When I conducted research into chequebook journalism in South African television current affairs, it was an unexplored area. Following international debates on the subject, it seemed that local discourse was critical.

Three investigative current affairs programs on three different channels were examined. As they receive many story ideas from the public, I believed they would have some knowledge of the practice.

They were asked about ethical considerations around the morally ambiguous areas concerning money. Interviews with the executive producers and producers were conducted as semi-structured interviews and analysed according to thematic content.

Four homogeneous focus groups were then set up with 6-7 members in each, divided according to gender as well as living standards measure, to ascertain whether journalistic practices were in line with audience views. These responses were also analysed according to thematic content.

Ethics are important in every profession, but perhaps more so for journalists, because virtually every journalistic decision has an ethical component – from the choice of subject, who to interview and quote, which visuals to include, etc. It is incumbent upon journalists to guard ethics, but difficult as so many of the ethics are at odds with each other.

Chequebook journalism is unique in the "shalt nots" of journalism - censured by media ethicists, yet usually ignored in codes of conduct. The SPJ's code of ethics is extensive, and generally followed in democratic countries, yet disappointingly vague. It only warns journalists of sources offering information for favours,

stating that one must “avoid” bidding for news. Yet chequebook journalism contradicts every tenet of the SPJ’s code.

South Africa‘s codes are equally unclear. ICASA states only that “no payment should be made to persons involved in crime”. The Press Code of Professional Practice adds the proviso “except where … in the public interest”. (Press Code of Professional Practice, 2006)

Chequebook journalism’s alleged origins date back almost a century, when *The New York Times* paid $1000 for an exclusive interview with the wireless operator of the Titanic. (Selcraig, 1994) America’s *60 Minutes* paid Watergate criminals H.R. Haldeman and G. Gordon Liddy generously for interviews. (Heyboer, 1999) Because of competition and the race for ratings, one expert noted that it surfaced during crises, like Watergate or OJ Simpson. (Veraldi as cited in Heyboer, 1999) But according to media academic Louis Day, some journalists who refuse to pay for stories found that they’ve been frozen out of key interviews. (Day, ‘03:211)

So rampant has the practice become in America that the late iconic journalist, Walter Cronkite, once caustically suggested that broadcasters be required to note, on screen, how much they had paid for the story. (Prato, 1994) As one newspaper editor pithily remarked, “paying for news, like paying for love, tends to cast doubts on the sincerity of the transaction”. (as cited in Selcraig, 1994)

There are those who argue that information is a product similar to other goods or services they would pay for, like legal advice and circulation figures. Gregg Easterbrook, senior editor of *The New Republic*, sees it in terms of intellectual

property. While that may be a minority view, media academic Robert Boynton (2008) notes that there is always some currency attached to journalism, whether emotional, ideological or financial.

In South Africa, there has only really been one incident that has raised eyebrows. In 1988, Barend Strydom, a member of the racist group "Wit Wolve", went on a killing spree in Pretoria, shooting any black person in his line of fire. By the time he was arrested, he had killed 8 people and wounded many others.

When released from prison a few years later, a weekly newspaper paid him R20,000 for an interview – a large amount at that time.

The erstwhile Media Council's code of conduct stipulated that journalists were not to pay criminals, and a complaint was laid. The newspaper appealed against the finding and won, as Strydom was not involved in criminal activity **at the time** of the payment. (Roelofse, 1993:88) ICASA has subsequently amended that clause to include "people who have been engaged in crime".

Media academics noted that it was about what one could get away with, concluding that the newspaper's actions were technically correct, but irresponsible and ultimately unethical.

The exchange of money has the potential to compromise the truth in several other ways. Paying for videotape, location fees, and the suggestion of audience reaction to a story, could all have the same effect.

Interviews with the executive producers revealed a deep awareness of the potential negative consequences of purchasing stories. They confirmed that chequebook journalism is not acceptable on their respective programs.

But there were two incidents of paying primary sources on the part of one journalist. She rationalised her decisions, saying both stories were in the public interest. The executive producer ostensibly knew nothing about these events, and was disconcerted, then admitted that some of the footage had appeared staged. The producer felt that as the subjects would not speak without payment, her choice was to tell an unbalanced story, or pay to get the complete picture.

Nevertheless, it was clear this was not normal operating procedure at this program, or at the others.

Two instances of videotape purchase from questionable sources came to light – one source in particular stood to gain much more than a per minute fee for the footage. The producers involved looked long and hard at the predicament, finally making the decision to pay as the footage in both cases revealed iniquities within state institutions.

The same footage was offered to one of the other programs, who refused to pay for it. But the purchasing program felt that, had they not bought the footage, it would have been sold to overseas networks, and stories that were very much in the South African realm would have been removed from our public sphere.

There was another story produced about a drug lord, who, upon leaving prison, publicly proclaimed his life rehabilitated and free of drugs. The crew moved into

his home to document his life “on the outside”. Aware they needed to contribute to costs, they agreed on a “location fee” to be paid after the shoot.

However, the drug lord’s wife continually approached the producer for money for electricity and food, which was doled out in R50 and R100 notes. The crew soon discovered that their rehabilitated subject actually had a long standing drug habit, and were anxious that they were funding it. Their decision was to leave and tell the story as accurately as possible, though they did not mention their concerns.

There is a custom practiced by one program which broadcasts only to subscribers. Producers, presenters and the executive producer all readily admit that when a subject is reluctant to appear on camera, they suggest that the audience may react in a very generous manner, though they always hasten to qualify it by saying “maybe” and “sometimes”.

The truth is some participants’ lives have been changed tremendously after being on this program. They’ve had homes bought for them, medical equipment donated, expenses paid. The return for reaching the audience emotionally is far greater than being paid by any producer. The risk of exaggeration and manipulation is high.

But even when there is no payment forthcoming, one journalist is adamant that “we don’t give nothing”. When experts appears on camera, they are being acknowledged independently, and subjects are likewise rewarded by having their lives validated by “good and ethical attention being paid to them”. (R. Landman, 2008)

Almost all journalists interviewed eventually concluded that anything paid for should be revealed to the public.

Amongst the focus groups, it emerged that the only common element was general distrust and suspicion of the media.

In each group, two camps immediately developed - those who felt that paying for a story contaminates the information; and those who saw information as a commodity.

However, the prevailing attitude was “no one’s going to venture any information for nothing”. The views in the upper LSMs were generally cynical and jaded.

The lower LSM groups felt that it is essential to pay, believing that the truth would not be forthcoming unless money was. When asked if they were not concerned that information would be withheld in the hopes of a second payment, the response was one of indignation. “You cannot pay someone fully and get half a story.” (Timon)

All groups generally believed that television and print actuality was paid for, and were surprised to hear that was not the case.

Overall, there was no distinction made between paying for stories, and paying for videotape. Some felt that a story could be completely fabricated, while others noted that videotape could easily be manipulated.

The upper LSM men and women, and lower LSM women unanimously felt that any payments should be revealed to the public, while the lower LSM men all believed payment should not be disclosed, believing no one would find out.

In conclusion, perhaps South Africa has been protected by its distance or relative lack of competition. While it appears there are a few areas that have the potential to obscure the truth, these journalists perceive the public interest as the only excuse for veering from acceptable norms.

The audience and journalists concurred about the need for transparency. But while journalists have lofty ideals about their profession, the viewing public is largely unaware of the normal functioning of the media, and describe journalists as biased, lazy and sensational.

The reality of journalism as practiced in the three television current affairs programs is high, certainly much higher than the focus groups perceive it to be and thus **not** in line with audience views.

Journalists perhaps need to reflect back to their responsibility to be accountable, encourage dialogue about methods used and educate the public about the process of journalism.

However, as flawed as journalism is, there was nonetheless a sense amongst audiences that it is important, and is increasingly functioning in the areas in which the police and government have failed to deliver.