



In search of critical engagement: a history of South African university based journalism education

BETWEEN THE PRESSURES OF THE APARTHEID STATE OF THE RECENT PAST AND THE NEO-LIBERAL ECONOMY NOW, JOURNALISM EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA HAS NEVER QUITE SUCCEEDED IN PRODUCING A CURRICULUM FOR RADICAL CHANGE OR STUDENTS PREPARED TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE. JEANNE DU TOIT'S DOCTORAL THESIS RESEARCH INTO THE FOUNDING OF THE VARIOUS JOURNALISM SCHOOLS IN THIS COUNTRY SHOWS THAT THERE WAS A BRIEF MOMENT DURING THE HEIGHT OF RESISTANCE TO APARTHEID THAT SHOWED PROMISE.



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Historical discussions of South African journalism education (Tomaselli 1991: 167; De Beer and Tomaselli 2000; Steenveld 2006) refer to examples of teaching practice which have served as critical interventions into political process. They occur primarily in the late 1970s and 1980s and it is arguable that the social circumstances that existed during this period presented unique opportunities for critical education. The literature suggests, however, that these examples represent the exception rather than the rule. It would seem, in fact, that a critical approach to journalism education has never been realised in South Africa in any substantive way. It is with this argument in mind that I explore, in this paper, the historical construction of journalism as a subject of university education in South Africa.

In the 1960s and 70s, when journalism education first became a reality in this country, three distinct university systems were in existence in this country. One was a liberal, English tradition which drew on the “Oxbridge” model as well as aspects of the Scottish university tradition (Dubow 2006). The second tradition was that of Afrikaans-language universities, and the third that of black universities which were primarily established as part of the infrastructures of the apartheid state (Vale 2008: 122; Jubber 1983: 58).

The newspaper landscape shared many of the distinctions which characterised this university system. It is again possible to identify three separate traditions; that of a white English press, a white Afrikaans press, and newspapers that target black audiences.

Like its counterpart within the academy, the white, English-language journalistic tradition associated itself with humanitarian and liberal ideology, and opposed the policies of apartheid. It did so primarily through an emphasis on the Anglo-American model of objective journalism, insisting for example on reporting “both sides” of the social conflicts that characterised South African society (Pinnock 1991: 123).

Afrikaans newspapers, again in parallel to developments within the academy, operated primarily to promote Afrikaans and Afrikaner culture, often articulating this task explicitly as a struggle against British influence (Pollack 1981:

12). Newspapers targeting black audiences formed part of the same ownership structures as those of the English liberal press (Johnson 1991: 21).

When university-based journalism education entered this context, it did so almost exclusively within Afrikaans-language institutions of learning, and in service of the Afrikaans journalistic community. The first journalism education programme was established in 1959 at the University of Potchefstroom (now North-West University), and the second four years later at Unisa. At the beginning of the 1970s, communication programmes with some journalistic content were also established at the Rand Afrikaanse University and the University of the Free State.

The close association between journalism education and Afrikaans-language universities, at this time, should not come as a surprise. These institutions had become central to the intellectual infrastructure of the South African state and understood their role explicitly in instrumental terms, as serving the interests of hegemony.

The Afrikaans press had adopted a similar role and combined this with a growing sense of professionalism. One implication of this professional identity was that these papers prioritised the recruitment of university graduates. Their interest was in students who had benefited from a general education in the liberal arts, rather than those who had completed a programme that prepared them to work as journalists.

English newspapers also took seriously the need for knowledge acquisition for journalists, but rather than a university education they favoured the idea of on-the-job mentoring and apprenticeship. The adherence of English universities to traditionalist academic models meant that they, too, expressed very little interest in the idea of journalism education (Hachten and Giffard 1984: 181; Interview: Harber). One exception to the rule is that of the Department of Journalism launched in 1969 at Rhodes University.

It seems curious, given the trends described above, that it was this programme, along with the one established at Potchefstroom, that at this early stage emerged as the two most substantive journalism education programmes in South Africa. One could say, in fact, that at this early stage the English and Afrikaans histories of journalism education, as represented by Potchefstroom and Rhodes, had much in common. Both operated in an academic context that tended to be either indifferent or openly hostile to their existence. The programmes that took shape at both institutions were informed, furthermore, by similar approaches to journalistic knowledge, and to the role of universities in engaging with such knowledge. In each case, the emphasis appeared to be on an instrumental approach, informed by a commitment to producing graduates who could be assimilated into the existing practices of particular journalistic communities (Interviews: De Beer, Switzer and Giffard).

Under the leadership of Gert Pienaar, the teaching programme that emerged at Potchefstroom was designed primarily to deliver students to the Afrikaans-language press. The curriculum for ‘journalism practice’ drew heavily on texts that were standard in American journalism education, and which tended to focus on guidelines for the production of journalism without placing such discussion

primarily within a reflective exploration of social context.

At Rhodes, Anthony Giffard was the first head of department, and then in 1972 Les Switzer was employed as a lecturer. As with the Potchefstroom programme, Giffard and Switzer started off within a practice oriented approach (Interview: De Beer).

Giffard saw the role of the journalism programme as one of supporting independent media in South Africa, particularly the English-language press. His approach to such support was, admittedly, different from Pienaar’s commitment to delivery of students to Afrikaans newsrooms. He wanted to produce journalists who recognised the vital role played by the liberal English press in challenging apartheid policies in South Africa, and who wanted to contribute to this (Interview: Giffard).

The key differences between the two programmes emerged as they matured and in relation to the way that each programme grounded itself within theoretical resources.

In the early 1970s, the Potchefstroom programme expanded the initial focus on practical skills to include a more sophisticated tradition of “perswetenskap”, which drew on a European (particularly German) tradition in the theorisation of media history, law and ethics. The result was not, however, a coherent curriculum. The programme was framed by two spheres of knowledge: that of the “perswetenskap” tradition, and that of vocational training in the conventions of mainstream print journalism (Interviews: De Beer and Fourie). Though efforts were made to ingrate ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, these two spheres remained disjointed, so that the Potchefstroom programme became characterised by the classic schism experienced in much of journalism education in English speaking countries across the world.

The Rhodes programme experienced a similar process of theoretical maturation, but did so at a very different moment in South African history, and in a different institutional context. This would, even if only momentarily, make possible a very different relationship between the study and production of journalism.

The period from the mid 1970s into the 1980s was characterised by dramatic intensification in the contestation of the hegemony of apartheid ideology. On one hand, there was an increasingly confident and widespread public expression of resistance to the state. On the other hand, the South African government responded to expressions of dissent with increasing intolerance, and with more and more elaborate strategies of social engineering.

The movement of popular resistance to apartheid was growing rapidly in strength, and claimed campuses as one of its sites of struggle. At the same time, there was an infusion of new intellectual ideas into universities, which helped to open up spaces for political contestation. These ideas included concepts drawn from the theories of historical materialism, which began to inform radical challenges to traditional liberal conceptualisations of society. The ideas fostered by the Black Consciousness movement also increased the rift between liberalism and radicalism (Vale 2008: 123). Student resistance politics was intensifying within black universities. The focus of academic debate was, however, primarily on the development of a radical approach to social engagement in English-language universities (Dubow 2006: 269).

In South Africa at this time, the English-speaking community was quite marginalised from the political sphere. The institutions of Afrikanerdom were engaged in a power struggle with the black majority, with English liberals locked out and looking on from the sidelines. One response within the left-wing, English-speaking community influenced by the growing interest in Marxist ideas, was to colonise the English-language press (Interviews: Giffard and Louw). Another, related response was the involvement of this constituency in the teaching of journalism production skills to people involved in the progressive movement as a form of activism. White English liberal university students and

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staff, and the student press through the South African Students' Press Union (Saspu) helped to organise and produce community papers (Tomaselli 1991: 167).

It was also such individuals who gravitated towards the Journalism Department at Rhodes University. At Rhodes, the impact of critical knowledge and the impetus towards reform could be strongly felt within journalism education, in a way that was not possible at Potchefstroom. At this time, Switzer experienced a dramatic transformation as an intellectual, which he connected with the learning that his own students were engaged in. He became increasingly convinced of the importance of melding the practical teaching of the fundamental competencies of journalism with a critical mindset (Interview: Switzer).

Teaching needed, therefore, to be grounded in critical theory. He began to read extensively, including literature within a more critical paradigm than the approach of the Rhodes curriculum up to this point. He became interested, for example, in the potential of literary journalism (or new journalism, as it was then called) as a vehicle for communicating the broader realities of popular culture, and created a course on this topic.

He also began to reason that, if journalism educators were going to think critically, then the practical skills that they taught students should include the ability to work strategically with research methods, and the ability to analyse the media. Out of this argument came the idea of a course in research methods and also one in critical theory.

When Switzer took over as head of department in 1979, he took the opportunity to add the words "media studies" to the name of the department. In doing so, he intended to make the statement that the department did not have a 'trade school' mindset in the teaching of journalism. He avoided the term "communication" because he saw in it a code word for the conservatism which, at that time, was dominant within American journalism education. The thrust of media studies scholarship that was then being generated by the Birmingham school made it an attractive alternative.

It would seem, however, that the critical approach that characterised Rhodes at in the late 1970s and early 80s could not be sustained over time. Over recent years, staff working in this department have repeatedly commented, in their reflections on their own teaching, on the difficulty of doing so. One observation has been that students struggle to relate the knowledge that they gain from production courses to those that deal with the study of journalism.

Another is that teaching within the department is, in the end, primarily shaped by the imperatives of industry (Amner 2005; Garman 2005; Steenveld 2006).

The difficulty of sustaining a critical approach to education is, of course, not unique to journalism education.

Discussions of the contemporary academic landscape (Hendricks 2006; Vale 2008; Nash 2006) indicate that the centrality of radical intellectual scholarship is generally under threat. It is suggested that such scholarship has become relegated to the margins of public discourse. In particular, the social sciences are no longer at the centre of critical intellectual debate. Furthermore, the close engagement that existed in the 1970s and 80s between universities and South African communities has dissipated. The rise of neo-liberalism within universities is often cited as a key factor in this context, a trend that became powerfully felt in the South African context at the close of the 20th century (Vale 2008: 117).

After the 1994 elections, economic changes overwhelmed South African universities "like a flood through a hole in the wall" (Cloete 2002: 15). There was, in particular, an increasing demand on higher education to be commercially viable, and for university education to serve the needs of "industry" (Singh 2001: 8). In this environment, many social science disciplines have redefined themselves in terms of professionalism. In response to the environmental changes, the centrality of critical scholarship has been replaced by an "instrumentalist" approach to knowledge (Hendricks 2006: 86).

It is suggested that it is also because of the pressure of economic context that the study of journalism has been increasingly appropriated by new sections of the university community. Such courses tend to detach the study of journalism from the teaching of practice, their contribution to the critical engagement with the practices of journalism remain limited (Tomaselli and Teer-Tomaselli 2007: 180).

In this context, ideas that had once formed the basis of critical approaches to journalistic knowledge have become commodified. This appropriation and "hollowing out" of the study of journalism can also be observed within many of the communication science departments at Afrikaans-language universities. Such departments began to incorporate

cultural studies and media studies into their curricula, but did so in a way that simply assimilated these traditions without confronting their political implications (Interview: Louw).

I would propose, in context of the above, that the factors that are necessary for a critical approach to journalism education cannot be traced solely to the influence of any particular disciplinary approach. Of equal if not greater importance is the nature of the relationship that exists between institutions of higher learning and the social context in which they are situated. It would seem, indeed, that irrespective of the intellectual traditions within which teaching programmes are based, their relationship with their social environment tends to be that of conservative instrumentalism. Such instrumentalism remains the constant that runs through the history of South African journalism education, and it is one that has always existed in context of the requirements of oppressive forces. During apartheid, the institutions of journalism and of the academy were expected to serve the needs of an authoritarian state. In the post-apartheid era, the pressure to conform remains, this time framed by the hegemony of neo-liberal economic context.

It is important to remember that the "critical" turn in the history of journalism education, as described in this paper, resulted because the contradictions that defined the South African social context had become too great, and hegemony could no longer be maintained.

At this time, because of their association with a broad popular movement which arose to challenge the authority of the apartheid state, universities were able to develop radical approaches to journalism education.

It may be that, within the current situation, it is again only in context of such broad contestation of the status quo that a critical journalism education can come into existence.

It is, of course, important to draw on the knowledge resources of the university to open up a space for such education. Even more important, however, is the need for educators to engage with social forces outside the university which could form the foundation of a new critical turn.

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Interviews

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| Arnold S de Beer, 27 May 2008 | Eric Louw, 29 May 2008 | Les Switzer, 17 May 2007 |
| Anthony Giffard, 19 May 2008 | Pieter Fourie, 13 May 2008 | Anton Harber, 28 May 2008 |

THE DIFFICULTY OF SUSTAINING A CRITICAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION IS, OF COURSE, NOT UNIQUE TO JOURNALISM EDUCATION. DISCUSSIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE INDICATE THAT THE CENTRALITY OF RADICAL SCHOLARSHIP IS GENERALLY UNDER THREAT. IT IS SUGGESTED THAT SUCH SCHOLARSHIP HAS BECOME RELEGATED TO THE MARGINS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE. IN PARTICULAR, THE SOCIAL SCIENCES ARE NO LONGER AT THE CENTRE OF CRITICAL INTELLECTUAL DEBATE.