

Assessing the Responsiveness of Journalism Curricula to the Labor Market Needs in South Africa: A Systematic Review

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Tigere Muringa¹  and Theodora Dame Adjin-Tettey¹

Abstract

Through the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, this study evaluates the responsiveness of journalism curricula in South Africa to the evolving needs of the industry. Forty-six reviewed studies literature were retrieved for analysis. Findings indicate that while some institutions have incorporated digital media skills, critical thinking and ethics into their curricula, significant gaps remain in multimedia storytelling, data journalism, media entrepreneurship and AI tools in newsrooms. Furthermore, there is limited emphasis on practical work-integrated learning (WIL), leaving graduates underprepared for the fast-paced and highly competitive journalism labor market. The study recommends curriculum reforms that emphasize practical skills, industry partnerships and adaptability.

Keywords

core skills, curriculum, employment, journalism and mass communication education, skills

Introduction

Journalism education in South Africa is at a critical juncture as the media landscape continues to evolve. Rapid technological advancements and the increasing demand for digital skills largely drive the evolution. With the advent of digital media, traditional

¹Durban University of Technology, South Africa

Corresponding Author:

Theodora Dame Adjin-Tettey, Department of Media, Language and Communication, Durban University of Technology, P. O. Box 1334, Durban 4001, South Africa.
Email: TheodoraA@dut.ac.za

journalism education models are being challenged (Botha & de Beer, 2007; Prinsloo, 2010). The rise of online platforms, multimedia storytelling and artificial intelligence tools such as chatbots are reshaping the media industry, thereby making it imperative for journalism programs to incorporate these elements into their curricula (Sethusa, 2024; Tsarwe et al., 2024).

Historically, journalism education has played a crucial role in shaping the media professionals who operate in this dynamic environment. In the post-apartheid era, journalism education in South Africa has not only focused on equipping students with technical skills but also on fostering democratic values and promoting social transformation (Wasserman, 2005). This dual imperative makes it essential for journalism curricula to be responsive to both the evolving technological landscape and the societal needs of a transforming nation. The growing influence of global media and the need for sustainable journalism further complicate the role of journalism education (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2021). To ensure that newsroom practices reflect the crucial social role that journalism plays as a public good, training must equip students with the necessary skills, competencies, and the right frame of mind, including ethics. This could potentially contribute to a more effective media system and help address some of the challenges journalism currently faces.

Furthermore, South Africa's media sector has also experienced severe disruptions, resulting in the closure of daily newspapers and weeklies, as well as newsrooms shrinking to a few staff members (Daniels et al., 2024). Besides, journalism education must now prepare graduates for a media environment characterized by constant change, digital convergence, and the challenges posed by misinformation (Booker et al., 2024). In light of this uncertain future, journalism education must address the challenges of journalism and potentially extend students' knowledge to other communication fields (Severijnen & de Haan, 2024). This study can, thus be used to determine what the literature has to say about these, possibly including how training institutions are matching education needs to other forms of communication industries.

The objective of this systematic review is to critically assess the alignment between journalism education in South Africa and the evolving demands of the labor market. This review examines whether current journalism curricula equip students with the relevant skills required in the modern media landscape.

The paper uses Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) to evaluate adaptations in the journalism curricula of South Africa's higher education institutions in response to changes in the media labor market. The Human Capital Theory explains that the primary reasons for education and skill development are to enhance employability and productivity. According to the tenets of the theory, education investments enhance the skills of the labor force and yield a potential economic return (Goldin, 2019). Hence, to ensure employability, the education of Journalism students should be in line with the needs and demands of the industry. When there is disparity, it reflects the misalignment between education and labor market demands (Kuznetsova, 2020).

Research indicates that in Poland, institutions integrating industry-specific skills produce graduates with better job prospects (Liwński & Pastore, 2021). Work-integrated

learning (WIL) and industry partnerships enhance student readiness for the competitive media environment (Fleming, 2017). In addition, aligning curricula with industry transformations ensures that graduates acquire relevant competencies, thereby improving their employability and the efficiency of the media sector (Lazear, 2003). However, Holborow (2018) avers that many journalism programs emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical training, limiting graduate adaptability in digital newsrooms.

This study also applies the Skills Mismatch Theory to assess the alignment of journalism curricula in South African universities with industry needs. Skills Mismatch Theory differentiates between qualification mismatch, field-of-study mismatch, and skills-based mismatch (Brun-Schammé & Rey, 2021). It is essentially a situation where the skills of graduates do not match those of the labor market, ultimately creating inefficiencies in employment outcomes (McGuinness et al., 2018). For instance, journalism graduates may hold degrees but may lack critical competencies such as multimedia storytelling, AI-assisted journalism, and data-driven reporting (Draissi et al., 2021), which cannot be ignored in contemporary journalism practice. The absence of industry-relevant training leads to job dissatisfaction and underemployment (Allen & Velden, 2001). Hence, this theory is relevant in explaining the consequences of the gaps in journalism education, particularly on the employability of the graduates.

The theory makes a case for the role of technological advancement in reshaping skill requirements. Digital transformation increases demand for specialized skills, yet curricula in the United States, for instance, are slow to adapt (Guvener et al., 2020). This misalignment reduces graduates' ability to compete in a changing job market. Existing literature related to the context of the Middle East and North Africa highlights that skills mismatch affects job retention and productivity (Adely et al., 2021). In Europe, graduates who lack practical training struggle in high-paced newsroom environments (Allen & Weert, 2007). This study applies Human Capital Theory and relevant literature to ascertain what pertains in South Africa and to advocate curriculum reforms in journalism education, where necessary. The study also applies Skills Mismatch Theory to examine how journalism education aligns with industry expectations to ensure that graduates acquire the skills necessary for media sector success, thereby reducing the negative effects of mismatch and improving workforce efficiency. The following critical questions inform this inquiry:

1. To what extent do journalism curricula in South Africa align with the evolving labor force requirements of the media industry, particularly in relation to digital media, multimedia storytelling, and the integration of AI-driven technologies?
2. What are the existing gaps within South African journalism education concerning the provision of practical, work-integrated learning experiences that adequately prepare graduates for the dynamic and competitive media labor market?
3. What curriculum reforms and industry partnerships can be implemented to bridge the skills mismatch in journalism education and enhance graduate readiness for the modern media industry?

Method

This systematic review, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology, aimed to assess the alignment of South African journalism curricula with the evolving demands of the labor market. We considered the systematic review important in identifying the research gaps related to the subject (Bangdiwala, 2024). Also, unlike a syllabus analysis that is limited to the level of a specific institution, the systematic review helped us consolidate evidence from a wide body of scholarly literature, which assisted in capturing national trends, skills gaps, and curriculum changes. This provided us with a basis for future syllabus analysis of current curricula to determine what has changed over time. PRISMA's structured approach ensures transparency through a thorough literature search, pre-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria, and careful data extraction and synthesis. The review screened an initial of 5800 studies worldwide, selecting 46 relevant articles that focused on curriculum content, practical skill development, and the preparedness of graduates for the media industry in the South African context.

Eligibility Criteria

The primary eligibility criterion for this review was studies that examined the alignment of journalism curricula in South Africa with labor market requirements, particularly in relation to digital skills, employability, and WIL. Studies on journalism education's responsiveness to the media industry's evolving requirements were included. This focused on digital transformation and technological advancements. Also included were studies on the impact of WIL on student employability. In addition, the responsiveness of curricula to the changing demands of the media industry was examined. Studies included in the review were primarily peer-reviewed journal articles. Studies that focus on different educational systems or regions outside South Africa, or that do not specifically discuss employability and skill development, were excluded.

Information Sources

For this systematic review, a comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic databases to ensure a wide range of relevant studies were included. The primary databases for peer-reviewed articles included Google Scholar, JSTOR and Scopus. These are well-established sources for academic literature (Adjin-Tettey, 2020; Serwonoo et al., 2024), providing access to diverse publications related to journalism education and labor market alignment. This approach ensured that peer-reviewed articles, critical reports, and unpublished theses relevant to journalism curricula and employability were included.

The review focused on studies published from 2000 to 2024. The choice was grounded in the reason that the early 2000s marked a significant shift in communications technology. This period saw the rise of devices such as USB flash drives, camera

phones, iPods, and Bluetooth technology. Broadband became a necessity, with world-wide users reaching around 21 million. This growth reflected a notable year-on-year increase (Waggoner, 2021). Thus, the timeframe was chosen to capture the digital revolution's full impact on journalism education. It focused on significant technological advancements and their influence on media education. The study also considered how these changes affected labor market demands. Studies from the early 2000s provide insights into the initial stages of the digital shift. At the same time, more recent publications highlight the ongoing challenges and curriculum adaptations in response to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). This range also enabled the inclusion of pivotal moments in the evolution of media and technology, such as the rise of social media and AI tools, which are reshaping journalism education today (Sibiya & Ngulube, 2024).

Search Strategy

The search strategy for this systematic review employed a combination of specific keywords and Boolean operators, including *AND*, *OR*, and *NOT*, to identify relevant studies that focus on aligning journalism curricula with labor market demands in South Africa. Keywords such as “journalism curriculum South Africa,” “media labor market,” “digital skills journalism education,” and “work-integrated learning journalism” were used across the identified databases. The searches were limited to studies published from 2000 to 2024.

The Raayan Systematic Literature Review tool managed and organized the retrieved studies, streamlining the screening and selection process. It allows multiple users to collaborate in real-time, ensuring efficient screening of studies. Users can tag studies based on predefined criteria and extract key data systematically. Its structured approach enhances organization, reduces errors, and improves the overall reliability of the review process. Filters for geographical location and language (English only) were applied to focus on studies specific to South Africa. In addition, a date range filter (2000–2024) ensured that studies captured the evolving trends in journalism education, particularly integrating digital skills, employability, and WIL. This approach resulted in a targeted and comprehensive selection of studies that align with the objectives of this study (Muringa & Shava, 2025).

Study Selection

The study selection process adhered to the PRISMA guidelines to ensure a comprehensive, transparent and methodologically sound approach. The initial Identification phase, which yielded 5,800 studies from databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR and Scopus, mirrors the approach taken by many systematic reviews where extensive searches are conducted to capture a wide range of relevant literature (e.g., Azanu et al., 2025; Dhingra et al., 2024; MacDonald et al., 2016; Tedja et al., 2024). Similar studies, such as those by Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021), emphasize the importance of broad initial searches to ensure that no key studies are overlooked in reviews.

The removal of 800 duplicate records and the exclusion of 200 ineligible records by the Raayan Systematic Literature Review align with best practices used in systematic reviews, as detailed by Ouzzani et al. (2016), who advocated the use of automation to streamline the initial stages of data management and minimize human error. The dataset was refined by manually removing 50 additional records. This was based on language and relevance criteria. Such practices align with systematic reviews in global contexts. The study selection process is captured in Figure 1 below.

In the screening phase, 4,750 records were assessed based on their titles and abstracts. This process is commonly employed in systematic reviews to ensure that only studies directly relevant to the research questions progress further (Muringa & Shava, 2025). Excluding 4,500 records for not meeting inclusion criteria aligns with studies focusing on specific educational or industry contexts. Many records were tangentially related as they were conducted in South Africa but not directly applicable to this study's core review objective. This approach is consistent with the methods seen in Gamble (2022). Some of the articles were also not open access. Thus, full texts were not accessible to us to do a proper analysis. The decision to proceed with full-text retrieval for 250 reports while excluding 20 due to accessibility issues reflects common logistical challenges in systematic reviews. This approach is supported by studies emphasizing the impact of publication access on review comprehensiveness (Gamble, 2022; Ouzzani et al., 2016). A significant number of studies were conducted in other African countries. In contrast, others were commentaries, opinion pieces and editorials with insufficient context and methodological rigor and therefore could not be included in the study.

In the eligibility phase, 230 reports were thoroughly assessed and 184 were excluded based on relevance, methodological rigor and data clarity. This step follows the approach outlined by emphasizes the need for rigorous full-text evaluation to ensure that only high-quality studies that meet predefined eligibility criteria are included in the final review. The exclusion of studies based on inadequate focus or poor methodology aligns with similar educational reviews, where studies with insufficient empirical support or vague outcomes are deemed unsuitable for inclusion (Muringa et al., 2025; Moher et al., 2015).

Ultimately, 46 studies (see Appendix below) were included in the final review, ensuring a focused, high-quality dataset that provides robust evidence on journalism curricula and labor market alignment in South Africa. The systematic and transparent selection process utilized structured exclusion criteria and comprehensive documentation to ensure that only the most relevant and reliable evidence informed the conclusions. This enhances the credibility and validity of the review's findings (Danso et al., 2024).

Data Extraction

Data extraction focused on key aspects such as study characteristics, curriculum components and outcomes related to journalism education and its alignment with labor market needs in South Africa. The review analyzed study characteristics, including the

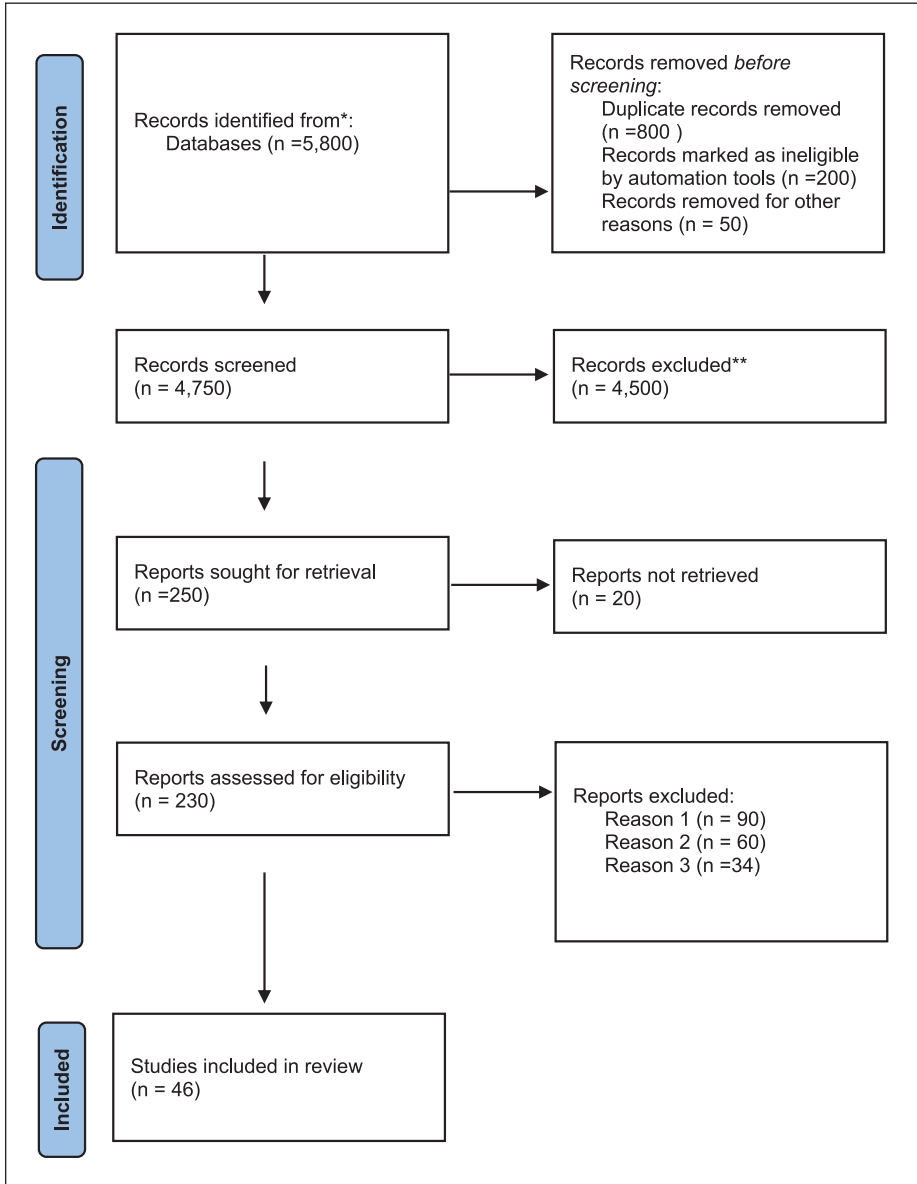


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for the Systematic Review Which Included Searches of Databases Only. Source. The authors.

institution and year of study, to ensure the research was relevant to the evolving digital landscape and the 4IR developments. Special attention was given to curriculum elements. These included theoretical content, practical training modules, and digital media integration. The focus was on digital skills like multimedia storytelling, data journalism, and AI tools. These components were crucial for assessing how well journalism education prepares students for the workforce. This is highlighted in a study by Makhadi and Diederichs' (2021), which stresses the importance of combining theory and practice to produce work-ready graduates.

To effectively manage the vast amount of data, the Raayan Systematic Literature Review tool was employed, ensuring a structured and transparent review process. Raayan's collaborative features allowed for efficient screening, tagging, and extracting relevant information, making it an ideal choice for managing systematic reviews. In addition, reference management tools like EndNote were used to organize citations and maintain consistency throughout the review, ensuring accurate tracking of sources. These tools played a crucial role in ensuring the systematic and replicable nature of the review process, which is critical for conducting a comprehensive assessment of journalism education's responsiveness to labor market demands.

Risk of Bias Assessment

A manual Risk of Bias Assessment was conducted. Each study was evaluated across key bias domains. These included selection bias, performance bias, detection bias, and reporting bias. A standardized checklist was used to assess methodological rigor. It focused on transparency, study design, and potential conflicts of interest. Two independent reviewers assessed each study. They assigned low, moderate, or high bias ratings. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Table 1 in Appendix captures the studies that were included in the analysis.

In terms of bias, studies were critically evaluated for methodological rigor and potential author bias, particularly where self-reported data were not triangulated or peer-validated. Bias was problematic where it limited the validity or generalizability of claims, especially in contexts where author opinion substituted for empirical fact without careful consideration or verification. This evaluation ensured that only valid methodology and contextually relevant studies were included in the final synthesis.

Synthesis of Results

Due to high heterogeneity in research design, focus areas, and methodologies, a narrative synthesis was used. It allowed flexibility in combining findings. Common themes, trends, and gaps across studies were identified. The narrative synthesis focused on several key themes. First, curriculum trends were analyzed, particularly how journalism programs in South Africa respond to the challenges posed by digital transformation. Through thematically grouping the findings, the narrative synthesis provided a structured way to assess the alignment between journalism education and labor market demands. This approach was well-suited for synthesizing diverse data and provided a

comprehensive understanding of the state of journalism education in South Africa, enabling the researchers to identify areas of improvement that formed the basis for recommendations for future curriculum reforms.

Results

To examine journalism education in South Africa and its fit for the labor market, the 46 studies reviewed used a variety of research designs and methodologies. They were predominantly set in South Africa, with only a few comparative insights provided, drawing from models in other regions of Africa (Jordaan & Groenewald, 2021; Makhadi & Diederichs, 2021; Prinsloo, 2010).

Methodological Approaches Conceptualisations of Reviewed Studies

Qualitative approaches, including interviews, case studies, and content analyses, were the most prominent. For instance, Makhadi and Diederichs (2021) applied qualitative interviews to inquire about WIL as a tool to close the gap between academic education and industry demand. Furthermore, Prinsloo (2010) adopted a case study to evaluate digital media time design curriculum adjustments. Jordaan and Groenewald (2021) used interviews and content analysis to assess changes to journalism programs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman (2024) also conducted semi-structured interviews to explore South African journalists' understanding of constructive journalism and situate this understanding within development journalism and democratic resilience. Using qualitative interviews, Christians (2023) reported on how journalism educators navigate trauma exposure in curricula, ultimately advocating for trauma training among journalism educators (Boshoff & Garman, 2016).

Several studies employed mixed methods. This national skills audit, conducted by de Beer and Steyn (2002), developed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative focus groups, to identify digital literacy and multimedia production skills gaps. In a comparable study, Workneh (2018) employed document analysis, online surveys and interviews to assess the impact of Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) on a graduate journalism program in Ethiopia, underlining both challenges and serendipitous benefits for Sub-Saharan journalism education. Dube (2013) also utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate whether journalism curricula in South Africa had changed in the post-1994 context. It revealed a predominance of Western epistemologies and little integration of indigenous language reporting. Ncube et al. (2025) used a mixed-methods approach and provided an in-depth analysis of the integration of AI into journalism curricula, assessing both the challenges and opportunities that arise from this technological shift.

Comparative studies provided wider views. For example, Berger (2008) provided a comparative analysis of journalism schools across Africa, measuring their potential to gauge excellence under the UNESCO umbrella. Similarly, Booker et al. (2024) examined syllabi from numerous countries, including South Africa to investigate sustainable journalism training gaps. Umejei (2018) discussed journalism education

throughout Africa, with a regional-focused view emphasizing finding the right balance between global journalism skills and requirements for local relevance. Beckett and Dueze (2016) provides a comparative perspective on journalism curricula, addressing global challenges in journalistic training. More comparative work was done by Tsarwe et al. (2024) who explored the post-pandemic convergence of journalism education in Southern Africa.

Theoretical and literature reviews contributed significantly to the discourse. Sewchurran and Hofmeyr (2020) critically reflected on digital disruption in journalism education. They employed theories from Castells, Foucault, and Habermas to address challenges in adopting data visualization. Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009) provided a comprehensive literature review, offering a foundational understanding of journalism studies across different contexts. Garman and van der Merwe (2017) considered the subject from the historical and policy perspectives. They provided a comprehensive overview of curriculum changes and the impact of student protests on journalism education. Similarly, de Beer et al. (2017) used policy analysis to explore structural and ideological shifts in journalism training post-1994. They highlighted the challenges of adapting to socio-political changes. Other theoretical studies (Banda et al., 2007; Duma et al., 2023; Fourie, 2010; Loeffelholz & Quandt, 2010; Tsekeris, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009; Wasserman, 2005) collectively contributed to a broader conceptual understanding but varied in their engagement with contemporary digital and decolonial challenges in journalism training.

Critical historical and policy reviews (Blom et al., 2018; De Beer et al., 2017; Garman & van der Merwe, 2017; Steenveld et al., 2012) were key to helping to put journalism education in context. Botha and de Beer (2007) look at the development of journalism education in South Africa, particularly the changes since 1994 and the challenges facing journalism education in today's world. Meanwhile, reporting at an intersection between content analysis and changes and dilemmas in journalism education at Rhodes University Prinsloo (2010) reflects journalism education as a voice in the democratization of journalism. Drawing on qualitative interviews and open-ended questionnaires, Motsaathebe (2011) examined the tensions between global journalism skills and local relevance in South Africa.

Autoethnographic (Adjin-Tettey, 2024) and case study (Fourie, 2013; Mpofu & Matsilele, 2023; Rodny-Gumede, 2013; Sethusa, 2024) approaches offered nuanced insights. Wasserman (2005) examined journalism education as a form of transformative praxis, arguing for its potential to cultivate democratic ideals. WIL is part of the preparation of journalism students for the workplace, according to Makhadi and Diederichs (2021), who undertook a qualitative exploratory case study. Adjin-Tettey (2024) autoethnography study reflected on trends in journalism education and provides strategies for bridging the gap between academia and industry.

However, even with methodological heterogeneity, some limitations were identified. Qualitative studies (Fourie, 2013; Jordaan & Groenewald, 2021; Motsaathebe, 2011; Umejei, 2018; Jordaan, 2024) with smaller samples, like the one conducted by Prinsloo (2010), were insightful but not widely generalizable. Self-reported data in studies such as Makhadi and Diederichs (2021) and Christians (2023) had rather

narrow perspectives. For instance, Makhadi and Diederichs (2021) study involved perspectives of students and teachers on curriculum effectiveness without including perspectives and triangulation of data from external stakeholders. Similarly, Christians (2023) relied on journalists' self-assessments of their digital competencies and adaptability. As a result, this did not reflect objective performance or industry benchmarks. Few longitudinal studies were carried out, which limited the understanding of graduates' long-term career trajectories. However, the model of using multiple data sources, as in de Beer and Steyn (2002) and Booker et al. (2024), increased the reliability and comprehensiveness of findings.

Taken together, the reviewed studies contribute to the ongoing discourse on journalism education by emphasizing the importance of adapting to digital transformation, integrating local knowledge and aligning curricula with industry demands and societal needs. Combining emotional resonance with fact-checking, as proposed by Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman (2024) and Booker et al. (2024), suggests a concretized lineage of processes for promoting more constructive conversations on identity and nationality in journalism education.

Thematic Synthesis

Digital Skills Integration in Journalism Curricula

A recurring theme across the studies was the extent to which digital skills, particularly multimedia storytelling, data journalism, and AI tools, have been integrated into journalism education. Studies such as Sethusa (2024) and Tsarwe et al. (2024) emphasized that while some institutions have introduced digital media training, significant gaps remain in the depth and breadth of these offerings. For instance, Makhadi and Diederichs (2021) found that many journalism programs still prioritize traditional media formats over digital storytelling, leaving graduates underprepared for modern newsrooms' realities. Several studies, including Booker et al. (2024), highlighted the growing importance of AI tools such as chatbots and data analytics in journalism education. However, the review found that few South African institutions have fully embraced these technologies in their curricula. This was seen as a missed opportunity to align education with industry trends, particularly as AI-driven technologies transform the media landscape.

WIL and Industry Partnerships versus Theoretical Knowledge Grounded in Democratic Values

Another critical theme identified in the synthesis was the role of WIL and industry partnerships in bridging the gap between education and employability. Studies like Adjin-Tettey (2024) and Makhadi and Diederichs (2021) stressed that WIL is crucial for equipping students with practical experience and preparing them for the fast-paced media environment. However, many studies reported that WIL opportunities are inconsistently implemented across institutions, with some programs lacking sufficient

industry partnerships to offer meaningful work placements (Botha & de Beer, 2007; Jordaan & Groenewald, 2021). This gap in practical training is a significant barrier to graduate readiness.

Research by de Beer and Steyn (2002) and Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021) highlighted a disconnect between industry expectations and the educational outcomes of journalism programs. Employers often reported that graduates lacked critical skills in multimedia production and digital journalism despite the growing demand for these competencies in the workforce. These studies argue for stronger collaborations between journalism schools and media organizations to ensure curricula align better with industry needs (de Beer and Steyn, 2002; Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy, 2021).

However, some studies (Botha & de Beer, 2007; Wasserman, 2005) argued for a fair balance of practical and theoretical knowledge not to sacrifice journalism education's dual role in equipping students with technical skills and fostering democratic values. The literature revealed a tension between preparing students for the commercial realities of the media industry and maintaining journalism's role as a public good. Thus, while many studies highlighted a persistent skills gap, particularly in data journalism and multimedia storytelling, contradictions emerged regarding the emphasis on theoretical versus practical training. Some studies (e.g., Botha & de Beer, 2007; Wasserman, 2005) argued for a continued focus on journalism's democratic role. Others (e.g., Sethusa, 2024) called for a more significant shift toward digital and entrepreneurial skills to meet industry demands.

The findings suggest that while South African journalism education has made progress in incorporating digital skills, significant gaps remain, particularly in AI integration and practical experience. But at the same time, the foundational knowledge of journalism, which is grounded in theoretical knowledge, is being sacrificed for digital skills. The narrative synthesis reveals a critical need for curriculum reforms that balance technical training with promoting democratic values. It also points out that South African journalism programs must evolve to better prepare graduates for the digital media landscape.

In South Africa, WIL is emphasized, much like globally, as a critical bridge between theory and practice, a theme echoed by Makhadi and Diederichs (2021) in their study on South African journalism education. While these global studies (Deming & Silliman, 2024) highlight common challenges, the South African context adds a unique socio-political layer where journalism education must address democratic imperatives while embracing digital transformation.

The divergences observed across studies on journalism education can largely be attributed to differences in contexts, levels of digital infrastructure, and the specific focus of each institution. For example, in Europe, initiatives like the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) have been established to systematically address the digital skills gap through coordinated efforts across EU member states (Annette, 2021). This contrasts with findings from South Africa, where similar large-scale, coordinated government initiatives are less prevalent, leading to slower adoption of digital competencies within journalism curricula (Motsaathebe, 2011). This may result from South Africa's apartheid

history, which makes some educational stakeholders resist any kind of government intervention in university curricula. In other regions, such as Asia, the challenges around equitable access to digital tools and WIL opportunities further complicate the curriculum's ability to meet industry standards, as highlighted by Poluekhtova et al. (2020) in their assessment of digital learning environments during the pandemic. While European and U.S. models are more likely to include structured WIL programs, as seen in studies by Valencia-Forrester (2020), South African institutions often face limitations in resources and industry partnerships that hinder the widespread application of such models. In addition, studies from Brandi et al. (2023) emphasize the necessity for lifelong learning and continuous skills development, which is less consistently implemented in African contexts due to infrastructural and economic constraints. Ultimately, these discrepancies highlight the varying levels of institutional support, government initiatives, and socio-economic factors that influence how journalism education adapts to the demands of the digital era.

Discussion

This systematic review aimed to evaluate the alignment of journalism education in South Africa with labor market needs. The review aimed to assess the integration of digital skills, the effectiveness of WIL, the incorporation of multimedia storytelling and the integration of AI-driven technologies into journalism curricula.

Digital Skills Gap in Journalism Education

A central theme identified in this review is the persistent gap between the digital skills offered in journalism education and the demands of the modern media industry. While there has been some progress in incorporating essential digital skills, such as multimedia storytelling and data journalism, the pace of integration remains slow and inconsistent across institutions. As noted in studies by Valencia-Forrester (2020), digital tools and AI technologies like chatbots are becoming critical components of news production. However, many South African journalism programs lag in adapting their curricula to include these tools. The findings from this review mirror global trends, where institutions, particularly in Europe and the United States, face difficulties in fully embedding digital competencies into journalism education (Saliuk & Shkola, 2023; Valencia-Forrester, 2020). In the South African context, this skills gap is particularly concerning because the digital transformation in media is rapidly altering job requirements, leaving journalism graduates underprepared for the evolving labor market (Michalon & Camacho-Zuñiga, 2023). The slow integration of AI tools and data journalism reflects broader infrastructural and resource challenges that must be addressed at the institutional and policy levels.

Importance of WIL

WIL emerged as a significant theme in this review, emphasizing the importance of practical experience in preparing students for the workforce. Many studies highlighted

WIL as a critical bridge between theoretical education and industry demands. Makhadi and Diederichs (2021) found that students who participated in internships or industry partnerships were more likely to be employable and better prepared for the challenges of the media industry. This aligns with global literature, where WIL has been identified as a key component in enhancing student employability across various educational systems (Valencia-Forrester, 2020). However, access to WIL opportunities in South Africa remains uneven, with certain institutions lacking strong partnerships with media organizations, which limits students' ability to gain hands-on experience (Fourie, 2013; Makhadi & Diederichs, 2021). This is exacerbated by the resource constraints of news organizations and the resultant newsroom cutdowns, making it difficult for universities to maintain comprehensive internship programs or establish long-term industry partnerships. The divergence in the implementation of WIL between South Africa and more developed regions highlights the need for more structured and equitable WIL programs across all journalism schools in the country.

Journalism Education Grounded in Ethics, the Public Good and Critical Thinking

In addition to digital and practical skills, this review also identified the promotion of ethical journalism and critical thinking as a crucial element in South African journalism education. Studies like Wasserman (2005) emphasize journalism education's dual role in providing technical skills and fostering a sense of social responsibility and democratic engagement. This theme is particularly relevant in South Africa, where journalism has historically played a significant role in promoting social justice and addressing inequality. Many journalism programs continue to prioritize critical thinking, ethics and the public good, balancing the technical training required for modern media careers with a broader educational mission. This focus aligns with global concerns about journalism's societal role, particularly in regions that have experienced political upheaval or democratic transitions (Saliuk & Shkola, 2023). However, this emphasis presents a challenge, as institutions must navigate between providing ethical training grounded in theoretical and contextual knowledge. This ensures that students are technically proficient in digital journalism—a balance that has proven difficult to maintain in South Africa and other global contexts.

Socio-Political and Economic Barriers

Another important theme that emerged is the impact of socio-political and economic barriers on the responsiveness of journalism education to labor market demands. Many South African institutions face challenges in updating their curricula due to limited funding, insufficient access to technology, and the lack of widespread government initiatives to enhance digital skills, as is common in countries like the United States and parts of Europe (Annette, 2021). Studies by Poluekhtova et al. (2020) highlight

similar issues in other developing regions, where economic and infrastructural constraints make it challenging to adopt cutting-edge digital tools and implement robust WIL programs. The financial disparity within the country also exacerbates inequalities between universities, with well-resourced institutions being better positioned to offer industry-aligned programs. In contrast, others struggle to meet basic educational standards. This divergence points to a broader structural issue in South African higher education, where socio-political factors impede journalism education's complete modernization.

Theoretical Connection, Implication and Contribution to the Field

The persistent gap between the skills taught in journalism curricula and the needs of the labor market supports the Skills Mismatch Theory, highlighting the need for updated educational frameworks that integrate digital competencies and practical training. In addition, the review underscores the Human Capital Theory by emphasizing the role of WIL in enhancing students' employability. It suggests that investments in practical, industry-aligned education directly contribute to better labor market outcomes for journalism graduates. There is also the need for curricula to be responsive to the requirements of the digital landscape to cover digital storytelling, data storytelling supported by relevant tools and the use of AI to tell compelling stories and to facilitate journalistic routines. Resource allocation also makes this possible. Journalism's unique position in society also requires curriculum reforms that not only address technical skills but also foster critical thinking, ethical principles and theoretical foundations that promote the democratic function of journalism in society. The paper argues that enhancing journalism students' practical skills and industry-relevant knowledge will increase their employability and economic contribution, which are aligned to the human capital theory. Simultaneously, applying the Skills Mismatch Theory demonstrates that without a concerted effort to reform journalism curricula, graduates will continue to face difficulties securing employment, and the media industry will suffer from a shortage of appropriately skilled professionals.

This review contributes to the growing literature on journalism education, particularly in Africa. It highlights the challenges and opportunities for aligning journalism curricula with labor market needs. It advances our understanding of the digital skills gap and emphasizes the crucial role of WIL in enhancing employability. Moreover, the findings highlight the unique socio-political context in which South African journalism education operates, where ethical journalism and democratic engagement remain priorities alongside technical skills development. The review also underscores the need for more excellent infrastructural support and policy interventions to facilitate the integration of digital tools into journalism education to support the gains already made by some educational institutions and to help those who are yet to introduce such into their curricula to do so.

Conclusion

This study set out to evaluate the responsiveness of journalism curricula in South Africa to labor market needs, particularly in the context of digital transformation. The review has shown significant gaps in integrating essential digital skills, such as multi-media storytelling, data journalism and AI tools, into journalism education programs. WIL was also identified as a critical factor in preparing graduates for the workforce, although access to such opportunities varies widely across institutions. The findings suggest that curriculum reforms are urgently needed to address these disparities and better align educational outcomes with industry demands.

These insights contribute to our understanding of the ongoing challenges in journalism education, especially in the African context, where socio-political factors influence the ability of institutions to modernize their programs fully. Despite some limitations, such as the variability of methodologies across the studies reviewed, this study adds valuable insight into the current state of journalism education in South Africa and the need for more structured and digitally focused training.

Study Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations must be acknowledged in this review. First, the diverse methodologies employed across the included studies, ranging from qualitative interviews to large-scale surveys, introduce a level of heterogeneity that may have affected the synthesis of findings. However, there is some advantage in the heterogeneity of studies as it provides a broader perspective on the subject matter. In addition, many studies relied on self-reported data from students and educators, which may introduce biases in assessing curriculum effectiveness and employability outcomes.

Future research can focus on longitudinal studies that track journalism graduates' career progression and employability, providing deeper insights into the long-term impacts of curriculum reforms. This could take the form of observations. In addition, there is a need for more empirical studies that explore the effectiveness of integrating advanced digital skills, such as AI tools and data journalism, into journalism programs, particularly in the African context. Research could also examine the role of government and industry partnerships in strengthening WIL opportunities and how these collaborations can be scaled across under-resourced institutions.

A limitation of this study is the sole reliance on systematic review to assess the responsiveness of journalism curricula to labor market needs. We therefore recommend empirical data collection techniques in future studies to explore the perspectives of educators and industry players on the responsiveness of journalism curricula to labor market demand. Finally, comparative studies between different regions in Africa and globally would offer valuable perspectives on how journalism education can adapt to diverse socio-political and economic environments while balancing both technical and ethical training.

Appendix

Table 1. Table of Analyzed Studies Sorted by Year.

Authors	Year of publication	Title	Methodology	Aim	Relevance/Justification for Inclusion
Ncube, Mofokeng, Chibwe, Munonyanya, & Mungwi	2025	Mind the gap: artificial intelligence and journalism training in Southern African journalism schools	Mixed-methods approach	Examines how journalism schools (J-schools) in Southern Africa are responding to the disruptions introduced by Artificial Intelligence (AI).	The research highlights the necessity for curriculum development that aligns with industry demands
Booker et al.,	2024	Putting Forward Sustainability as a Model for Journalism Education and Training	Syllabi Analysis	Examines the role of sustainability in journalism education in Africa.	Explores the gaps in sustainable journalism training and the potential for curriculum reform.
Jordaan & Groenewald	2021	(Life) Lessons Beyond the Lecture Hall: Alumni Reflections on Their Work-Readiness after Completing a South African Postgraduate Journalism Degree	Focus Groups	Investigates how journalism graduates perceive their readiness for the workplace and the skills they found most valuable post-graduation.	Highlights the need for soft skills and adaptability in journalism education amid industry changes.
Nkhalo & Lesame	2024	African Journalism Education Reimagined Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Aftershocks and Seismic Shifts	Comparative multi-case study approach	Assess the transformations in journalism education in Sub-Saharan Africa post-pandemic	It provides empirical insights into the pedagogical and institutional shifts in African journalism education post-pandemic
Tsarwe, Matsilele & Evans	2024	Toward a Converged Post-COVID Journalism Training in Africa: A Case Study of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Eswatini	Comparative Case Study	Explores post-pandemic convergence of journalism education in Southern Africa.	Discusses the integration of digital tools in journalism training
Adjin-Tettey	2024	From the Classroom to the African Newsroom: How Journalism Education Can Bridge the Gap	Autoethnography	Reflects on trends in journalism education and provides strategies for bridging the gap between academia and industry.	Offers insights into curriculum reforms needed to align journalism education with industry needs.
Mpofu & Matsilele	2023	Challenges and Opportunities at Decolonizing the Curriculum: Narratives from Selected Southern African Journalism and Media Schools	Case Study Analysis	Explores efforts to decolonize journalism curricula in Southern Africa and the challenges faced by educators.	Discusses barriers to curriculum transformation and the importance of local knowledge systems.
Sethusa	2024	Reimagining Through Crisis: How the Covid-19 Pandemic Changed the Fortunes and Futures of Journalism Schools and Graduates	Qualitative—Case Study	Examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected journalism graduates and curricula in South Africa.	Discusses the long-term impact of pandemic-induced shifts in journalism education and employment.
Jodaam	2024	(Life) Lessons beyond the Lecture Hall: Alumni Reflections on Their Work-Readiness after Completing a South African Postgraduate Journalism Degree	Qualitative research design	The study seeks to identify which knowledge and skills graduates find most valuable in their professional lives post-graduation.	It provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of journalism education programs in South Africa from the perspective of graduates
Folcher-Kingwill & Wasserman	2024	The Ideal and Practice of Constructive Journalism: How South African Journalists Perceive Their Roles	Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews	Investigates South African journalists' perceptions of constructive journalism and its application in digital news environments.	Links constructive journalism to development journalism and explores its role in South Africa's democracy.
Musvairo, Bebbwi & Borges-Rey	2024	The Routledge Companion to Journalism in The Global South	Thematic Analysis	Examines the challenges and opportunities for journalism in the Global South, emphasizing decolonization and local knowledge.	Offers critical perspectives on journalism education, ethics, and media development in non-Western contexts.
Duma et al.	2023	The Dichotomy of Curriculum Responsiveness and Graduate Unemployment in South African Higher Education	Desktop Analysis	Evaluates how higher education curricula in South Africa respond to graduate unemployment, emphasizing employability gaps.	Highlights the misalignment between journalism education and the job market, calling for curriculum reforms.
Nkhalo & Matsilele	2023	Remote Student-Centered Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Journalism Education	Case Study—Student Vlogs Analysis	Explores how access disparities affected journalism students' experiences with emergency remote learning.	Highlights inequalities in digital access and its impact on journalism education.
Madkiza	2023	Book Review: Decolonizing Journalism Education in South Africa: Critical Perspectives	Literature Review	Reviews the need for decolonizing journalism education in South Africa, critiquing Western-centric curricula.	Highlights perspectives on integrating local knowledge and epistemologies into journalism training

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Authors	Year of publication	Title	Methodology	Aim	Relevance/Justification for Inclusion
Christians	2023	Preparing Journalism Graduates for Career Trauma Exposure: An Exploration of Perspectives of South African University Journalism Educators	Qualitative—Semi-Structured Interviews Commentary	Examines how South African journalism educators address trauma exposure in curricula.	Highlights the importance of integrating trauma training in journalism education.
Raetzsch, Ngomba, Oliveira, From, & Bodler	2022	Toward Diversity in Global Journalism Studies: A Reply to Seth C. Lewis	Commentary	Critiques existing approaches to journalism studies and calls for greater diversity in global journalism education.	Highlights the necessity of global inclusivity in journalism education and its implications for curriculum reforms.
Makhadi & Diederichs	2021	The role of work-integrated learning in preparing journalism students for the workplace	Qualitative and exploratory research approach	This article investigates the importance of preparation for WIL in the field of journalism.	It examines how undergraduate journalism students perceive the WIL program and how they work toward rendering themselves employable in the media industry.
Sewchuran & Hofmeyr	2020	A Critical Reflection on Digital Disruption in Journalism and Journalism Education	Theoretical and Literature Review	Critically examines the impact of digital disruption and data visualization on journalism education, using theories from Castells, Foucault, Habermas, and Fuchs.	Addresses challenges in adopting data visualization in journalism education and its implications for democratic resilience.
Tsekeris	2019	Surviving and Thriving in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Digital Skills for Education and Society	Theoretical Review	Discusses the role of digital skills in education amid technological disruptions.	Highlights the increasing need for digital literacy in journalism education.
Blom et al.	2018	Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications Accreditation: Quality or Compliance?	Policy Analysis	Investigates the impact of accreditation on journalism education quality and curriculum standards.	Analyzes how accreditation standards affect journalism training programs and their ability to adapt to industry changes.
Workneh	2018	Journalism education interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa: An examination of the Norwegian model in Ethiopia	Mixed-methods	Assess the impact of NORAD on a graduate journalism program in Ethiopia, underlining both challenges and serendipitous benefits for Sub-Saharan journalism education	It contextualizes the broader discourse on journalism education reforms, underscoring the need for locally grounded, sustainable interventions rather than externally imposed models
Unejei	2018	Hybridizing Journalism: Clash of Two 'Journalisms' in Africa	Qualitative—Interviews	Investigates how African journalists adapt to Chinese and Western journalism models.	Examines ideological influences shaping journalism training in Africa.
Workneh	2018	Journalism Education Interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Examination of the Norwegian Model in Ethiopia	Document Analysis, Online Surveys & Interviews	Assesses the impact of Norwegian development assistance on journalism education in Ethiopia.	Provides insights into international collaborations in journalism education and the challenges of top-down intervention models.
Garman & van der Merwe	2017	Riding the Waves: Journalism Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa	Historical and Policy Analysis	Explores how South African journalism education has evolved since 1994, emphasizing decolonization and newsroom changes.	Provides a comprehensive overview of curriculum changes, industry demands, and the impact of student protests on journalism education.
de Beer, Pitcher & Jones	2017	Journalism Education in South Africa: Taking on Challenges for the Future	Policy Analysis	Explores shifts in journalism education post-1994 and the challenges faced in curriculum transformation.	Discusses structural and ideological shifts in journalism training in response to socio-political changes.
Blom et al.	2017	Global Journalism Education in the 21st Century: Challenges and Innovations	Mixed Methods	Explores global trends in journalism education and the emerging challenges in journalism training.	Offers insights into international approaches to journalism education and innovations in training.
Roddy-Gumede	2016	A Teaching Philosophy of Journalism Education in the Global South: A South African Case Study	Conceptual Analysis	Explores how journalism education in South Africa can move away from Western normative models and incorporate local realities.	Advocates for decolonizing journalism curricula and adopting African-centered approaches.
Daniels	2016	Chasing Hashtag#25 in the Newsroom Presents Challenges for Journalism Education	Empirical Data Analysis	Analyzes how social media and digital trends impact journalism education.	Discusses tensions between traditional journalism education and digital-first imperatives.
Bosheff & Garman	2016	Capital or critique? When journalism education seeks to influence the field	Qualitative longitudinal	Examines the limitations that a journalism school at a prestigious university faces in making a meaningful contribution to the field within a developing country.	It offers comparative insights into the ongoing challenges of journalism education, showing how past reforms continue to shape current industry-academic dynamics.
Fourie	2013	Beyond Skills Training: Six Macro Themes in South African Journalism Education	Thematic Analysis	Identifies six major socio-cultural and political themes shaping journalism education in South Africa.	Provides a framework for understanding journalism education beyond technical skills, focusing on critical societal themes.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Authors	Year of publication	Title	Methodology	Aim	Relevance/Justification for Inclusion
Dube	2013	Challenges for Journalism Education and Training in a Transforming Society: A Case Study of Three Selected Institutions in Post-1994 South Africa	Mixed-Methods (Qualitative and Quantitative)	Examines whether journalism curricula in South Africa have transformed post-1994 to address societal challenges.	Findings reveal heavy reliance on Western epistemologies and limited transformation efforts, particularly in indigenous language reporting.
Rodny-Gumedes	2013	The Local in the Global: Challenges of Teaching Global Journalism	Case Study and Interviews	Explores the relevance of global journalism education in South Africa and discusses students' and newspaper editors' responses to the curriculum.	Contributes to debates on de-Westernizing media studies and making journalism education more locally relevant.
Seenveld, Snelitz & Wasserman	2012	The School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, South Africa	Historical and Policy Review	Traces the transformation of journalism education at Rhodes University.	Provides historical context for curriculum evolution in South Africa.
Moraaathebe	2011	Journalism Education and Practice in South Africa and the Discourse of the African Renaissance	Qualitative Interviews & Open-ended Questionnaires	Explores journalism education in relation to Africanization and the African Renaissance discourse.	Examines the balance between global journalism skills and the need for local relevance in African journalism education.
Prindloo	2010	Journalism education in South Africa: Shifts and dilemmas	Content Analysis	Examines journalism education in South Africa in relation to social equality and justice.	Provides a historical and contextual analysis of journalism education at Rhodes University and its impact on democratization.
Foune	2010	The Past, Present and Future of South African Journalism Research	Theoretical Review	Discusses how apartheid shaped journalism research and proposes a metatheory for future studies.	Provides an important historical and conceptual background for South African journalism research.
Wasserman	2010	Tabloid Journalism in South Africa	Media Content Analysis	Examines the rise of tabloid journalism and its social significance in post-apartheid South Africa.	Highlights the role of alternative media formats in journalism education and media literacy.
Loeffelholz & Quandt	2010	Journalism Theory: Developments in German-Speaking Countries	Theoretical Analysis	Discusses the evolution of journalism theory in German-speaking regions and its relevance for contemporary journalism education	Provides comparative insights into journalism education and theoretical developments that may inform curriculum adaptation.
Wahl-Jørgensen & Hanitzsch	2009	The Handbook of Journalism Studies	Comprehensive Literature Review	Provides a broad overview of journalism studies, covering historical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives.	Offers a foundational understanding of journalism education across different contexts and approaches.
Berger	2008	Toward Defining 'Potential Centres of Excellence' in African Journalism Training	Comparative Analysis	Identifies and assesses leading journalism schools in Africa under UNESCO's initiative.	Evaluates journalism education quality and the potential for African journalism schools to achieve excellence.
Banda, Beukes-Ames, Bosch, Mano, McLean & Seenveld	2007	Contextualizing Journalism Education and Training in Southern Africa	Theoretical and Policy Analysis	Explores journalism education in Southern Africa, emphasizing the need to move away from Western-oriented models.	Advocates for journalism education that reflects African contextual realities and socio-political conditions.
Botha & de Beer	2007	South African Journalism Education: Working Toward the Future by Looking Back	Historical Review	Examines the evolution of journalism education in South Africa, focusing on post-1994 changes and contemporary challenges.	Highlights transformations in journalism curricula due to political and technological advancements.
Deuze	2006	Global Journalism Education: A Conceptual Approach	Conceptual Framework Analysis	Maps key debates in journalism education across different global contexts, synthesizing research from multiple regions.	Provides a comparative perspective on journalism curricula, addressing global challenges in journalistic training.
Wasserman	2005	Journalism Education as Transformative Praxis	Critical Theoretical Analysis	Advocates for journalism education as a transformative practice integrating research, theory, and activism.	Provides a framework for socially engaged journalism education in South Africa.
Seyn & De beers	2002	Sane's 2002 South African National Journalism Skills Audit	Mixed Methods Quantitative Survey and In-depth interview	Conducted a skills audit of South African journalists to assess their reporting, writing, and accuracy abilities.	Provides critical insight into journalism skills gaps and recommendations for improved training.

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ORCID iD

Tigere Muringa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3773-4959>

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Author Biographies

Tigere Muringa is a multidisciplinary researcher specialising in media, governance, and leadership with previous teaching experience at the Durban University Technology and University of KwaZulu-Natal. His expertise spans journalism, digital media, and development communication.

Theodora Dame Adjin-Tetty is a senior lecturer in the Department of Media, Language and Communication, Durban University of Technology, South Africa. Her research interests span journalism and media studies, new media use and appropriation in diverse social and communicative contexts and climate change communication.