South Africa is frequently referred to as an “emerging democracy” and it is often argued that the media have a critical role to play in fostering this anticipated democracy.

In higher education, journalism is located at the nexus where the twin imperatives of intellectual knowledge relevant to the field and vocational training meet – demands that are frequently reduced to a crude dichotomy of theory versus practice (Prinsloo, 2010). Because these fields of study generally seek to be both vocational as well as socially relevant, a new journalism education discourse appears to be emerging – one which is defining a new academic identity for journalism education, and in some senses “extricating itself from dependency on Western orientated models of journalism education and training” (Banda et al, 2007).

But some of the major challenges and issues in this regard include the introduction of curricula that are far more concerned with providing market-related skills for future journalists than with challenging their preconceptions and broadening their horizons; in other words, institutions can more easily “sell” vocational skills aimed at a specific career. What we are failing to do at South African universities in general and in journalism courses in particular, is to educate young minds broadly in critical thinking, ethics, values, reasoning, appreciation, problem solving, argumentation and logic. “Locked into single-discipline thinking, our young people fail to learn that the most complex social and human problems cannot be solved except through interdisciplinary thinking that crosses these disciplinary boundaries” (Jansen, 2010).

This is aggravated by the fact that as more people turn to the internet for news and information, the importance of training future journalists in online and mobile journalism grows increasingly important, as otherwise graduates are simply not equipped to operate competitively in a 21st century newsroom.

Changes in both the state and media landscape in South Africa after apartheid have impacted on the discourses about journalism education, with two discourses being influential in this regard: transformation, and private-public partnerships (Banda et al, 2007). Consequently since 1994, there has been a marked shift in the way that journalism education has taken place. “Professional education has largely become driven by industrial and commercial imperatives, rather than the more civic-minded and critical approach of a university-based education, resulting in a functionalist approach to learning – as ‘training’” (Banda et al, 2007: 165). Two contextual issues are important here, the first
What is encouraging in the South African context is that in spite of the perceived “theory versus practice” divide, there is lively and continuing debate on the issue, and signs of a new journalism education discourse emerging.

What is encouraging in the South African context is that in spite of the perceived “theory versus practice” divide, there is lively and continuing debate on the issue, and signs of a new journalism education discourse emerging. There is fairly broad agreement, for example, on the need for journalism education to include the cultivation of an informed and critical mindset as well as the honing of skills at universities. Although the market-driven imperatives of corporate media remain, some media and cultural studies educators continue to problematise journalism education curricula’s relationship to the market; there is awareness of the impact of problematic political systems and an over-reliance on Western influence on journalism education in the region; and there is also awareness of the impact of lack of resources, capacity and infrastructure on journalism education.

The latter is most apparent in the acknowledgement that in order for journalism education to continue to demonstrate its contemporary relevance in both its profile and practice, it needs to ensure continuous innovation in the world of new media. There is widespread agreement, for example, that South African future newsmakers need to be conversant with new technologies in information gathering, processing and distribution, and to understand the ethical implications of using these technologies (Banda et al, 2007). Although this can be problematic in terms of resources and access to new media, most journalism schools are aware that they need to broaden their range of training topics – and, perhaps, their range of students, by offering not only undergraduate and postgraduate courses, but also courses aimed at professional journalists seeking to upgrade their qualifications and obtain new skills, as well as topical courses for citizen journalists, and perhaps even news or information literacy courses for the general public.

References
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