

# What is enough change?

THE THEME FOR THIS YEAR'S REVIEW IS DESCRIPTIVE OF THE TIMES WE LIVE IN. IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRY PERHAPS MORE THAN EVER. AND IN JOURNALISM EDUCATION AND TRAINING PERHAPS THE MOST. THE HEAD OF THE GRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY, **LIZETTE RABE**, WAS A MEMBER OF THE VERY FIRST CLASS IN ITS FOUNDING YEAR DURING THE LITERALLY DARK DAYS OF DEEP APARTHEID IN 1978. AFTER A CAREER OF MORE THAN 20 YEARS IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRY, SHE RETURNED AS HOD IN 2001. SHE THINKS AN "AGE OF RADICAL CHANGE" SHOULD BE THE KEY ACCORDING TO WHICH JOURNALISM AND ITS EDUCATION AND TRAINING SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD – ALWAYS.

I am putting the final touches to this piece a day after the shockwaves of the murder of South Africa's very own ET, Eugène Terre'Blanche, moved like a tsunami over the South African landscape. Looking at this morning's papers, listening to TV and radio news bulletins, checking the online news sites, some of many questions, as always, can be formulated along the lines of:

What is the role of the media?

How could we report this differently?

How can we provide more perspective, context, insight?

What are media ethics?

Especially in an age of instant gratification in which the media contributed, and contribute, to the "dumbing-down" of society in a time when it is becoming more and more complex?

In other words: what is the role of the media in a democracy which is already 15 years old but still in its infancy as a result of our, oh, so complex past?

For the purposes of this piece: which essential, conceptual, analytical skills should those – who find themselves at the daily coalface of the news desk, in a mediated world, under the omnipresence of the now 24/7 deadline of digimedia – have?

Translated: how should journalists be educated and trained to comply with a taxing career which has to "translate" and "mediate" answers when our complex society tends to overwhelm us?

It is a given that entry-level journalists today must have the practical technical skills to work in a multimedia environment. In other words, they need to know which buttons to push, and sometimes even all at the same time, for print, radio, TV and new media. Luckily, for the tech generation, this is almost like breathing, and "all" we have to do, is to teach them the necessary programmes according to which they should "do" for print, broadcast and new media.

But especially because it is so easy to "push the buttons" in a multimedia environment, the need for conceptual skills has increased. It seems thinking skills are more lacking than ever before...

And that is our challenge in journalism education and training, because we live according to a tireless deadline in an age where circulation/eyeballs/hits and the dictatorship of the profit margin are relentless.

Founded in 1978, today only the beautiful Edwardian building on Crozier Street in Stellenbosch in which the department is housed is still the same. And even that will be different when our main activities move to our new building, an annex just behind the existing building later this year.

In that very first year in 1978 the first batch of bright-eyed journalism fledglings, including current *Beeld* editor Tim du Plessis, were under the wings of Piet Cillie, founding professor



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and (really really) big name in Afrikaans journalism. He did not lecture. His classes were “news conferences”. And we of course were supposed to take down notes in shorthand and/or snelskrif. Please note, two completely different systems. And the focus was on print. Radio, and TV, the latter only a couple of years old at the time, was not “real” journalism in the eyes of that era’s newspapermen. And yes, they were newspapermen.

What has changed? On the surface: the department was founded to educate and train beginner journalists on the honours degree level only – in other words, the first postgraduate tier in the South African higher education framework.

Since then, South Africa and the media have undergone total transformation. So did our school. The honours degree, with an intake of just more than two dozen graduates of the crème de la crème of South Africa’s wanna-be journos (yes, we’re fortunate) has been complemented with a masters as well as a doctoral programme.

The department today operates along two paradigms: the journalism school in our postgraduate honours level programme with its practical, vocational education and training, and our research focus in the masters and doctoral programmes, respectively with 35 and five candidates.

The department’s honours level students have to undergo an annual assessment by the media industry in the form of a four-week internship at the end of their course. The average mark for this internship, awarded by industry, is consistently a cum laude mark for the class as a whole. These outstanding marks have been complemented by other forms of recognition, among others, Unesco’s list of the top 12 journalism schools on our continent.

But besides healthy statistics, also in terms of research output by faculty members (only three full-time), how can we answer the question at the beginning of this piece: how can journalism education and training ensure the media contribute in a positive way to our beloved country’s painfully slow birth from all kinds of oppression to real freedom?

If you look beyond the number of editors the department has contributed, the literary contributions of many alumni, and even our Niemann fellows – which role should the Stellenbosch Journalism Department play in the ongoing dramatic birth of a “new” South Africa?

How did Stellenbosch help our country to “critically contemplate” South Africa’s “story of the day” – the Latin word *diurna* from which journalism is derived?

Of course, one can literally see the change if you look at the students who enter our building. The previously-advantaged white group is now more diverse, but still not as diverse as it should be.

The department offers several bursaries, through Media24, for black Afrikaans-speaking students. And it is the proud founder of the Percy Qoboza and Aggrey Klaaste bursaries. It is still not enough, and annually the department tries to improve its diversity, despite lacking funds.

Also the curriculum is a “work in progress”. Every year

the programmes are assessed: how can we make the existing modules more relevant? For example, the Internet course has evolved from a course consisting of two foci, the technical building of a news website plus the journalistic content, to a course which now includes social media and its journalistic interface. And in all our programmes we attempt to find ways to “Africanise” our curricula.

As a whole, the graduate

vocational course has developed into an honours course in which multimedia practice and theory dovetail on a daily – hourly – basis. Our masters programme is a challenge for both the practising journalist and the more theoretically-orientated media studies student. And of course, in the DPhil our candidates really want to contribute to answering some of our country’s most pressing media questions, to contribute to the “verstehen” of media and society.

But still, how does the department answer to the needs of our country?

Luckily, whereas the department stood in the shadow of that unholy trinity three decades ago, namely the old Stellenbosch University (SU), the old Naspers and the old National Party, the surviving two, the SU and Naspers, have repositioned themselves totally to be part of a new, liberal, democratic order.

One can then also say that the old school under the hand of Piet Cillie (where he tried in vain to help us understand his understanding of nationalism, which, in fairness, was with a lower case n), has also totally transformed itself.

But is it ever enough?

In an era of radical change, what is “enough” change?

How critical and analytical should we be with regard to our own role in educating and training journalists? And in our research? Indeed, if the department itself is not critical-analytical, how can we ever succeed in delivering critical-analytical beginners in our vocational course, or formulate the critical-analytical questions for our research?

Or to come back to today’s blood-curdling, screaming headlines: what is the difference between Afrikaner nationalism and African nationalism? Or in the technicolour “rainbow nation” construct: is it only a matter of colour?

And how can Stellenbosch especially contribute to our country’s understanding of complex issues in a time of baffling complexities?

### **HOW CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL SHOULD WE BE WITH REGARD TO OUR OWN ROLE IN EDUCATING AND TRAINING JOURNALISTS? AND IN OUR RESEARCH?**