

Without a doubt journalism around the world has undergone tremendous changes in the last 20 years. Just to think that 20 years ago most of us did not have computers at home, let alone internet access. If connected, connections were slow, information, although available, often posted on rather crude looking webpages (later websites) if we even dare to compare with today's sophisticated interactive platforms. These changes are almost incomprehensible, or at least difficult to capture in a few lines. In South Africa of course, these changes are coupled with the social, political, economic and cultural change that the country as a whole has undergone since the first democratic elections in 1994. Few other disciplines (and nations) have undergone such tremendous changes in the last 20 years.

The South African news media has certainly leap-frogged in terms of technology adoption and development. Media24 is a global brand and a definite leader in the country and on the continent in terms of their around-the-clock news ventures with a clear focus on developing the business on new media platforms and many other media houses have followed. However, new business models for traditional news media ventures are yet to be developed. The news media has also come under severe scrutiny in later years, and criticism has ranged from the lack of basic skills among journalists, to failing ethical standards and the loss of experienced journalists and the juniorisation of the newsroom. Critique has also come from government focusing mainly on the news media's seeming unwillingness to transform and meet the demands of the nascent democracy and a changing audience.

Ideas around transformation have penetrated much of the debates about the news media in the last 20 years and issues have ranged from how to make the journalistic corps and news producers in general more equitable in terms of race, to the transformation of news content itself amidst criticism of racism and too narrow a focus on issues concerning only a small wealthy urban elite. As in many parts of the world, debates around the apparent dumbing down and trivialisation of news content are ever present. In our context this debate has been countered, however, by ideas of transformation and the opening up the news media to groups in society previously neglected and cut off from many mainstream news media outlets.

Transformation in the news media, no matter how contested and no matter how it is defined, has undisputedly come a long way since the days of apartheid. Gone are the days of overt racism exercised against black journalists in the newsroom, and gone are overt racist conceptualisations of the audience as reflected through "black editions" of newspapers and native or Bantustan news, and newspapers overtly carrying an agenda of particular racist ideologies and beliefs. However,

Some reflections on the challenges of teaching journalism at the University of Johannesburg

By Ylva Rodny-Gumede



Journalism
EDUCATION

Paul Weinberg

As much as journalists need technical skills linked to specific media platforms as well as sound language, writing and editing skills, equally there is a need for journalists with solid analytical abilities and research skills, knowledge of ethics and an understanding of the world that goes beyond mere reporting of events and that dares to pose the hard and difficult questions to both local and global actors.

It is still true that the news media in South Africa is fragmented and audiences divided by language and socio-economic factors that dictate access and ideas around what is considered news.

These rapid shifts in technology development impacting on production and dissemination of content as well as the underlying ethos of the news media have been echoed through journalism curricula at learning institutions around the country. The BA Journalism degree and other journalism course offerings at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) are no different in this regard. UJ itself has undergone tremendous change, from being an exclusive white Afrikaans-speaking university to a multi-cultural essentially English-speaking university with a strong focus on serving students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and so-called first generation university students (ie students who come from families where no one else holds an academic degree).

UJ came into being after the university merger in 2005 when the Department of Communication at the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) merged with the Department of Public Relations Management at the Technikon Witwatersrand (TWR). In 2009 the Department was reconstituted as the School of Communication comprising three distinct but complementary departments: the Department of Strategic Communication, the Department of Communication Studies and the Department of Journalism, Film and Television. In 2014, the typical UJ journalism student is a young black woman graduating with a three year BA degree with anything from politics, sociology, economics or a language as an additional subject.

The Department of Journalism, Film and Television currently offers two distinct degree programmes in Journalism and Film and Television Studies respectively. Each of these programmes is run from an undergraduate BA degree through to PhD level. The Journalism and Film and Television studies degrees have always had an applied component to them, with students receiving theoretical as well as vocational and applied training as part of the major subject in each degree. To further consolidate the professionalisation of the

degrees within an academic set up, as of 2013, the applied and theoretical components have been split into two separate subjects. Students registering for a BA degree in either Journalism or Film and Television Studies now have two compulsory majors – one theoretical and one applied. Students are also required to do Communication Studies for at least two years of their degree and as previously mentioned an additional subject from within the broader field of the humanities and social sciences.

The university and its lecture staff are acutely aware of the need for support and bridging courses, especially for students with English as a second language. For the BA journalism degree the need for bridging gaps in basic writing and comprehension skills with regards to both academic and journalistic texts are particularly pronounced. In an effort to deal with some of the criticism coming from industry as well as from within the university itself with regards to basic writing and editing skills, the BA journalism degree dedicates the first semester of the applied journalism course to academic writing followed by two semesters of news writing in the first and second years. This is further enhanced in the third year where students do an additional semester of advanced news writing.

Writing skills aside, in the light of retrenchments and low recruitment figures within the industry in South Africa as well as elsewhere in the world, the question that is being asked is how relevant journalism courses are (university courses in particular) to aspiring journalists and what these courses really prepare students for once graduated and working in the newsroom? How can the gap between industry's demand for practical content/skills and academy's emphasis on theory be bridged?

As much as journalists need technical skills linked to specific media platforms as well as sound language, writing and editing skills, equally there is a need for journalists with solid analytical abilities and research skills, knowledge of ethics and an understanding of the world that goes beyond mere reporting of events and that dares to pose the hard and difficult questions to both local and global actors. We need intellectual editors,

journalists, writers and commentators. Our discipline cuts to the heart of democratic values and the realisation of a qualitative, deliberative and participatory democracy.

Throughout our courses film, television and journalism are considered within a variety of national, global and industrial contexts with a view to train graduates with both practical production skills talking to the contemporary media landscape as well as theoretical knowledge to interpret and critically analyse and examine the field of journalism, film and television and intersections hereof, including wider areas of public dissemination of information.

Ultimately, it is industry and the audience that provide quality assurance and evaluation of the quality and relevance of the degree, that said universities are well placed to continuously evaluate and monitor the quality of their degrees and courses through rigorous peer review mechanisms established over extended periods of time. Of course, journalism degrees at universities, like many news media outlets, will have to learn to adapt to constant change and flux. Media outlets and platforms that journalists work for are changing rapidly, the way in which journalism is produced no less so and the way in which audiences consume news is definitely changing in leaps and bounds. However, the fundamentals of journalism in terms of providing, contextualising and interpreting information (particular information that someone wants to keep out of the public realm) has not changed and is needed more than ever with the complexity of modern society, social organisation and information dissemination.



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