



# Changing The

**YES** WE WANT HIGHLY SKILLED, ACCURATE, MULTI-SOURCED, RACE- AND GENDER-SENSITIVE JOURNALISM. WE WANT GRADUATING JOURNALISTS TO COME OUT OF SCHOOLS PREPARED TO TAKE JOURNALISM FORWARD FOR ANOTHER 20, 30 YEARS. WE WANT THEM ADAPTIVE ENOUGH TO THINK AHEAD, PLAN AHEAD, FORGE AHEAD. WE WANT THEM NOT TO BE LURED AWAY INTO OTHER PROFESSIONS.

BUT WHY? WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR PURSUIT THAT WE CARE ABOUT SO MUCH, THAT WE ARE PUTTING ALL THIS ENERGY INTO AUDITS, CONFERENCES AND ENDLESS DISCUSSIONS?

SO, LET'S START WITH THE BIG PICTURE. LET'S TALK ABOUT THE CONTEXT THAT LIES BEHIND THE CONCERNS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS. LET'S TALK ABOUT WHAT JOURNALISM IS, WHAT IT DOES IN THE WORLD, WHY IT'S DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF WAYS OF KNOWING AND DOING.

IN THIS SECTION WE SET THE SCENE BY HEARING FROM SONJA BOEZAK – ON BEING SOMEONE WHO MAKES A DIFFERENCE; SARITA RANCHOD – ON OUR LOCATION IN AFRICA; MONDLI MAKHANYA – ON THE NEW, 'NORMAL' SOUTH AFRICA; FRANCOIS NEL – ON THE SHIFTS IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRIES; JUSTICE MALALA – ON TRYING OUT SOMETHING BRAVE AND NEW; AND FERN GREENBANK – ON THE POLITICS OF EDUCATING JOURNALISTS.

**THE  
POINT IS TO  
CHANGE THE  
WORLD.**

by Sonja Boezak

# subject

The pressures on a professional school like journalism are inevitably more textured/layered/complex than the pressures on an academic school like, for example philosophy. In philosophy we are already engaged in the thing itself – it is the nature of philosophical conversation and engaging, to engage in and with the subject, ‘reality’. The reporter, however, in practising, is separated from the thing with which s/he is to engage – because “the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object of contemplation, not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively” (Feuerbach, 1972). It is separated from itself, from its own subjectivity, its being, its sensuousness. What this kind of journalism is engaged in and with, is not the understanding of the performance of reporting, but in the act of reporting. And it is engaged in it the way one engages in travelling to work, for example. It is not the journey that counts, but the outcome, the destination (the product). **The shortest route with the least traffic will be the easiest way there.**

In a school of journalism the complexity is brought into the ‘newsroom’ (its structure and form as from within the academy) by the very fact of this schizoid separation from engaging in understanding the meaning of its practice. **An ‘old’ philosophical dilemma**, albeit a different inflection of the mind-body dichotomy; a dilemma brought about by the location of professional schools within such ideological (read reflective, reflexive, theory-centred) spaces as universities – where the role of the university is understood as a place for the exchange of ideas and engaging in an understanding of itself as an actor in (if not a changing of) the world. And perhaps this is where the perceived split lies: journalists in their current practice of journalism, are engaged with changing the world (whether they want to admit it or not); theorists are engaged in understanding the patterns of these expressions of power.

If people like Keith Windshuttle (who sparked a fierce debate in Australia because of his stance that the study of media theory was damaging the training of journalists) is to be believed, or taken seriously, then his solution to this apparent dilemma is to separate the two once and for all. As far as he is concerned, journalism practice is only hampered by this engagement/enquiry into how it is practised.

From where I am sitting, this is an argument that lacks depth; what the often-cited Feuerbach would call a lack of sensuousness, an absence of subjectivity. What I would also call the absence of thought, understanding that **“thought is not a matter of theory, but rather a way of being”** (Braidotti, 1991).

But what indeed is the role of the journalist in (post-)modern society? Is it merely to observe and to report? Is it at all realistically possible to report (if we are to think of reporting as the verbatim notes on an event)? Does this kind of suggestion not necessarily require the reporter to step outside of him/herself; to extract themselves from their location, from their society, from their cultural

identities? **Does (and can) such a person exist?**

Columbia University President, Lee C. Bollinger, in his statement on the future of journalism education says: “What leading journalists need to know, include, for example, a functional knowledge of statistics, the basic concepts of economics, and an appreciation for the importance of history and for the fundamental debates in modern political theory and philosophy.” **A mouthful.** And while I celebrate his acknowledgement of the range, flexibility and expression of what would make a journalist, I am disappointed. I had expected more – and not necessarily a longer list. My disappointment is in the creation of an outcome; and the fact that there might be a checklist to evaluate and measure the outcome by. **And then I wonder**, is the point that these schools prepare a student for the furtherance of the profession, or for life with the profession as vehicle of expression, as lens for engaging with and understanding the world?

Then it also makes me wonder about the frequency with which Feuerbach’s 11th thesis has been quoted in the last while – in particular in relation to practitioners of this profession: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it...”

Perhaps this is where I should stand back for a moment, and consider what it is that may have caused this personality split.

Finding and making meaning is something we all engage in, in everything we do. But when it comes to interrogating either our actions or our interpretations of a reality beyond the world of things (matter), we feel ourselves personally attacked. And this speaks to a pervasive schizophrenia. **Separating thinking from living is like separating the content from the frame, the body from the soul, sensuousness from its lived experience.**

While it is true that economic and social pressures prescribe early entrance into the professional world, so placing pressure on students (to finish degrees/diplomas; to do internships as soon as possible), the industry (to engage in skills training as a way to fast track this process), journalism schools (to teach and train for trade), it certainly is not and cannot be true that these agents have to indiscriminately bow to this pressure. The point is indeed to change the world. And change rests on understanding and engaging – an impossible task from the outside.

As a student doing research and some coursework on an international programme in the Netherlands, **I was the only black woman from**

Turn over for more...

**Africa** in the group. It was the first time I was to spend a considerable amount of time away from home, on foreign soil. Daily I was surprised by, and confronted with, the personal shifts and changes I was experiencing; feeling my difference, my otherness almost everywhere I went. And my course co-ordinator did not make it any easier. While I certainly had no expectations of preferential treatment, I also did not, with equal certainty, expect to be confronted with questions of difference and colonialism at every turn – as if I was somehow expected to have some **special insight into these matters**. I did not understand and often felt frustrated, somehow inadequate, lacking. I felt as if there was something I was meant to know, but did not. It was only toward the end of my stay that I was able to make a connection between these (ostensibly theoretical) questions and my very real experiences of otherness/foreignness. It was only then that I could begin to take up the challenge to understand the lived practice and engagement in and with theory (as a matter of being).

Some of what I learned then was that **it takes an exceptional guide to lead students** to that insight by themselves. To make a connection between theory and life is an art. To understand the nature of that art requires an engaging with the world that relies absolutely, fundamentally, on a respect for my histories and locations, whether they be personal, cultural, political; a fundamental, radical reliance on the creation of meaning and an interpretation of the world from where I stood. **In short**, in order to engage at all, one needs to understand; and understanding makes the way for change. For me to at last understand the meanings of the texts (out there), **I had to place myself at the centre**. I had to become the subject in order to change the subject.

And perhaps this is the greatest difficulty in reconciling journalism 'training' (directing, shaping modes of behaviour, skilling) and 'education' (facilitating understanding) with itself. Like any other discipline, journalism is itself also a (social) whole with its own history, historicity, political frameworks, politics, cultural and economic conditions that frame its continued existence. (Reflecting the necessity of borders, structures and definitions as a way of understanding and communicating that understanding

of the world.) The vulnerability this (re-)insertion exposes us to lies in the fact that we are forced to **hold a mirror up** to

ourselves, and in the fact that we, as journalists, as actors in the world have to look. There is no other realistic possibility to be.

This is what journalism practice is faced with, not only within

the academy, but in understanding its place in the world: it is

asked to hold itself accountable and to be under (theoretical and practical) **scrutiny**.

Journalism studies is asked to shift its outward gaze and **look itself in the eye** to understand its function in the world – as it relates to issues of power, politics, cultural and economic frameworks in the world(s) in which it operates, and as itself being a politically, culturally and economically powerful actor. This is the very thing that is imperative if journalism schools are to not churn out 'reporters' (read automatons), standing outside of events, unable to see the world because of the large shadows they themselves cast in their absence. For the reporter to become a journalist (present in themselves, in the world), s/he has to step back into her/himself. For journalism to be contributing to a body of ethically-sound engagement with the world, it has to understand its role as reflector and (change) agent in the world.

Where departments like philosophy have (until now) been left alone to engage with the world in the realm of ideas – because that is what there (apparent) nature demands – the difficulty in journalism and media studies departments is having to make their way back to themselves. The schizoid personality traits of journalism in this sense are not easy to treat. Symptomatic treatment will only **aggravate the dis-order**. Nor is assimilation an effective

way to treat this psychological problem. By implication, assimilation requires that one or the other be subsumed, overridden... incorporated into one dominant category/set/cultural experience under a general (other) principle. What is instead required, in order to achieve, maintain and constantly renegotiate a (fine) balance, is respectful (read subjective, sensuous) conversation, dialogue and debate.

It is our responsibility as actors in the world, to know and understand the impact of our being and acting in and on the world. At the same time, this responsibility is impossible without admitting to oneself that **"I am a real and sensuous being"** understanding that "being... is sensuous being; that is, the being involved in sense perception, feeling and love" (Feuerbach, 1972).

The study and practice of journalism does not and cannot make allowance for journalists to write passively, absently, from a distance, or that other word **we have become afraid** of, "objectively". This, for at least two reasons: who we are is eminently important to what we write and what that writing means. And, who I am as writer or speaker is also defined by where my body and mind (as **sites of sensuousness**) are located (viz. those indelible connections we have with the cultural, political, racial, social). It is simply not possible to engage in or with the world without considering my own subjectivity, sensuousness and location(s). We do not come to the text (in its broadest sense) tabula rasa.

So what is needed is a renewed maturity and more encompassing sense of interconnection. We need **a transformation of consciousness** that allows one not to be nervous about the fact that what one is saying can be undermined by the way one says it. This requires an artistic acceptance of the multiplicities, diversities and contradictions within ourselves as sensuous beings. **This requires artful living** – meaning that art (re-)presents a truth of sensuousness. And, "that which art represents in the form of sensuousness is nothing else than the very essence of sensuousness that is inseparable from this form" (Feuerbach, 1972).

We need to forge a practice which takes into account the changing nature of life – not one that (pretends to) make(s) **a nice solution**. This requires holding what we believe as the principles of journalistic practice, up to the scrutiny of itself, and its being-in-the-world. This is itself a process, not an end. This kind of creative, artistic engagement and evaluation means having the freedom to assert difference, to recognise the transitory nature of social and political systems, so becoming an affirmation of chance, of change and even of chaos – giving new meaning to transformation.

"Intersubjective relations" (a notion borrowed from the philosopher and critical theorist, Jürgen Habermas, who worked with the notions of communicative action and moral consciousness as possible solutions for the malaise of modern society) **or sensuous conversation**, can create room for the creation of a (whole) identity and the recognition of boundaries between the self (as expressed in journalism practice) and the other (theoretical interrogation). Identity in this sense is not a construct, and is maintained and created via the continuous redefinition of boundaries between self and other. This kind of communicative action would suggest the political aim of establishing a community based on the tolerance and protection of individual and group difference(s), not the erasure/assimilation that a falsified sameness would create.

What is needed to change our perspective(s) is a thorough analysis of the present; an analysis of social life and the patterns that constitute it – we could then conceive of **constructive imaginative futures**. Crossing disciplinary boundaries without concern for the disciplinary distinctions which organise knowledge(s) is impossible without sensuousness, without subjectivity.

I have touched on the theory-practice dilemma and of 're-insertion into the text' as the only realistically possible solution. But what would the possible practice(s) of that solution be?

We, as South Africans, are all quick to show our struggle credentials, to claim a black (read coloured, Indian, black African... any apartheid racial classification other than white) history/line/genealogy/experience. Somehow this is what makes us acceptable now. **This is the ticket in**. The irony of this shift does not escape me, especially because it is still an 'out' in other spaces, but more so, because it is an artificial one.

In 2000, at the Beijing **+5** World Conference on Women in New York, I had an experience that made me come closer to an understanding of that shift. Forming part of a global media team as well as an African media team, I acted as go-between between the two groups – filling an in-between space. Apart from witnessing, experiencing and participating in the very different processes in both groups, the incident that marked the shift occurred over a brief much-needed coffee break with a European (how the meaning of that word too, has changed for us!) colleague. It was a

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comfortable space. She very easily, comfortably, asked me how the African group was getting along (of course assuming that they were not), and in the same breath 'apologised' for not making use of as many African stories or African writers or technical skills in the global paper. "Because," she went on, as if I would have complete understanding of the unfortunate nature of the 'forced' decision, "they need too much help and we don't have that kind of time here."

**I was stunned, outraged, shocked. And briefly, I even despaired.**

At the time I said nothing, but also heard the complaints of the few black (African as well as Latin-American) writers who were included in the global team – their stories were not being published, or their ideas for stories or approaches were politely excused and not taken seriously. The incidental irony was that the African publication by contrast was a showcase of creativity, good journalism, effective partnerships and unity of thought and diversity. All of it stayed with me, and just before my return, I mentioned the incident in an email to a South African colleague. Her response was different: she expressed her outrage and the issue was raised within the global network. A letter was drafted and an apology demanded and secured. **But the damage had been done.** The words had been spoken, and worse, the issue had now been dealt with, and as a consequence, could no longer be spoken of. **Subject closed.** We could get on with business as usual.

Still, it bothered me. In part, because I was left thinking that she was at least half right. We do, as Africans, need time. But the African-ness I speak of cannot be defined by historical origin, by skin colour, by gender, by social or political standing. What bothered me was not the fact of the exchange, nor the fact of the associated exclusions, but the ease of the exchange and the inherent assumed justification of the acts of exclusion. The implication of that speaks even louder than anything else to me. The reasoning goes something like this: **1.** They (Africans, by extension, blacks) are unskilled. **2.** We (white, northern) are skilled and benevolent. **3.** Because of 2, we have to give them an opportunity to acquire skills with us as teachers. **4.** They are slow learners. **5. We know the way. 6. Our way is the right and only way.**

What struck me in the argument, was the assumption that I would agree with the racist, northern-biased underlying 'facts'. **Of course these are not things to argue with! It is the way of the world!**

But my colleague was brave enough to recognise her own discomfort and spoke it. In her speaking, however, she expressed the need to explain to me why African writing, leadership, content, expertise, were being excluded from this publication. She did not assume that this is the way things should be. Of course I am giving her the benefit of personal insight. She could just as easily have been thinking or alluding to her own racist assumptions – setting up an us and them and including me (for the moment) into her us. And that is what offended me, stayed with me, created the brief despair: I had been made one of them, those We's that exclude us. From her perspective, she shifted my position from object to subject. A subjectivity that without doubt was not mine to accept.

And still I am comforted by her bravery for speaking out, for saying something, and I am saddened that these are the things that course through the lifeblood of the body of – dare I say it? – the white world.

Just as African is not about a race or referring to a continent, white is not a race or skin colour. **Both of them are attitudes, ways of being, ways of being in the world.** Africans can no longer be recognised by where they live or the colour of their skins. Similarly, whiteness is neither defined by genealogy, nor is it a racial marker. While my definition would certainly include colonial practices, one is not white by virtue of a historical or genealogical link with the



actors in colonial and imperialist plays. Whiteness, in the sense in which I use it here, includes the assertion of difference based on (an external, imposed) racial classification, politics, social status, gender. African in this sense speaks of a oneness, a collective memory and enactment of that memory, that celebrates the whole through the individual – based on a fundamental respect for life and all who share in it.

And this is the role of the (post-)modern African journalist in the 21st century. **Times have changed;** we can no longer ignore the effects and affect(ation)s of post-colonial society. We cannot pretend that the products of colonialism do not exist in the world, or that this is not the world in which we live. We cannot disengage from the debate; we cannot afford to (again, still) silence ourselves through white impositions. In its practices and inception, the *raison d'être* of the media as a white (read colonialist, imperialist) concept and imposition, is set up to other, to maintain distance, to hold on to its schizophrenia, when the point is engagement, sensuousness. The role of the African journalist is to make her/his way through the world by engaging in African ways; by being African. The tools (albeit white) at our disposal can and must be used to **release the world and the face of the media from white supremacy.**

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Sneaking and nasty, **Ray Sism** is the baddie we all have to battle. Since 1994 he has become a shadow of his former self, but he still lurks in dark language, unsuspecting issues and pops up in the most unexpected places – like news conferences.

Difficult to detect, he remains one of Di Versity's strongest foes. He is often blamed for the work of the more sophisticated, but just as sinister, Klaus Bias.

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