Revisiting South African Journalism Education in the Post-apartheid Era

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As elsewhere in the world (Frölich & Holtz-Bacha, 2003; Murray & Moore, 2003), journalism in South Africa is still, after decades, trying to find its niche within the university scholarly environment. Since the turn to democracy in 2004, journalism and journalism education have experienced profound changes. Technologically, reporting has moved from a position where conventional printed media, radio and television dominated, to a landscape where the internet and satellite technology enabled all those with access to the internet to be a 'journalist' of sorts. The political landscape transformed almost beyond recognition, and so did the need for a new approach to journalism education. The Cold War ended, Communism was no longer a threat to the West and South Africa moved into the continent to re-discover its African roots.

Changes in society and concurrently in journalism as implied new needs and challenges in the way prospective journalists should be prepared for the future. Now, more than a decade after South Africa's socio-political metamorphosis, it is has become imperative to consider the scope and significance of the changes that had occurred in the field of journalism and journalism education, but more importantly to identify – and rectify – weaknesses that are a natural consequence of any process of rapid transformation.

Journalism schools

In South Africa, degree and diploma courses in journalism are currently taught at three universities and six 'universities of technology' (Diederichs, 2005:9). The first faltering steps in journalism education at university level were taken in 1959 when the first department of journalism was founded at the Afrikaans language Potchefstroom University (PU), now the Potchefstroom campus of the University of North West – UNW (De Beer, 2006; also see De Beer & Tomaselli, 2000 for a comprehensive discussion). PU decided to follow the Dutch and German routes of *perswetenschap* and *zeitungwisschenschaft,* but without the research rigor that these traditions would bring to their countries of origin. In the 1970s the Afrikaans universities of Orange Free State (UOFS - now the University of the Free State) and Rand Afrikaans University (now the Johannesburg University) established their departments of communication. At the same time, communication departments were founded at the historically black universities of Fort Hare, Zululand, and Bophuthatswana (now part of the UNW). All of these departments, together with the department of communication at the University of South Africa (also founded in the 1970s), offered journalism as part of their communication programmes.

In the early 1980's, a graduate journalism department, based on the Columbia University model was set up (at that time, an Afrikaans speaking) Stellenbosch

University (SU). Journalism departments were also established at the technikons (since 2005 Universities of Technology) at Pretoria, Durban, and Cape Peninsula.

Due to perhaps an elitist academic view of journalism as something 'the study and research of which do not belong at universities', English language tertiary academic institutions took somewhat longer to initiate journalism programs (De Beer, 2006). The first to follow the trend were Rhodes University and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where a graduate program in cultural and media studies was founded in 1985. The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) joined the South African journalism education community only in the early 2000s.

Prior to democratisation in 1994, politics and journalism education in South Africa were very much interconnected (Wasserman, 2005). Because of divergent political positions vis-à-vis the apartheid dispensation, this often led to ideological disparity between academic departments and scholarship. These academic-political positions ranged from descriptive 'administrative' studies and 'ivory tower idealism' to praxis relationships between academe and working class/black organisations (De Beer & Tomaselli, 2000:10; De Beer, 1995; Krabill, 2004:356).

Changing society

Many of the structural problems inherent to the previous political dispensation fell away with democratisation. But, both journalism and journalism education were faced with the new bouquet of questions and challenges in the form of: affirmative action, black empowerment and other forms of demographic transformation (i.e. a new socio-economic scale of 'blackness' based on real and perceived 'disadvantagement' of groups, ranging from 'black African', 'coloured' and 'Indian'; the trend towards 'trivia and tripe' rather than stories reflecting transformation in the country; ethical scandals, such as plagiarism, limited indigenous language provision and media diversity; a lack of developmental involvement in issues such as HIV-Aids, housing, unemployment, and poverty; and moreover, a democratic media dispensation that was reduced to binary choice between being either an independent voice, or being supportive of government efforts to reconstruction and nation building (see Berger, 2005:2).

More than ever before journalism education itself got caught between industry's demands for ready-made cogs to fit into the existing profit-driven media system and the need to reinvent much of journalism in the interest of larger societal issues (Berger, 2005:2). The present-day dilemmas of journalism educators are compounded by a lack of resources, unrealistic workloads, and the inability of the majority of teachers to speak an indigenous language. Most of these university teachers were brought up and trained within a European (read critical) or American (read liberal-democratic) paradigm. Now they have to try to understand and teach from an African perspective, while at the same time being greatly denied governmental research funding in terms of the policy of Affirmative Action.

Issues

During a series of conferences and colloquia held by the South African National Editor's Forum (Sanef) and other institutions since the turn of the century, a number of issues came to the fore, apart from those mentioned above, the key of which is the issue of race *per se* – both in terms of the education of students and its manifestation in the transformed/transforming media industry. This necessarily impacts on the design of curricula.

Race

Journalism studies in South Africa is still largely based on the Western world view, with its focus on individualism, cause and effect, and measurable and observable evidence (Fourie, 2005). This paradigm does not allow for the innate spirituality of Africa's various cultures and ethics.

It has recently more and more argued that in order to redress this ostensible iniquity, the notion of *ubuntu* as an African worldview and life orientation could be taken as a point of departure (Christians, 2004; Nussbaum, 2003). *Ubuntu* can be understood as a shared humanity, an aspect of communitarianism, and humane behaviour towards others (Rabe, 2005:23). It is also referred to as 'Afro-humanism' , which includes 'sympathy, care, sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience and kindness' (Chikanda, as cited in Prinsloo, 1998:42). New programs for the education and training of journalists in South Africa could therefore embrace these Afro-centric, Afro-humanistic values in order to promote African liberatory journalism (Rabe, 2005:23). While being a commendable ideal, it raises perplexing questions of how educators working from a libertarian, Western background – both in terms of culture and newsroom practice – will manage to align the philosophies of African *ubuntu* and Western the notions of 'objectivity' let alone the individualistic drive for personal freedom and attainment, as well as a market-driven economy vis-à-vis the collective nature of ubuntu.

A possible approach to the refocusing of journalism from an Afro-humanist perspective could entail the establishment of African epistemology as the intellectual foundation South African journalism studies, as proposed by Fourie (2005). This would imply an academic shift towards African history, philosophy, symbolic forms, cultures, achievements and needs, as well as a 'decolonising of the mind' (Maluleke, 2005; Mangu, 2005), and the questioning of the existing Western journalistic world view.

Afro-humanism might therefore become central to a new understanding of the fundamental journalistic principles contained in normative media theory and ethics. Issues that would have to be addressed would include the question of how concepts such as freedom of expression, public, publicity, representation, objectivity, news values, newsworthiness and ethics be reinterpreted in terms of *ubuntuism*? (Fourie, 2005). Also, how can these interpretations be implemented to form, the foundation of African-conceptualised media and journalistic practices? This 'decolonising of the

mind' would entail an intellectual exercise through which both educators and their students would need to reconsider their own world-and-life view, which might in the end be a enriching – even liberating – experience, but still is nowhere near its implementation stage.

The danger of this approach, of course, is that the majority of journalism teachers are still white (Berger, 2005:2) and that it would once again be a question of Euro-Africans trying 'to get to the bottom of African's hearts' (Sesanti, 2005:8). Despite their most valiant intentions, they are, in the present situation, almost set up to fail.

Also, in terms of demographic profile Some of the South African journalism schools are hampered by their inability to accept the correct black/white quota of students. For example, at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, a predominantly African region, the majority of applicants are still white, and therefore 'do not meet the requirements that we, as educators, look for in students that we would like to prioritise in our teaching' (Du Toit, 2005:6).

Basic skills

While the above is a worthy ideal, the biggest problems experienced by journalism educators and journalism practitioners in South Africa are in many instances much more basic. During the Sanef Skills Audit (De Beer & Steyn, 2002), a number of obstacles in journalism educations was identified..

One of the biggest challenges for journalism lecturers in South Africa today is the students' inability to write (Du Toit, 2005:6; Fisher, 2005:5). Writing is supposed to be a basic skill expected of a prospective journalist (Rabe, 2005:23). While the knee-jerk reaction would be to attribute this deficiency to the apartheid style black educational systems, the reality is that it is white students, as much as black students, who seem to be unable to write functional journalistic prose (Fisher, 2005:5). A main reason for this probably lies in the absence of a reading culture among young people of all cultures in the country.

The level of innumeracy, the general lack of knowledge of and concern for social context, and the inability to understand the significance of South Africa being part of the African continent was also noted by the Sanef audit (also see Berger, 2005:2).

The new Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, has accepted the fact that 'most people trained as journalists in South Africa probably don't work as formal journalists' and therefore their policy is that 'training should adjust accordingly' (Glenn, 2005). The centre strives to give its students 'analytical ability and skills that would enable them to change careers and flourish in the uncertain new media environment. Students might end up working in advertising, HIV-Aids education, television production, magazines, television scriptwriting, editing, sub-editing. Unlike the more traditional departments of journalism, the centre appoints

staff whose background was in novel-writing and narrative journalism in order to give more emphasis to writing and the mechanics of story as a narrative, than most traditional journalism schools do (Glenn, 2005).

This is in agreement with the approach of the School for Media, Communication and Culture at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, which does not only focus on journalism, but aim to 'equip students with more than just skills in one discipline, but rather produce graduates who are critically reflective, multi-skilled, technically proficient and possessing of a broad theoretical and contextual framework' (Wright, 2005:7).

Conversely, the Department of Journalism at the University of Stellenbosch fully focuses on journalism education and training. 'If one assumes that the outcome (of the US BPhil in Journalism) is a vocational journalism qualification, (then) students should be equipped with the basic skills and knowledge of entry-level journalism as identified according to the Sanef 2002 Audit, and it should go beyond that: namely that these skills should be practiced within an Afro-humanist *ubuntu* journalistic model' (Rabe, 2005:23). At this school too strong emphasis is therefore placed on writing practice, for as the founder of this Department, the late Afrikaans doyen of South African journalism, Piet Cillié, maintained: 'You learn to write by writing' (Cillié, 1979:4).

Occupational attitude

An increasing group of journalism students, probably the same as students in other faculties, exhibit an alarming attitude of entitlement, aspiration for personal celebrity status, wealth and consumerism. While many students 20 years ago studied journalism to be able to 'fight apartheid', or make 'the world a better place', students today generally enter the field in search of the 'fame' it might bring (Christie, 2005:14). Journalism is no longer seen as a passion, but more and more as just another job – a way to find the road to a 'better life'.

Young journalists become people driven by pay cheques or the possibility of a BMW in the drive-way of an up-market home (see Thloloe, 2005:11). Consequently, according to Wright (2005:7), 'journalism students attracted to journalism are often not the ideal candidates. They are drawn by the perception that 'anyone can write' and the idea that being a journalist brings with it special rights and privileges.

The flip-side of this argument is that collectively, South African journalism schools are producing far too many graduates, and that the market is unable to absorb the hundreds of new journalists that are churned out every year (Fisher, 2005:5). '[A]re we creating a situation where, more and ore, out of desperation to gain experience and to earn some money, young journalists are forced to work for almost nothing?' Fisher (2005:5), a lecturer at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) argues that the number of inexperienced journalists that are sent out into the field

provide media owners with a source of cheap labour, which enables them to get rid of people with more experience.

Journalism education and industry

Problems in journalism education translate to even bigger problems in the media industry. The lack of the 'right' people enrolling for journalism training obviously impact upon the ability of academic institutions to supply enough skilled graduates to satisfy the industry's demand, especially for skilled African journalists. A major South African television broadcaster *etv*, alarmed by the scarcity of skilled journalists, is sixteen years after the advent of democracy 'desperately searching for indigenous African journalism staff' (Thloloe, 2005:11).

The challenges set by the media industry do not end with the growing demand for appropriately skilled journalists from the correct cultural background. The stakes are raised even further by a growing demand of different media genres who all dip into the same pool of graduates. Journalism schools no longer have to cater only for the needs of the traditional print, radio and television media, but must increasingly provide graduates skilled in writing and producing for all the variants of these media, plus additionally the growing range of new media, such as the internet.

For example, the 'sensationalist' tabloid as the 'bastard offspring' of the traditional print media, and despite its poor reputation among champions of the 'old school' of 'quality journalism', is rapidly gaining popularity in segments of the population who previously had no interest in reading newspapers. For instance the lower-market tabloid *Daily Sun* has attained a circulation of 400 000 in record time, compared to the influential up-market analytical *Mail & Guardian*, with a circulation of not yet 40 000 (Joseph, 2005:31). Despite adhering to news values and news practices frowned upon by many traditionalists, there is an obvious need for the new kind of lower-market journalism and therefore student journalists should have to be trained in this genre as well.

Likewise, the internet has already brought massive changes in the media landscape (Loeffelholz & Quandt, 2005). Journalists in all spheres of the media use the internet for research as well as for interpersonal communication, but at the same time, various new forms of 'online journalism' is emerging. This poses new challenges to journalism schools in terms of the adaptation of curricula, as well as in both the acquisition of new skills and the transfer of these skills to students.

Conclusion

This overview only touches on some of the salient issues now prevailing in South African journalism education. Unlike in the past, when answers were mostly seek within the context of the North (read the English speaking world), the questions and answers now seem to be embedded in the folds of the continent. It might yet be another case of: *Ex Africa semper, aliquid novi.*

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