

Media skills in the making

GUY BERGER says a new dispensation means a new menu for journalism training.

THE PRIORITY is for programmes, especially quality programmes, to grow the numbers of black journalists.

But what's also important is the fact that journalism in a democracy changes the kind of training every journalist requires.

It impacts on the status and demands of reporters' beats, and training for these.

Of course, staple political news and analysis will still be important. In fact, with no real opposition to this coalition government, the press will have to work as hard as ever.

But with the end of apartheid, much of South African life loses its political edge. There's now the space to upgrade specialist financial reporting, arts/culture coverage, military reporting, development journalism, environmental stories, crime investigations and so on.

Attention to ethics and especially to excellence in the craft can replace the concern with journalists' safety and the politicised character of society. Training has to tackle these new issues, as well as new challenges thrown up by the demands of economic development.

Big issues and big jobs are going to be found in the realm of media and education — putting media into education, and education into media.

This democratic era coincides with a shift towards bi-media, multi-media and the like, again with implications for training.

Journalists increasingly need a good grounding in all media skills. And an openness to the technologies that are more closely linking sound, moving images, photographs, graphics and text.

There's heightened competition between South Africa's electronic and print media, even before any liberation of the

airwaves. Journalists need to have a global view of the burgeoning flood of media messages.

Newspaper reporters can't continue reporting as if the SABC still suppressed more news than it delivered.

Photojournalists ought no longer to think only in terms of pictures; reporters only words. Their separate, narrow reporting practices need the enhancement borne of a sensitivity to the all-round sounds, images, and words of life; not only to what one particular communication vehicle emphasises in relation to others.

Also, in these mid-1990s, we need to start producing media with closer attention to how it is consumed.

No one, anywhere, consumes messages from only one medium. People read, watch and listen — and assemble their information and entertainment from a plethora of sources. They choose and change in the context of a whole media universe.

But too many of our journalists blithely keep their speciality blinkers on. Likewise too much training still teaches compartmentalised skills.

There's also the need to open more windows between editorial and management. Not that journalists should be guided by business considerations; only that they should be aware of these — aware that their work deals in commodities in competitive markets, that readers and audiences have to be continuously attracted; that they're not writing, designing, announcing or performing for themselves.

In this new period, media management training is more and more vital — not least because of the impending proliferation of new radio stations and the growing presence of black owners and managers in print.

It's time to introduce training that keeps in mind that media is no ordinary business.

This means equal understanding of both editorial and business sides of media enterprises, the links and contradictions between them, and the nature of the wider media marketplace.

Research has to be a growth area. Demographic and psychographic characteristics, combined with changing media technology, mean new niche and mass markets in this changing nation. Journalists and managers need to know how to identify information gaps, how to read research, and how to use data.

Media policy is in the melting pot right now. It's urgent that journalists, media managers and owners, and media academics intervene more actively in the great debate. Without this, politicians, lawyers and pressure groups will decide free expression, cross-ownership, affirmative action and a host of other crucial matters.

For once, South African media has a chance to get the State off its back. Now's the time to go further and open up the State itself. That means publishing, conferencing and lobbying for "sunshine legislation" and a Freedom of Information Act. And training a new generation of journalists to report these matters and research State data.

We meet these training challenges — and we cook up a media meal suitable for South African journalism entering the 21st century.

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<p>What's cooking at the Rhodes journalism school?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● From 1995, Rhodes B.Journ students can take three years specialised training in either print, TV, radio, or photo-journalism; two years in one of the other three options; and one year in what's left. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There will also be a diploma in media management, a higher diploma in journalism and a coursework masters degree. Each involves an intellectual education combined with real-world practical training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'Journalist in residence' and 'Nieman Fellow'-style scholarships are on the cards for mid-career journalists. ● The department aims to host a conference on Freedom of Information in 1995.
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