

# Minding the gap

students reporting on poverty and inequality

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By Martha Evans

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# “South Africa has developed an alarming momentum for inequality,” says top poverty researcher Murray

Leibbrandt; yet poverty and inequality remain underreported in our mainstream media. UCT’s print journalism students collaborated with a top poverty think tank to produce Cape Connect, a newspaper devoted solely to South Africa’s most pressing concerns. Here’s how events unfolded.

“You can’t teach journalism, any more than you can teach sex,” the Canadian journalist Allan Fotheringham is reported to have said, adding to the long list of disdainful comments on teaching journalism at tertiary institutions. Part of the challenge is the “play-play” nature of the university setting. Students pretend to be journalists, writing reams of news articles, profiles, and features that never see the light of day. As much as one might urge classes to write for “real” publications, feedback remains abstract. Students don’t have to hammer away at their writing as they’d have to in the so-called “real world”. Nor do they have to properly consider the impact of their words, or fight for column space. I suspect it’s part of the reason why there is so much scepticism around teaching the profession.

Because of this, when seasoned journalist Pippa Green approached UCT’s Centre for Film and Media Studies with a proposal to put together an actual, funded newspaper, we jumped at the chance. Here was an opportunity for our students to learn “on the job”, so to speak. Green, the former head of radio news at the SABC and ex deputy editor of the Sunday Independent, currently works as the media manager for UCT’s Poverty and Inequality Initiative (PII). One of the Vice-Chancellor’s four strategic initiatives, the PII is tasked with tackling the twin challenges of poverty and inequality. Green approached the Centre in the hope that our student journalists would be willing to help make some of the initiative’s aims and research more accessible in a newspaper format.

Non-profits, start-ups and PR companies frequently approach journalism departments with pleas for students to produce newsletters or promotional videos, but I remain a little sceptical of such offers. While collaborative projects can provide valuable practical writing and branding experience, because of their focused agenda, more often than not, they don’t teach students much about journalism, whose cornerstone is independence.

Working with the PII was different. In South Africa, what could be more important than poverty and inequality? They remain stubborn and pervasive challenges; while the number of people living in extreme poverty has decreased because of social grants, inequality has widened, and jobs remain scarce. Focusing on these issues hardly seemed a departure from journalistic concerns. “Poverty and inequality are the big story,” said the former editor of the Mail &

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Guardian Nic Dawes at the 2012 "Towards Carnegie III" conference on poverty in South Africa, adding that the media had been "awful" at covering them.

Because of this, an increasing number of social justice organisations aim to give voice to the communities and issues overlooked by the mainstream media. NGOs such as Ndifuna Ukwazi and the Social Justice Coalition lobby to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged South Africans. GroundUp, an online news organisation devoted solely to reporting on matters affecting vulnerable communities, has emerged as one of one of the most exciting advocacy journalism initiatives of the past few years, and our students were very much inspired by their example.

It was in this vein, that our student newspaper Cape Connect was born. Staffed by the third-year print journalism students, the newspaper set out to reflect the latest research on poverty and inequality, and to articulate the concerns of those still struggling to find dignity and security even 20 years after the end of apartheid.

#### *Academic research as a starting point*

We were lucky enough to begin our journey with a series of lectures from a trio of luminaries working on poverty in the academic field. If only all newsrooms were afforded this kind of luxury. Professors Murray Leibbrandt, Francis Wilson and Haroon Bhorat presented a snapshot view of the situation in current-day South Africa, as well as their views on required policy changes.

South Africa needs to look to other emerging economies for ideas, Bhorat informed us; doing so will show us that South Africa has become too reliant on public sector employment and the finance industry, whereas the small-scale farming and agricultural industries are overlooked. Leibbrandt showed us some illuminating statistics on education and the real difference that secondary schooling can make to unemployment.

Armed with information from the best brains in the business, our students went out to report on the lived realities of disadvantaged South Africans, giving life to some of the vague-seeming statistics and policy statements. In Green's words: "The stories reflect one of the key roles of

journalism, which is to find the human stories that illuminate society's most pressing challenges."

After workshopping ideas, we came up with a two-pronged approach:

1. to report on the current state of affairs (where does South Africa

stand in terms of inequality, poverty, education; what anti-poverty policies are in place; which ones are working, etc.) and

2. what citizens can do (and are doing) to stop it. Such an approach, we hoped, would result in a publication both realistic and inspirational in its focus.

#### *Yes, Rhodes Must Fall, but what else is happening?*

So how did students respond to this mandate?

Some of the initial ideas followed the agenda of the mainstream press, and we discussed how to cover the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which was unfolding at the time. Eventually, it was decided that the movement was adequately dominating headlines and that there were other, equalling urgent events and issues requiring attention.

Better student ideas emerged directly from the PII seminar – on, for instance, the success of conditional cash transfers in fighting poverty and HIV in KwaZulu-Natal, on the difference education makes to joblessness, or on the need for increased governmental support of the informal sector. For these and other stories, students echoed the comments of the researchers directly. In their research, and in line with Bhorat's advice, students sought information from other emerging economies to provide background to these articles.

Additional stories focused in a less direct manner on key issues mentioned in the lectures. Small-scale farming in peri-urban areas emerged as central theme of the paper, in line with the PII's findings on South Africa's lack of focus on small-scale agriculture. The importance of schooling was another key concern; perhaps because of their own recent schoolgoing experiences, this resulted in some excellent reporting on some of the the challenges preventing our youth from staying in school – with strong pieces on the detrimental effects of a lack of access to sanitary towels and the impact of gang violence on school attendance.

#### *Getting away from PR copy*

By far the largest number of articles consisted of positive "human interest" features and profiles on the groups and individuals working to combat poverty. Several pieces showcased the work of

lesser-known but important NGOs, such as the Raymond Ackerman Foundation, which supports entrepreneurs in business; the Spier Art Academy, which runs business and marketing training for artists looking to enter the high-end art scene; the Chris Steytler organisation, which creates job opportunities for citizens with disabilities; and The Street Store, an innovative pop-up urban store that attempts to restore dignity to the city's homeless by providing them with a choice of free clothing.

Many of these articles needed extra reporting and revision, as they tended to read too much like PR copy for the organisations. It is of course easy to forget about the differences between journalism and PR when reporting on the work of do-gooders, and students struggled with this. They were urged to seek out additional information and commentary to locate the organisations' work within the wider context of poverty in South Africa. In addition, too many of these articles were single-source pieces that relied on the voices of NGO workers. As we had quite a generous lead time, students had the luxury of returning to seek comments from beneficiaries of the organisations, as well as expert commentary from academics in the field. This kind of learning was extremely beneficial.

A few students also reported on new services that might benefit disadvantaged South Africans, such as an innovative online website that charts taxi routes, operating hours and approximate fares, and the cellphone-friendly toilet fault reporting system piloting in Khayelitsha. Here, we benefited enormously from the information sent out by organisations working directly with affected communities. Ndifuna Ukwazi press releases provided the impetus for numerous news stories, and they were quick to provide commentary and, where necessary, images.

As with any news reporting experience, challenges included some of the unseen issues that arose during the production process. The editors agreed that, although not a central strand of our focus, unlike the Rhodes Must Fall movement, we needed to report on the new xenophobic attacks, and the ways in which Cape Town communities had responded to the news from other parts of the country. Here, the students found stories both on campus and beyond, reporting on university panel discussions centring on the causes of the violence and attending an anti-xenophobia Khayelitsha march (which received little attention in the mainstream media).

In general, the university environment proved to be hugely beneficial, with a ready supply of experts and several debates on current events. Even some course lectures provided stories, now

that students were viewing the world through the poverty and inequality lens.

Still lacking, in my view, were the voices of the poorest of the poor, the kinds of stories seen in GroundUp, such as Nombulelo Damba's piece about the orphaned Sibhozo brothers living in abject poverty (see: [http://groundup.org.za/article/sometimes-i-only-manage-make-r10-day-just-put-bread-table-17-year-old-boy\\_2870](http://groundup.org.za/article/sometimes-i-only-manage-make-r10-day-just-put-bread-table-17-year-old-boy_2870)). This story was moving without being patronizing and it silenced the usually vindictive internet commentators, eliciting instead a flood of empathetic responses from concerned citizens wanting to help. I have no doubt, however, that the students were not far from this kind of reporting and some of them are now interning with GroundUp.

### *You can't teach journalism, but you can practise it*

The experience of collaborating with the PII was beneficial to both parties: it provided the institute with a newspaper that publicises – in an accessible tabloid-sized format – some of their key concerns and suggestions; and it provided UCT students with the opportunity to practise their craft.

One of the key differences between “pretend” and “real” reporting involved the interaction with sources. Students frequently complain that it is difficult to get sources to speak to them when they tell them that the interview is “only for a university assignment” – it either makes sources loose-tongued and careless, or, particularly in the case of authoritative sources, prevents them from returning students' calls and emails. While some organisations were still unwilling to talk to students (and some very good story ideas were thwarted), on the whole, students found that there was greater willingness to allow access. For instance, the City of Cape Town, usually silent in the face of student requests, provided comments for the Khayelitsha toilet fault reporting system.

Another important difference, of course, is the necessity for accuracy. Aware that any errors would be reprinted thousands of times, many students were chastened by the meticulous requirements of print journalism -- from correct spellings of names to the latest and most accurate statistics, where, again, the academic environment proved useful.

Students emerged with these kinds of useful insights, but they also had many complaints -- about the lack of editorial control, for instance, or their classmates' failure to pull their weight. For the most part, these reflected the kinds of everyday frustrations experienced by “real” journalists, illustrating again that the best way to teach journalism is to practise it, in every sense of the word.



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