisation which continues to place the print newspaper at its centre, the potential for convergence and resocialisation as suggested by Singer (2004b), is not able to exist. In short, resocialisation around a new technology cannot happen if that new technology remains on the periphery of the organisation.

9.2.6. A digital strategy cannot be built around a print newspaper

The answer to the question, 'is the *M&G* a digital-first publication?', is no. The *M&G* has at its core the print publication, not just in terms of its revenue streams but also in terms of its content, its production and its use of online tools like social media. The case study of the *M&G* shows that the privileging of the print product was ultimately to the detriment of the digital offering and to a converged newsroom in general. In this way, the *M&G* has not engaged in convergence of various media forms as defined by Quinn (2005), and, further, has prevented the convergence of skills among staff members. This study shows that the focus on the print newspaper has reinforced the traditional print workflow and prevented a resocialisation of the journalists, as Singer (2004b), suggests should happen in a converged environment. Journalists at the *M&G* continue to work in silos that are reflective of the age-old section divisions of the print newspaper. There are no format specialists just subject specialist writers. I would argue that a mix of both is required to produce quality journalism for a multiplicity of platforms. The presence of format specialists, like videographers or photographers, would enable the organisation to fully offer a digital experience to its users.

Through an ethnography of the organisation, this study shows that despite the introduction of the WordPress content management system to make online publishing accessible to the majority of the staff, the well-established print-focused workflow persisted with the two-member online team taking responsibility for the digital face of all of the organisation’s content. In the period under observation, the website showed no production or use of multimedia content. Indeed, original content produced for the website was rare. In short, the website remains the online archive of the print newspaper. The most visual elements on the website are graphics ad cartoons which are lifted directly from the paper, but not enhanced in any way to offer an interactive experience to the user. This interactivity is one of the common features of online media which distinguish it from traditional media (Van Dijk, 2006).

The ethnography concludes that even with a technology in the form of a CMS, which was intended to make access to the digital platform easier for the majority of the staff in the newsroom, the same print workflow remained, as did the same roles and responsibilities for the staff in the newsroom. The weekly print workflow dominated the newsroom with two juniors assigned to run the digital and social media platforms.

9.3. The *M&G*'s digital and social first transition is yet to take off

This study finds that the mere presence of technology in a newsroom such as the *M&G* did not determine or steer the strategic direction of that news organisation disproving the theory of technological determinism. As Lievrouw and Livingstone write (2006:21), technological determinism is the "belief that technologies have an overwhelming and inevitable power to drive human actions and social change". This study shows though that the shape of the *M&G*'s digital transition has been moulded by individual journalists, the relevant social group in Pinch and Bijlker's (1984), delineation of social constructivism. The relevant social group is that group of actors whose common ideology shapes how technology is used. Described in Chapter Seven, this study shows how the presence of new media technologies in the *M&G* newsroom is simply not enough to move the organisation further along in its digital transition ambitions. The lack of will from the staff, the journalists in particular, has hampered the digital transition of the organisation. This study therefore argues that the presence of digital technology in a newsroom is not, in itself, symbolic of a digital-first newsroom.

9.4. Re-imagining the audience - a critical factor in online journalism

One of the most significant markers of a digital and social first publication is the reimaging of the audience as core to the organisation, and not just in terms of ability to but a subscription. Indeed, one of the fundamentals of online journalism is interactivity which speaks to a closer relationship between journalists and audiences. This study finds that while the *M&G* showed a strong sense of the centrality of the audience to news production in the early 2000s through a number of blogging platforms hosted by the *M&G*, this conception was driven by individual digital champions and not by the bulk of the staff who remained committed to the print newspaper as the core of the organisation. While some may argue that it is reductionist to gauge audience engagement through social media alone, the lack of usage of these platforms by *M&G* journalists is a clear indication of the rejection of online tools which all of the journalists have access to.

The *M&G*'s lack of a digital and social first publication flies in the face of the assertion that Talabi (2011:5) makes that the audience, "Armed with easy-to-use web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information; and it's doing just that on the internet." The *M&G* newsroom though, is less intentioned to meet its audiences in this way.

The question of the relationship between news organisations and their consumers or audiences is a central question globally in journalism today. This relationship is at the centre of the future of journalism as it is through consumption that the production of journalism can continue. Chapter Five examines the *M&G*'s relationship with its audiences, trying to understand how the organisation defines its audiences

and engages with them. The chapter finds that the *M&G* does not engage with its online audience. Dan Gillmor's (2004), theorisation of the audience as part of the process of media production, known as participatory journalism, forms the framework within which this chapter is composed.

9.5. Newsroom socialisation and ideological disruption

This study reinforces Singer's (2004b), theory that journalists are socialised through their experiences in the newsroom (see also Deuze, 2011:18). This study shows that the journalists at the *M&G* remain tied to practices which are anchored to a print-focused workflow which is what is embedded in the *M&G* newsroom. This consensual understanding of what a journalist should and should not be doing in the course of their work is known as the "occupational ideology" of journalists (Lauk, 2009; Deuze, 2011:18).

In order to change this occupational ideology, I would suggest newsroom practices and workflows have to experience an ideological disruption, a jarring shift in the way journalism is practiced. Through my experience at *Wits Vuvuzela*, I can confirm that the removal of the print newspaper provides this ideological disruption, which then gives journalists and management the time and resources to focus on developing the online offering. The *M&G*'s continued focus on the print newspaper with an ever-shrinking staffing complement, removes any opportunity for an ideological disruption in the newsroom. Instead, the organisation will continue trying to rescue its print publication at the cost of its reputation for high quality journalism.

Marenet Jordaan's study (2012:28) of the use of social media in the *M&G* newsroom in 2011 showed that "journalists also actively used social media to promote themselves and their work". The 2020 *M&G* newsroom is vastly different to the one in Jordaan's study nine years earlier, with a drastically reduced headcount. The reduction in staff numbers has resulted in a heavier burden on the remaining journalists to fill the pages of the weekly newspaper which takes up the bulk of their work week. In terms of the digital component, the responsibility for online and social media falls to two junior staff members, which is a serious shortcoming of the strategy to move online. I would suggest that the only way to completely shift attention to the digital and to develop an online revenue model is to remove the print newspaper in its entirety.

9.6. Media literacy as part of the work of journalists

Contemporary journalism studies is largely silent on the question of media literacy in relation to journalism practice implying that the two are mutually exclusive. Yet, it seems to me that the two are intrinsically linked given declining trust in the media and the flourishing of mis-/disinformation. Like

mis-/disinformation though, media literacy is seen as a problem outside of the boundaries of journalism, (Wasserman, 2017). I argue that, in a media ecosystem under the siege of mis- and disinformation which is so effortlessly disseminated via social media platforms, the professionalised media has a responsibility to actively engage in media literacy. Media literacy refers to the ability to understand and interpret media messages, and to be able to distinguish sound information from bad information which is a critical skill needed by media consumers.

Wasserman (2017:13), suggests that the need for media literacy to tackle mis-/disinformation must involve a process that allows journalists to "engage with, and listen to, audiences in such a way as to take on board their informational needs and desires to be represented in mainstream media narratives" He adds that the very problem of 'fake news', "may read as symptomatic of a gap between mainstream journalism and the appeal of populistic narratives and expressions of popular culture" (Wasserman, 2017:13). In it, he suggests, are lessons for the mainstream media and, I would add that in the absence of media literacy, these lessons will be difficult to understand or address. The *M&G*'s lack of engagement with its own audiences as shown in this study, means it is not well placed to take on the challenge that Wasserman (2017), sets out. Instead, the *M&G*, in lacking a relationship with its audiences is likely to alienate itself even further from the very people whose support they seek to continue operating.

This study finds that the *M&G* is not actively engaging in media literacy due to a lack of fact-checking journalism, nor is it engaging in listening or engaged journalism which requires that the organisation engage with its audiences in some way. As this conclusion is written, it is not even possible to leave comments on the organisation's website, and the staff do not engage with their audiences on the official social media accounts - each of which has a significantly high follower base. This lack of engagement is typical of a print newspaper-driven organisation where the engagement of the staff ends with the printing of the newspaper.

Mis-/disinformation as produced by journalists at the *M&G* was used to in a discussion in Chapter Six about the rising spectre of the problem and its impact on journalism. I argued here that mis-/disinformation as defined by Wardle (2017), plays a significant role in the diminishing relationship of trust between those who produce news professionally and those who consume news. Using the typology of misinformation as developed by Claire Wardle (2017), this study shows that the *M&G* journalists are themselves guilty of producing mis-/disinformation at times and when they do, it is excused away on terms other than the ones used to penalise mis-/disinformation produced by individuals outside the boundaries of professional journalism.

The use of the complaints made against the *M&G* at the Press Council of South Africa are an indication of two things:

- Media self-regulation is a powerful tool in holding journalists accountable for the production of mis-/disinformation.

- The Press Council is a useful mechanism to encourage more audience engagement with newsrooms. The analysis of the complaints does show that the use of the Press Council mechanism leans towards those individuals who wield some power or hold some position of prominence in society. I suggest that this mechanism needs to be more widely used, and to that end, more readily accessible.

I consider the *M&G* to be a 'quality' newspaper which I take to mean that it is able to produce indepth journalism that follows the fundamentals of journalism and journalism ethics to the letter. The assumption here is that a quality publication should have few rulings against it at Press Council level, given the rigour and attention to detail that goes into the production of the paper. A second aim of this chapter was to look at the whether the *M&G* engages in media literacy through the organisation's fact-checking journalism.

Media literacy and listening journalism form part of a participatory journalism approach which the *M&G* engaged in during parts of its existence through offerings like the *Thought Leader* blog which it launched in 2007. At time of the blog's launch, citizen journalism was part of the global media discourse and the *M&G* showed a responsiveness to this new dimension of journalism by the launch of the blog. The blog also showed a new and innovative use of technology to bring the voices of the audience closer to the centre of production of the *M&G.* This affirms the idea of social constructivism, that it is the work of human actors that drives change in the use of technology and fills a lacuna that Evans (2016), pointed to in studies of innovation in journalism practice.

9.7. Is online journalism THE model for the future of journalism?

A second theoretical assumption of this study is the notion of digital or online journalism – aiming to understand the standard requirements for journalism to qualify as online or digital. It is important to point out that a news organisation that has a website is not necessarily engaged in online journalism. The three key features that this study uses as distinctive of online journalism when compared to traditional journalism are convergence which produces multimedia, interactivity and hypertextuality (Mabweazara *et al*., 2014:4). Convergence, which Van Dijk (2006:6) refers to as "the most important structural new media characteristic," which "is the integration of telecommunications, data communications and mass communications in a single medium". The coming together of these previously distinct platforms and media types results in the multimedia format. What this means is that online, a text article can contain a video, make use of audio and animation. This study uses the contribution of Quinn (2005), who writes that convergence can be separated into three broad categories, the convergence in skills, in technologies, and between media consumers and media producers. Singer

(2004b:838), believes that convergence is also apparent in the interactions and collaborations between journalists who specialise in traditional media forms, which act as a mechanism for the resocialisation of journalists. This is echoed by Deuze (2011:24), who adds that convergence has changed the conceptualisation of a journalist from individualistic to that of a group player.

Convergence facilitates multimedia in that multiple media forms are possible on a single platform, namely the Internet. Interactivity, on the other hand, is the ability to engage with content online shaping our experience of a multimedia text, and allows for consumers of media content to engage with the producers of that content. In the words of Van Dijk (2006:8), "interactivity is a sequence of action and reaction". This is made possible at a very basic level through hypertext, the language of the web, which facilitates interactivity through the clickability of text. This clicking through content makes possible the formation of non-linear texts based on a user's preferences. Social media has made the interactivity of media consumers and producers possible and, while not captured in the early literature on the features of online journalism, can and should be made a part of the features of the practice.

The three defining features of online media as expressed by the bulk of the literature on the matter are hypertextuality, multimedia and interactivity, (Van Dijk, 2006; Singer, 2004a; Vobič, 2011). Singer's (2004a) contribution that convergence move away from its technical interpretation towards a more social interpretation which accounts for the transference for skills among journalists, was critical in understanding how the *M&G*'s staff have resisted a resocialisation of themselves away from the rituals and habits in relation to the print newspaper. Singer (2004a), suggests and this study confirms that convergence among the skills of journalists allows for a resocialisation to occur as was the case when the *M&G* transitioned from an anti-apartheid alternative newspaper to a mainstream one. But, this study also shows that convergence as Singer posits, has not occurred at the *M&G* in terms of its digital transition, despite the access to the digital technologies required to make a technical convergence (Van Dijk, 2006), possible.

9.8. Social constructivism in journalism studies

This study was framed within the theory of social constructivism which directs research to account for the agency of individual actors in the interplay between themselves and technology. As Edge (1999:15), writes, social constructivism argues that "the relationship between technology and society is genuinely an interaction; a recursive process". This study and the conclusions reached confirm the use of this theoretical orientation.

Lievrouw and Livingstone's (2006), articulation of social constructivism, is key to this study. They argue (ibid. 2006), that the term 'new media' should not be defined by technology alone, but should extend to the social contexts in which those technologies operate, along with "the social arrangements

or organisations that form around the devices and practices" (2006:23). In a digital age, where the world's media appears to have accepted the move to digital, the South African media industry has not shown the same enthusiasm (Ndlovu, 2015). This is due to the unique context of the country, where data costs are prohibitively high and there is still a persistent and seemingly inextricable link to traditional media products (Ndlovu, 2015: 125). This contextual response to digital migration in South African newsrooms is confirms social constructivism as an appropriate methodological lens for this study.

9.9. Beyond the teaching hospital model of teaching journalism practice

The Covid-19 pandemic has also allowed me to consider, as a journalism educator, the possibility of journalism education beyond the current teaching hospital model. I suggest in this study that the teaching hospital model which favours the setup of local university newsrooms, needs to be dismantled in favour of an in-community practice model which allows student journalists to immerse themselves within the communities that they are reporting on. This is based on the assertions by Mabweazara (2015) that African newsrooms are not homogenous and are reflective of a particular context; of Mensing and Ryfe (2013), that the teaching hospital model is built on a conceptualisation of journalism and democracy that is "unravelling"; and of Wasserman (2017), that journalism needs to pivot to a more engaged or listening form that is responsive to the needs of it audiences.

My notion of a community-specific experience also accounts for the changes that journalism is undergoing and is yet to undergo and as Deuze and Witschge (2017:166) postulate, "Journalism is transitioning from a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices." Zelizer (2004:6), believes that journalism looks to two groups, namely journalists and journalism scholars for its "social map" or its conceptualisation. An in-community teaching hospital model of teaching journalism, journalism educators and scholars have the opportunity to train journalists in ways that more closely resemble what is practiced in the field, which in itself may comprise a diversity of practices.

Through the autoethnography in Chapter Eight, this study shows that what is taught at Wits Journalism is a digitally-focused journalism that encapsulates the key features of online journalism, namely, interactivity, multimedia and convergence, (Lievrouw and Livingston, 2002; Pavlik, 2000; Quinn, 2005; Van Dijk, 2006). The students in the career-entry programme at Wits Journalism, work more collaboratively and digital is not a project on the periphery but an integrated part of the immersive learning experience through the student publication, the *Wits Vuvuzela*. In this way, and as is shown in this study, what is taught, and somewhat practiced, at Wits Journalism differs from what is practiced at the *M&G*. The current cash-strapped state of the *M&G* and its continued focus on a declining medium, does not make it a good example of how contemporary journalism should be practiced. As such, the

misalignment between the practices at the *M&G* and what is taught at Wits Journalism reflects a curriculum that is where the *M&G* should be. Of course, the student journalists at *Wits Vuvuzela* lack the gravitas of an older or even a professional journalist who has age and experience on their side. However, the Wits Journalism students are able to work in a converged newsroom more easily, are able to adapt to various CMS's quickly, and, most importantly, are able to conceptualise and produce stories for a variety of media types, print included. What is also quite striking about the way the career-entry students work, is that they set the news agenda in line with their lived experiences as members of the community that they serve. In this way, what is produced changes annually, ensuring that the student journalists reflect the community they find themselves in.

There are no fixed answers to what journalism will look like in the post-Covid-19 period, but what is clear is that the industry needs to take its cues from the communities on which it will rely for its income and not from the journalists who are used to doing things in one way with little room for experimentation and innovation.

9.10. Shortcomings of this study and opportunities for further study

Implicit in this study is the standpoint that digital/online publishing is the recommended launchpad for success in the media space. The study assumes that a sound digital transition, without the presence of the print newspaper, would have benefitted the *M&G* in terms of its current revenue crisis. In the absence of the implementation of the digital strategy though, this assumption cannot be proven within the context of this study though and I consider this to be a shortcoming of the study.

But the assumption is based on the following points:

- The decline in print newspaper sales globally is well established;
- There are established examples like that of the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and South Africa's *Daily Maverick*, which demonstrates the potential of a strong digital offering;
- The *Daily Maverick*, a digital-first competitor of the *M&G*, has managed to grow its newsroom and subscriber base by making use of a well-defined membership model which brings the audience closer to the centre of production, (Brkic & Charalambous (eds), 2019).
- The *M&G* has neglected its digital presence in favour of a print newspaper which has demonstrated a steady decline in sales. The organisation continues to invest its resources in a failing product while ignoring the digital product with the potential to expand the journalistic offerings of the *M&G* newsroom.

Media literacy is an idea that this study suggests in several instances. But the study did not manage to interrogate the forms that media literacy could take in journalism practice on a day to day basis. This

shortcoming of the study is seen as an opportunity for further new and interesting work in the future of journalism as a craft and in terms of journalism studies.

In calling for a reconsideration of the teaching hospital model of journalism education in this study, I am aware that the current place of the physical newsroom at the heart of journalism is undermined. There is much research still to be done on what benefits and constraints there are to producing journalism within a confined space but the Covid-19 pandemic and the move to working remotely from home, has raised questions about the need to centralise journalism inside a newsroom. I would argue that in moving away from a newsroom, journalists will move closer to their communities and this can only benefit the kinds of stories that are told.

Journalism studies, as far the practice of journalism goes, has only started to engage with the impact of online and social media algorithms in how news in consumed and by whom. I would argue that the literature needs to account for algorithms in the process of receiving information from the audience who feature as statistics in online analytics. Moyo, Mare and Matsilele (2019), have demonstrated that within an African context, newsrooms that are online rely heavily on analytics to determine their editorial strategies. These analytics are the result of algorithms at work. The latter then shapes a picture of online audiences which news organisations then target in various ways. More research is needed in this area which accounts for the people behind the statistics.

9.10.1. Reflections on studies of the alternative press in South Africa

This study was my first engagement with the literature on the alternative press in South Africa, which is the framework for the discussion in Chapter Four. The literature used in this study (Trabold, 2018; Tomaselli and Louw, 1991) was useful in helping me to characterise the early iteration of the *M&G*, the *Weekly Mail*, as part of the alternative press in South Africa. But, the literature fell short, in terms of its uncritical look at organisations that fell under the umbrella of the alternative press. There is much work to be done here in terms of a revision of the literature through a more critical analysis of organisations like the *Weekly Mail*. I would suggest that a relook at the alternative press in South Africa is one way of contributing to the project of the de-westernisation of journalism studies in South Africa.

Additionally, social media platform need to become a feature of online journalism studies and needs to be addressed in the literature as such. I would suggest that given that social media is not considered to a valid space for journalism production, it is not interrogated in journalism studies. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp have fundamentally altered the ways in which news and information are found and shared and engaged with. The role of these platforms in the practice of journalism needs further research and theorising, especially within an African context.

9.10.2. On the de-westernisation of journalism studies

One of the major achievements of this study is its comprehensive use of the work of South African and other African journalism studies scholars. This is a significant move away from a reliance of western theory and case studies in order to understand and analyse a local South African case study. In doing this, this study has heeded the call of Chuma (2010), and Mabweazara (2014), for the de-westernisation of journalism studies.

Deuze and Witschge (2017), who posit that journalism studies faces a new trajectory given the lack of coherence in what constitutes journalism today. The analysis offered in this chapter is mindful of Banda *et al*.'s (2007) call for African journalism studies to shift its reliance on Western modalities and instead produce a more nuanced epistemology that reflects the local context.

The newsroom ethnography in this study was undertaken early in 2020 with the intention of repeating the exercise later in the year but these plans were scuppered by the global pandemic. This necessitated a change of plans and a methodological diversion which would achieve the same aims and outcomes as the ethnography although did not yield the richness of a first-person narrative. This chapter used newsroom ethnography to understand how the *M&G* practices journalism at the moment. The declining advertising revenue has presented a watershed moment for the organisation, as it can no longer afford to privilege its print newspaper. The ethnography was complemented by interviews and through a comparative analysis of how the organisation uses social media to push its content further - given the limitations on further newsrooms visits due to Covid-19 regulations. The ethnography was undertaken when the new website was launched using the WordPress CMS, which would make online publishing a lot more accessible to the majority of the staff in the newsroom.

9.10.3. Reflections on the triangulation method of research

Berg writes that "by combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements," (1995:4). This study chose to employ a variety of methodological tools to answer the key and sub-questions that were set out. The reasons for this were many:

- The study involved a historical narrative and it proved difficult to find staff who were willing to speak to the entire history. This narrative was therefore constructed through the use of a South African newspaper database together with interview responses and the *M&G*'s reporting on itself;
- Questions about digital strategy could only be answered by people involved in that aspect of the business;

- Reflecting on how the newsroom currently operates was difficult to achieve through interviews alone as this narrative is likely to be less than accurate given the interpersonal relationships and sensitivities at play. The ethnographic component of the methods toolkit proved invaluable in this regard as did the comparative content analysis applied to the social media posts in relation to the weekly edition of the paper.
- There is a difference between what is happening in South Africa newsrooms and what is happening at tertiary institutions where journalism is taught. The autoethnographic component of the study was useful in proving a first-person account of how disconnected the university is from what is happening in journalism in the 'real world'.

Overall, the triangulation of methods allowed me to gather various types of data which read together has provided a rich narrative and basis for analysis. The ability to pivot between methods because of the constraints imposed on the project by the Covid-19 pandemic proved invaluable. One of the biggest challenges in methodological approach relates to the online archive, discussed in the next section.

9.10.4. The chaos of the online archive and challenges for research

The online archive, or the archive of material stored online, is a treasure trove of material for study but is largely dependent on individuals or organisational will to contribute to it. It is also cluttered and chaotic, belabouring the process of research for someone who is not familiar with an organisation. What this means is that historical information is sitting on individual desktops, external hard drives and personal clouds which needs to be hunted down instead of simply retrieved through regular database searches.

The *M&G* was not able to assist me with any strategy documents or material relating to its digital transitions through the course of its history only because this material left the organisation along with people who had moved on. It became apparent early on in this project that documentary data, which Cresswell defines as minutes of meetings, personal diaries or private communications (2003:187), were in very short supply. This is because archiving at the *M&G* focuses on the content of the paper and not the business of the organisation. As such, the methodological approach had to account for this challenge. Much of the data that replaced these documents that I had hoped to have access to were news articles, which are also considered to be documentary data according to Cresswell (2003:187), along with papers and presentations which I was able to find online. Matthew Buckland, one of the former editors and someone that I consider to have been a digital champion in the organisation, was fastidious about loading his professional presentations about the organisation’s digital strategy to online archives and these were extensively used in this study.

As this study is completed in 2020, it is quite disappointing to note, from the experience of the *M&G*, that there are no agreed upon guidelines, no stepping stones to a digital transition that news organisations can follow. The case of the *M&G* shows us that newsrooms are still walking the minefield of the digital transition blindfolded. There is room for more business-based studies of newsrooms which are likely to yield a firmer roadmap for a digital and social first transition.

While most academic studies hope to offer conclusions which can be applied more broadly, this study is cognisant of Mabweazara's assertion that, "even with regions on the African continent, including individual countries, newsrooms' adoption of new digital technologies are enormously varied and far from being homogenous" (2015:7). So, while these findings may not be directly applicable to other organisations, it is hoped that the conceptualisation of this study will inspire similar research focused on other case studies in the country, if not the continent, given the lack of such research, (Mabweazara *et al*., 2014).

A final argument is that journalism studies that focus on digital and social first transitions also remain fixated with technologies or on the individual's use of those technologies. There is little to no interrogation on the definition or character of what journalism is or should be in shifting to digital or social first. In doing this, journalism studies assumes that a digital and social first transition is simply about doing the same things in a different space. The case of the *M&G* in this study, shows us that there is an urgent need to redefine journalism not only in terms of where it publishes and through the use of which tools, but what it publishes also.

I started this conclusions chapter off by asserting that a digital and social first transition is a necessary step for news organisations to secure a future for themselves. In the wake of the rampant job losses and cutbacks in the journalism industry in South Africa, I find myself leaning towards a more optimistic outlook for smaller print newspaper titles like the *M&G*. I would suggest that there is room for the community newspaper to serve smaller groups on a vastly reduced scale than our national or regional papers. In this suggestion is room for reinvention for the *M&G* newspaper itself and perhaps, a lifeline to re-imagine its future, audience integration and ultimately, achieve its digital ambitions.

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Appendix 1: Maimane/De Klerk story

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Educating Mmusi: Is FW tutoring him?

NEWS ANALYSIS
Nelly Shamase & Verashni Pillay

Is Democratic Alliance leader Mmusi Maimane taking political classes from South Africa's last apartheid-era president?

While investigating claims of racism within the DA this week, four separate senior DA insiders confirmed to the *Mail & Guardian* that Maimane had visited former president FW de Klerk on various occasions.

"He [Maimane] has been to his [De Klerk's] house a few times and sought his advice on speeches and leadership and acting presidential. In the party they are known as 'leadership classes'," said one.

A constituency leader said: "He's [Maimane] a new guy on the block whose [political] experience is mostly in Gauteng, so I don't think there's anything wrong in him getting advice from former leaders, even though there may be a stigma attached in this instance. De Klerk took the bold step to release Nelson Mandela from prison, so he's clearly not anti-reconciliation."

A DA Youth representative also defended the alleged decision, saying: "I'm of the firm belief that if you want to drive a car you must go to a driving school, which is what Mmusi is doing. De Klerk led South Africa out of apartheid, so it's fitting that he advise Mmusi. Others may have a problem with it, but I personally don't."

But a federal council representative disagreed: "I'm very shocked to hear this. We are busy fighting racism in the party and Mmusi even did a very powerful speech on it so if this is true it's a double standard. I'm going to raise this in federal council and I'll never support something like this."

Maimane would not answer specific questions about the claims.

DA spokesperson Phumzile van Damme responded on his behalf to these and other questions, saying: "We are not going to give oxygen to nameless and faceless individuals who make unsubstantiated claims behind the cloak of anonymity."

The four party insiders — one staff member from national head office, two members of a provincial legislature and one member of the federal executive — declined to be named, citing a culture of silence around race-sensitive complaints.

A spokesperson for De Klerk said he was not available to comment on the allegations as he was travelling.

De Klerk won the Nobel peace prize in 1993 with former president Nelson Mandela "for their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa".

But he has since come under scrutiny for his past as an apartheid leader and occupies an increasingly complicated space in South Africa's public life. Recently, De Klerk made headlines for saying that black people are more racist than white people, following the public outcry at Penny Sparrow's comparison of black people to monkeys and the ensuing comments from the ANC's Velaphi Khumalo.

The ANC member has since been suspended from the party for stating that white people should be "eradicated" from South Africa, which sparked debate about whether black people can be racist.

The FW de Klerk Foundation has reported 45 social media posts, made by "disaffected blacks", that it perceives as racist to the Human Rights Commission, a move that the ANC said was insulting to black people.

De Klerk has also been lambasted by the #RhodesMustFall student movement at England's Oxford University after he criticised students who wish to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at one of the university's campuses. The Oxford chapter of the movement called his statement on the matter "cute".

Capetonians also rallied against the naming of a busy street after De Klerk, with detractors saying that the City of Cape Town ought to name the street after a black struggle hero rather than De Klerk.

Regardless of whether the allegations are true, the perception that Maimane could be taking lessons from De Klerk is likely to cause further friction in a party already battling with a number of scandals around racism at a time of increased sensitivity in South Africa.

Sparrow was an ordinary DA member, but her affiliation with the party caused it untold damage. She was subsequently suspended from the DA. "Racists are not welcome in the DA, and have no place in our democratic South African society," the party said.

Her comments were also roundly condemned by Maimane, who spoke passionately about rooting out racists in a recent landmark speech that impressed many.

His one time peer in the party, former parliamentary leader Lindiwe Mazibuko, commended Maimane but pointed out there was a "brains trust" of "white males" in the party who would continue to prevent real change (see Page 4).

Others have called for real action instead of words, citing the suspension of party stalwart and MP Dianne Kohler Barnard, whose DA membership was terminated and subsequently restored following a social media disaster.

Kohler Barnard's membership was terminated at the end of October after she shared a Facebook post praising apartheid president PW Botha. The post said: "Please come back PW Botha — you were far more honest than any of these [ANC] rogues, and you provided a far better service to the public."

She later said she had not read the post fully before sharing it. The party's decision to overturn her expulsion was unpopular with many black South Africans, who were particularly vocal on social media.

The fetish with former apartheid-era and colonial leaders continued when a photo came to light this month of DA MP Anchen Dreyer posing with a cardboard cut-out of Paul Kruger at a Solidarity event in October. Her sign read: "Happy birthday Uncle Paul" in Afrikaans.



Mail & Gaurdian

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Both the DA and Dreyer dismissed criticism of the photo, saying South Africa has a rich and complex history that cannot be wished away. The ANC, however, has used each of these incidents to label the opposition as racist, in an attempt to drive away potential DA voters.

The current allegation could well be part of a smear campaign against Maimane, in a party that has seen similar tactics deployed against leaders such as Mazibuko to discredit them.

If Maimane has consulted De Klerk, it would be an incredibly unwise association during an extremely politically sensitive time for the party, ahead of an election. If he hasn't, he would do well to quell the perception that he is enthralled by former apartheid leaders — especially ones as controversial as De Klerk. — ***Additional reporting by Ra'eesa Pather***

"If you want to drive a car you must go to a driving school, which is what Mmusi's doing"

Insiders say the DA boss is taking 'leadership classes' from the controversial ex-president



Apt pupil: Mmusi Maimane is said to be consulting FW de Klerk on how to act 'presidential'. Photo: Delwyn Verasamy

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

Questions for staff in non-managerial roles/positions:

- Please confirm your current or previous position at the *M&G.*
- Describe your role, if any, in driving technological change and innovation at the *M&G* during your time with the organisation.
- Where would you situate the *M&G* and its technological changes in relation to other news organisations in South Africa, rest of Africa, internationally?
- What was your response to technological changes within the organisation?
- Can you give two examples of successes and two of failures in terms of technological change within the organisation
- Do you have any thoughts about how technological change could have been initiated or done differently at the *M&G* - if so, why?

Questions for editors or individuals in managerial roles/positions:

- Describe your role,if any, in driving technological change and innovation at the *M&G* during your editorship
- Where would you situate the *M&G* and its technological changes in relation to other news organisations in South Africa, in the rest of Africa or internationally?
- What were the challenges, Describe the challenges, if any, of initiating/driving technological change within the organisation?
- Can you give two examples of successes and two of failures in terms of technological change within the organisation
- How were your changes initiated by you received by the staff?

Appendix 3: Ethics clearance

Research Office

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RETROSPECTIVE APPLICATION FOR ETHICS CLEARANCE
R14/49

CERTIFICATE OF RETROSPECTIVE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
PROTOCOL NUMBER H20/11/03

PROJECT	Going online: an analysis of shifts in journalism practice in the Mail & Guardian's history of digitisation.
INVESTIGATORS	Ms D Balliah
DEPARTMENT	Literature, Language and Media
DATE CONSIDERED	20 November 2020
EXPIRY DATE	29 November 2023
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE*	Retrospective Acknowledgement Risk Level: Minimal

NOTE:

- **The HREC (Non-Medical) acknowledge receipt of this retrospective ethics clearance application.**
- **The HREC (non-medical) found no ethics problems.**
- **This acknowledgment is valid for three (3) years.**

J. Knight

DATE 01 December 2020 **CHAIRPERSON** .....
(Professor J Knight)

cc: Supervisor: Prof G Daniels

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University.

I/We acknowledge that appropriate permission should have been sought, this acknowledgement does not entitle the applicant to conduct further research under this protocol number.

Balliah . 02.12.2020
Signature

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES