

Teaching conflict- sensitive journalism

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We expect court reporters to know something about the law, financial journalists to have a grounding in economics, and parliamentary correspondents to understand politics, but many journalists are ill-equipped handle social phenomenon that is ubiquitous to most beats – conflict.

This is the frustration expressed by the author of a 2010 Unesco-commissioned conflict sensitive reporting curriculum, Ross Howard¹ in his introduction to *Conflict-Sensitive Reporting: State of the Art – A Course for Journalists and Journalism Educators*.

Howard, observes that: “Conflict is a curious blind spot in journalism education and training.” He takes this point further: “Traditional journalism skills development has not included the study of how best to cover violent conflict, and has ignored any understanding of violent conflict as a social process.

“Other subjects demand that journalists have knowledge and expertise and experience... But the dynamics of violent conflict, its instigation, development and resolution are not much understood by most journalists nor proficiently reported on.”

Howard is by no means alone. His views are supported by a host of writers who have focused their attention on the journalist’s potential to either mitigate or exacerbate social conflict.

These writers make up a particularly fractious bunch² whose perspectives on the journalist’s role in conflict can be plotted on an axis ranging from a total commitment to detachment and objectivity, through a point informed by a deliberate commitment to promoting peace and ending with a journalism of attachment that promotes a particular solution for a particular party.

Regardless of where they stand on this axis, most of these writers agree that an introduction to some of the core concepts and analytical tools from the interdisciplinary field of peace and conflict studies could dramatically enhance the journalist’s ability to report on conflict.



It’s also clear that the earlier journalists are introduced to these concepts and tools the better. It may take several years – these days seldom enough – before a journalist is deemed ready to be assigned to highly specialised beat, but the odds are a hard news reporter will be covering a conflict (not necessarily violent) within his or her first month on the job. News is about change and change seldom happens without conflict.

The above would suggest that all journalists should start their careers with a basic understanding of conflict, while those expecting to be at the forefront of change would benefit from a more extensive introduction to the field. It would thus make sense to introduce some of these concepts into a basic journalism curriculum and to offer a more advanced elective to students anticipating careers that involve covering social upheavals at local, national and international levels.

What follows is a sample of concepts that might be introduced into a journalism curriculum to prepare graduates to do more than provide a shallow disservice to people living in conflict affected communities.

Conflict is a process, not an event – the tendency to equate conflict with violence results in conflicts

being ignored until they reach a point where they become severely disruptive. The result is a misleading picture that seldom goes beyond the behaviour (violent acts) of parties to explore the underlying causes. Important stories can be missed because journalists are not tracking social processes as they develop. Violent outbreaks often catch journalists, the public and political leaders by surprise. A deeper understanding of the dynamics of conflict should help journalists to anticipate these outbreaks and report on them before they erupt.

How we frame conflict shapes the way we think about it – conflicts are often treated as competitive events that will inevitably conclude with winners and losers; a tug-of-war in which gains by one side imply concomitant losses by the other. Journalists who frame conflicts in this way are likely to miss important angles and opportunities for exploring the different alternatives that might be available to parties. The recognition that conflicts can be approached cooperatively opens up a whole new line of questioning for journalists and which can provide audiences with a richer and more comprehensive picture of the range of possibility.

There are seldom two sides to any conflict – the concept of balance is normally taken to suggest that



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Gender in media education audit

Pat Made

The Audit of Gender in Media Education and Training in Southern Africa presents some preliminary findings on gender in media education and journalism training in the entry level and postgraduate media and journalism training programmes offered at 23 tertiary institutions in 12 Southern African countries.

The research was conducted in 2009 by Gender Links through the Gender and Media Diversity Centre (GMDC). During the period of October 2009 to February 2010, researchers interviewed 305 people across Southern Africa – 58 staff members and 233 students. Of these, 31 staff members and 126 students were women.

The key findings of the audit:

- There are very few institutions with policies or other special measures to achieve gender equality; exceptions are the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania which has a policy on gender equity and on mainstreaming gender in teaching, curriculum development and research, and Midlands State University in Zimbabwe, which has a draft gender policy.
- Males comprise the majority of the academic staff at these institutions (60%), while females predominate as students (57%).
- Sixty-two percent of the respondents said that gender is not considered in curriculum policies and processes at institutional or departmental level.
- Media and journalism students receive very little theoretical grounding in gender. Few institutions, except for the University of Namibia and Midlands State University in Zimbabwe offer core courses on gender, or gender and the media. Gender-specific modules have been developed at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Dar es Salaam and at the University of Zambia. There is evidence of the incorporation of gender into some course content. But the attention given to gender is dependent upon lecturers' own knowledge and commitment. However, there is a fair degree of gender awareness among staff.
- Both male and female students acknowledged the importance of gender in media education and journalism training. Male students indicated that their misconceptions had been changed in courses where gender had been incorporated, while female students noted that gender education tended to build their confidence.
- The wealth of gender and media literature, research and training materials that has been published internationally and within the Southern African region is missing from the prescribed texts, readings and course materials.
- While there are examples of theses and special projects on gender and media issues, as well as projects on women's representation and gender stereotypes, gender and the media has not become an area of academic research and scholarship among lecturers.
- While the audit found commitment among lecturers and students to the mainstreaming of gender in media education there is no comprehensive policy framework to embed gender in curricula.

parties on both sides of a conflict are fairly represented. It's a noble goal, but this way of thinking belies the fact that parties are seldom, if ever, monolithic. Conflicting groups may appear to be cohesive units to outsiders, but a little digging and probing often reveals that this is seldom so. Groups are comprised of smaller groups and these different entities will have their own nuanced understandings of the origins of the conflict and their own ideas about potential solutions. By exploring these different positions a journalist will be able to represent the conflict and the views of the different protagonists more accurately. Failing to recognise that there can be multiple stakeholders involved in a conflict can lead to misrepresentations.

What they say and what they mean are often very different – most, but not all, conflicts will be marked by parties spelling out their demands in great detail. Equipped with the tools of conflict analysis a journalist will understand that these demands conceal a range of more deep seated interests and needs that must be addressed. While it may be accurate to simply relay what different parties are demanding, the journalist who does so is, to a degree, simply allowing him or herself to be used by the antagonists. Yes, journalists must report what people are demanding, but they must also go beyond that. To provide our audiences with a more accurate understanding of

what is taking place requires careful probing and asking the right questions from a range of different sources within the conflicting parties.

These are but some of the ways in which introducing journalism students to some of the core concepts from peace and conflict studies can contribute towards enhancing their understanding of conflict and their ability to report on it. But this will not be an act of kindness.

By encouraging students to develop a more sophisticated understanding of conflict we will make it much harder for them to pass off simplistic narratives as fair and accurate reporting. We will be asking them to dig deeper, to probe more, to broaden their search for answers and to accept nothing at face value. In short, we will be asking them to be better journalists.

Endnotes

1. Ross Howard teaches journalism at Langara College in Vancouver, Canada, and is president of the Media and Democracy Group. His conflict-sensitive curriculum can be found at http://gppac.net/documents/Media_book_niew/a_b_contents.htm
2. For evidence of the fractiousness of this debate see the debate on peace journalism in the journal *Conflict and Communication Online* 2007 6 (2) available at <http://www.cco.regener-online.de/>