

Focus is the secret

Reg Rumney

While I was researching a story for the Anglo-American in-house magazine *Optima* recently I found myself literally balancing a camera, a notebook and a digital recorder. One or two of them was bound to fall distractingly as I focused on writing, or recording or taking pictures. Luckily it was usually the notebook.

I did my best, but the pictures did not live up to the material. One of the interviewees was a smiling, young woman entrepreneur who owns a funeral parlour in Vanderbijlpark. Thandi Khumalo's funeral parlour, the Bold and the Beautiful, provides rich visuals for a photographer tuned in to colour. The small digital camera I was using, which was

all that I could comfortably handle along with the notebook and the compact recorder, was just not adequate in my hands.

I was visiting the entrepreneurs Anglo Zimele small business start-up fund aids to get a feel for what the corporation's enterprise development actually meant to them, putting into practice my teaching about business

journalism by going out into the field rather than being content with phone interviews or talking to people in air-conditioned HQs. I didn't allow the camera to be more than a distraction. There was no question that the text-based story would come first; that I was concerned, for instance, about the interaction between the black recipients of Zimele's small business loans and Zimele's sympathetic but no-nonsense, white loan officer.

And once again, it struck me how wrong-headed the enthusiasm for the multi-media technology in today's newsrooms is. It makes it possible for people to be ADD, when focus – in more ways than one – is the secret to good journalism as well as much other endeavour. Luckily I wasn't asked to produce a video clip, a radio story and a blog about the experience on my return to the office. For whatever "convergence" or "new media" means in the university, what it seems to me to boil down to in newsrooms is a lot of zeal for doing things like blogging and vlogging simply because they can be done and because they hold out the hope of greater productivity.

This is déjà vu, taking me back to a tiresome bi-media experiment at the SABC, when it became clear that the only way reporters could do both radio and TV reports on a big story was – because radio's prime time is the morning and TV's is in the evening – to sleep under their desks.

True, reporters have the chance to try out new toys, like palm-sized, high-definition video cameras

and ever-more sophisticated smart phones. But if their satisfaction derives directly from the task of creating meaningful stories the excitement of the technology will fade. And after the novelty of the toys wears off, comes the pain of doing more with less, as commercial imperatives demand that there is something to show for the money expended.

I am no stranger to technology and understand the thrill of the new. I was one of the first SABC-TV journalists to use a then cutting-edge, compact, high-definition video camera to take my own visuals for a story, though I don't think anyone took much notice. I love the freedom computerisation has allowed, and am an enthusiastic first adopter of innovative products. I enjoy the freedom of blogging, of the global reach of the Internet, of its potential to knit communities closer together, both geographical and cultural. I appreciate the commercial possibilities of building brands and creating reader, listener and viewer loyalty by interaction.

But teaching journalism has led to me to try to ascertain the essence of what I did for three decades. And the answer to that question leads me to seriously doubt the value of simply mirroring what is happening in newsrooms in our teaching practices.

To be sure, I don't think we should be disconnected from the news media as business as well as its other, social and political, aspects. As a long-time business journalist I retain a strong interest in the financial situation of news media. But we miss the essence of journalism if we see it purely through the lens of commercial functionalism.

I propose a normative approach. In other words, the answer to the question, "What is journalism?" cannot be derived simply from what journalists do, because a lot of what people who call themselves journalists do may superficially look like journalism but it is suspect. The connotations of "journalism" are not simply of a job, or a profession in the sense of self-regulation, but of a task people expect to be pursued with the highest integrity. When the public expresses dissatisfaction with journalism or particular journalists, I believe they have that higher ethical standard in mind, and are judging journalists against that.

Nick Davies, the author of *Flat Earth News*, has described in detail the flaws of modern journalism, even as the profession in the West became imperilled, apparently by the same sort of disruptive technology that threatens the model of music production and dissemination through record companies. His premise in the book is that the main threat to journalism as truth is not so much propagandising media bosses or increasing government and private PR "spin doctoring" of news (though these remain a real threat), but its replacement by "churnalism" – inadequate, quickly-produced, superficial non-news, the equivalent of fast-food, often focusing on celebrities or PR events.

Davies, in line with the emphasis on verification in the seminal *The Elements of Journalism* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, talks of the defining

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characteristic of journalism being truth: “You could argue that every profession has its defining value. For carpenters, it might be accuracy: a carpenter who isn’t accurate shouldn’t be a carpenter. For diplomats, it might be loyalty: they can lie and spy and cheat and do all sorts of dirty tricks, and as long as they are loyal to their government, they are doing their job. For journalists, the defining value is honesty – the attempt to tell the truth. That is our primary purpose. All that we do – and all that is said about us – must flow from the single source of truth-telling.”

For me, journalism is about finding out the truth and then telling the world. I know that “truth” is a problematic concept, but philosophical paradigms that discount the possibility of its existence are quite frankly bullshit. I am not simply being crude in using that word. In a long essay, “On Bullshit”, that has become famous, Harry G Frankfurt has given it academic respectability, observing that bullshit is not about lying, it is about not actually caring what the truth is. For the bullshitter, unlike the liar, truth is immaterial. Think for a moment about many business speeches you have heard and you’ll instantly recognise the phenomenon. Journalists, however, should care about what the truth is.

What that leads us to as journalists and as journalism teachers is to realise that at the heart of journalism is research, which is another way of saying, “getting a good story”. Communicating that story is the other leg of journalism, which is historically a mass medium, and that’s where cameras, recorders, and various means of broadcasting text come in. And we do it “professionally” ie within a commercial context because that’s what seems to work best, though it could be argued that journalism is often subsidised outright by investors or governments supporting some mission and even, in a sense, by advertising.

Part of the problem of the news media in the West, I guess, is that monopolies of certain information flows have enabled organisations with economies of scale to extract rents from the public in exchange for information. If you had a printing press or a TV station you could ask money for information that was only roughly processed, often passed on in a form that privileged packaging over content in the form of sensationalism.

The Internet cuts through that monopoly in that basic news can be broadcast from many sources instantly: few tech-watchers waited for magazines to find out about the iPad launch. They watched it live via Internet, and read the twitter feed to see what the first experiences of using the “Jesus Tablet” were: hence the excitement about new media.

In this environment, however, research to find out what is not obvious, often what is deliberately hidden, becomes even more worthwhile. The concept of “added value” is useful in understanding the process, but it’s more than that, the kind of depth of understanding that is associated with philosophical thinking.

Philosopher and journalist Carlin Romano, writing in the *Chronicle Review*, has a dig both at universities and donors for giving in to what he calls “faddishness and lack of vision”: “Too many foundations and universities breathlessly fasten on the bells and whistles of new technology, as if tweets shall save us all, rather than attending to longstanding gaps in journalism education.”

As journalists, we have to return to our roots as seekers of the truth rather than being turned into ever more inventive users of new technology that enables us simply to be packagers and repackagers of trivial or stale information; to be, in other words, bullshitters, albeit bullshitters skilled in the use of the latest tools.