

### WORSTEL JOERNALISTE OM SYFERS TE ONTSYFER?

**n Gevallestudie van n steekproef Suid-Afrikaanse joernaliste se syfervaardighede**

Juanita Alida Prinsloo

Studieleier: Prof. George Claassen

Maart 2006

#### Opsomming

Meeste joernaliste erken sonder om te skroom dat hulle geensins met hulle syfervaardighede kan spog nie. Die literatuur skets ook n oorwegend donker prentjie rakende joernaliste se gebruik en dikwels misbruik van syfers. Hierdie kwessie is veral kommerwekkend in die huidige eeu wat gekenmerk word deur snelle ontwikkeling op wetenskaplike en tegnologiese gebied. Syfergeletterdheid is noodsaaklik is om sin te maak uit dié ontwikkelinge wat dikwels met behulp van syfers of wiskundige en statistiese begrippe verduidelik word. Joernaliste wat nie eenvoudige wiskundige berekeninge kan uitvoer of korrekte afleidings oor die betekenis van n betrokke syfer kan maak nie, kan hulself onbewustelik aan misleidende beriggewing skuldig maak. Hierdie kwantitatiewe studie ondersoek n steekproef Suid-Afrikaanse joernaliste se vermoë om basiese wiskundige berekeninge suksesvol uit te voer. Dit is verder ook n verkennende studie wat bepaal of faktore soos onder meer geslag, ondervinding, kwalifikasies, vlak van wiskunde opleiding, wiskunde angs en persepsie van eie syfervaardighede korrelasies met prestasie in n wiskundetoets toon. Die instrument wat gebruik is, is n wiskundetoets tesame met n vraelys van 14 biografiese- en houdingsvrae. Die resultate van hierdie studie is gebaseer op die terugvoering van 54 deelnemers van sewe publikasies. Dagblaaie, weekblaaie en streekskoerante in beide Afrikaans en Engels is in die steekproef ingesluit. Die steekproef joernaliste het verrassend goed presteer met n gemiddelde toetspunt van sowat 72%. Dit blyk dus dat joernaliste se syfervaardighede dalk nie so gebrekkig is soos aanvanklik aanvaar is nie. Die studie het ook getoon met watter berekeninge joernaliste kopkrap en veranderlikes geïdentifiseer wat daartoe kan bydra dat joernaliste soms so sukkel met syfers. Opleidingsinstansies en nuuskantore se interne opleidingsprogramme sal by die resultate van hierdie studie kan baat vind. n Groter bewustheid van die belangrikheid van syfervaardighede moet gekweek en doelbewuste pogings aangewend word om joernaliste se syfervaardighede te verbeter. Die motivering is dat die beklemtoning en bevordering van syfervaardighede in die joernalistiek tot groter noukeurigheid in beriggewing sal bydra.

#### Summary

Most journalists readily acknowledge that they cannot be proud at all of their numeracy. The literature also depicts a rather bleak scenario regarding journalists' use and often misuse of numbers. This matter raises concerns especially in the present century, characterised by a rapid development in the area of science and technology. Numeracy is essential to make sense of those developments that are frequently explained by means of numbers or mathematical and statistical concepts. Journalists who are not able to execute simple mathematical calculations or come to correct deductions on the sense of a relevant number could well unconsciously be guilty of misleading reporting. This quantitative study investigates the ability of a sample of South African journalists' ability to successfully execute basic mathematical calculations. This is also an exploratory study to determine whether factors, such as *inter alia* sex, experience, qualifications, level of mathematical training, fear of mathematics and perceptions of their own numeracy, reveal any correlations with their performance in a mathematics test. The instrument used is a mathematics test together with a questionnaire of 14 biographical and attitudinal questions. The results of this study are based on the feedback of 54 participants from seven publications. Dailies, weeklies and regional newspapers in both English and Afrikaans were included in the sample. The sample of journalists performed surprisingly well, with an average test mark of approximately 72%. It would thus appear that journalists' numeracy is perhaps not as deficient as initially accepted. The study also indicated what calculations proved problematical to journalists and variables were identified that could contribute to journalists' problems regarding numbers. The internal training programmes of training institutions and news offices could well benefit by the results of this study. A higher level of

consciousness should be inculcated regarding the importance of numeracy and deliberate efforts be made to enhance journalists' numeracy. The motivation is that the emphasis on and promotion of numeracy would contribute to more accuracy in reporting.