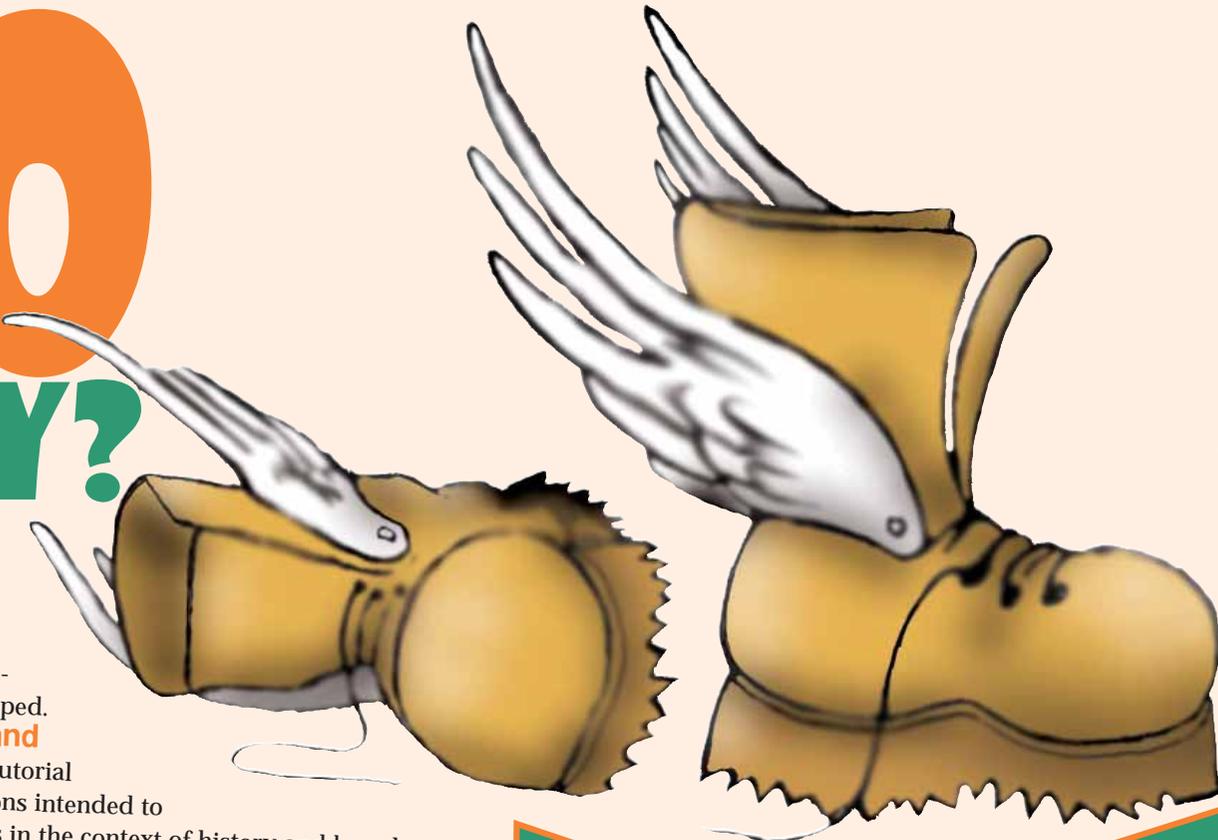


WHO ARE THEY?



The first term of first-year Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes this year included a section on the “Social history of the media”. This involved thinking about the history of literacy, print and broadcast media in the social contexts in which they developed.

In order to **encourage a sense of society and history**, students were at one point given an informal tutorial exercise in the form of a questionnaire that asked questions intended to encourage them to locate their own experiences and lives in the context of history and broader society. It asked what they remember about events and people who (for those of us who set the questionnaire at least) are recent history – the fall of the **Berlin Wall**, the release from prison of **Nelson Mandela**, the 1991 **Gulf War**, the 1994 **election**, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and PW Botha.

It posed questions related to their use of media and technology: when did they first use a computer? The Internet? Have they ever used a typewriter? Sent or received a telegram? Used a thesaurus? **Do they own a dictionary? An atlas?** Do they remember dialling telephones? Telephone party lines? Cassette tapes? Long-playing records? Floppy discs? When did they get their cellphones? Did they belong to libraries as children? What do they read?

The responses encouraged us to think about who our students are. We knew that our undergraduates are likely to be in their late teens or early 20s but **we hadn't entirely thought through the implications of our average first-year journalism student having been born in 1984**. They've never known a South Africa without television or ATM cards. They don't really remember apartheid. They were in pre-school when the Berlin Wall came down and in grade one when Mandela was released from prison. They vaguely remember the 1994 election and were too young to vote in 1999. They were 10 years old when cellphones first appeared in this country.

What do they remember? The Hansie Cronje trial. Princess Diana's death. Nkosi Johnson. Monica Lewinsky. Mad Cow Disease. Mark Shuttleworth's space trip. The 1999 Cricket World Cup. **Interestingly, a number mention Chris Hani's assassination in 1993.**

Some responses on PW Botha: “Studied him in high school history, don't actually remember him.” “Was it his wife who was murdered?” “Key player in apartheid.” “I don't know much about him.” “Who is he?” “Internal Affairs Minister?” “Once a president of SA.” “Was he the one called Pik?” “Don't know who he is.” “One of Pieter-Dirk Uys' characters.” “Racist.” “He has a house near Wilderness.” “I know he was big, bald and had affairs.” **“Seem to remember him being part of the apartheid thing.”** “Matric history.” “Didn't he wag his finger a lot?” “I remember that my family opposed him.” “Vaguely. I was young.” “A man my mother called names.” “He refused to go to the TRC.” “An old Afrikaans guy.” “On the old R1 coins.”

And on Ronald Reagan: **“Watergate? Or was that someone else?”** “Vietnam in the 1970s.” “Not at all.” “I remember he was shot but not killed.” “Has Alzheimer's Disease.” “Sounds familiar.” “Sorry, politics isn't my favourite subject.” “Big cars.” “No idea.”

And Margaret Thatcher: “An old lady on TV.” “The iron lady.” “She looked like a man, sort of.” “The first lady of Britain.” “Big hair.” “British something?” “An old lady with **a really bad hair-do.**” “Looked like my gran.” “Remember her from Adrian Mole.” “She's in Austin Powers.”

These responses are not, of course, an adequate reflection of who our students are or what they do and do not know. Also, the memories of a person born in 1984 about the release of the Rivonia trialists, for example, are going to be as vague as those of someone born in 1958 of the actual trial.

Older people have always been concerned about what “young people today” do not know but the impressions we gained from this exercise do relate to some of Steve



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Wrottesley's concerns about the **inadequate “general knowledge” of trainee journalists**. It is clear that aspirant journalists need a grounding in fields such as history, sociology, economics and literature. The few students who were able to make notes of some substance on our (arguably arbitrary) questions relating to late 20th Century events and people, had school history as their source. Only three students (out of more than 200) **referred to their reading of books** other than school textbooks as a source of knowledge.

This is where debates about the value of reading more than prescribed textbooks become relevant. Jonathan Franzen, in his essay *The Reader in Exile*, considers the limitations of a generation who have been socialised by electronic media and are **“estranged from spoken and written language”**.

It appears that most of our first-year students were introduced to computers and the Internet at primary school. Almost all have cellular phones. Less than half belonged to libraries as children. Some theorists, such as Nicholas Negroponte, who is the director of the Media Lab at MIT, have suggested that **we are too concerned about the demise of reading**. In *Being Digital*, a collection of his monthly columns in *Wired*, he says that we now live in a world in which young people can compete in a space where “the pursuit of intellectual achievement will not be tilted so much in favour of the bookworm”.

However, while wary of elitism and over-generalisations about “today's young people”, I remain persuaded that **literature is a source of knowledge, insight, self-consciousness and an ability to interpret the past and the present**. And the question from the professor to the perplexed student in JM Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* remains important: “Do you have any literary passions?”

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by Carol Christie