Factors affecting the decision making of news editors in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this exploratory study is to gain an understanding of the factors which influence the decision making of news editors in South Africa. The independent news media is an important source of information in modern society. It has a significant influence on people's perceptions of the political and social issues facing a society. However it is not a neutral institution as it is a commercial business driven by profit. Within news organisations, editors are key decision makers as they decide how resources are allocated and which stories enter the public domain. The decisions taken by editors are immediately open to public scrutiny and often impact a range of stakeholders in society.

In this study an exploratory phenomenological approach was used, as this approach seeks to capture the meaning of an experience through an examination of an individual's lived experiences. To achieve this, twelve, in-depth interviews were conducted with editors, with over 85 years of editorial experience, in order to establish which factors influence their decision making process. The data was analysed using content and frequency analysis.

The main factors which the editors identified as influencing their decision making process when evaluating a story included the following: the relevance to the audience, accuracy, the public interest, newsworthiness and entertainment value. In difficult editorial decisions which involved a trade-off between two or more important factors, the editors showed a strong commitment to the journalistic values of acting in the public interest and newsworthiness. Consultation, knowledge and personal attributes emerged as important competencies in ensuring good editorial decisions.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this study to Andrew and Charlotte who have made me realise how full of possibilities life is.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

1. CHAPTER 1:   INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

The media is an important source of information in modern society. The independent news media, in particular, occupies a unique position in that it wields significant influence over the public agenda while still operating as a commercial business (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Within news organisations, editors are key role-players as they decide how resources are allocated and which stories enter the public domain. Decisions made by editors on a daily basis can have a disproportionately large impact on society because of the influence of the media on society (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). The objective of this study was to gain insight into the factors which influence the decisions of South African news editors. The decisions taken by editors in South Africa on a daily basis ultimately shape the role the media is playing in this new democracy.

1.2. Illustration of the problem

Editors are tasked with making complex decisions, which are open to public scrutiny, on a daily basis. Unlike in other professions, there is no objective set of criteria which exist that determine whether a story is published or not. "Determining what to report, how to report it, and what ethical boundaries to draw in the process are all left to individual editors" (Rosner, 2004, p. 428). Editorial decisions are complex because there is often not a 'right' answer and a large portion of the decision making process is evaluative (Donsbach, 2004).

An example of this process is a story broadcast by E-news which featured self-confessed criminals discussing how they would target tourists during the World Cup hosted by South Africa (Sapa, 2010). The story was picked by the international media and it reinforced the perception that South Africa is a dangerous place to visit. The story had a number of unintended consequences in that the journalists were subpoenaed under Section 205 to reveal their sources to the police and the original source of the story committed suicide (Sapa, 2010). The decision to broadcast the story and reinforce the stereotypical perception of South Africa and the decision to protect the identity of sources rather than hand over the details for the police to arrest the suspects are both decisions that represent the complexity of the choices facing news editors. As illustrated in the example above, these decisions often involve trade-offs between values. In this case was it more important to broadcast the story as it was in the public interest or should it have been held back to preserve the national interest by protecting the international image of South Africa?

The majority of research into news decisions has been conducted in Western, industrialised countries (Reinemann & Schulz, 2006). News professionals in South Africa, however, are faced with a unique set of challenges. The traditional news values of accuracy, reliability, and honesty must be considered in all news decisions, however in addition there is also the need to "contribute to helping democracy take root" (Harber, 2004, p. 79). This example of the E-news story illustrates the fact that editors need to be sensitive to "not just economic, but also moral and social aspects of (their) decisions" (Gully, Stainer & Stainer, 2006, p. 185 - 186).

1.3. Background to the problem

The central role which the media plays in a democratic society and its power to shape public perceptions are important reasons for a closer examination of the decision making process of editors who ultimately control the flow of information. News is a narrative of the events in society and with any narrative it is selective and involves decision making (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009).

Decision makers in newsrooms are faced with a number of considerations when selecting stories to publish. Journalism "is guided by professional values, including public service, allegiance to the truth, journalistic autonomy and social responsibility" (Gade, 2008, p. 374). In addition, there are business considerations which include maintaining audience numbers in order for the business to continue to attract advertising and ultimately remain profitable. Therefore the link between revenue and journalism is clear – "you cannot have one without the other" (Wolff in Martin & Souder, 2009, p. 127). However there is an inherent tension between commercial interests and journalistic goals. This tension is something that has been a concern of media scholars and critics for years (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006; Curran, 2005; Hallin, 2000; Picard, 2005 in Beam, Brownlee, Weaver & Di Cicco, 2009).

Globally, the news media is facing an increasingly competitive environment and it is feared that economic pressures could ultimately undermine journalism's ability to fulfil the role that "democracy requires of it." (Overholder, 2004, p. 13 in Beam, Brownlee, Weaver & Di Cicco, 2009, p. 735).

Locally, the independent media has come into the spotlight as the public debate about the role of the media in a developing democratic society is intensifying. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) is proposing the establishing of a media tribunal to

3

provide recourse for members of the public against unfair journalism in the print media. The proposed tribunal forms part of the Protection of Information Bill currently in front of the South African Parliament. The South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef, 2010) believes that this Bill and the tribunal poses a serious threat to the free flow of information and the right to freedom of expression which is enshrined in the Constitution. This context of the research highlights the importance of gaining a greater understanding of how editors in South Africa are influencing the public agenda and whose interests they are serving.

Editors play a fundamental role in the media as they are entrusted with the decision of what to publish. Editors are the top newsroom managers and the custodians of the professional values of the newsroom (Gade, 2008). There is a high level of pressure on editors to make good decisions as each day or week an editor's decision is scrutinised by the public. For instance, in the case of the *Sunday Times*, there are four million readers who are exposed to the decisions of the editor on a weekly basis. It is critical therefore that an editor is able to make sound and justifiable decisions in a short space of time.

The objective of this research report was to understand the factors which influence the decisions of news editors in South Africa. The context of this research is the independent news media due to the complexity of the decisions and the potential impact that one decision can have on a variety of stakeholders in society, including the state, civil society, companies and individuals. There is no other profession where an individual's decisions are open to public scrutiny on such a consistent basis. If a story is inaccurate or violates an individual's rights, the feedback on these stories is usually immediate in the form of legal action or a competitor publication running the correct story.

4

1.4. Relevance of this research in the South African context

South Africa is a country which has undergone profound social and political transformation in the last sixteen years. Under apartheid the media operated in a state-controlled environment, but today the freedom of the press is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). The independent media has played an important role in the country's social and political transformation. The relevance of this research in a South African context is twofold. Firstly, due to the critical role that the media plays in a democratic state like South Africa, it is worthwhile to examine how and by who decisions are made about the flow of information. The media in South Africa is facing increasing commercial and political pressure. The debate about the role of the media in South Africa has recently intensified with the ruling ANC releasing a discussion document analysing the role of the media in transforming South Africa and the proposed increased regulation of the media. As managers within this context editors occupy a unique position as they are tasked with ensuring that the news organisations they work for are financially viable and able to fulfil the social mandate which society expects of the independent media.

Secondly, decision making is critical to effective management in any industry. The role of managers is to develop the ability to evaluate alternatives and pick a course of action (Rahman & De Feis, 2009). Understanding how editors make decisions, in high pressured environments on a consistent basis, may provide insights for other business leaders on how to develop structures or approaches which improve the decision making process in business. The public interest is a central concept to journalism. Editors are not only bound by organisational goals but by a professional duty to serve the public interest. The well-known comment of Milton Friedman's that the "business of business is business" is up for debate, as increasingly other business leaders are being

5

called upon to consider the public interest in terms of the impact of their operations on society and the environment.

1.5. Purpose of this study

On a daily basis editors are tasked with making complex decisions which affect a number of stakeholders and which often involve a trade–off of interests. The purpose of this study is collect empirical data which provides an insight into the factors which influence editors in their decision-making process. The research goes beyond the philosophical debate about the role of the media in an emerging democracy to providel evidence about how editors, through their decisions, are practically determining the role the media is playing in South Africa.

For the purpose of this study, editors and news editors of news and current affairs media were interviewed. The editors all worked in independent news media organisations. The editors included in the sample work for traditional news organisations in the print, online and broadcast media. These editors are responsible, in their organisations, for deciding which stories are pursued, how resources are allocated in a newsroom and ultimately which stories reach the public domain. This study aims to contribute to understanding how editors make complex decisions by focusing on the factors which South African news editors consider when making a decision.

1.6. Scope of research

The scope of the research is limited to editors and news editors working in South African media organisations. The aim was to gain an insight into how editors make decisions which can have a profound impact on the society in which we live. The

editors were also asked about which factors they perceive influence their decision making and about which competencies they believe are required to make effective decisions in the socio-economic context of South Africa. The lived experiences of the editors and how they make trade-offs at the moment of decision provides a unique insight into the South African media and into decision making in a complex environment. This is of value to editors, news professionals, academics and media commentators who are interested in how the media is shaping its role in society through the decisions editors take.

How journalists select stories has remained largely unanswered due to the complexity of the process (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009). A number of models and theories have been developed to understand the different influences which determine news decisions. The majority of the research however has focused on journalists and not on editors. This is interesting as ultimately editors carry the overall responsibility for the newspaper or news broadcast and often the most controversial decisions are made by the editors. The aim of this study is to provide insight into the decision making processes of editors working in the complex socio-economic environment of South Africa. Furthermore, the analysis of the decision making process of the editors contributes to the area of decision making theory. It is a study which examines how complex decisions are made in reality. This forms part of descriptive decision theory.

The literature review in the following section focuses on the key issues regarding the news media, decision making, decision making in the media and the role of the media in South Africa. The review provides the theoretical foundation for the qualitative interviews used to collect the data.

2. CHAPTER 2:   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The literature review comprises of the following sections. Firstly, an overview of the challenges facing the global news media is outlined to provide the international context of the research. The South African news media operates in a unique context as it is part of the development of a new democratic society and in sections two and three the debate around the media's role in a new democracy is outlined and other challenges are highlighted. The following section outlines the key stakeholders of the commercial news media.

The key decision makers in the media are the editors and the last five sections deal with the theory decision making and its impact in the news media. A discussion on the evolution of research into decision making takes place to highlight the importance of effective decision making and previous research which has taken place into decision making. The importance of trade-offs in decision making is outlined and finally the impact of editorial decision making is discussed in light of the objectives of this research. The literature review provides the foundation of the research and the context in which the in-depth qualitative interviews with editors about decision making took place.

8

2.2. News media: A global industry in turmoil

Globally, the news industry is facing a number of challenges due to increased competition and the emergence of alternative information sources (Beam *et al*, 2009). Technology has fundamentally changed the future of the traditional news media and its survival and relevance will depend on its ability to respond to this dynamic environment. There is now a greater focus on the role of the media in a changing environment and the impact of market forces on the content of the media (Beam *et al*, 2009; Gade, 2008).

In the US, the traditional media, especially print media, is facing intense competitive pressure with the emergence of the Internet and other competing platforms such as social media (Gade, 2008). The newspaper industry in particular is facing serious challenges to its sustainability. In 2009 this industry experienced dwindling advertising revenues and declining circulation numbers in the US and Europe (World Editors' Forum, 2010). The number of employees in the print media, according to the Newspapers Association of America, declined by 18% between 1990 and 2004 (Fortunati & Sarrica, 2010). In addition, newspapers in the US have experienced a 41% drop in revenue over the last three years (Pew Research Center, 2010). Other mediums had a similar experience with local television advertising revenue falling 24% in 2009 and radio experiencing an 18% drop (Pew Research Center, 2010).

In 2009, several governments came to the aid of the newspaper industry. Despite protests from the European Commission the Swedish government has provided subsidies to its large newspapers to ensure the industry's sustainability. A member of the Korean Press Commission has recently recommended the establishment of a $1.5 million fund to assist that country's newspaper industry (World Editors' Forum, 2010).

There are also positive developments in the news industry such as the increase in news websites and free presses which have increased the penetration of newspapers in industrialised countries. There was also a sustained increase in 2009 of newspapers' penetration in emerging markets (World Editors' Forum, 2010). The news media is in effect growing, but its penetration is increasing through the use of new platforms including blogs and social media sites (Pew Research Center, 2010).

The increase in competitive forces has resulted in increased debate, both publicly and academically, about the role of traditional news values like the public interest, as the media becomes more market-driven (Gade, 2008). In a recent study in the US it was found journalists remain committed to serving the public interest and keeping the public informed, however there are increasing economic pressures which may undermine their ability to uphold these professional values (Beam *et al*, 2009). The changing environment has heightened the inherent tension in journalism between market forces and journalistic goals. In the academic literature about the role of the media there is ongoing debate about whether the independent media are businesses or agents of democracy and social change (Sylvie & Huang, 2006).

Beam *et al* (2009, p. 735 - 6) identify the following four main challenges to the news media in the US:

1. Inherent tension between market forces and journalistic goals;

2. Interaction between commercial goals and professional values;

3. Impact of media ownership on journalistic goals and values; and

4. Increasing market-orientated editorial strategies of news organisations.

These challenges identified by Beam *et al* (2009) are in relation to the US news media; however the South African news media is not immune to these challenges and in effect face more intense pressure due to the importance of a free media in a new democracy.

2.3. The South African media

South Africa has a dynamic and diverse media industry with over 30 million South Africans having access to some form of media (Media Development & Diversity Agency (MDDA), 2009). Radio is the most dominant medium with 94.1% of the adult population having access to it and television has a reach of over 83.4% of the adult population (MDDA, 2009). Over 5 million newspapers are sold daily in South Africa - however the print media's reach is limited as newspapers reach only 48% of the adult population. The Media Development and Diversity Agency speculates that this may be due to the country's low literacy levels (MDDA, 2009). It is clear from these statistics that the media play a central role in South African society (ANC, 2010).

The South African media industry is dominated by the following companies; the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), Avusa, Caxton / CTP, Naspers (Media24), the Independent Newspapers Group, Kagiso Media and Primedia (MDDA, 2009). The South African media continues to be fragmented according to race and language (Wasserman & Botma, 2008).

This overview of the South African media landscape provides an insight into the scale and reach of the media in South African society. The media sector occupies an important space in the socio-economic landscape of South Africa. This is reflected in the current intense debate between the government, the media and civil society about the role of the media in a new democracy like South Africa.

2.4. The media in post-apartheid South Africa

The media landscape in South Africa has changed significantly since 1994. The demise of apartheid has resulted in the mainstream media having to respond to and operate in a different socio-economic context. The media under apartheid was split along ideological lines and its activities were severely restricted due to government control (Tomaselli & Dunn, 2001). The alternative independent media played an important role in the struggle against apartheid but financial support for these papers decreased as it became clear that apartheid was no longer sustainable (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005)

In a democratic South Africa the media has had to reposition itself on an ideological front (Wasserman & Botma, 2008). In addition, the media is facing serious commercial pressures due to global competition and increased competition for audiences and resources (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005).

The South African media are facing a number of challenges as they shape their role in society. These challenges include:

1. The relationship between the media and the post-apartheid government (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005);
2. Increased competition (Wasserman & Botma, 2008);
3. Diversity and representivity in the media (Mtimbe, 2010; Manzella, 2008);
4. Shortage of skills (Berger, 2004; Sanef, 2005); and
5. Defining the role of the public broadcaster (Cottle & Rai, 2008).

The current public debate around the South African media is mainly centred on its role as a social agent and not the economic pressures it is facing. It is anticipated however

that economic pressures will increasingly become a factor in the choices South African editors make.

2.4.1. The relationship between the media and the government

The existence of a free media is widely accepted as critical to the functioning of a democratic state. An analysis of the state of the media is often considered a debate about the state of a democracy (Jacobs, 2002; Manzella, 2008). "Concern for democracy, therefore necessitates a concern about media" (Jacobs, 2002, p. 280). The public debate around the role of the media in South Africa and government's increasing interest in directing this role is a central challenge facing the South African media in executing its duty effectively.

Since 1994 the media are no longer subject to government censorship and control and the sector has had the freedom to determine its role in the new society. The years since democratisation, however, have increasingly been characterised by conflicts between the government and the independent news media, particularly around the role of the media in a new democracy (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005).

Media Institute of South Africa deputy chairman Raymond Louw (2009) argues that there is a "creeping censorship" which has occurred through a number of laws and specific clauses in revised legislation, which are seriously threatening the freedom of the press in South Africa. For instances, the Key Points Act, which prevents the publication of information about installations and buildings or other institutions which are strategic to South Africa's national interest does not specify the national Key points. This Act has been used by the State to prevent a Beeld journalist reporting on an internal disciplinary hearing into a corruption charge against a senior SABC official which is not in the spirit of the Act (Louw, 2009).

13

Since 1994 the mainstream media has adopted a largely liberal democratic approach which views the media as having a 'watchdog role' and serving the public interest as central to its role (Wasserman & De Beer, 2009).

> "*According to this perspective, the media acts as the fourth estate to keep government in check, and provides the public with the information it needs to participate in public life.*" (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005, p. 45)."

The independent media is therefore one of the key instruments in ensuring accountability in society (Battersby, 2008).

In the post-apartheid era it was agreed that the media would devise self-regulatory mechanisms and ethical codes on which to be judged. The Press Ombudsman and the Broadcast Complaints Commission was established to deal with complaints from the public (Wasserman & De Beer, 2009). The self-regulation of the media complements the liberal democratic view of the media as it allows it to remain independent and outside of state control.

The concept of 'the public interest' in post-apartheid South Africa is not undisputed and a large part of the debate about the media in South Africa is centred on the interpretation of the concept of 'public interest'. The ANC believes that the media has a central role in transforming the nation and that the notion of serving the 'public interest' is not sufficient and that a broader 'national interest' needs to be served (ANC, 2010).

At the recent National General Conference of the ANC, a discussion document on the role of the media in South Africa was presented. While the ANC continues to reassert its commitment to freedom of expression, it believes that this right should be balanced

with the media's responsibility to report accurately (ANC, 2010). The party believes that the current self-regulation mechanisms, like the Press Ombudsman, are not sufficient to ensure that the media is held accountable for the accuracy of its reporting (Mawson, 2010). To address this concern the party is proposing the establishment of a Media Appeals Tribunal. The tribunal's role will be to monitor the media and to provide the public with recourse against inaccurate reporting. The mainstream media, led by the South African National Editors' Forum and civil society, views the legislation as an attempt by government to curb freedom of expression and to limit the media's watchdog role (Sanef, 2010). Berger (2010, p. 1) argues that "while the press has its problems, its freedom is intrinsic to democracy."

The ANC are not the only critics of the South African media; a number of media commentators believe that the media "have not engaged in an effective critique of the country's continuing high levels of social and economic inequality or the structural constraints on its democratisation of its political life" (Jacobs, 2002 p. 279; Duncan, 2003).

Tensions between the government and the mainstream media have recently reached a new high with the proposed Protection of Information Act. The Bill and the proposed establishment of a statutory Media Appeals Tribunal have been debated widely in the media. Civil society, political parties, international media bodies, business and local media have all added their views to the debate (Mtimde, 2010). This intense public debate around the Act and the different viewpoints illustrates the importance of the ideological debate around the role of the media in post-apartheid South Africa.

The outcome of this current debate about the Media Appeals Tribunal and the Protection of Information Act will have significant implications for the independent media in South Africa and its relationship with government.

2.4.2. Diversity and transformation

The lack of diversity in the media in terms of ownership, newsroom diversity, and representation of viewpoints remains a major challenge for the South African media (Mtimbe, 2010; Manzella, 2008). The sector has seen a diversification of its ownership and senior management, however there is still a debate about whether it has changed on a grassroots level and whose interests it is serving (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). The print media has increasingly come under government focus as it is dominated by four groups of which two do not have any diversity in their ownership structure (ANC, 2010). In addition English remains the dominant language of the commercial media.

The transformation of the sector will continue to be a challenge until it reflects the demographics and viewpoints of all South Africans.

2.4.3. Shortage of skills

It is widely acknowledged that one of the critical challenges facing the South African media is the 'juniorisation' of the newsroom (Harber, 2002; Tsedu, 2002). Concerns about the quality of journalism led to the South African National Editors' Forum conducting an audit into the skills of journalists in 2002. The report found that there was serious lack of basic interviewing, writing and accuracy skills amongst junior reporters (Steyn, de Beer, & Steyn, 2003). The report also noted that many junior reporters did not stay in the industry and this was resulting in a lack of experience in newsrooms (Steyn *et al*, 2003). There are a number of theories why the media

industry is experiencing a lack of skills, including experienced journalists finding more lucrative positions in government and business (Manzella, 2008). The important debate around this challenge is not about why it has occurred, but rather around the implications of a media sector lacking in skills and experience. The government has used examples of poor quality journalism in its argument for the proposed Media Appeals (ANC, 2010).

The former Chairperson of the South African National Editors' Forum, Mathatha Tsedu (2002), highlights the fact that the lack of skills and experience has serious implications for the quality of journalism which takes place in the complex socio-economic environment of South Africa.

2.4.4. Increased competition

The South African media has experienced heightened competition since 1994 due to its re-entry into the global arena, the influx of foreign content and the deregulation of the sector (Wasserman & Botma, 2008). People are no longer relying on news organisations as their only source of information. The traditional news media is therefore not just competing with other media outlets for audience numbers, but also with the Internet and alternative sources of information like social media. This is a direct threat to the long-term economic sustainability of the media (Gade, 2008). As discussed previously, a news organisation's ability to deliver on its social mandate is strongly related to its ability to remain financially sustainable.

An indication of the competitive environment in South Africa is the fact that in recent years, three newspapers, Nova, This Day and The Weekender have tried to break into the mainstream and none have succeeded (Sapa on News24.com, 2010).

The central ideology of journalism is a commitment to serve the public interest. This foundation of journalism is under "constant challenge because what is in the public interest is not always in the economic interest of the news organisations" (Hallin, 2000 in Beam *et al*, 2009, p. 736). Numerous studies have shown the inherent tension within the independent media due to its duality of purpose both as a commercial enterprise and as the protector of the public interest. The implications of this research for the South African media is that economic pressures could ultimately undermine journalism's ability to fulfil its role as the fourth estate.

The economic pressures on the South African media, as in the US, have serious implications for the effectiveness of the media. The increasing competitiveness of the sector has resulted in the following trends: the 'tabloidisation' of the media, a reduction of staff, increasing consideration for commercial imperatives in making editorial decisions and a decline in specialised reporting (Harber, 2002). These consequences have serious implications for the media in its role as the public's 'watchdog'.

2.4.5. Role of the public broadcaster

The SABC is the public broadcaster and the state is its sole shareholder. The funding of the SABC is derived from government funding, license fees and advertising revenue (MDDA, 2009). This is in contrast to the commercial media which relies solely on advertising revenue and in some cases subscription fees for its income. The Board of the SABC is appointed by Parliament and the organisation has a developmental mandate. The SABC broadcasts news in all 11 official languages (Cottle & Rai, 2008).

The end of apartheid signalled the end of the state's monopoly over broadcasting. In this new competitive environment the SABC has struggled to define its role in the new South Africa. The corporation has had a series of crises over the last few years and

there is increasing concern that the organisation is not fulfilling its developmental mandate (Cottle & Rai, 2008). It has been accused of having a pro-ANC bias, with allegations of self-censorship and blacklisting of commentators critical of the government (Cottle & Rai, 2008). The role of the public broadcaster and its news editors in society is beyond the scope of this study.

2.5. Stakeholders in the commercial news media industry

The decisions taken by editors have an impact on a number of stakeholders in society. It is for this reason that an overview of stakeholder theory is of value when analysing the decision making process of editors. Stakeholder theory advances the view that decision makers in businesses have moral and ethical obligations to consider the interests of a wide range of stakeholders and not just the interests of profit seeking shareholders (Freeman, 1984). The term stakeholder emerged in the 1960s as an alternative view to the stockholder position, which holds that the sole role of a company's executives is profit maximisation (Stern, 2008). In contrast, stakeholder theory argues that "other parties hav(e) a 'stake' in the decision making of the modern, publicly held corporation in addition to those holding equity positions" (Goodpaster, 1991). Stakeholders are any parties which have an interest in the overall success of the company, including employees, suppliers and customers.

The theory of a stakeholder was advanced by Freeman in 1984 when he defined stakeholders as:

> "…groups and individuals who benefit from or are harmed by, and whose rights are violated or respected by, corporate actions: : : : Just as stockholders have a right to demand certain actions by management, so do other stakeholders have a right to make claims." (Freeman, 1984, p. 69)

The media has a more complex relationship with society than other corporate entities. There has been significant research into the fact that the media, through editorial decisions of what to cover and how to cover it, has a significant impact on the issues which feature on the public agenda (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). This is due to the fact that the publication of a story can have a significant impact on a number of stakeholders in society, irrespective of whether these stakeholders are consumers of the news media (Stern, 2008). For example, the decision of an editor to run a story about a corrupt high ranking political official can result in a change in political leadership, which affects society at large.

Stakeholder theory is particularly applicable in the context of the South African news media because of the central role the media plays in entrenching democracy. The news media are "an industrialized society's primary means of gathering, processing, and disseminating information to its individual members and to its institutions" (Lodges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993, p. 603). Editors are in a unique position in that they work for commercial companies and yet their decisions are not solely driven by the profit motive. Stern (2008, p. 51) argues that "the most challenging task for the top decision-maker in a news organization becomes how to weight the interests of these various parties." Editors are compelled in every decision to balance the interests of the various stakeholders. These stakeholders include:

- Audience;
- Advertisers;
- Shareholders;
- Staff;
- Government;
- People featured in the story;
- Civil society; and
- The public.

Inevitably, whatever decision an editor makes, it will result in the interests of one stakeholder group being placed above the interests of another (Stern, 2008). Stakeholder theory however does not place the interests of one stakeholder group above another (Freeman, 1984). In examining the decision making of South African editors it will be important to note which stakeholders' interests are considered by editors in their decision making and if any stakeholder group's interests are dominant.

2.6. Editors as key decision makers

Editors are the primary source of journalism expertise in a media organisation as they are essentially the managers of the newsroom and they espouse the highest level of journalism in the newsroom (Gade, 2008). They have a significant influence over what information and stories enter the public domain. Therefore any debate about the role of the media needs to consider the role that editors play in defining the role of the media.

The duties of an editor often include:

- Assessing which stories are been considered for publication;
- Assigning journalists to specific stories;
- Allocating resources to stories;
- Making the final decision of whether to run a story or not; and
- Providing the link to the management of the news organisation.

A number of these responsibilities are delegated to the news editor, however the editor has final responsibility for the operations and policies of the news organisation. In practical terms, the editor will be involved in all the high profile or high risk stories which may have serious consequences.

The decision making process in the news media is characterised by consultation which takes place through mechanisms such as editorial meetings. The final decision on

whether a story is published lies with the editor. The editor's influence is further strengthened by the fact that editors determine which stories are pursued and how journalists are allocated to stories. The news agenda is therefore set by the editor. Effective decision making is central to the role of an editor in the news media.

Ethical decision making is an area covered extensively in the literature on the media and decision making by editors and journalists (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004; Correa, 2009). The current study does not focus on ethical decision making but rather on the factors which South African editors consider when making editorial decisions.

2.7. Decision making

Decision making involves making a choice between several alternatives to achieve a specific outcome (Knighton, 2004). Decision making is critical to effective management in any industry. The role of managers is to develop the ability to evaluate alternatives and pick a course of action (Rahman & De Feis, 2009). In the news media decisions are made by editors every day under severe time pressure; in the medical field, health professionals make decisions that can change the course of people's life's and in strategic management successful decision making is a critical skill of any successful executive.

Effective decisions shape every aspect of society. Research into decisions and the decision making process has taken place across a wide variety of disciplines including mathematics, economics, statistics, psychology, management and philosophy. The interest in the analysis of decisions cuts across a number of disciplines because of the importance of decisions and the consequences of decisions. A clearer understanding of what drives decision making, especially in the media, is therefore of value. Galotti (2007) makes the point that much of the research and findings around decision making

has been established through the study of experts and laboratory experiments where researchers are able to control the variables. This study continues this approach by examining the decisions of 'experts' in the news media, namely editors.

The evolution of decision making theory will be outlined in the following section in order to provide the academic context for the current research. There are two main categories for decision making theories, namely normative theories and descriptive theories. This analysis of the evolution of decision making theory begins with the normative approach to decisions, which is captured by the rational decision making model, followed by descriptive theories which examine factors which influence how people make decisions in real life situations.

2.7.1. Normative decision theory

The initial normative research into decision making focused almost solely on a rational approach to decision making. Normative decision theories examine how individuals *should* make decisions when confronted by a number of alternatives. This approach assumes that decision making takes place through a logical process whereby the optimal solution is selected after all possible alternatives are considered (Chance & Chance, 2002). The key principle of the rational model is that people will choose the optimum solution after considering all the available options by the application of the laws of probability when making decisions (Knighton, 2004). There is a debate around the definition of optimum or the highest expected value.

The rational model has been largely used in economics to explain decisions and the behaviour of individuals. It has been the dominant model studied until late into the twentieth century.

The conditions for a rational decision making model rarely exist in the real world however. This limitation of the model resulted in a number of other decision making models been developed within economics and across other disciplines, including organisational theory and psychology (Cortés & Londoňo, 2009). The most prominent critics of the rational theory were two Israeli psychologists, Kahneman and Tversky, whose work showed how people consistently violate the principles of the rational model of decision making (Cortés & Londoňo, 2009).

2.7.2. Descriptive decision theory

The real world is complex and decisions are often not a simple choice between several known options. Managers, including editors, are often faced with decisions which are complex and unique. There are no mathematical tables or models which can be used systematically to come up with an optimal decision. In response to the real world's limitations of normative theories of decision making, there emerged the development of descriptive decision theories. These are theories which deal with how people *actually* make decisions in real world situations (Roos & Nau, 2010).

There are numerous descriptive theories of decision making which examine the impact of different factors on the way people make decisions in real-life situations. The following factors have been researched when examining the decisions and decision making process of an individual:

▪ *Demographics* which includes the role of gender, race, age and education level. Coleman (2003) found that race had an impact on the ethical reasoning and decision making of student journalists. In a disturbing finding, the student journalists in this study showed higher ethical reasoning when the

photographed subject was white than when the photographed subject was an African American.

- *Time pressure* (Rahman & De Feis, 2009). This is particularly relevant in the current study as Sylvie & Huang (2008) highlight the fact that in a newsroom, due to deadlines there is not sufficient time for journalists and decision-makers to reflect and discuss decisions.

- *Experience* has an impact on how a person's decision making style evolves. In a study of the decision profiles of 120 000 managers, it was found that there is a predictable pattern in how a successful manager's decision making style evolves during the course of their career. As a manager moves up in his/her career, there is a steady progression "toward openness, diversity of opinion, and participative decision making, matched by a step-by-step drop in the more directive, command-oriented styles" (Brousseau, Driver, Hourihan & Larsson, 2006). The implication on the current research is that the experience of the journalist or editor could be an important factor in the decision making style favoured by the individual.

- *Values* are key determinants in decision making (Urbany, Reynolds & Phillips, 2008, Sylvie & Huang, 2008; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998).

- *Situation/Context* is an important consideration when examining the choice of decision making style. Decision making literature has had a large focus on the impact of this variable regarding how decisions are made and which style is adopted (Scott & Bruce, 1995).

- *Culture* is an important factor in decision making (Yi & Park, 2003).

There are a number of descriptive theories which examine the impact of internal and external factors on decision making. Gary Klein introduced the naturalistic decision making (NDM) research approach which is one of the more prominent descriptive theories. This approach emerged in the late 1980s to examine how people make decisions in real world settings. A central feature of this approach is the NDM framework which emphasises "the role of experience in enabling people to rapidly categorize situations to make effective decisions" (Klein, 2008, p. 456). The characteristics of an NDM environment include:

- ill-structured problems;

- uncertain, dynamic environments;

- shifting or competing goals;

- action/feedback loops;

- time stress;

- high stakes;

- multiple players; and

- organizational goals and norms (Klein, 2008).

These characteristics highlighted by NDM can be found in a newsroom. In contrast to the rational decision making process, the NDM approach suggests that the process of decision making is complex and nonlinear (Galloway, 2007). Editors and other experts often have to make decisions instantaneously and without the luxury of following a systematic process.

Multi-criteria decision making analysis (MCDA) is a structured approach to decision making which assists decision makers who are faced with decisions with multiple alternatives (Mustajoki & Hämäläinen, 2005). There are a number of methods like

interval modelling and even swaps, which have been developed to assist people with the decision making process (Mustajoki & Hämäläinen, 2005).

Research into decision making has also focused on "biases that can be introduced into decision making by the cognitive short-cuts *(heuristics)* people use to cope with the complexity and ambiguity of the real world" (Knighton, 2004, p. 310). "The heuristics and biases paradigm (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982) demonstrated that people did not adhere to the principles of optimal performance; respondents relied on heuristic as opposed to algorithmic strategies even when these strategies generated systematic deviations from optimal judgments as defined by the laws of probability, the axioms of expected utility theory, and Bayesian statistics (Klein, 2008, p. 456)."

In organisational theory the work of James March, an American sociologist, into decision making, is highly regarded. He focused on the impact of the organisational context on decision making. He developed a descriptive model of decision making which viewed decision making as bounded rationality. The boundaries discussed by March were:

- Limits of the mental capacity of decision makers
- Political limits; and
- Organisational limits.

These boundaries have a significant impact on the decision making process in organisations (Chance *et al*, 2003, p. 182).

In organisational theory, research into decision making has evolved from focusing on the leader as the key decision maker to focusing on models which emphasised the participation of different stakeholders within organisations. Participatory decision

27

making and decision making in teams has received increasing focus in literature on management (Chance *et al*, 2003, p. 183).

2.7.3. Decision making models

The importance of decision making in all professional environments has resulted in numerous models been developed to guide the decision making process. From business management to medical care there is a vast amount of literature providing models and guidance on how to make effective decisions. An example of a decision making process was developed by Drucker (1974, p. 19 - 20), who outlined a linear decision making process which consisted of the following five steps:

- Define the problem;
- Analyse the problem;
- Develop alternative solutions;
- Decide on the best solution; and
- Convert decisions into effective actions.

This exploratory study focuses on the factors which influence how editors analyse the problem, develop alternatives and decide on a course of action when faced with difficult editorial decisions.

It is anticipated that the in-depth interviews with the editors will provide insight into whether there is a systematic decision making process in the South African media or if there is a reliance on the editor's personal intuition and judgement. This research follows a similar philosophy to the Naturalistic Decision Making approach as it examines how people make decisions in their real life settings.

Active research into how people make decisions continues and Cortés and Londoňo (2009, p. 179) recently made the point that it "is necessary to go beyond one discipline to understand in a better way what happens with human decisions." It is clear that the evolution of decision theory and research around decision making continues to develop and that the need to understand effective decision making remains relevant.

2.8. Impact of trade–offs in decision making

Complex decisions often involve trade-offs as these types of decisions are not usually just a simple process of selecting one optimal solution, as each option presents its own unique outcome. A trade-off involves selecting between two options which have a similar value (Dictonary.com). Hammond, Keeney, Raiffa and Howard (1998, p. 137) believe that "(m)aking wise trade-offs is one of the most important and difficult challenges in decision making."

News editors are faced with complex decisions every day and these decisions often involve trade-offs. A story may serve the public interest but in order to tell it, an individual's right to privacy may be violated. Each story has its own unique set of circumstances and possible implications. It is up to the editor to assess the options and make the relevant trade-off. This often has to take place in a short space of time and with no analytical process to reflect the implications of each trade-off. The difficulty lies in determining the relative value of each of the options and subsequent outcomes. Subjective judgement is required to make the trade-off (Hammond, Keeney, Raiffa & Howard, 1998, p 147). Hammond *et al* (1998) developed the even swaps method which is a MCDA method which provides an approach to making trade-offs by assigning values to each alternative and through a process of elimination coming up

with the optimal solution. The issue of trade-offs has been researched in a number of disciplines, from decision making to investment banking to environmental science.

2.9. Decision making in the media

Decision making in the media is a central concern in communication research (Donsbach, 2004). There are a number of models and theories which have been developed which identify a wide variety of influences on news decision making. However there is no one model which can predict whether a story will be published or not (Reinemann & Schulz, 2006).

There is a common understanding that news decisions are a 'highly complex phenomenon' and to date there is no single empirical theory which integrates all the factors which influence news decisions "and probably such a theory is not possible theoretically due to the complexity of the process" (Donsbach, 2004, p. 132).

The criterion for how news items are selected is an area of continuing debate because of the importance of the media in society (Eilders, 2006). Reinemann & Schulz (2006, p. 1) argue that due to the complexity of news decisions there are "many unanswered questions that stimulate both empirical studies and theoretical thinking on news-making." The current debate in South Africa about the role of the media illustrates the point that the factors influencing the media are also not static and are constantly changing. Editors make decisions in a specific context and this context is constantly changing.

A large degree of research has taken place into the influence of news factors or news values which are "professional assessments of the characteristics that make a story worth reporting" (Donsbach, 2004, p. 134). These include characterisitics like

prominance, human interest, conflict, novelty, timeliness and proximity (Sylive & Huang, 2008). Most of the research has focused on the decision making process of journalists and has taken place in developed nations, particularly in the United States. The decision making processes of editors has not received the same attention as that of journalists, despite the critical role played by editors - particularly in the case of controversial stories where there is a trade-off of values.

It is interesting to note that research into decision making in communication research has not drawn on other normative or descriptive decision making theories. Researchers have tended to view the news decision making process as complex and resistant to a specific model or theory.

Donsbach (2004, p. 136 – 137) captures the challenges facing editors as they "have to decide what is true, what is relevant and what is, in a moral sense, good or bad." He makes the point that other professionals face similar decisions, however editors face four additional problems. These are:

- Severe time constraints;
- Intense pressure of competition;
- There is a lack of objective criteria; and
- The decision becomes immediately public.

Figure 1:   Journalists' dilemma in news decisions

> What is true? (→ truth)
>
> What is relevant? (→ news value)
>
> What is good/acceptable? (→ evaluation)

Time pressure | Pressure of competition | Lack of objective criteria | Publicness

'Undetermined situations'
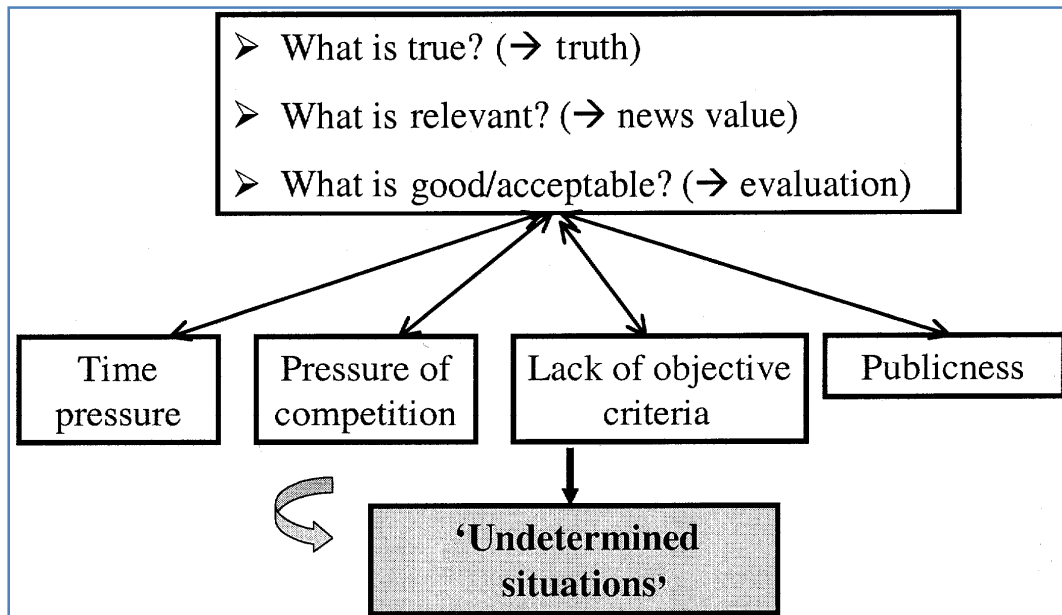
(Donsbach, 2004, p. 137)

It is possible to establish truth, however the challenge comes when a story needs to be evaluated as there is often no objective criteria. Research has found that news professionals rely on their colleagues when it comes to consulting and seeking advice on a story. In one study, 65% of US journalists and 84% of Swedish journalists listed other journalists as a very or quite important source of guidance (Donsbach, 2004).

Donsbach (2004, p. 143) argues that as "journalists have similar values and attitudes, more than members of most other professions it is rather easy for them to develop a shared reality."

2.10. Editorial decision making in a democratic South Africa

The strict regulatory regime of the apartheid state had a significant influence on editorial decision making in South Africa and "the law rather than ethical principles formed the yardstick for judging difficult editorial decisions" (Froneman 1994 in Wasserman & De Beer, 2005, p. 41). The dramatic shift in regulatory and socio-economic conditions has meant that the media has been allowed to negotiate its own role and responsibility in this new democratic society. As key decision makers in the media, editors are playing a central role in defining the role of the media on a practical level. An understanding of the factors which influence these decisions is critical due to the importance of the media and the importance of the editorial decision making process on various stakeholders in society.

The current research is based loosely on a study done by Sylvie and Huang who examined the role of the personal values of editors in the "struggle to meet the various challenges of fewer readers, changing public tastes, and responding to change" (Sylvie & Huang 2008, p. 20). Sylvie and Huang (2008) identify the following four value systems which underpin most editorial decisions:

- Journalistic values;
- Audience values;
- Social values; and
- Organisational values.

The findings of this study showed that despite these various external pressures, editors remain firmly committed to traditional journalistic and audience related values.

Cortés and Londoňo (2009, p. 178) believe that there is a "need for continuous thinking about human rationality if we want to make sense of our actions." This study aims to contribute to this process by providing insight into the factors underlying editorial decision making in South Africa. The factors are identified by the news editors themselves through in-depth qualitative interviews. The analysis of the interviews takes place on three levels. The first level will be the identification of the factors which impact the decision making process and how trade-offs are made by the editors. For example; how editors make trade-offs between concepts like the public interest vs. the national interest. The data is then analysed to assess how through their decisions, editors are shaping the role of the media in South Africa. Finally, the competencies required by editors to make effective decisions will be discussed.

2.11. Conclusion

The global news media, including the South African media, is facing a continuously changing environment and in order to remain relevant it has to redefine its role both ideologically and economically (Wasserman & Botma, 2008). A review of the literature shows that there is intense interest and debate about the role of the media and the interests it serves in a democratic South Africa. Editors, who are key-decision makers in the media, actively shape the role the media plays through their editorial decisions. Editors determine which stories enter the public domain but there is little empirical evidence on how editors make these decisions and the type of trade-offs the editors make in the process. The research into which stories are selected for news has to a large degree focused on how journalists select a story. And yet ultimately it is the editor which has the responsibility of deciding which stories gets published. Furthermore, the editor is tasked with ensuring the news organisation retains its

audience to stay financially viable. This adds a level of complexity which journalists are not faced with.

All business leaders have a number of stakeholders to consider in their decision making process, however editors have the added pressure that their decisions can impact on stakeholders who are not related to the news organisations. Editors have to consider the broader public and the impact of their decisions on society. The trade–offs made in editorial decisions is often between the interests of different stakeholders.

Decision theory forms the theoretical foundation of this research. How people make decisions has been the subject of active research for over fifty years. This reflects the importance of decisions in shaping society and businesses. The quest for effective decision making remains an important area of research (Cortés & Londoňo, 2009). This study focused on how editors make decisions in real life and therefore falls into the area of descriptive decision theory (Roos & Nau, 2010). This study did not preselect the factors to focus on, but rather relies on the editors' perceptions of the factors which influence their editorial decision making process.

This study set out to understand how South African editors working in a media which has adopted a liberal democratic approach and which is facing increasing economic and political pressure, make decisions. Are these editors driven by 'the public interest' or are commercial or political interests becoming more important in the decision making process? Or are there factors not identified by the literature which the editors consider in the moment of decision?

3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the literature review, the emphasis on the importance of the role of the media and the central role played by the decision making of editors informed the following four research questions:

3.1. Question 1

What factors do editors perceive to be important when evaluating a story for publication or broadcast?

This question seeks to go beyond the philosophical debate about the role of the media to understand which factors are considered by editors at the moment of decision. What values or factors are editors considering when framing their decisions?

3.2. Question 2

What is the relative importance of the factors?

The research question seeks to understand how editors assign importance to the factors which influence the decision. This question will also form the basis of comparison between the factors identified by the different editors.

3.3. Question 3

What are the trade—offs that editors make when making a difficult editorial decision?

This question seeks to explore, through specific examples, the nature and characteristics of a difficult editorial decision in terms of the trade-offs which are made. Trade-offs are common in complex decisions (Hammond, Keeney, Raiffa, Howard, 1998). This question aims to gather data on how editors view these trade-offs and how they prioritise certain factors and value systems to come to a decision in a short space of time.

3.4. Question 4

Question 4: What competencies do editors believe are important to make good editorial decisions?

This research question seeks to provide qualitative data on what competencies editors perceive is necessary to make good editorial decisions in a complex socio-economic environment like South Africa. It is anticipated that the data collected will provide general guidelines which can assist with improving the editorial decision making process.

4. CHAPTER 4:   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

The following chapter discusses the research methodology utilised in this study. The purpose of the research required a highly exploratory approach as the objective was to gain an insight into the factors editors consider when making decisions about which stories to publish or broadcast.

The research process consisted of the following four stages:

Stage 1:   A literature review was undertaken which provided insight into the area of decision making and the need for the research in terms of the role of the media in South Africa and the critical role played by editors.

Stage 2:   Data was obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 South African news editors.

Stage 3:   The information obtained from the interviews was classified, integrated analysed and interpreted using frequency and content analysis.

Stage 4:   The findings, areas for future research and implications of the research for the relevant stakeholders were discussed.

4.2. Research method and design

Qualitative research was selected as the primary method, as the intention of the research was to identify and gain greater insight into factors influencing the decisions

of news editors. Qualitative research allows for the exploration of the meaning of experiences lived by individuals in specific contexts (Malterud, 2001). This research method complements the research objectives, as qualitative research focuses on phenomena which occur in the real world and involves studying "those phenomena in all their complexity" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 133). Decision making in an uncertain situation is a complex phenomenon. Qualitative research is a method which provides the opportunity "to construct a rich and meaningful picture of a complex, multifaceted situation" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 133).

The research was exploratory as it seeks greater understanding of an experience rather than attempting to provide a precise measurement or quantification of the experience (Zikmund, 2003). The research methodology was exploratory and qualitative in nature as there is limited research into the factors which are driving the decisions of editors in post-apartheid South Africa - the need to understand these factors have been acknowledged (Mazella, 2008). The research is based on both secondary data in the form of a literature review, and primary data (Zikmund, 2003). The primary data was generated through in-depth interviews with editors from news organisations in South Africa.

The literature review formed the basis for the selection of the repertory grid technique (RGT) as a structured interview technique in order to obtain the relevant information from the participants (Marsden & Littler, 2000). Specific elements of the RGT were used to ensure that the interviews had a structure to address the research questions without imposing any meanings or concepts on the editors. There is limited research on the factors editors use to make editorial decisions in South Africa and it would therefore have been premature to develop a research hypothesis at this stage. In

39

addition, this study aimed to provide greater insight into the types of decisions editors are confronted with and how they resolve difficult editorial decisions.

A phenomenological approach was used as this approach seeks to "capture the meaning and common features, or essences, of an experience or event" through an examination of an individual's lived experiences (Starks & Brown, 2007, p. 1374). This supports the objectives of the research which was achieved through the analysis of the lived experiences of the editors when making decisions.

4.3. Population

The population consists of editors working in the South African news and current affairs media who are tasked with making decisions about which stories are selected and published. The population is a select group of individuals and there are a small number of individuals which fit these criteria. To illustrate this point it is worth noting that there are only 23 daily national newspaper titles in South Africa (MDDA, 2009).

4.4. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis was the perceptions of the editors about the factors influencing their editorial decisions.

4.5. Sample, sampling method and size

Sampling is a procedure which uses a small portion of the identified population "to make a conclusion about the entire population" (Zikmund, 2003, p. 70). The sample reflected the identified population as it is only individuals working in the newsroom who carry the responsibility of selecting the stories which are published or broadcast (Sylvie & Huang, 2008).

Judgment sampling was used to select the participants because the sample needed to consist of a set of individuals who have a specific set of characteristics. This is a non-probability sampling method as not every member has a "known, nonzero probability of selection" (Zikmund, 2003, p. 379 – 380).

The sample consisted of 12 editors who work at news organisations in South Africa. Eleven of the editors were based in Gauteng and this allowed the interviews to be face-to-face. Furthermore, most of the national media is headquartered in Johannesburg. One of the editors is based in Cape Town and the interview took place telephonically. The sample size is relatively small because it is drawn from a hard to access population of people with a highly specific job. A sample size of between 5 and 25 is deemed adequate for a study of this nature which requires a sample which has had direct experience of the phenomenon or process being researched (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

The editors all had the following characteristics:

- Employed by a South African media organisation; and
- Occupy a decision-making position in terms of deciding what gets published or broadcast.

The following methods were employed to ensure that the required number of respondents was obtained:

- Use of personal and professional networks in the media industry to identify editors to participate in the research;
- A request was submitted to the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) to request access to its membership list. Sanef is a non-profit organisation

whose members are predominately editors and senior journalists from all areas of the South African media. (Sanef, 2010). However the request was not responded to; and

- Obtained the email details for news editors and emailed them directly requesting their participation in the research. This method obtained a higher than expected response rate with a third of the sample being recruited via this method.

The sample included editors from the broadcast, print and electronic media. Titles represented include: *The Sunday Times*, *Carte Blanche*, the *E–news Channel* and *Beeld*. The majority of the editors in the sample work on national publications or broadcasts. In total there is approximately 160 years of experience in journalism in the sample and over 85 years of editorial experience. The profile of the sample is provided in *Appendix A*.

Table 1: **Demographic features of the sample**

Category	Number
Gender	
Female	4
Male	8
Age	
20 - 30	0
30 - 40	9
40 - 50	3
Race	
Black	2
White	8
Coloured	2
Medium	
Print	4
Broadcast	6
New media (Internet)	2

4.6. Interview schedule design

The interview was a semi-structured conversation which was guided using specific techniques derived from the RGT. In order to explore the themes identified in the research questions the interviews were guided by an interview schedule (*Appendix B*). The questions were intentionally open-ended in order to allow the editor to discuss their perceptions about the factors and concepts which are important to them when making an editorial decision.

The interview design allowed each of the editors to provide insights into their personal experiences and the factors which have the greatest influence on their decision making

43

process. The factors and concepts were not 'imposed' on the editors; rather the editors were able to determine the direction of the interview according to their personal experiences. The techniques of RGT complemented the phenomenological approach of the study. There was flexibility in the interview as it took the format of a conversation. This facilitated an in-depth discussion about editorial decision making and allowed time for the editors to reflect on their answers and the role of the media in South Africa.

The semi-structured interview was appropriate given the exploratory nature of this study as it allowed data to be captured from the perspective of the participants. These types of interviews are appropriate in gaining the editor's insights and experiences (Alam, 2005). The majority of the participants noted that the interview was a valuable experience as they do not often have an opportunity to reflect on what the underlying factors are which drive their decision making, despite the fact that it is the central function of their role.

4.7. Data collection

The method for data collection was semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 11 news editors. As mentioned previously, one of the interviews was conducted telephonically. The interviews took place from September 2010 to October 2010 at each of the participants' offices in Johannesburg. The interviews took on average forty five minutes to complete. The researcher explained to each participant the purpose of the research and the ethical principles governing the process. Each of the interviews, except the telephonic interview, were recorded and subsequently transcribed, with the participant's consent.

The focus of the interview was to gain an insight, through the exploration of specific examples, into the factors which South African editors consider when faced with a

difficult editorial decision. This method is appropriate for the research topic as the intention is to understand which factors editors consider at the moment of decision and how these decisions shape the role of the media (Alam, 2005). The interviews allowed data to be collected which addressed the four main research questions outlined in Chapter 3.

The interview was guided by a schedule which began with simple questions about the experience of each editor. The main portion of the interview centred around two examples of difficult editorial decisions. The editors selected the examples themselves and explained why the decisions were difficult and how they resolved the complexity in the decision.

The interview took the format of a conversation and the questions were open ended in order to ensure that it complemented the exploratory nature of the research. In order to gather information relevant to the research objectives, elements of the repertory grid technique (RGT) were used to structure the questions and direct the conversation.

The RGT is a structured interview technique which has been used extensively in a number of disciplines including psychology, marketing and medicine to understand how individuals create meaning (Marsden & Littler, 1998). The technique has been selected as it aligns with the research objectives in that it does not impose any meanings, categories, or factors on the individuals. It allowed the editor being interviewed to highlight and identify the factors which are important to them. It is based on the work of George Kelly's personal factor psychology which sought to understand how individuals factor meaning in specific circumstances. The approach uses bipolar factors to understand the process of meaning factorion (Marsden & Littler, 1998).

The RGT consists of the following four stages, namely element selection, factor elicitation, element comparison and data analysis (Marsden & Littler, 1998). A pilot interview was conducted using all four stages of the RGT. It was clear from this interview that not all the elements of the RGT process were useful in eliciting the required information for the objectives of the research. The interview schedule was refined in order to capture relevant information which would address the four research questions. The interview schedule included questions which ensured element selection and element comparison from the RGT technique.

Element selection is the first stage of the RGT. It is a process whereby a set of elements are selected which are relevant to the research objective. Element selection took place at the beginning of the interview by asking the editors to provide examples of difficult editorial decisions and to discuss why these decisions were difficult. The discussion around why the decisions were difficult resulted in the selection of the key elements and concepts relevant to editorial decision making. The elements are the factors which the editors use or consider when making a decision (Marsden, Littler, 1998). In all the interviews the editors identified the elements, which included the public interest, the right to privacy and freedom of expression, in each of the decisions discussed. The objective of this phase of the technique was to gain an understanding of the way editors categorise the factors which drive their decision making in the professional context.

Element comparison is another step of the RGT. It is used to understand the relationships between the set of elements or factors. Participants were asked to rate on a scale from one to five, with three being neutral, each of the factors identified earlier in the interview. The rating is a method to understand how the factors lie in relation to each other (Marsden, Littler, 1998). This stage provided a holistic picture in

46

terms of the factors influencing an editor and which factors are the most important to the editor. This technique was very successful as it allowed the editor to rank the factors and assign each factor a relative importance. This technique provided valuable insight into research question three.

4.8. Data Analysis

The central purpose of data analysis is to transform the raw data through a number of processes into information which can be studied and interpreted in a meaningful way (Zikmund, 2003). In qualitative research it is a process which seeks to identify common themes in the data which are relevant to the objectives of the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

The data analysis followed the steps identified in the *data analysis spiral* developed by Creswell (1998). The *data analysis spiral* which identifies the following four steps in data analysis, namely organisation, perusal, classification and synthesis. A final step involving the interpretation of the results was also included in the process.

In this study the interviews were transcribed and the following steps were followed to analyse the data:

1. **Capturing of data** *(organisation)*: All the interviews were recorded, saved electronically and transcribed;
2. **Review of transcripts** *(perusal)*: Each transcript was reviewed several times to gain an overall sense of the data;
3. **Identification of relevant data** *(classification)*: Each transcript was assessed individually in order to identify statements and themes which related to the

research questions. The interview questions were aligned to the research questions and this aided in the process of identifying the relevant information;

4. **Integration of the data** *(Synthesis)*: The results from the data were summarised in tabular form; and

5. **Interpretation of the data** *(Interpretation)*: The tables generated in the previous step were analysed in conjunction with content analysis of the transcripts to interpret the results relevant to the research questions.

The analysis process took approximately 120 minutes per interview conducted.

4.8.1. Frequency analysis

Frequency analysis is used to indicate the number of times a variable occurs (Zikmund, 2003). This method was applied to each of the research questions as it allowed for the factors to be listed in a rank ordered frequency table. A frequency table is a table which shows the number of times the editors gave a particular answer (Zikmund, 2003). The frequency table allowed a comparison of the various factors to take place. The use of the techniques of the RGT ensured that the data from the individual participants was comparable. Each factor and the implications of each factor was then analysed using content analysis.

4.8.2. Content analysis

A content analysis is a systematic examination of information with the express purpose of identifying patterns and themes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Content analysis was undertaken on the data obtained from the open–ended questions contained in the interview schedule *(Appendix B)*. The interview transcriptions were analysed by extracting all the direct quotes from the interview which were relevant to the research

questions. The quotes were then organised into categories which were aligned to the research questions. These quotes and the emergent themes were then used to analyse and interpret the results obtained by the frequency analysis. In the case of question 3 where editors had to describe a difficult editorial decision, the content analysis took place first in order to identify the trade-offs which took place in the decision making process. Once this interpretation had taken place, frequency analysis was used to determine how often a particular trade-off took place. Content analysis relies on the researcher's ability to interpret and analyse the data in the context of the research questions and the literature review (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Schram (2003, p. 97) states that qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive and that it "is not necessary (or feasible) to reach some ultimate truth in order for your study to be credible and useful" (Schram, 2003, p. 97).

4.9. Research limitations

The research has a number of limitations and challenges that need to be noted. These include:

- The research is based on the perceptions of the editors about their decision-making process and the factors which are important. There is no mechanism to independently verify which factors are actually important and therefore there may be a response bias. A response bias occurs when a participant may intentionally or unintentionally "misrepresent the truth" (Zikmund, 2003, p. 178);

- The research does not assess all the external factors which could influence the decision making process of editors. This includes variables like demographics, age, education levels and experience which could impact on decision-making;

- The exploratory nature of the research and the sample size limits the ability to make generalised statements about factors influencing the decisions of South African editors (Zikmund, 2003);

- The editors interviewed work in the independent, commercial news media. This is a specific context which is affected by market forces and the research does not reflect the factors influencing editors working in the public broadcaster; and

- The research focused on traditional media including television, newspapers, radio, magazines and news websites. Social media is gaining influence in shaping the public agenda however this is not covered in the scope of this research.

5. CHAPTER 5:   RESULTS

5.1. Introduction

The following chapter is a presentation of the data collected during the qualitative interviews with each of the editors. The interview schedule was designed to collect data to answer the research questions presented in Chapter 3. The presentation of the data is fine grain and qualitative in nature. Content and frequency analysis was used to elicit the key factors from the data obtained from each interview. The presentation and analysis of the results is presented according to the research questions in Chapter 3.

5.2. Results for research question 1

What factors do editors perceive to be important when evaluating a story for publication or broadcast?

The editors were asked an open ended question about what factors they consider when evaluating a story for publication or broadcast. The question was purposively open-ended due to the exploratory nature of the research. The transcription of each interview was analysed to identify the factors which influence whether a story enters the public domain or not. The analysis of each transcription took approximately sixty minutes. Twenty two unique factors were identified by the editors. These factors are listed in rank order in Table 2. The frequency column reflects how many editors mentioned that particular factor. The factors are in descending order from the highest frequency to the lowest frequency.

Table 2:   Factors influencing the decision making process

Rank	Factors	Frequency
1	Relevance to the audience	8
2	Accuracy	7
3	The public interest	4
3	Newsworthiness	4
3	Entertainment value	4
6	Suitability to the medium	3
7	Corporate interests	2
7	Truth	2
7	Understanding the story/Context	2
7	Is the story interesting?	2
7	Balance – representing diverse views in the story	2
12	Fear of consequences	1
12	Credibility	1
12	"Gut feel"/instinct	1
12	National or local interest	1
12	Mix of stories	1
12	Ratings/competition	1
12	Objectivity	1
12	Links to relevant information in the story (Online)	1
12	Credibility and authority of the sources	1
12	Information/Educational purposes	1
12	Influencing society in a particular direction	1

5.3. Results for research question 2

What is the relative importance of the factors?

The editors were then asked to rate the factors which they had identified on a five point scale. The following scale was used:

1 = Unimportant
2 = Slightly important
3 = Important
4 = Very important
5 = Critical

Table 3 shows the weighted total of each factor. The weighted total is achieved by multiplying the frequency of the factor by its rating. For example: The weighted total of relevance to the audience is (1 x 3) + (2 x 4) + (5 x 5) = 36. The totals are weighted in order to give a more accurate representation of the most important factors. For instance the factors of objectivity and credibility have the same frequency but they have different ratings. The difference in the ratings is reflected in the weighted total.

Table 3:   Relative importance of the factors

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
1	Relevance to the audience			1	2	5	36
2	Accuracy					7	35
3	The public interest			1		3	18
3	Newsworthiness				2	2	18
5	Entertainment Value			2	2		14
6	Suitability to the medium			1		2	13
7	Truth					2	10

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
7	Understanding the story/context					2	10
7	Representing both sides - balance					2	10
10	Is the story interesting?			1	1		7
11	Credibility					1	5
11	"Gut feel"/instinct					1	5
11	Links to other information (Online)					1	5
11	Credibility and authority of sources					1	5
15	Fear of consequences			1			3
15	National or local interest			1			3
15	Mix of stories			1			3
15	Ratings/competition			1			3
19	Corporate interests	2					2
19	Objectivity		1				2
19	Information/Educational purposes		1				2
19	Influencing society in a particular direction		1				2

It is interesting to note the dominance of 'relevance to the audience' and 'accuracy' when considering the weighted totals. In the case of 'relevance to the audience', two-thirds of the respondents identified this as an important factor when evaluating a story. 'Accuracy' had fewer respondents, however every respondent which identified it gave it a 5 rating, indicating that it is critical factor in any story under evaluation.

The weighted totals of the other factors are significantly lower than the first two factors. 'The public interest' and 'newsworthiness' shared the third ranking. These are two factors strongly associated with the profession of journalism. It is important to note that 'the public interest', as presented in these results, is the concept discussed in

Chapter 2 whereby the media serves the interests of broader society by providing information for citizens to participate in public life and holding those in power accountable (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). There is a broad spread of other factors which show the complex nature of the decision making process of editors and the flexibility news editors have to exercise their own judgement when assessing a story.

5.4. Results for research question 3

What are the trade-offs that editors make when making a difficult editorial decision?

What are the trade-offs that editors make when making a difficult editorial decision?

The editors were asked to describe two situations in which they had to make difficult editorial decisions. The question was open-ended and it was up to the editor to define a difficult decision and why it was difficult. The use of examples was to elicit the actual factors which editors use when making decisions and to identify which factors were the most dominant in making the final decision in the trade-off. The factors elicited by this question differ from the factors in research question 1 and 2 as these relate to *actual* decisions. A number of editors noted that they faced difficult decisions everyday and that it was part of their job to make difficult decisions.

The value of asking for a specific example is that it provided the editors with the opportunity to reflect on actual decisions and the factors which influenced these decisions. This is in contrast to the factors which they *perceive* to be important which was presented under the results for research question 1 and 2. With the increasing

economic and political pressure facing the media, the examples provided insight into which factors and frameworks editors in South Africa are using to evaluate stories.

A large amount of data was accumulated for research question 3. The classification of the data took place at a number of levels from basic frequency analysis of the factors and trade-offs to a more complex analysis of mapping each of the trade-offs against a framework of values. The following table is a summary of the results derived from this data:

Table 4:   Summary of the results for reseach question 3

Results	Description	Focus
Table 5	Summary of all the data including the examples, trade – offs and factors determing the final decision	Overview of all the data
Table 6, Figure 2	Summary of the factors mentioned in the examples	Factors
Table 7	Summary of trade – offs for each factor	Factors and trade - offs
Table 8	Summary of the trade – offs	Trade - offs
Table 9	Summary of the factors determing the final decision	Factors determing the final decision
Table 10	Editors' value systems	Framework to classify the trade – offs and final decisions
Table 11	Values underlying each factor	Factors
Table 12, Figure 3	Values underlying each trade – off	Trade - offs
Table 13	Values underlying the final decision	Values determining the final decision

Table 5 is a summary of the examples of difficult editorial decisions identified by and discussed with the editors during the interview. In each example there is a trade-off between two or more factors. These factors were identified by each editor during the qualitative interview. The trade-off in each decision is noted in the table. The important aspect of this data is that in each case the editor was able to identify which factor was the most influential in determining the final decision.

Table 5:   **Difficult editorial decisions**

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
1	TopTV is a new independent TV station in South Africa. The holding company of the newspaper is also the owner of a TV station in direct competition with TopTV. The launch of TopTV raised a number of questions in the decision making process. Should the newspaper run a positive story about the launch of TopTV which is in direct competition to the station with which it shares an owner?	Corporate interests vs. Newsworthiness	The positive story on TopTV was published. A disclaimer was included which noted that the publication shared a holding company with the competitor TV station.	Newsworthiness
2	A journalist interviewed criminals about their views on the new "shoot to kill" policy of the police. The police requested the identity of the criminals from the editor so that they could arrest them.	Newsworthiness vs. Public safety	The interview with the criminals was broadcast. The editor refused to hand over the identities of the criminals. The police laid charges against the editor and journalist. The charges were later dropped	Newsworthiness

Table 5: Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
3	The ANC's National General Congress (NGC) was held in Durban. All the discussions were held behind closed doors and no-one would be interviewed on camera to discuss what was been discussed and decided upon. The editor had to decide whether to use information provided by anonymous sources to tell the story about the NGC. This would be in direct contrast to the TV station's policy.	The public interest vs. Editorial policy	Multiple sources were used to verify information but it was the presenter who transmitted the information as there were no people willing to be interviewed.	The public interest
4	A media outlet reported that the Zambian President, Levy Mwanawasa had died. The story however had not been confirmed by the Zambian government. The editor had to decide whether to run the story using the rival media as a source or wait for confirmation from the Zambian government. The risk was the longer he waited for official confirmation the higher the chance that his competitors would broadcast the story.	Competition vs. Accuracy	The story was not broadcast as it could not be verified with the Zambian government. It turned out not to be true.	Accuracy

59

Table 5:   Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
5	A security guard was gunned down by robbers in Lenasia. This particular security guard had previously lost his father to criminals and he became a security guard because of his father's murder. The murder scene was particularly gruesome. Traditionally this television station does not show pictures of dead bodies however the editor wanted the story to have an impact because of the personal story behind the murder.	The public interest vs. Editorial policy The public interest vs. Right to privacy of the victims family The public interest vs. Risk of consequences i.e. negative audience reaction or a complaint lodged at the Broadcast Complaints Commission.	The pictures were broadcast and there were no consequences.	The public interest *(in all three trade – offs identified)*
6	A columnist wrote a column criticising the owner of the newspaper in which the column was to be published.	Free flow of information vs. Corporate interests	The editor published the article and gave the owner a right of reply in the same edition.	Free flow of information
7	An article was written which was highly critical of one of the publication's major advertisers.	Free flow of information vs. Corporate interests	The editor published the article and gave the advertiser the right of reply.	Free flow of information

60

Table 5: Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
8	The story exposed safety concerns around the rides at a popular entertainment resort however the source of the allegations had a grudge against the resort.	The public interest vs. Credibility of the source	The story was broadcast as the information was substantiated by other sources and the resort was given a right of reply.	The public interest
9	Abortions were taking place at a public hospital which did not adhere to basic medical standards. The basic human rights of the patients was been violated. Hidden camera footage of the abortions had to be obtained to verify the allegations. However the context was extremely sensitive and private.	The public interest vs. Right to privacy	The footage was obtained but no identities were revealed.	The public interest
10	The major source on a story decided at the last minute not to be interviewed on camera. The broadcaster had all the relevant information and could have opted to go with the story without the interview. However the editor questioned the	Newsworthiness vs. Credibility of the source	The story was not broadcast on the scheduled date. The journalist had to find other sources to verify the information and who	Credibility of the source

Table 5:   Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
	motives of the source when he pulled out of his interview at the last minute.		were prepared to be interviewed on camera. The risk of this decision was that a competitor could broadcast the story first.	
11	The source of a story agreed to be interviewed on camera but at the last minute asked for his identity to be hidden. The key information was contained in an affidavit but that was the only source of the story.	Newsworthiness vs. Credibility of the source	The story was pulled as the editor felt that it was not sufficient to have one source who would not allow their identity to be revealed.	Credibility of the source
12	An editor had to decide whether to use an image of a baby which had been abandoned and which had passed away.	Newsworthiness vs. Risk of consequences i.e. negative audience reaction or a complaint lodged at the Press Ombudsman	The picture was not published on the front page but later in the paper. A warning was placed on the front page warning readers about the sensitive nature of	Newsworthiness

Table 5:   Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
			the picture.	
13	A women committed suicide in Sandton Square by jumping out of the Michelangelo Towers. She fell through the roof of a restaurant and caused extensive damage. The editor wanted to take a different angle on the suicide and calculate the cost of the fall in terms of damage to the restaurant.	Newsworthiness vs. Sensitivity to the family of the victim	The story was published under the headline "R28 000 plunge"	Newsworthiness
14	A South African trade union has a stake in a factory in Lesotho which was paying its workers the minimum wage. The factory operated within the law but the worker's earned far less than their South African counterparts.	The public interest vs. Accuracy	The story was run under a sensational headline – "Textiles Union has stake in sweatshop". By operating within the law the factory was not strictly a sweatshop. however the paper chose to use this angle due to the hypocrisy of the	The public interest

Table 5: Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
			Union.	
15	Andre Nel, an ex-South African cricketer, was caught having an affair. He is a married man but no longer a South African cricketer.	Newsworthiness vs. Right to privacy Right to privacy vs. Entertainment value	The story was published as the editor believes he is still a public figure and it is a story which would interest his audience.	Newsworthiness Entertainment value
16	The paper was pursuing a lead about increased security at the marketing manager of ABSA's house. The marketing manager was at the centre of a controversy as he had requested SA rugby to address transformation through a sms. The story was of interest to the paper's readers however there was only one source.	Newsworthiness vs. Credibility of the source	The story was not published as there was only one source.	Credibility of the source
17	The Deputy President, Kgalema Motlanthe, gave a speech in which he	The public interest vs. Entertainment value	The editor placed it on the front page due to its	The public interest

Table 5:   Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
	stated that racial tension in South African is like a volcano waiting to erupt. Motlanthe is traditionally known as a moderate voice and this statement was in contrast to his usual style.		public interest value even though it was not typically a story suited to his audience.	
18	The paper received information that President Zuma had recently had a love child with the daughter of a prominent soccer administrator.	The public interest vs. Right to privacy The public interest vs. Risk of consequences Newsworthiness vs. Right to privacy	The story was run on page 1 after it had been verified by a number of sources and the paper's legal team had been consulted. The editor believed it was in the public interest as it is leader of the country and his private behaviour is open to public debate.	The public interest Newsworthiness
19	A newspaper receives information that a woman in prison in Brazil on drug charges is accusing the wife of the Minister of Intelligence of being involved in the drug	The public interest vs. Risk of consequences i.e. safety of the journalist and backlash from the government	The story was published on page one after it had been verified through additional sources and	The public interest

Table 5:   Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
	deal.		documents..	
20	A minor was raped and her mother agreed to be interviewed on camera. This was highly unusual as it would have compromised the victim.	Newsworthiness vs. Protection of the victim	The editor ran the story but did not show the identity of the mother even though she had agreed for her interview to be broadcast.	Protection of the victim
21	Rhino poaching has dramatically increased in South Africa. The story however does not appeal directly to the audience of this particular show.	Newsworthiness vs. Relevance to the audience	The editor chose not to run the story but admitted that if there was a lack of news that day the story would have been broadcast	Relevance to the audience.

Table 5:   Difficult editorial decisions

No.	Example	Trade-off	Decision	Factor which determined the final decision
22	A journalist had access to sensitive information about money laundering. If the story was published it could place the journalist's life in danger.	The public interest vs. Risk of consequences i.e. safety of the journalist	The editor chose to run the story but put in place extra measures to guarantee the safety of the journalist. The publication also passed on the information to other publications so that the threat against one specific journalist would be diluted.	The public interest

One of the editors could not name one example of where he had a difficult editorial decision. His view was that if a story is true and it is in the interests of the viewers, he will broadcast the story.

In the 22 examples of difficult editorial decisions there are 15 factors which were considered in the decision making process of the editors. Each example provided by the editors was analysed for the trade-offs which made the decision difficult. The trade-offs were elicited through the interview with the editor and after the interview with a thorough analysis of the transcript of the conversation.

The following table lists the factors identified and the number of times the factor was mentioned as an element of a trade-off.

Table 6:   Summary of the factors

Rank	Factor	Frequency
1	The public interest	12
2	Newsworthiness	11
3	Right to privacy	6
4	Risk of consequences	5
5	Credibility of the source	5
6	Corporate interests	3
7	Editorial policy	2
8	Accuracy	2
9	Free flow of information	2
10	Entertainment value	2
11	Protection of the victim's rights	1
12	Relevance to the audience	1
13	Public safety	1
14	Competition	1
15	Sensitivity to the victim's family	1

Figure 2: **Frequency of the factors in difficult editorial decisions**
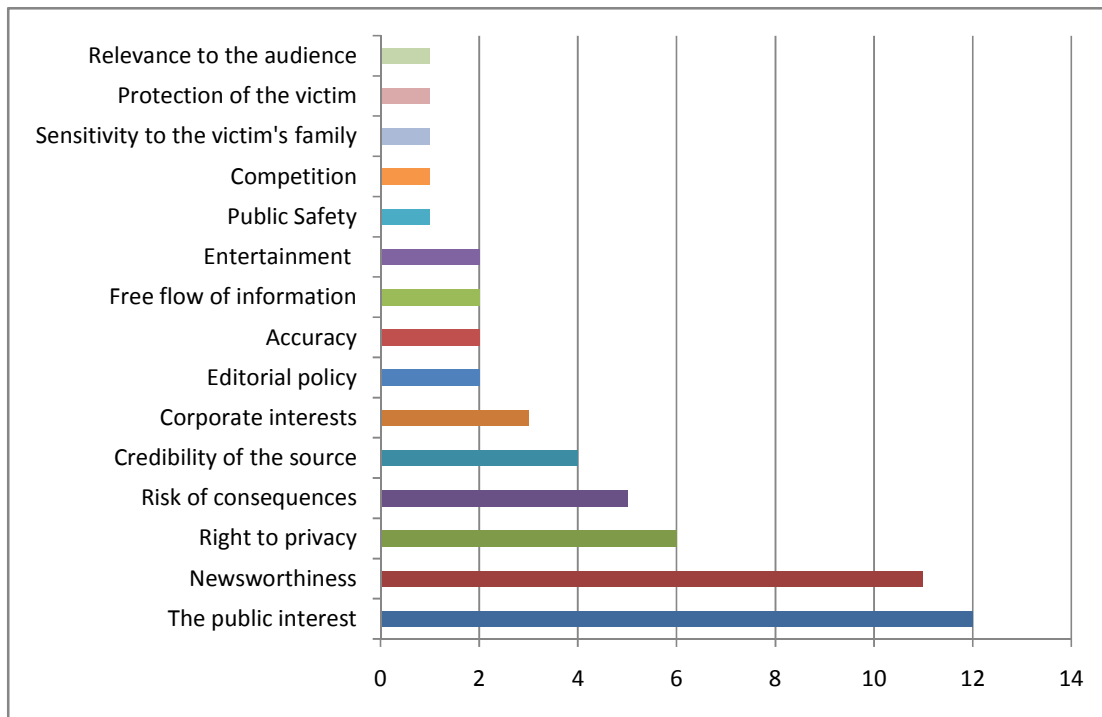
The examples provided by the editors of difficult editorial decisions all involved a trade-off between two or more factors. These factors usually represented the interests of two different sets of stakeholders. The factors being traded off for each example were identified and captured in a table format.

69

The following table is a comprehensive overview of the factors which were traded-off against each other and the frequency of the trade-off. For instance corporate interests was traded – off three times - once in relation to *newsworthiness* and twice in relation to the *free flow of information.*

Table 7: **Summary of the trade-offs for each factor**

Factor	Trade-off	Frequency
Corporate interests	Newsworthiness	1
	Free flow of information	2
Newsworthiness	Corporate interests	1
	Public safety	1
	Right to privacy	2
	Credibility of the source	3
	Risk of consequences	1
	Sensitivity to the family of the victim	1
	Relevance to the audience	1
	Protecting the victim's rights	1
The public interest	Editorial policy	2
	Risk of consequences	4
	Credibility of the source	1
	Right to privacy	3
	Accuracy	1
	Entertainment value	1
Right to privacy	Newsworthiness	2
	Entertainment value	1
	The public interest	3

Factor	Trade-off	Frequency
Entertainment value	Right to privacy	1
Entertainment value	The public interest	1
Risk of consequences	Newsworthiness	1
	The public interest	4
Free flow of information	Corporate interests	2
Credibility of the source	Newsworthiness	3
	Credibility of the source	1
Sensitivity to the victim's family	Newsworthiness	1
Protecting the victim's rights	Newsworthiness	1
Editorial policy	The public interest	2
Accuracy	Competition	1
	The public interest	1
Competition	Accuracy	1
Relevance to audience	Newsworthiness	1
Public safety	Newsworthiness	1

The following table highlights the frequency with which each trade-off occurred in the examples:

Table 8:   **Summary of the trade-offs**

Rank	Trade-off	Frequency	Factor determining the final decision
1	The public interest vs. Risk of consequences	4	The public interest
2	The public interest vs. Right to privacy	3	The public interest
2	Newsworthiness vs. Credibility of source	3	Credibility of the source
4	The public interest vs. Editorial policy	2	The public interest
4	Corporate interests vs. Free flow of information	2	The free flow of information
4	Newsworthiness vs. Right to privacy	2	Newsworthiness
7	Newsworthiness vs. Relevance to the audience	1	Relevance to the audience
7	Newsworthiness vs. Public safety	1	Newsworthiness
7	Competitions vs. Accuracy	1	Accuracy
7	The public interest vs. Credibility of the source	1	The public interest
7	Newsworthiness vs. Risk of consequences	1	Newsworthiness
7	Newsworthiness vs. Sensitivity to family of the victim	1	Newsworthiness
7	The public interest vs. Accuracy	1	The public interest
7	Right to Privacy vs. Entertainment value	1	Entertainment value
7	The public interest vs. Entertainment value	1	The public interest
7	Newsworthiness vs. Protection of the victim	1	Protection of the victim
7	Newsworthiness vs. Corporate interests	1	Newsworthiness

Table 9 is a summary of the frequency of the factors which determined the final editorial decision. This table provides insight into the factors which are most influential when there is a clash of interests or a trade – offs of principles to be made.

Table 9:   Summary of the factors determing the final decision

Rank	Factor	Frequency
1	The public interest	12
2	Newsworthiness	6
3	Free flow of information	2
4	Credibility of the source	3
5	Protection of the victim's rights	1
5	Relevance to the audience	1
5	Accuracy	1
5	Entertainment value	1

In 2005 a survey was conducted with newspaper editors in the United States with the view to understanding which values drive their decisions. Through quantitative analysis four value systems were identified by the survey namely journalistic values, audience values, social values and organisational values (Sylvie & Huang, 2008). Through personal correspondence with the authors of this research it was established that the naming of the value systems was developed by the authors by mapping concepts with a similar meaning under an umbrella term for the value – system. The following table reflects the concepts identified in this study and the set of values the concept was mapped onto.

73

Table 10:   Editors' value - systems

Journalistic Values	Audience Values	Social Values	Organisational Values
Ethics	Visual appeal	Peers	Motivation
Objectivity	Competition	Routine	Company Goals
Fairness	Scoop	Liberal	Values
Accuracy	Timeliness	Personal Ties	Planning
Responsibility	Deadline	Group Conflict	Satisfaction
Libel	Impact	Politics	Coordination
Sourcing	Space	Organisational norms	Beliefs
Newsworthiness		Job Level	My role
		Humour	
		Pride	
		Autonomy	
		Control	

(Sylvie & Huang, 2008, p. 66)

The value systems developed by Sylvie and Huang provide a useful evaluative framework to analyse the trade-offs which South African editors make in difficult editorial decisions. There are a number of concepts which the South African editors identified which are identical to the US editors; however there are also additional concepts. Building on the previous research, the additional concepts, which are noted in bold in the following table, have been added and categorised according to these value systems. The factors which emerged in both studies are underlined in the table below.

The factors were categorised as follows:

Table 11:   Values systems underlying the factors

Journalistic Values	Audience Values	Social Values	Organisational Values
Ethics	Visual appeal	Peers	Motivation
Objectivity	Competition	Routine	Company
Fairness	Scoop	Liberal	Goals*(Corporate*
Accuracy	Timeliness	Personal Ties	*interests)*
Responsibility	Deadline	Group Conflict	Values
Libel	Impact	Politics	Planning
Sourcing (Credibility	Space	Organisational norms	Satisfaction
of sources)	**Relevance**	Job Level	Coordination
Newsworthiness	**Entertainment**	Humour	Beliefs
The public interest		Pride	My role
Free flow of		Autonomy	**Editorial policy**
information		Control	**Risk of**
		Right to privacy	**consequences**
		Public safety	
		Sensitivity to	
		victim's family	
		Protection of the	
		victim's rights	

The social values in the previous research are confined mainly to the journalist's individual social values – in this study this category includes broader concepts which relate to the broader society. In essence the value-systems relate to four key stakeholders in the business model of a news media organisation namely the audience, journalists/editors, broader society and the organisation itself. The interest of advertisers is not represented at all - however these are strongly tied to the audience values because advertisers want an audience.

Table 12:   Summary of the values in each trade-off

Rank	Trade-off	Value Systems	Frequency
1	The public interest vs. Risk of consequences	Journalistic vs. Organisational	4
2	The public interest vs. Right to privacy	Journalistic vs. Social	3
2	Newsworthiness vs. Credibility of source	Journalistic vs. Journalistic	3
4	The public interest vs. Editorial policy	Journalistic vs. Organisational	2
4	Corporate interests vs. Free flow of information	Journalistic vs. Organisational	2
4	Newsworthiness vs. Right to privacy	Journalistic vs. Social	2
7	Newsworthiness vs. Relevance to the audience	Journalistic vs. Audience	1
7	Newsworthiness vs. Public safety	Journalistic vs. Social	1
7	Competition vs. Accuracy	Journalistic vs. Audience	1
7	The public interest vs. Credibility of the source	Journalistic vs. Journalistic	1
7	Newsworthiness vs. Risk of consequences	Journalistic vs. Organisational	1
7	Newsworthiness vs. Sensitivity to family of the victim	Journalistic vs. Social	1
7	The public interest vs. Accuracy	Journalistic vs. Journalistic	1
7	Right to Privacy vs. Entertainment value	Social vs. Audience	1
7	The public interest vs. Entertainment value	Journalistic vs. Audience	1
7	Newsworthiness vs. Protection of the victim	Journalistic vs. Social	1

Figure 3:   Frequency of the value-systems in each trade-off
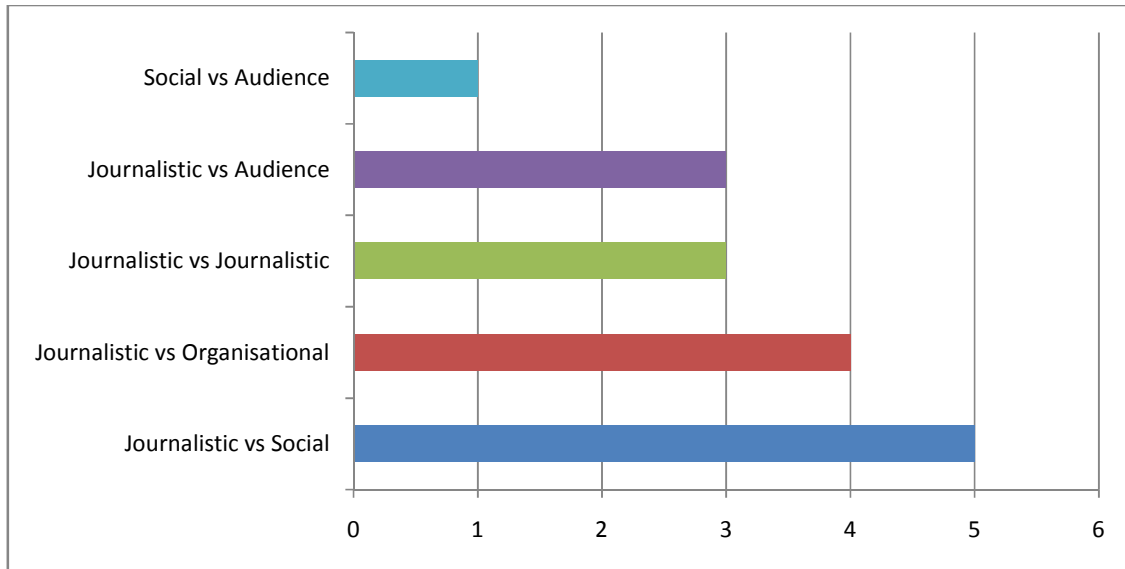
The examples provided substantial data around the factors which editors consider when making difficult editorial decisions. The interesting part of the data however lies in which factors and ultimately values are influencing the final decision made by the editor. Each editor was able to identify which factor determined the final decision. The following table is a summary of the values underlying the factors determing the final decision.

Table 13:   Summary of the values determining the final decisions

Rank	Value system	Frequency
1	Journalistic	24
2	Audience	2
3	Social	1
	Total	**27**

It is clear from this high level analysis of the values underlying the factors used to make decisions that journalistic values dominates the decision making process when the editors are faced with difficult trade-offs.

5.5. Results for research question 4

What competencies do editors believe are important to make good editorial decisions?

The interview schedule included a question about the competencies required to make good decisions. The following competencies were identified by the respondents as important to making good editorial decisions. The competencies are listed in rank order in the following frequency table. These competencies are based on the perceptions of the respondents on what is necessary to make a sound editorial decision.

Table 14: **Competencies contributing to good editorial decision making**

Rank	Competencies	Frequency
1	Consultation with other people – including journalists, lawyers, mentors	6
2	Knowledge of the socio-economic context	5
2	Knowledge of the audience	5
4	Confidence	4
5	Experience	3
6	"Gut"/instinct	2
6	Knowledge of the role of journalism	2
6	Knowledge and insight into the topic	2
6	Understand all the options and the impact of each option	2
10	Guided by the public interest	1
10	Listening skills	1
10	Information on both sides of the story	1
10	Objective information to substantiate the story	1
10	Relationships with the newsmakers	1
10	Get a wide range of views as possible	1
10	Ask the relevant questions	1

Rank	Competencies	Frequency
10	Knowledge of history	1
10	Sense of fairness and judgement	1

The competencies identified are a combination of acquired competencies, such as knowledge of the socio-economic context and personal attributes like confidence and instinct.

The competencies fall into three broad categories namely consultation, personal attributes and knowledge. The first category of consultation includes all the factors which involve a process of the editor seeking additional information or advice from other sources to strengthen the decision making process. Consultation is a process through which the decision is refined and tested. The second category includes all the factors related to the personal attributes of the editor. These are innate qualities which are unique to each editor and are difficult to measure. The third category relates to the knowledge required for an editor to make good decisions. Experience is the one factor which is the exception and does not fall into these categories. An editor's experience is acquired and provides the context in which consultation and knowledge accumulation take place.

In the following table the competencies identified are categorised according to these three categories:

Table 15:   Categories of competencies contributing to good decision making

Category	Competencies	Acquired/Innate
Consultation	- Consultation - Get a wide range of views as possible - Ask the relevant questions	Acquired
Personal attributes	- Confidence "Gut"/instinct - Listening skills - Relationships with the newsmakers - Sense of fairness and judgement - Guided by the public interest	Innate
Knowledge	- Knowledge of the socio-economic context - Objective information to substantiate the story - Knowledge of history - Knowledge of the audience - Knowledge of the role of journalism - Knowledge and insight into the topic - Information on both sides of the story - Understand all the options and the impact of each option	Acquired

The following frequency table was developed by combining the frequencies of each individual competency in each category to obtain a frequency for the category.

Table 16:   Frequency of each category of competencies

Category	Frequency
Consultation	8
Personal attributes	10
Knowledge	19
Experience	3

Table 15 highlights the importance of knowledge in good editorial decision making. It is critical that an editor has sound knowledge of a number of areas, including the socio–economic context, the historical context and of audience interests.

5.6. Conclusion

Chapter 5 is a consolidation of the data captured during the qualitative interviews. The tables have been used to rank and compare the factors identified by the editors. These results and direct quotes from the interviews will be interpreted in Chapter 6 in order to answer the four research questions posed in Chapter 3.

6. **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION**

6.1. Introduction

The results in Chapter 5 provided a high level overview of the factors and the types of trade-offs which are driving the decision making process of news editors in South Africa. In this chapter these results and the emergent themes will be analysed in conjunction with the literature and direct comments from the editors. The significance of this research is that it provides a unique insight into the influences shaping the news agenda and the implication of these influences on all the stakeholders of a news organisation.

In addition, this study is taking place at an important time as the independent media in South Africa is facing increasing political and economic pressure. Editors are at the frontline of determining which issues enter the public domain and how these issues are positioned. The findings of this research contribute to the larger debate currently taking place about the role of the media in an emerging democracy like South Africa.

The focus of the discussion will be on the key themes which emerged in the interviews in order to answer the 4 research questions posed in Chapter 3. The open-ended nature of the interview schedule meant that the editors themselves defined the scope of the data. The fact that there were a number of factors mentioned reflects the uncertain situations which editors face everyday (Reinemann & Schulz, 2006).

6.2. Discussion of results for research question 1

What factors do editors perceive to be important when evaluating a story for publication or broadcast?

The aim of Research Question 1 was to capture which factors editors perceive to be important when deciding whether to publish or broadcast a story. The data shows the complexity facing editors when making decisions as 22 unique factors were identified. These factors are captured in Table 2 in Chapter 5.

6.2.1. Relevance to the audience

	Factors	Frequency
1	Relevance to the audience	8

The highest ranked factor was the story's relevance to the audience. The majority of the editors felt a primary responsibility to their audience. A story has to be of some relevance to their audience if it is to be considered. It is about *"(k)nowing your readers, knowing what your reader's lives are like, understanding why something would be important and interesting to them."* The audience is central to the unique business model of media organisations in that to be financially successful the organisation has to attract one customer, namely the audience, to sell to another customer, namely advertisers (Stern, 2008). For a news organisation to fulfil its social mandate the publication or programme has to be commercially successful. This factor therefore relates to both the commercial and the public interest aspect of journalism.

The audience is a central stakeholder in a news organisation. The importance of the audience as a stakeholder is confirmed in the literature and current trends in developed

markets. The decline in the newspaper industry in the US and Europe is a direct result of declining audience numbers (World Editors' Forum, 2010).

The audience is a narrower concept than the public, in that these are the people who directly 'consume' the news. An editor captured this sentiment when discussing the key ingredients of a successful news organisation, when he stated that *"it's (in) understanding the consumer and understanding the news, you can't put out a good newspaper if you don't have a grip on both those things."* One of the editors believes that "*One of the important roles of a newspaper…is to foster community."* This community, namely the audience, is his primary concern and he believes that even when acting in the public interest by publishing certain stories he has to ask the question *"(D)oes it matter to this community?"*

6.2.2. Accuracy

	Factors	Frequency
2	Accuracy	7

Accuracy was the second ranked factor in terms of the frequency of responses. The editors placed a high value on the accuracy of a story when considering it for publication or broadcast. The concept of accuracy is strongly associated with the concept of truth as it means 'exact' and 'correct' (English Dictionary, 1998).

The importance of accuracy for South African editors is in line with previous research which explored the values which drive editors' decision making styles. In a study by Sylvie and Huang (2008), editors in the United States ranked "accuracy" as the most important value, with 79 percent of the editors ranking it the most influential value when making decisions.

One of the editors captured the high stakes involved when making an editorial decision when she noted that: "(I)f somebody (has) done something disgraceful and you have to share it with four million people, make sure that you get your facts straight, for me there is no excuse for getting it wrong." This comment captures the pressure which editors are faced with as their decisions are scrutinised daily or weekly by the public. This pressure is highlighted in the literature in the journalists' dilemma which was developed by Donsbach (2004). The importance of accuracy can be understood because decisions taken by editors are immediately open to public scrutiny and therefore it is critical that they are correct.

6.2.3. The public interest, newsworthiness and entertainment value

	Factors	Frequency
3	The public interest	4
3	Newsworthiness	4
3	Entertainment value	4

Stories which are in the public interest and newsworthy are important journalistic values (Gade, 2008). The public interest is directly linked to the media's role in a democracy, which is to ensure accountability and to provide the public with information to participate in public life (Battersby, 2008; Wasserman & De Beer, 2005).

Newsworthiness relates to the innate characteristics of a story which make it 'sufficiently interesting to be reported as news' (English Dictionary, 1998). The characteristics which make a story newsworthy have been the subject of a vast amount of research. These characteristics include proximity, relevance, continuity and elite persons (Eilders, 2006).

It is interesting to note that these journalistic values share the same ranking as 'entertainment value'. 'Entertainment value' is not a traditional news value and is directly

linked to the first factor of 'relevance to the audience'. The high ranking of this factor highlights the need for news organisations to make the news interesting in order to retain audiences.

An editor mentioned this dilemma in the decision making process as he stated that in some cases *"it will be a strong story, but it will maybe not be as sensational as you would want it so then you need to decide as to how do we make the story a bit more special without distorting the facts."*

6.2.4. Summary of additional factors

Table 17:   Summary of additional factors influencing the decision making

	Factors	Frequency
12	Fear of consequences	1
12	Credibility	1
12	"Gut feel"/instinct	1
12	National or local interest	1
12	Mix of stories	1
12	Ratings/competition	1
12	Objectivity	1
12	Links to relevant information in the story (Online)	1
12	Credibility and authority of the sources	1
12	Information/Educational purposes	1
12	Influencing society in a particular direction	1

There were eleven additional factors identified in the qualitative interviews. Each of these factors, however, was only mentioned once. An analysis of the factors shows that there is a

strong bias towards journalistic considerations and not commercial interests. The only factor which directly relates to commercial interests is the 'fear of consequences'.

The fear of consequences relates to the risk attached to publishing a story. The nature of the consequence can vary from jeopardising the safety of the journalist by publishing the story, to an advertiser removing adverts in response to an unfavourable story.

In some cases the factors are related to each other. Credibility and objectivity are important concepts in journalism. One editor noted that credibility is a factor which is strongly related to accuracy and truth. In order for a news organisation to be credible it must be perceived to be accurate and truthful. He made the point that *"once you lose credibility it's incredibly difficult to regain it."*

One of the editors highlighted objectivity as an important factor in the decision making process. However this same editor acknowledged that it was almost impossible to be objective but that it was important in all decisions to strive to exclude personal bias from the decision making process. He believes that this can be achieved by ensuring that the story represents diverse views. In addition, the credibility of a story relies on the credibility of the sources who provided the story.

The mix of stories relates to the other content in the paper or news bulletin. A story will be evaluated in the context of other stories chosen for that particular edition. For example, if there are too many stories about crime it may result in a story which is newsworthy being dropped from the bulletin. In addition, an editor mentioned that whether a story is of local or national interest is a news factor which is an inherent characteristic of a story which makes it newsworthy (Eilders, 2006).

87

The impact of the story on ratings, which is an important measure in a competitive media environment, was only mentioned once although this does relate to the highest rank factor of relevance to the audience. The more relevant a story the higher the ratings will be.

The editor of an online publication said that in his medium it was important that any story was accompanied by links to relevant information in the story (Online). This factor allows the reader to verify the story and to find additional information which provides context to the story.

The factors identified by editors are a combination of journalistic and commercial factors which need to be considered when evaluating a story. These factors range from the story's 'relevance to the audience' to the story's ability 'to influence society in a particular direction.' The interesting part of the list is that it captures the complexity of the decisions facing editors. Editors are tasked with meeting their audience's needs in order to remain relevant and financially sustainable, while at the same time considering the broader public interest. The complexity is in the mix of factors that need to be considered. A comment by one of the editors captures the importance of getting the right mix of factors when evaluating a story as he highlighted that *"(I)t's in understanding the consumer and understanding the news, you can't put out a good newspaper if you don't have a grip on both those things."*

There is no set of uniform factors which all editors consider in the decision making process - this reflects the fact that there is a large amount of personal discretion in editorial decision making and in some cases editors rely on their 'gut instinct' when making a decision. There are three stakeholder groups whose interests can be inferred by the factors identified within this list, namely the audience, the broader public and news professionals. There is no mention of the interests of the media organisation as a commercial entity.

These findings are supported by the research into the 'duality' of purpose facing editors as they operate in an organisation which has both commercial and journalistic mandates to fulfil (Gade, 2008). Research in the US has shown that news professionals maintain a strong commitment to journalistic values despite increasing commercial pressure (Beam *et al*, 2009). The relative importance of these factors will be addressed in research question 2.

6.2.5. Conclusive finding for research question 1

The analysis of research question 1 provides empirical evidence of the complexity of the factors driving editorial decision making. Editors are balancing the need to attract and entertain audiences with the need to maintain journalistic integrity by ensuring that stories are accurate, newsworthy and ultimately serve the public interest. There is no set of objective criteria which exist which editors use to judge a story and each editor identified a unique mix of factors which influence their decisions. The implication of this finding is that editors require the ability to judge each situation and adapt their decisions according to the influences relevant to that particular story. This is a reliance on the editor's innate decision making ability.

6.3. Discussion of results for research question 2

What is the relative importance the factors?

The results for research question 2 provide further insight into the factors influencing the decision making process of editors as it captures the relative importance of the factors. Table 3 provides the results for this research question. It is interesting to note that the top three factors which had the highest frequencies are also the factors with the highest weighted averages. The top five factors identified in research question 1 are the same top

five factors in research question 2. The following discussion will unpack the factors which were mentioned by more than one respondent.

6.3.1. Relevance to the audience

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
1	Relevance to the audience			1	2	5	36

The weighting of the frequencies of each factor does not alter the factor with the highest ranking. The story's relevance to the audience remains the key influence in the decision making process. One of the editors highlighted the importance of the audience when he stated that: "*You need to feel the pulse of what your audience is interested in, you need to know your audience very well and you need to be able to get it…If you get that wrong, sooner or later it is going to hit you. Your figures will go down and you won't survive.*"

The editor's awareness of the importance of the audience is supported by the literature as Wasserman and De Beer (2008) point out that the South African media is facing serious commercial pressures due to global competition and increased competition for audiences and resources. International editors are facing a similar challenge for audiences as people begin to find their news from alternative sources like the Internet (Gade, 2008). "*If you don't know what your readers want they are not going to buy your paper - you've got to be in tune with that*", was a comment from one of the editors interviewed.

It is interesting to note that the editors used the word 'audience' and not 'public'. This is an indication that there is awareness amongst the editors that to be successful they first have to be accountable to their audience, even if their personal commitment is to journalistic values like the public interest (Beam *et al*, 2009).

90

The implication of this finding in South Africa is outlined in the literature review as the competitiveness of the sector has resulted in the following trends: the 'tabloidisation' of the media, a reduction of staff, increasing consideration for commercial imperatives in making editorial decisions and a decline in specialised reporting (Harber, 2002). The increasing centrality of the audience due to commercial pressures has serious implications for the media in its role as the public's 'watchdog'.

6.3.2. Accuracy

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
2	Accuracy					7	35

'Accuracy' is ranked second in terms of importance. The interesting point to note is that all the editors which mentioned accuracy gave it a ranking of 5. Its weighted total is just one less than 'relevance to the audience'. As mentioned previously this is supported by the literature which shows that journalists place a high degree of importance on accuracy (Sylvie & Huang, 2008).   "*If the facts are correct and can be proven as such, it does not matter what the implications are and who will be offended or upset by it"* is the view held by one of the editors interviewed.

Another editor reflected that accuracy is critical and he is continuously "*thinking have I got it right, have we done the story thoroughly enough?"* The fact that the decision is made public places an additional burden on the editor to ensure that it is accurate and true (Donsbach, 2004).

This finding is important in the context of the political pressure that the South African media is currently facing. The ruling party is arguing for greater regulation so that the public has recourse against the media. The editors' commitment to accuracy shows that the editors

91

place a high value on the integrity of the stories which they publish or broadcast. The majority of the editors show an '*allegiance to information'*. Accuracy is also critical to the survival of a news organisation because if the audience perceives a news organisation to be inaccurate, it loses its credibility and ultimately its central stakeholder - the audience.

6.3.3. The public interest and newsworthiness

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
3	The public Interest			1		3	18
3	Newsworthiness				2	2	18

The factors of 'the public interest' and 'newsworthiness' are ranked third in terms of importance. This supports the view stated in the literature that the South African media, since the advent of democracy, have adopted a liberal democratic approach to the role of the media (Wasserman & De Beer, 2006). One of the editors captured this view when he stated that "*(W)e are primarily watchdogs of democracy, so there are stories that we place because we must because they matter so much."* The implication of this finding is that despite political and economic pressure, South African editors remain committed to fundamental values of journalism like the public interest and the newsworthiness of a story. This is an encouraging finding as it indicates that editors continue to be motivated by the importance of fulfilling their social obligation in a democratic society.

6.3.4. Entertainment value

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
5	Entertainment Value			2	2		14

The high ranking of the factor referring to the 'entertainment value' of a story is interesting as this is not usually a concept associated with news. The increasing importance of the

92

entertainment or interest value of a story is supported by the literature which details the character of the media in post-apartheid South Africa. Harber (2004) referred to this tendency as the tabloidisation of the media. However the increasing importance of the 'entertainment value' of a news piece can also be understood in terms of the increased competition in the information space. One of the editors made the point that it is "*a cut throat business (because) in the information age you can find information online, on Twitter, on Facebook, on news, television, on radio.*"

This finding is an acknowledgement on the part of the editors that it is not sufficient to do an accurate and true story which is in the public interest. In a highly competitive environment a news story has to be relevant and entertaining to the audience.

6.3.5. Suitability to the medium

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
6	Suitability to the medium			1		2	13

Suitability to the medium is a term which refers to the actual platform on which the story will be published or broadcast. For example, if there are no images to accompany a story it is highly unlikely it will be featured on a television news broadcast. This factor differs from the others in that it is a technical factor and it does not relate to any external influences.

6.3.6. Truth, context and balance

Rank	Factor	1	2	3	4	5	Weighted Total
7	Truth					2	10
7	Understanding the story/context					2	10
7	Representing both sides - balance					2	10

The three factors which share the seventh ranking are important journalistic values. All three are critical to producing a quality piece of journalism. These concepts are related in that to represent the truth it is critical to understand the context in which the story happens and to represent a diversity of views.

"(D)oes the editor have enough knowledge of what is going on around him to be able to work out whether this is the right decision for that moment in this particular context, you know it's all about the bigger picture, where does it fit, you have got to think of the bigger picture, you have got to be alive to the issues that are already in the public domain, or you have got to be alive to the fact that you are creating an issue which is a going to steer people's thinking in a particular direction."

The factors with the highest ratings are largely ones associated with journalistic values. The editors show a strong commitment to key journalistic values like accuracy, the public interest, truth and newsworthiness. However these factors are balanced with a degree of pragmatism in terms of understanding that in order for a news organisation to be sustainable it has to be relevant and deliver interesting content to its audience. This is reflected in the high rankings of the factors of 'relevance to the audience' and 'entertainment value'.

Despite the intense debate around the role of the media in South Africa there was no mention of the concept of 'national interest' or any concept related to the government. The journalistic values identified, like the public interest and balance, are strongly related to the democratic liberal view, articulated in the literature, of the media as the 'watchdog' in society. This conceptualisation of the role of the South African media by the editors is supported by the literature (Wasserman & De Beer, 2009; Battersby, 2008). It indicates that

the editors in South Africa - while aware of the importance of commercial factors - are strongly committed to the social mandate of the news media in a democracy.

Corporate interests were mentioned by two of the editors, however both editors gave the factor the lowest rating of 1. This is significant as it shows that news selection is independent of the corporate interests of a news organisation. An editor provided an interesting insight into this relationship: "*I think we are incredibly fortunate, I speak to colleagues in the States, for example, which is supposed to be the best democracy…and they have interference fairly regularly, we just don't have that. You know I am sure people believe we do, but we don't.*"

A fascinating aspect of these findings is that the top three factors identified by the South African editors are identical to the top three factors identified by editors in the US in a similar study. The study by Sylvie and Huang (2008) revealed that the three most important values driving the decisions of editors are accuracy, newsworthiness and readers (audience). The relative importance of the factors differs however in that the audience or readers are ranked the highest by South African editors. Therefore even though the editors operate in different socio-economic environments, the factors influencing decision making are similar.

6.3.7. Conclusive findings for research question 2

The findings to research question 2 provide evidence that editors perceive the following factors to be the most significant when evaluating a story:

- The story's relevance to the audience;
- Accuracy;
- Newsworthiness; and
- If the story is in the public interest.

This finding highlights the importance of the audience as a stakeholder and that editors are aware that for a news organisation to be sustainable it must be relevant to its target audience. Accuracy and newsworthiness are innate qualities of the story and relate to traditional journalistic values. Corporate interests were highlighted in question 1 but received very low ratings in terms of importance. This is an indication that editors believe their primary responsibility is to the audience and the public before considering the interests of the company which employs them. The top three factors ranked by South African editors in terms of importance are identical to the top three factors ranked by US editors in a similar study (Sylvie & Huang, 2008). This is an interesting finding as the editors operate in different socio-economic settings and yet they are bound by similar values.

6.3.8. Conclusive finding for research questions 1 and 2

The factors identified and rated in research questions 1 and 2 show the complex nature of the decisions which editors are required to make on a daily basis. The factors listed by the editors largely related to ensuring that the story is relevant to the audience. The audience have an expectation of the independent news media that stories will meet key journalistic values like accuracy, truth and be in the public interest. But furthermore, audiences want content which is relevant and entertaining. To achieve this, editors have to ensure that certain technical aspects of a story are evaluated – such as if the story is suited to the medium (i.e. television). In line with the phenomenological approach factors with a similar meaning or characteristic have been grouped together in the following table.

Table 18: **Factors affecting a story's relevance to the audience**

Audience considerations	Journalistic considerations	Social considerations	Technical considerations
Entertainment value	Accuracy	Represent diverse views	Suitability to the medium
Is the story interesting?	Objectivity	The public interest	Link to relevant stories (online)
Local or national interest	Truth	Educational purposes	Mix of stories
	Newsworthiness	Influencing society	
	Gut instinct		

The following model *(Figure 4)* was developed from the findings of research questions 1 and 2. It captures the central role of editorial decisions in a news organisation and the factors which influence them as identified by interviews with the editors. The audience is central to the sustainability of the independent media – this is represented by the 'relevance to the audiene' in the centre of the model. To ensure a story is relevant to the audience an editor has to understand all the considerations as listed above. The factors listed by the editors reflect these expectations of the audience in terms of stories told. If an editor in their decision making process fails to consider one of these aspects it may impact the ratings or sales of the programme or publications or the credibility of the news organisation. There is also the possibility of additional consequences including legal action or a complaint to the Press Ombudsman. The editorial decision is central to the sustainability of the news organisation as reflected in *Figure 4*. Editors typically do not follow a check list approach and the decision taken is usually taken intuitively. This model is useful in that it takes the tacit knowledge of the editors and makes it explicit.

Figure 4: **The decision making process**

Represent diverse views

The public interest

Educational purposes

Influencing society

Accuracy

Objectivity

Truth

Newsworthiness

Gut feel

Suitability to the medium

Link to relevant stories

Mix of stories

Entertainment value

Is the story interesting?

Local or national interest

Consequences

Relevance to the audience

Editorial decision

Ratings

Credibility

Corporate interests

6.4. Discussion of results for research question 3

What are the trade-offs that editors make when making a difficult editorial decision?

This analysis of the data for research question 3 follows a normative approach to decision making because it examines how editors *actually* make decisions in a real world situation (Roos & Nau, 2010). The results for research question 3 provide insight into the factors and ultimately value-systems underlying difficult editorial decisions. The examples of difficult editorial decisions identified by the editors in Table 4 all involved a trade–off between two or more factors. This is in line with previous research which found that making wise trade–offs is one of the most difficult challenges in decision making (Hammond *et al*, 1998).

In contrast to research question 1 in which 22 factors were identified by the editors, only 15 factors (*Table 5*) were identified in relation to difficult decisions. The two factors with the highest frequency are 'the public interest' and 'newsworthiness'. The results in Table 8 show that 'the public interest' was a factor identified in 12 trade–offs and 'newsworthiness' was mentioned in 11 of the trade-offs. In question 2 these two factors were ranked joint third in terms of importance, which reinforces the importance of these factors in editorial decision making. The trade-off which occurred most often was the trade–off between 'the public interest' and the 'risk of consequences' as reflected in *Table 6.* The 'risk of consequences' in all the examples related directly to the news organisation and its employees. The consequences included possible complaints to the Broadcast Complaints Commission/Press Ombudsman, a threat to the safety of the journalist and legal action. Although all the editors were aware of the consequences, these consequences did not stop the story being published. In all its

99

trade–offs, *the public interest* determined the final decision. In contrast, *newsworthiness* appeared in 11 trade-offs and only determined the final decision in 6 of these cases. It is clear from these results that South African editors have a strong commitment to journalistic values and they view themselves as custodians of the professional values of the newsroom (Gade, 2008).

Figure 2 provides an overview of the frequency with which each trade-off took place. In all of the examples, except one, journalistic values were part of the trade-off. For instance the example where a column highly critical of the newspaper's publisher was submitted for publication. The trade-off between 'the free flow of information' and 'corporate interests' was acknowledged. The journalistic value system was selected as the dominant value system in all of the final decisions except three as shown in Table 12. In one case it was more important to protect the victim's rights than to broadcast an interview with the victim's mother, therefore the editor chose not to broadcast an interview which was newsworthy but which would have compromised the victim's identity. In the other case an editor chose not to broadcast a story about rhino poaching that was clearly newsworthy because it did have any relevance to her audience. Therefore the audience value system was used to determine the final decision. The variety of trade–offs and the reliance on the editor to make the final decision reflects the complexity and the evaluative nature of the decision making process of editors (Donsbach, 2004). This characteristic is reflected in the naturalistic decision making (NDM) discussed in Chapter 2 which believes that the process of decision making is complex and nonlinear (Galloway, 2007).

Despite the debate in the literature about the dominance of commercial principles, it is clear that in South Africa editors are aware of these pressures but they do not feature as a dominant factor in the decision making process. In all three trade-offs where

'corporate interests' were mentioned, 'the public interest' was placed above the company's interests. The editors showed an allegiance to traditional news values. In an interview an editor stated that *"I have never had, and I think we are incredibly, pressure from senior management…to cover anything and to cover things in a particularly way."*

In two examples the trade-off was between 'the public interest' and 'editorial policy'. In both cases the editors opted for 'the public interest' and were willing to disregard the editorial policy of the organisation. The editors have the discretion and flexibility to make decisions which violate the policy of the very organisation which employs them. This is supported by previous research which showed that US journalists remained committed to journalistic principles despite increasing commercial pressures (Beam *et al*, 2009).

The results from question 3 provide evidence that editors adopt a stakeholder approach when evaluating stories. The trade–offs show that editors believe the media have an obligation to act in the interests of a number of stakeholders and not just in the interests of profit seeking shareholders or owners (Freeman, 1984; Stern, 2008). Stakeholders considered in the decision making process of these examples included the broader society, the audience, the people being reported on and the owners of the news organisation. In all of the examples the editors displayed the ability to evaluate alternatives and pick a course of action despite the competing stakeholder interests (Rahman & De Feis, 2009). The interests of the broader society, as represented by the concept of 'the public interest', emerged as a dominant stakeholder group.

6.4.1. Conclusive finding for research question 3

Journalistic values overwhelmingly determined the final decision when there is a trade–off of values in an editorial decision. This research provides empirical evidence that South African editors show a strong commitment to journalistic values such as 'the public interest' and 'newsworthiness'. This reflects the editors' view that the media is the "watchdog" in society and that ultimately a news organisation's first priority is to carry stories which serve 'the public interest' and promote democracy. This view is in line with the liberal democratic view of the role of the media. The editors consider a wide variety of stakeholders in their decisions and the interests of the broader society as a stakeholder group received priority in difficult editorial decisions. This may be a direct result of the history of the South African press and the fact that the media are fiercely protective of their independence (Sanef, 2010).

Furthermore, the results indicate that despite increasing commercial and political pressures, editors in South Africa still have a fair degree of independence to act independently and prioritise journalistic values when there is a clash of interests. This supports the findings of similar research which took place into the decisions of editors in the United States (Gade, 2008). The results of research question 3 provide empirical evidence that there are no objective criteria which editors use to evaluate stories. but rather the decision about whether a story is published is left up to the individual editor (Rosner, 2004).

6.5. Discussion of results for research question 4

What competencies do editors believe are important to make good editorial decisions?

Research question 4 sought to capture the competencies which are critical to good decision making in a complex environment like the newsroom. The editors were asked an open-ended question about what they believed were the key competencies required to make good decisions. The results of the question are captured in *Tables 11, 12* and *13* in Chapter 5.

Each respondent had a unique mix of factors which are required to make good decisions. This is reinforced by the communication research which has taken place into news decisions. There is general agreement in the literature that news decision making is a complex process and good decisions cannot be ascribed to one factor or characteristic (Donsbach, 2004). The range of responses reflects the complexity and diversity of factors required to make good decisions in a time-pressured, high risk environment like the newsroom. Good decisions, according to the editors, are a combination of acquired knowledge and personal attributes. A number of the respondents identified the need to be flexible in order to make a decision appropriate to the uniqueness of the story. There is a vast amount of literature detailing effective decision making techniques, models and processes. It is interesting to note that not one of the respondents had a formal or a structured process in place which guided their editorial decisions. Despite the time-pressure and risk faced by the editors, a large portion of the decision relied on their innate ability and experience to make decisions and not on a formal decision making process. The findings of research

question four will be analysed according to the three categories of factors identified in Table 12, namely consultation, personal attributes and knowledge.

6.5.1. Consultation

Table 19:   Consultation

Rank	Elements	Frequency
1	Consultation with other professional people	6
10	Get as wide a range of views as possible	1
10	Ask the relevant questions	1
	Total	**8**

Consultation was identified by half the sample as important in making good decisions. The editors identified various stakeholders who were consulted including journalists, lawyers and mentors. It is interesting to note that consultation did not extend to the audience or members of the public, even though the public interest is a guiding principle for most of these editors. The editors relied on other experts when making editorial decisions. An editor expressed that he got a *"wide range input so that you can gauge what is public sentiment out there because obviously we reflect what's going on in society because we are part of society."* Previous research into managers has shown that managers develop a more consultative decision making style as they gain more experience (Brousseau *et al*, 2006).

Consultation is an important part of good editorial decision making and this is reinforced by the literature which highlighted the increase of research into team decision making in organisational theory (Chance *et al*, 2003). The consultation is a mix between formal processes like editorial meetings and informal processes like

consulting informal personal networks. The editors refine their decisions through the process of consultation and asking the relevant questions. This is captured by one of the more experienced editors in the sample when he stated that *"(Y)ou know one doesn't make editorial decisions in isolation. Ultimately the decision is the editor's but the editor works with a group of people and a group of intelligent people and trained people who come up with suggestions of all sorts and then you start cherry picking out of those already informed decisions. So the editor is in a rather privileged position actually because he can draw on so many resources"*.

Consultation is an important risk–management technique because by seeking input from other people it provides the opportunity to see the story from different points of view and to understand the possible impact of the story. All the editors interviewed had a formal process of consultation which involved daily or weekly editorial meetings. The importance of this process was highlighted by one of the editors who expressed that *"It shouldn't just be one person saying this is it. No, so you throw it around the Editorial Executive, you throw it around the newsroom and get as much buy-in as possible."* The emphasis on consultation is an interesting finding as an editor is appointed for their ability to make tough decisions in a short space of time and yet the majority of the respondents highlighted consultation with other people as key to good decision making. Consultation is a process and not an innate ability. It is an approach to decision making which can be adopted by any manager. One of the editors captured the role consultation plays in the process when he stated that *"Although at the end of the day I would still have to make a final call but I like input from all the people."*

Consultation however does not absolve the editor of the responsibility of the final decision. A number of the editors highlighted the point that it is up to them to make the final decision. One of the editors expressed the view that *"You can't put an issue to*

a vote, you have to have the confidence at the end of the day to make a decision, but you need to listen to others."

6.5.2. Personal attributes

Table 20:   Personal attributes

Rank	Elements	Frequency
4	Confidence	4
6	"Gut"/instinct	2
10	Listening skills	1
10	Relationships with the newsmakers	1
10	Sense of fairness and judgement	1
10	Guided by the public interest	1
	Total	**10**

The importance of personal attributes in good editorial decisions is evident in the results. Confidence and instinct were the highest ranked personal attributes.   In contrast to consultation which is a process, a personal attribute is an innate quality of the editor. One editor ascribed the key to good decision making solely to a personal attribute. He stated that, *"I think it's instinctive, I think it's a talent, I don't think it is something you learn. I think you have an acute sense of the urgency for decisions to be made and therefore an ability to look at the bigger picture almost instantly."* The implication of this view is that editors are born and not created. The belief that good editors have an innate instinct to make the right decision means that any training and development targeted at future editors first has to identify individuals with the right instinct – a talent for complex decision making. The same respondent went further and explained that, *"(Y)ou have got to have the courage to make the decision*

106

yourself…sometimes you might get contrary advice from everybody or they may all agree with each other and you may disagree and you have to go with what you believe and not with what they believe. I have found in my experience that I have always made mistakes when I have listened too much to other advice as opposed to assessing it and going with it instinctively."

In contrast with this however, another editor highlighted the inherent risk of editors who rely on their gut instinct when he stated that "I think not enough news managers, in my own experience, and I have worked under some of them, are broad enough in their thinking that they are willing to take on board concerns that their teams have about the stories."

6.5.3. Knowledge

Table 21:   Knowledge

Rank	Elements	Frequency
2	Knowledge of the socio-economic context	5
2	Knowledge of the audience	5
6	Knowledge of the role of journalism	2
6	Knowledge and insight into the topic	2
6	Understand all the options and the impact of each option	2
10	Information on both sides of the story	1
10	Objective information to substantiate the story	1
10	Knowledge of history	1
	Total	**19**

Knowledge was the factor which received the highest number of mentions from the editors. The factors in this category refer to a wide range of knowledge. Editors have to be informed about the socio-economic context, the audience, the story and the historical context in which they operate. The emphasis on knowledge of the socio-economic and historical context is understandable given the important role the media plays in providing information to the public. The importance of this factor is particularly relevant in South Africa which has undergone profound social change and many stories. Stories do not take place in isolation but are part of a broader historical context. An editor expressed her view about the importance of knowledge, *"(D)oes the editor have enough knowledge of what is going on around him to be able to work out whether this is the right decision for that moment in this particular context, you know it's all about the bigger picture, where does it fit, you have got to think of the bigger picture, you have got to be alive to the issues that are already in the public domain, or you have got to alive to the fact that you are creating an issue which is a going to steer people's thinking in a particular direction."* It is interesting to view this factor in relation to the age of the editors. Most of the sample is between the ages of 30 and 40. This is a relatively young sample and this characteristic of the sample ties in directly with experience.

Knowledge is central to editorial decision making. One of the editors captured this through the following example *"(U)nderstanding the environment, knowing what the country is about, understanding why it is important, when, why a remark of Zwelinzima Vavi at a press conference attended by a dozen journalists about political hyenas is actually a startling accusation against government, why that is news, why it shouldn't be a story on page seven, why we need to tell our readers, do you realise how important it is that Zwelinzima Vavi the Secretary General of Cosatu yesterday said*

that the present empire, (and by) implication the president and his families are like hyenas because they eat first and they are looting the public assets and whatever."

6.5.4. Experience

Experience is a factor which can only be acquired over time. The importance of experience in making good news decisions is highlighted in the literature, especially in the NDM approach to decision making which emphasises "the role of experience in enabling people to rapidly categorize situations to make effective decisions" (Klein, 2008, p. 456). The lack of experience in the newsrooms in South Africa has been identified as a central challenge to the quality of South African journalism in South Africa (Harber, 2002; Tsedu 2002). This reality was addressed by one of the editors who noted that: *"We don't have enough experienced TV managers in South Africa. Now I am not saying that I am perfect by any means, but I have worked in journalism for 15 years and although that doesn't sound very long there are not that many people here that have worked that long."*

In addition one of the editors related an anecdote about when he met the previous Governor of the Reserve Bank, Tito Mboweni. The Governor felt that many of the journalists that he dealt with were inexperienced and did not have a fundamental understanding of the economic context in which the bank operates. He believed that this ultimately impacted the quality of journalism and analysis which is taking place in the South African media. The value of experience was captured by one of the editors when he highlighted the insight that experience provides. *"So when you're making a decision, (experience) is going to count for a lot because you've dealt with these things before and I mean these are things that affect people's lives, you know, a story is not just a story but it can have tremendous impact on ordinary people and politicians as*

well as, you know, the very rich, so I think experience helps a lot in that regard." The literature confirms the fact that experience does have an impact on an individual's decision making style and more research into this area would be of value in the context of the media (Brousseau *et al*, 2006, Knighton, 2004).

6.5.5. Conclusive finding for research question 4

There is an interesting duality in the findings of research question 4 because the competencies central to good editorial decision making are a combination of competencies which can be acquired and competencies which are innate to the editors. Knowledge can be acquired through experience and a process of continuous learning. However personal attributes are innate and although they can be shaped and developed they are largely unique to the editor. The implication of this finding is that good decision making is a complex combination of knowledge and personal attributes. Experience provides the context for decision making as it shapes an editor's personal attributes and contributes to their knowledge. Consultation plays a critical role in refining an editor's decision. It is the process whereby an editor can test their decision and obtain input which provides additional information to inform the final decision. It is an important risk management technique in editorial decision making. However most editors reported consulting other professionals, like lawyers and journalists, and this may be a risk if these professionals hold similar views to the editor.

The following model illustrating the competencies required to make good editorial decisions is derived from the findings of research question 4. It represents the importance of each of the competencies required in good editorial decision making, namely experience, personal attributes, experience and consultation. Personal attributes and knowledge are developed and shaped by experience. These three

factors allow an editor to intuitively come up with the decision options available and the impact of each option. Through a process of consultation an editor is able to test and refine their thoughts and make a final decision. The model can be used by editors to develop a deeper understanding of how each element is important and that ultimately editorial decisions are not a case of 'gut feel' but the outcome of a systematic process.

Figure 5: **Competencies required for good decision making**

111
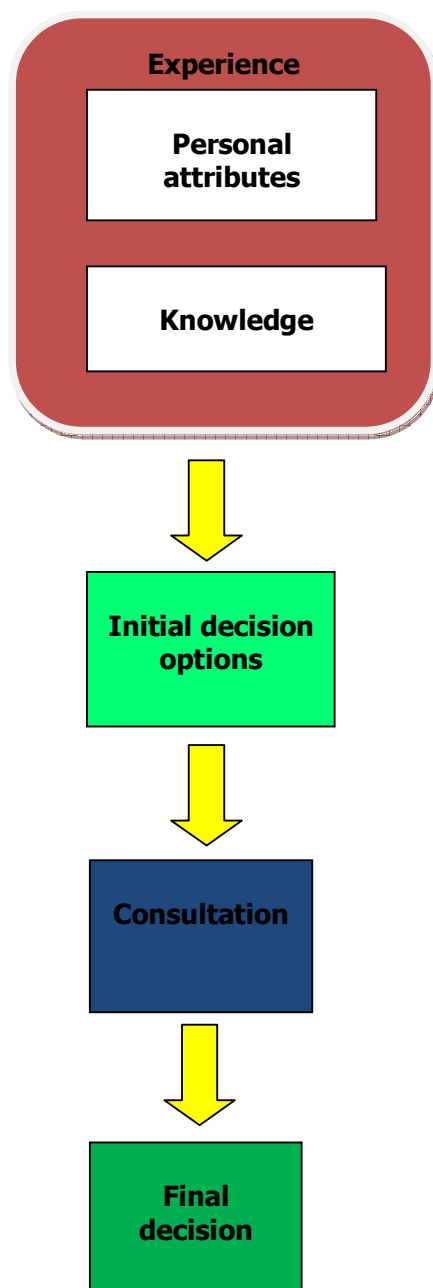
7. CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1. Introduction

The following chapter will outline the main findings of this study, including recommendations to the relevant stakeholders and areas for future research.

7.2. Review of research background and objectives

The independent news media play a critical role in democracies as it is an important tool for holding the powerful accountable and by providing information to people to make informed choices. Editors within the independent media are tasked with making complex decisions in a time pressured environment. In the decision making process an editor is tasked with balancing the interests of a number of stakeholders. They have to both ensure the sustainability of their news organisation by attracting and retaining an audience, while at the same time fulfilling a social mandate which both their audience and society requires of them.

The main objective of this research was to gain an enhanced understanding of the factors which are influencing the decision making of South African editors. The aim was to identify the factors and to gain an insight into which factors are important in influencing the final decision. This study is unique in that it provided empirical evidence of the factors by providing the opportunity for editors to reflect on their decision making process. The method captured the tacit knowledge of the editors and made it explicit.

112

7.3. Research findings

The findings of this research show that while South African editors prioritise the audience as a stakeholder in their decisions, they show an overwhelming commitment to journalistic values when faced with editorial decisions which involve a trade–off of interests. Despite the increasingly competitive nature of the news media business which has resulted in a heightened tension between commercial and journalistic objectives, commercial interests did not emerge as an important factor in influencing editorial decisions. Editors are aware of the need to be financially sustainable and this is achieved by remaining relevant to the audience.

The factors identified in the findings of research questions 1 and 2 provide the foundation of the decision making process of editors. The findings of research question 3, through actual examples, elicited the factors which are important when there is a trade–off between the factors or between different stakeholder interests. Finally, research question 4 addressed the competencies which editors believe are important to make good editorial decisions.

The contribution of this research is that it captured the tacit knowledge of the editors about their decision making processes and made it explicit. A number of the editors interviewed stated that this was the first time they had truly reflected on the factors which influence their decisions. Therefore these findings ultimately contribute to a greater understanding of how news stories are selected and this is a question which has remained largely unanswered (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009).

7.4. Recommendations for stakeholders

The following section outlines recommendations, which have emerged from the findings of this study, for four sets of stakeholders, namely editors, aspiring editors, owners of news organisations and communication researchers.

7.4.1. Editors

The factors identified in research questions 1 and 2 illustrate the complexity of the decision making process facing editors. It is recommended that editors develop mechanisms which provide opportunities for editors to reflect on their decisions and to understand which stakeholder interests are being prioritised in their decisions. Despite the importance of effective decision making many of the editors noted that they do not have time to reflect on their decisions or the influences driving these decisions.

In the findings of research question 4, consultation emerged as a key competency in good editorial decision making. It was interesting to note that in general the editors consulted with other professionals like fellow journalists and lawyers. Editors should be consciously aware of the type of people they choose to consult with and ensure it is not only people who share a similar world view to them. It is in an editor's interests to seek out people who have contrasting views or the courage to challenge decisions as this will contribute to refining and ensuring that the final decision is robust.

In addition the editors relied on audience research and ratings to gauge the needs and interests of the audience. It is recommended that editors explore avenues which allow for direct contact and consultation with audience members and members of the public.

7.4.2. Aspiring editors

The findings of research question 4 are particularly relevant for individuals aspiring to be editors. The implications of the findings are that aspiring editors should:

- Understand the context in which stories take place in terms of the various stakeholders;
- Have a thirst for knowledge and continually seek to update their knowledge through experience and reading widely;
- Develop the skill to consult effectively and solicit a wide range of views;
- Develop the ability to integrate a number of views and make a decision;
- Develop an awareness of the personal attributes like confidence which are necessary for this position; and
- Enjoy complexity.

7.4.3. Owners of news organisations

The decisions taken by editors can have a fundamental impact on the future of the news organisations. News organisations rely on an editor's innate ability to assess a situation and to make an appropriate and defensible decision. However there are no systems or criteria which challenge the editor's and journalist's world view which can be tested and defended with objective criteria. The reliance of editors on their own innate ability and on the opinions of colleagues to make news judgements opens editors to the risk of group think. There are no systems in place which challenge the world view of the newsroom. It is critical that there are sufficient risk management strategies in the organisations which ensure that difficult or controversial decisions are tested by a robust process. This is especially important given the findings of research questions 1, 2 and 3 which show that although editors are aware of corporate

interests, these are not considered important. However this statement must be qualified in that the audience expect editorial decisions to be taken independently and to serve the public interests and not the interests of the news organisation.

The lack of experience in newsrooms poses a significant risk to the management of news organisations. Strategies to retain and develop staff who could be future editors are critical to the long-term sustainability of media organisations. The comments by the editors in relation to research question 4 show that experience is critical to ensuring good editorial decision making.

It is anticipated that as commercial pressures increase and audiences in South Africa, like in the US, turn to alternative sources of information, this tension will place further pressure on the ability of the traditional news media to fulfil its social mandate. The challenge will be for news organisations to investigate innovative business models which allow the organisation to be financially sustainable without compromising its journalistic integrity.

7.4.4. Communication researchers

The communication research which has taken place into the selection of news and news decision making has largely ignored the decision making theory developed in other fields. This is mainly due to the assumption that news decision making is a complex process affected by a variety of factors and it is unlikely that an integrated theory into the process can be developed due to its complexity (Donsbach, 2004; Zhong & Newhagen, 2009). Editors have a strong professional commitment to the concepts of truth, accuracy and the public interest. To date the majority of research into news decisions has relied on journalist's and editor's perceptions of how they make decisions and on the actual characteristics of the stories published. In light of

116

this there is value in a future research project adopting the *Naturalistic Decision Making* (NDM) methodology, discussed in the literature review, to understand how editors make decisions. In line with this methodology the study would involve observing how editors actually make decisions in their natural environments rather than relying on the perceptions of editors of how they make decisions or on the analysis of news stories.

7.5. Recommendations for future research

In line with the exploratory nature of this research, a number of areas have been identified which can be considered for further research. The findings presented here are not conclusive evidence of the key factors influencing the decision making process of editors, however it provides an important starting point to establishing the dominant factors. The importance of the media in a successful democracy means that further research into the influences which impact on the decision-making process will be of value.

There are opportunities to examine the impact of the following factors on editorial decision-making in South Africa:

- Professional experience;
- Personal attributes;
- Cultural characteristics and background of editors; and
- Demographic factors like gender and age.

The impact of experience on decision making was highlighted as an important factor in the research. It is interesting to note that only three of the editors interviewed were over 40 and none were over the age of 50. These editors have substantial power and it

117

would be of value to examine the impact age and experience have on the editorial decision making process.

The inclusion of two editors working in the online media highlighted the importance of this medium in the future. The immediacy of the Internet places an additional stress on editors. The two online editors both highlighted the immediacy of online publishing as a challenge in the decision making process. In this medium, once information has been published on the Internet it can immediately be accessed globally and the potential impact is magnified. As the media continues to migrate to the web and other social media, the impact of decisions will be immediate and the consequences far reaching. The pressure on news editors to make good decisions will only increase in an online environment. A study into editors working in this environment would be an interesting and relevant study given the current trends in the media.

The concept of acting in the public interest dominates the profession of journalism. However in the current South African context this term is up for debate. The ruling ANC believes that the media should act in the 'national interest' and that it has an important role in the development of South Africa. The findings of the research reveal that South African editors have adopted a liberal democratic approach to the role of the media and they show a strong commitment to acting in the public interest. This is in line with research into the media operating in developed countries like the US. This finding raises an interesting question in that South Africa is not a developed country and it faces a different set of socio-economic consequences. Therefore should the media in a developing democracy, as argued by the ANC and several media commentators, play a more developmental role? Further research into editors operating in developing countries would provide greater insight into this question and the role that the media plays in a developing society.

There are increasing platforms which advertisers can select which are viable alternatives to the traditional media. The findings of this research suggest that although editors are aware of the importance of corporate interests, these interests are not prioritised above the audience's interests and the public interest. Newspapers in the US have already fallen victim to declining revenue and circulation. A challenge to South African editors is how to make decisions which protect the sustainability of the organisation but which do not compromise the core product of accurate and interesting news. The increase in competition to the traditional media and its impact on the decision making process of editors is an important area to explore. Does the increase in competition change the way editors make decisions? Is the issue of profitability and competition becoming more important in the final editorial decision?

7.6. Conclusion

It is clear from the findings that an editor needs to be sensitised to the world around them and have an awareness of the various political, social and commercial forces which influence their decision making process. The independent news media is facing a number of challenges ranging from changing public tastes, to political pressure from the ruling party. How editors respond to these challenges through the decisions they take daily will ultimately determine the role the independent media plays in South Africa. This study has highlighted the factors which are shaping the news agenda and provided a unique insight into how editors make trade-offs when there is a clash of interests.

The findings show that South African editors display a strong commitment to their audience and traditional journalistic values like the public interest. In difficult decisions where there is a trade-off of interests, the public interest is a dominant factor in

determining the final decision. This is encouraging as the free flow of information is critical to the consolidation of South Africa's democracy. Every citizen has a stake in a viable and independent news media, however as commercial pressures increase, what structures are in place to ensure that this sector is always able to fulfil its social mandate?

Society's reliance on the traditional news media for information and perspective has been diluted by the Internet. However there will always be a need for information which provides context and analysis of key issues. The ability of editors to respond appropriately to this changing environment will determine what role the media ultimately play in the future of South Africa.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Profile of respondents

Respondent name	Designation	Company	Years as an editor
Seamus Reynolds	Editor	*E-news Channel*	3
George Mazarakis	Executive Producer	*Carte Blanche*	21
Trevor Neethling	News Editor	*City Press*	1
Andy Duffy	News Editor	*Summit TV*	20
Ben Said	Managing Editor	*E-news*	1
Jessica Bezuidenhout	News Editor	*Sunday Times*	6
Phathiswa Magopeni	Editor	*E-news Prime Time*	6
Waldimar Pelser	News Editor	*Beeld*	1
Jessica Pitchford	Managing Editor	*Carte Blanche*	1
Kennedy Mudzuli	Editor	*Sandton Chronicle*	3
Desmond Langham	Online Editor	*Business Day/Financial Mail*	15
Matthew Buckland	Online Editor (former)	*Mail & Guardian Online*	10

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Informed consent letter

Dear

I am doing research into the factors which influence the decision making process of news editors in South Africa. The aim of the research is to gain an insight into how news media professionals make decisions especially in cases where there are competing interests. In order to complete the research your participation, as a news media professional, in this research would be highly appreciated.

The study is an exploratory study and data will be collected through in-depth interviews. The interview in which you will participate is solely for the purpose of this study. The interview will contain open-ended questions and will take the form of a conversation in order to gain an understanding of the factors which you consider when making decisions about what to publish and which stories to pursue. The interview will not be longer than an hour.

Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. All data and personal details will be kept confidential. By participating in the interview, you indicate that you voluntarily participate in this research. If you have any concerns or questions, please contact me or my supervisor. Our details are provided below.

Researcher:	Nikki Griffiths
Email:	lindsay.nikki@gmail.com
Phone:	082 304 8405

Research Supervisor:	Prof Margie Sutherland
Email:	sutherlandm@gibs.co.za
Phone:	011 771 4000

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview will take the format of a face-to-face, in-depth interview. It will be structured as a conversation and techniques derived from the Repertory grid technique will be used to gain an understanding of how the participant factors meaning when making a difficult editorial decision. The purpose of the interview is explained in the informed consent letter which will be signed by each participant.

Demographics

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Race: _____

How many years have you worked in journalism?   _____

How many years have you worked as an editor?   _____

In which medium do you work (*TV, radio, print*)?   _____

Interview Questions

The following questions will be used to structure the interview:

1. Please give two examples of situations in which you had to make a difficult editorial decision?

2. Why were the editorial decisions difficult?

3. What factors do you consider when evaluating a story for publication or broadcast?

4. Which factors are the most important to you?

5. Please rate each factor in terms of importance on the following scale ranging from 1 to 5. The scale is as follows one is not important, three is neutral and five is critical.

Factor	1 Unimportant	2 Slightly important	3 Important	4 Very important	5 Critical

6. What is the key to making good editorial decisions in difficult situations?