

Clickety Click!

Meeting the challenges of writing

Technology has changed our world forever. The internet has liberated information, the use of mobile telephony is rocketing, we're showered with powerful gadgets with ever-increasing capacities to record and share information. This exploding world is accompanied by complex cultural, legal and political issues.

But are our media keeping pace with these changes and challenges? Or is it as bleak as Jon Katz, an American media critic and author, says: "Technology is the biggest story in the world... there is no bigger story, no single story that more directly affects the young (or the rest of the planet) and no story more poorly or sporadically covered by journalism."

Of course, there are simple ways of telling complex stories. But the arguable state of ICT (information and communication technology) reporting in Africa shows that many journalists keep missing this moving target. ICT journalism is much more than just a specialist beat about technology. It is a story so intricate and vast that it affects every aspect of our lives. It is about development, economics, governance and, perhaps most importantly, democracy.

As Guy Berger, head of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University says, "African journalists understand the role of media in promoting democracy,

but don't fully appreciate that there is an equivalent in promoting ICT use, and convivial policy environments."

After all, ICTs allow citizens to access information – and give them opportunities to make their voices heard.

"ICT policies can play a key role in providing opportunities and empowering those who are marginalised," writes Claire Sibthorpe, director of the Catalysing Access to ICTs in Africa project (Catia), in *From the margins to mainstream: African ICT reporting comes of age*. "ICT policies and regulations being developed and implemented across Africa are impacting on its citizens and it is critical that media are engaged in promoting awareness and debate of the issues."

Because it is media that empower citizens to operate their rights in a society, critical and independent coverage is essential. But, broadly speaking, coverage of ICT issues is limited, too technical or from a single point of view. "You either don't get much coverage, or you get technical coverage, or business coverage," says Berger. "But this is a field that

The Judges and Journalists Project is trying to improve the delicate relationship between these two parties. It is not an easy task.

Judges are bewildered by the attitude of editors towards themselves and their work.

This became apparent at a ground-breaking meeting of representatives of these two groups late in 2005. Locked together behind closed doors in a mountain venue for two days, judges told the editors how much they depended on them and their media to convey what the courts were doing. But they were aghast at both the low quantity and poor quality of coverage the editors gave them.

Don't you get it, they were asking. We need you now, and you will need us at key moments to defend your freedom. Surely it is in our mutual self-interest to ensure coverage of the courts is thorough, rigorous and extensive? That was the only way that citizens would come to understand the special nature of a constitutional democracy, and the crucial role of the Constitutional Court in particular.

If that was not appreciated, democracy was in trouble. And it could only happen with

the appropriate understanding between judges and journalists, it was argued.

The meeting, organised by Wits Journalism and the Wits Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS), was the kick-off for a long-term project to examine and improve the working understanding between these two groups. It had begun when, some months earlier, the then Chief Justice Arthur Chaskalson expressed concern at how poor and sporadic was coverage of the Constitutional Court and its important decisions.

The new court had gone out of its way to change the way they related to both the public and the media. Their new building on Constitutional Hill was designed as a welcoming interface with the public, rather than the traditionally imposing and intimidating court buildings of the previous era.

Judges were writing summaries of their rulings in plain language and making these available on their website at the same time as release of their full rulings. At least some

Judges a

members of the Bench made themselves more available to explain matters and provide background to journalists grappling with their complex procedures and decisions.

They had even allowed SABC TV into their courts for a month of trial coverage, only to find that that little use was made of the opportunity and it only provided TV news with pictures of judges filing in and out of court that could be used for months thereafter (even when the judges changed, were ill or absent).

They felt that editors were letting the side down. Junior and inexperienced people were assigned to cover important and complex cases, and the reports were often sensational and plainly wrong. The media were just not

impacts on social life, politics and policy, health, economy and democracy.”

Other criticism leveled at coverage is that a lot of ICT journalism simply covers the news of the day – which is dictated by corporate agendas and marketing. Alastair Otter, editor of Tectonic, a website dedicated to technology, says: “I don’t believe that ICT journalism in South Africa is anywhere near as good as it could be ... We don’t have an industry that exposes wrongdoing in the ICT sector with regularity.”

about technology

by Anne Taylor

To do the job, journalists need to be well informed about all aspects of the story – not just knowing the difference between kilobytes and kilobits (size versus speed), but also issues around policy, legislation and regulation – and how these relate to consumers and citizens. Journalists need to be willing to learn and to spend time researching a topic, says Duncan McLeod, associate editor at the Financial Mail. “Even in an interview situation you need to be able to admit that you don’t have a full understanding.”

Passion and interest are essential too. “I would go so far as to say that if you’re not interested in it, you shouldn’t be covering it,” says McLeod. But it’s not just individual journalists who should take the blame. Editors and publishers can be shortsighted in how they handle technology stories too. “ICT journalism is very often marginalised in mainstream publications,” says Otter. “It is seen as the domain of a handful of ‘geeky’ writers with no real impact on the broader world.”

Otter maintains it is also the beat assigned to more junior writers as it is often perceived to be easier than others in business-focused publications. “With exceptions, of course. But where it is taken seriously, it is very often not because of an interest in technology but rather the business behind technology.”

The perception that ICT journalists are younger and less experienced has a negative impact on the industry as a whole. And this situation is not helped by the “geeks” and other technically trained people who enter journalism because of an interest in technology. And while their background is helpful, they don’t have the training to write

– especially news.

“You can’t avoid becoming a geek when you cover the beat. Unfortunately, many tech journos start out as geeks and never get the kind of rigorous journalism grounding that many retreaded news journos get,” says Toby Shapshak, a previous winner of the Telkom ICT Journalist of the Year and currently a columnist for The Times. “Very often a business or general news reporter ends up covering a specialised beat and they tend to unquestionably accept what they are told by tech or telecoms companies.” Apart from not having a solid grip on the technical stuff, there’s also a limited approach to understanding the impact of the story.

What is glaring to an ICT journalist is how frequently people get their facts wrong, says Shapshak. “Blindly accepting anything told to you by any source – even if they are the world’s largest maker of software or cellphones or iPods or plasma

TVs – is bad journalism. All claims must be checked and verified. If someone claims they have the ‘world’s first’ whatever, many general reporters blindly accept that as true. It may well be, but it has to be verified. That is our job as journalists.”

Berger believes ICT journalism in South Africa is “too silo-specific” and fails to make links to ICTs and communications more broadly. “Telecoms is one beat, media is another – but what happens when they coincide or have mega-implications for each other?” he asks. “Some journalism is gadget-style PR, without any critical reflection. A lot lacks the ease of understanding that you would find in [US technology writer] Dan Gilmore’s work, or in the Financial Times. The coverage of government policy is weak – driven one-sidedly by industry perspectives, with little consideration of consumer or development issues.”

But this boils down to a lack of skills in the industry, with coverage only being as strong as the reporter’s skills set. “When it comes to mainstream media without a specific technology focus there is very often a simple acceptance of technology news issued by the larger and more dominant ICT players in the country. So, for example, when vendor XYZ says that software piracy is costing the country so many billions of rands every year, writers simply accept this as true and publish it.”

In this way, PR spin enters the public domain and becomes fact. Interrogation and intelligent reporting can reveal a more accurate, discerning picture for consumers. Has anyone stopped and asked how piracy costs the country?

Otter believes that ICT can play a positive role. His

About Clict

The Clict ICT journalism course will be offered as a series of Rhodes-accredited short courses. They will be run entirely online. The aim of the courses will be to provide journalists with the skills and knowledge to effectively cover ICT issues in the South African and African context. Writing and editing will be an essential part of every course. For more information, email Anne Taylor at a.taylor@ru.ac.za

website is largely dedicated to highlighting information around the open source movement: “I don’t write from a truly objective point of view. I write from a belief that free and open source software and greater and more affordable access to technology is key to improving the country as a whole. By covering technology that many other publications don’t, we add to the debate around technology.”

That debate can only be made richer by a wider variety of voices – and this includes women. It should be noted that the 2006 Telkom ICT Journalist of the Year awards recognised 14 women out of a total of 19 citations. Nafisa Akabor, a runner-up in the citizen/community journalist category of the awards, says she believes school learners should be given more information on ICT journalism as a career choice. “I feel that women should also be encouraged,” she says.

In an attempt to assist in broadening ICT journalism, Rhodes University is planning to offer accredited training for ICT journalists. Known as the Centre for Learning Information and Communication Technologies (Clict), the courses aim to educate and train journalists in both the use and coverage of ICTs. It will draw on the resources and knowledge of the Highway Africa Conference, the Highway Africa News Agency and the vocational training courses run throughout the year by the School of Journalism and Media Studies. A much-desired by-product of this process will be the creation of a knowledge resource for journalists that will be interactive and participatory. The courses will act as a critical introduction to new media, but will have writing and storytelling as core focuses as these are the areas identified by industry players as needing the most attention.

After all, the ICT arena is only getting bigger. And, as McLeod points out, there are enormous opportunities for people interested in writing about technology. “With the increasing take-up of broadband in South Africa, the web is becoming a huge publishing medium.”

nd journos

by Anton Harber

seeing the importance of the courts, and not even realising their self-interest in ensuring there was proper public appreciation for this body.

Editors started the meeting by shrugging their shoulders. None of them defended their coverage, but many spoke of under-resourced newsrooms, junior journalists and market conditions which made it difficult for them to cover the courts properly.

Even the best-resourced editors said this, causing some scepticism and even hilarity among the judges. The journalists also complained that judges were bad communicators and unhelpful, even hostile, to them, and much more could be done – particularly in the lower courts – to make the work of reporters more manageable. Courts in other jurisdictions sometimes had information officers – people whose job was to actively promote public awareness of their work. Though

this was unlikely to happen in our country for some time, judges could be more understanding of and helpful towards the challenges journalists were facing.

After two days of talking, the mood changed somewhat. Most editors ended the meeting by acknowledging that something had to be done about media coverage of courts and the law, and pledging to put more resources and care into improving it. But, if truth be told, they went away and little changed.

This led to the second phase of the project – a range of long-term activities to encourage implementation. Firstly, the Ismail Mahomed scholarships – named for the former Chief Justice, a great defender of media freedom – were used to attract law graduates into journalism. The response was surprising: a flood of lawyers and legal students applied, and three are now doing the Journalism Honours programme at Wits. They are all doing research into media coverage of the law, and it is hoped this will become a seed for a new generation of properly-trained, legal journalists.

All Wits’ career-entry students spend at least a week doing practical court coverage and awards are given out for the best material produced in that week.

Secondly, a handbook was commissioned for judges on

dealing with the media. This follows a model used by judges in places like Britain and India, and is intended to encourage a better understanding of the workings of the media for those on the Bench. That book will be published and distributed by Juta to all judges and magistrates later this year.

Thirdly, a plan was set in place to facilitate more exchanges between judges and journalists at a local level. This has, however, proven a tough task that will take some time to implement.

The key question this raises is what the appropriate relationship is between judges and journalists. Clearly, they cannot be too close to each other, as both need also to keep an eye on the other. A better understanding of how each other work, and the constraints they face, would help, but one also has to guard against compromising the fact that they had to be distant enough to be free to protect or criticise each other.

And that is why the conference was called the “Two Pillars” conference – picturing these two bodies as two of the essential pillars holding up the edifice of democracy, separate but parallel, standing independently, but ineffectual without the other.

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