

A volcano erupts in Iceland, spreading its ash over European skies and forcing all air travel over this area to grind to a halt. The disruption is not limited to Western Europe: hundreds of thousands of passengers are stranded worldwide, as the knock-on effect of flight disruptions wreak havoc with travel schedules globally.

News reports about the chaos abound, most of them focusing on the implications of the volcanic eruption for air travel, the economic impact on the airline industry and human interest stories of travellers scattered around the world, waiting to get home. Disappointed travellers include a contingent of South African writers destined to attend the London Book Fair. Mentioned briefly amidst the woes and homesickness of global jetsetters, was the fate of farmers in Kenya forced to dump tons of vegetables and flowers destined for markets in Europe. Thousands of Kenyan workers are laid off (Wadhams 2010).

This news event was simultaneously an international and a local story – highlighting the mobility we often take for granted, the global ramifications when that mobility is curtailed, and the often hidden accounts of how distant events affect the lives of people in localities.

Yet sending a ‘foreign’ reporter to Iceland will tell you nothing about the plight of Kenyan families now without an income, or of the anxiety of the parents of a toddler awaiting bone marrow cells prevented from being transported from Canada to the UK (Hough 2010).

Globalisation is blurring the clear distinctions between local and international news, compelling us to think of news as global instead.

Think of how the failure of banks in the US eventually led to the meltdown of markets around the world; how the outbreak of swine flu in Mexico led to a global panic, how the attacks on Manhattan on 9/11 signified the threat of terrorism that may surface anywhere; and think of climate change that marches on inexorably across the planet as a whole (cf. Berglez 2008).

These events were reported by journalists around the world not only as distant, foreign events, but as stories that touched the lives of their domestic audiences locally – yet it was precisely the interrelation between different locales that gave these stories global relevance.

Much of this experience of interconnectedness in global journalism can be attributed to the profound changes that the news industry worldwide has been undergoing as a result of the ongoing development of new media technologies.

The rise of blogging, social media and mobile media have impacted on news production, traditional business models and the very definition of what counts as journalism and journalists. Yet the global reach of these technologies does not immediately imply homogeneity in the way that professional journalists, citizen journalists/consumer-producers and audiences interact with them in different places around the world.

“Foreign’ is not elsewhere

Journalism studies can no longer afford a parochial focus, nor can it be satisfied with old notions of ‘foreign news’ as something happening elsewhere else. As Berglez (2008) argues, the challenges facing the world today are too complex to be met by a journalism that conforms to outdated dichotomies of domestic/foreign news.

Even the notion of transnational news becomes problematic because it uses the nation-state as a basis for comparison, in the face of arguments that supranational organisations or regional regimes have eroded the significance of nation-states (cf. De Beer 2010).

Journalism educators have to find ways of teaching students the interrelationship between local news events and global structures and processes. Journalism scholars have to find ways of theorising journalism in new ways that take

into account the varied and multiple ideologies, practices and institutions of journalisms around the world, yet seek interconnections and comparisons between them rather than succumb to cultural relativism.

A global perspective on journalism does not mean a glib acceptance of the myth that global cultural flows have given everyone an equal chance in the global communication stakes.

For someone losing their job in a flower factory near Kenya’s Lake Navaisha, the global interconnectedness made visible through the eruption of Mount Eyjafjallajökull arguably means more than the temporary disruption to mobility experienced by an elite global cosmopolitan class.

A critical journalism studies will therefore not simply collapse the local into the global, but will have to find new ways of critically relating the local and the global, via the national and the regional.

National media and the state

Research in South African journalism has historically largely been inward looking. As a result of the tumultuous history of the country, scholarly attention has largely been directed inward to national media and its often fractious relationship to the state.

While some university journalism departments (eg Rhodes, with its Highway Africa conference and other pan-African ventures) have succeeded in locating South African journalism within the wider continent, only tentative strides have been made towards including other countries of the Global South such as India and Brazil, or the emerging economies of Russia and China in comparative research ventures.

This while journalism in South Africa probably has more in common with Brazil or India than with Britain or the US.

Contrast, for example, the lamentations about the demise of print in the US and the UK, with the much more vibrant newspaper industry in India and South Africa; consider the parallel tensions between journalists and post-authoritarian democratic governments in Brazil and South Africa; or the ways in which online journalism in South Africa and other African countries is being “glocalised” to suit a context where mobile phones dominate.

Critical studies of journalism in the global context, viewed from the perspective of those on the margins, are important not only for those scholars and researchers located in the Global South.

The experiences of the periphery can highlight the limits of the dominant assumptions about journalism in the centre (Tomaselli 2009: 17), and so may contribute to the de-Westernising or internationalisation of media studies (Curran and Park 2000; Thussu 2009).

What issues would be addressed by a *critical* global journalism studies in South Africa? A few suggestions:

Political economy of journalism

The interconnections between complex localities, regions and transnational cultural flows make it imperative for students and scholars of journalism to understand the political economy of local journalism institutions within a transnational context.

For instance, knowledge of the historical and political circumstances surrounding the South African media’s re-entry into the global media landscape is required to understand the interpenetration (Tomaselli 2009) of media capital in multinational companies such as Naspers and Independent newspapers.

Yet global trends in conglomeration and concentration are important to understand in order to identify the countervailing pressures of this global commercial journalism market and the political repositioning of media companies locally (Wasserman 2009).

Journalism ethics

In an era where media platforms increasingly have a global reach,

journalists’ ethical obligations can no longer be understood simply in terms of local or national audiences.

The now well-known example of the Danish cartoons illustrated how what is seen as freedom of speech in a Western liberal democracy does not unproblematically translate to contexts of reception everywhere.

The global reach of media also raises dilemmas for representation, eg how audiences relate ethically to the portrayal of distant suffering (Moeller 1999; Chouliaraki 2006; Silverstone 2007).

The sometimes conflicting interpretations of central ethical concepts such as truth, human dignity, freedom and responsibility, pose challenges for the field of journalism ethics that require a global outlook, rather than an Anglo-American one masquerading as universal.

Well-meaning attempts to include examples of ethical thinking from “elsewhere”, to fit an existing theoretical framework are not good enough.

The answer does however not lie in unhelpful counter-reactions that oppose African ethics (see Banda’s 2009 reappraisal of Kasoma’s work in this regard) with ‘Western ethics’. A crude us and them opposition could stifle free expression (Tomaselli 2003, Fourie 2007) instead of opening journalism ethics up for debate.

Journalism, democracy and development

Trends in global news and communication in emerging regions (for instance the study of media in “Chindia” by Daya Thussu) and in political communication across new democracies of the ‘Third Wave’ (leading work done by Katrin Voltmer and Barbara Pfetsch) can enrich our understanding of the relationship between South African journalism and democracy in the context of the globalisation of media, from the perspective of emerging regions.

Similarly, globalisation poses new questions for thinking about development journalism. The old models of centre-periphery approaches to development are being challenged by the emergence of rising powers like China, India, Brazil, Russia, South Africa, which at first glance indicate the potential for “developing” countries to successfully navigate global markets to their advantage.

Yet internally in these countries, huge inequalities persist (South Africa and Brazil being two of the most unequal countries in the world). The Indian journalist Palagummi Sainath gives a vivid example (see <http://www.whydemocracy.net/film/34>) to illustrate how establishment journalism in the developing world buys into the Western narrative of countries like India as shining examples of liberalised trade in the global marketplace, while hiding or ignoring globalisation’s underbelly – in the same year that 512 journalists were accredited to cover a gigantic Fashion Week in India in 2006, a total of 1 520 cotton farmers committed suicide because price of cotton have been destroyed by global trade policies which include subsidies for US and EU farmers.

Yet not a single correspondent of that country’s mainstream media has a full-time beat to cover labour or poverty. What would a comparison with South Africa look like in this regard?

Audience studies

Much of the popular debate about South African journalism foregrounds issues of freedom of speech and independence from state interference. The normative insistence on structural conditions that enable citizens the right to communicate is important in the light of the country's authoritarian past. But too often this is a debate about citizens without citizens, limited to a clique of professional journalists.

"Standards" in journalism are often debated without bothering to ask audiences what they think, how they relate to journalism and how they make meaning in their interaction with journalism.

In studying the attitudes and views of the consumers of especially global journalistic genres and products, parallels between South Africa and other regions in the Global South may also be drawn to explore patterns of hybridity, contraflow and glocalisation in the way local audiences relate to global journalism.

The role of new media technologies

It would be imperative for journalism courses aimed at equipping future journalists with the skills they will need in the contemporary converged newsroom to give students as much exposure to the technical aspects of using new media technologies. But it would be short-sighted to imagine

that technical skills are all that journalists need in order to flourish in this new journalism environment.

Journalism courses that approach students as if they can continue to work as an elite, professional class will have to make way for reflection on how journalism has become a more collaborative field of practice.

This would mean the incorporation of citizen journalism into journalism courses, providing training to members of the public to contribute to their empowerment as partners in this collaboration, but also encourage students to develop new attitudes and skills they will need when working alongside citizen journalists.

On a practical level this could mean incorporating more collaborative work in teaching – making use of team work, setting up wikis for classroom discussion or collaborative journalistic pieces; encouraging students to open their work up for comment (eg by writing an assessed blog which allows comments from student peers and readers internationally); using social media such as Twitter to connect with journalists globally and disseminate their own work, etc.

This style of teaching journalism could add a global dimension to a range of taught subjects, and will also require a mindset shift of lecturers whose teaching will of necessity take on a more open and collaborative dimension when they use new media platforms to invite feedback and comments from students. This more open and collaborative approach to teaching of course also has its pitfalls, most notably for issues around privacy or confidentiality.

But a critical global journalism will have to incorporate the study of new media technologies not only on the practical, but also on a more reflective intellectual level.

Critical approaches to media globalisation will puncture

the often exaggerated and technological determinist views of the potential of new media technologies for journalism by studying the use of these technologies within the overarching structural economic conditions as well as their actual everyday use.

This would mean taking into account the enormous disparities worldwide regarding access to the Internet, for example, but also the creative ways in which people in the South appropriate and adapt technologies to suit their various socio-cultural and economic settings.

Students in the South could be encouraged to find examples of such adaptations in their everyday lives and reflect on how such practices invite different theorisations about the relation between new media and society than those dominating scholarly literature produced in the North – for example, how mobile phones are adopted in African societies (De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh and Brinkman 2009), how the web is accessed via intermediaries (Wasserman and Kabeya-Mwepu 2005) or how new technologies are combined with traditional media by social movements (Wasserman 2007).

Conclusion

The contemporary global media landscape demands a critical study of how journalism practices and institutions relate to processes of globalisation, that moves beyond older notions of communication between nation-states.

Such a study should be critical, ie based on the scrutiny of the power relations inherent upon global journalism today, as well as cultural, in that it should be informed by an ethnographic approach to the everyday practices of and relationships between journalists, citizens and institutions.

For South African scholars of journalism, the challenge lies in contextualising their own experiences of journalism against a wider, comparative background of similar contexts in the Global South. If a sustained engagement between journalism studies of the South could be achieved, real headway could be made in the internationalisation of journalism studies.

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Teaching critical global journalism