

A conceptually relevant and practically sophisticated journalism syllabus for AFRICA

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Over 35 African journalism educators gathered in Grahamstown, South Africa in September last year, at the invitation of the SAB Ltd-Unesco Chair of Media and Democracy, to present and discuss initial research papers aimed at defining a common vision of journalism education on the African continent. The meeting was held against the backdrop of the bid by Rhodes University, under the auspices of the School of Journalism and Media Studies, to host the 2nd World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC).

The meeting was also part of a larger initiative of Unesco's aimed at deepening the exchange of knowledge and experiences within the context of the Unesco Centres of Excellence in Journalism Education project. An aspect of the meeting thus involved reflecting on the viability of

the Unesco model curricula in journalism education.

The Grahamstown consultation concluded that there were four key areas which needed continual work by African journalism educators and scholars:

- Interrogating the epistemic-ontological foundations of African journalism education.
- Analysing the complexities of national educational policies and their implications for quality assessment of journalism education.
- Experimenting with new teaching and learning innovations in journalism education.
- Making sense of the impact of African journalism education on journalistic practices and socio-political change.

Another conclusion of the gathering was a decision to take advantage of the second WJEC to be held in Africa to conceptualise, research and design a series of syllabi on reporting the African continent. One reason for undertaking

such an initiative was to influence how the continent is portrayed both in foreign and African media. A journalistic praxis that is rooted in the political history of the continent is likely to get African citizens – and others – to reconnect with their continent in a more organic fashion. The consultation was spearheaded by Rhodes University's SAB Ltd-Unesco Chair of Media and Democracy, Prof Fackson Banda, in conjunction with the Unesco Windhoek Office. It involved contributions from media practitioners, trainers, experts and other interested parties with a keen interest in indigenising journalism education.

The courses elaborated thus represent felt needs, as captured through the online consultation via the web site of the Unesco African Journalism Schools: <http://journalismschools.unesco-ci.org>.

The findings of the online consultation clearly demonstrated the need for an indigenised syllabus on reporting Africa. They also confirmed many of the themes espoused by the Unesco model curriculum, including the need for understanding the political history of Africa as a means to locating the practice of journalism in the African

context.

Peace journalism as a means to respond to the troubled history of conflicts in Africa was among the priorities identified. There was also an emphasis on experiential journalism, with a greater focus on the arts and sciences – knowledge which would enhance African journalistic analysis and reporting.

Participants also highlighted the importance of focusing on the interplay between the African continent and global decision-making institutions as an aspect of the contemporary political history of Africa in the age of global governance and communication.

In addition, they highlighted development journalism as a way of raising critical awareness among student journalists about the key development challenges that confront Africa and Africans, such as HIV and Aids and poverty.

The four resulting courses authored by myself, Prof Abiodun Salawu (University of Fort Hare) and Dr Monica Chibita (Makerere University), represent a series of initial attempts at mapping out a possible syllabus on reporting Africa which can be administered flexibly within any national journalism education curriculum.

The course outlines respond to the need for highly-contextualised teaching and learning materials on various aspects of reporting on Africa as a rich, multifaceted cultural unit of analysis. They take their cue from the Unesco model curricula for journalism education which recognises core competencies in journalism as consisting of:

- An ability to think critically, incorporating skill in comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of unfamiliar material, and a basic understanding of evidence and research methods;
- a knowledge of national and international political, economic, cultural, religious, and social institutions; and
- a knowledge of current affairs and issues, and a general knowledge of history and geography (Unesco 2007: 8).

The Unesco curriculum document is emphatic on the importance of a contextualised understanding and application of journalism. The result is that it recommends various electives for meeting the needs of the varied social contexts in which journalism is researched, taught and practised. For example, it recommends such electives as covering conflict, disaster reporting, development journalism, business journalism, etc. (Unesco 2007: 26).

The syllabus serves another purpose: to reorient students in their uptake of knowledge about the theory and practice of journalism. Many of the concepts presented in the syllabus are introduced and developed through the lens of African scholarship.

Here, African scholarship refers not only to scholarship by Africans but also by others producing scholarship about Africa. Such an "Africana" approach allows for the contextualised and relevant philosophical-intellectual cross-pollination that African journalism education would seem to require (cf. Eze 1997). Clearly, a relevant cross-cultural pedagogy would make it easy for African and foreign teachers of journalism to relate on a common frontier.

For example, with financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism was offering at the time of this research project a two-year course focused on increasing reporting on Africa and agriculture and women.

There were 15 students – 10 Americans and five international visiting scholars, including a journalist from Uganda – who would all be travelling to Africa to report stories. Their work was intended for distribution with partnering mainstream

media in the US, Africa and internationally, and the students were working to establish collaborations with African journalists while in the field. Their stories and blogs would also be published in a digital site the class recently launched at: <http://africareportingproject.org> (Herrman 2010).

The rationale behind this present syllabus is thus informed by the recognition that Africa is often inaccurately and incomprehensively represented in foreign, and even African, media.

However, it is evident that such representations are ideologically flavoured, often fitting into the media frames that such foreign journalism has, wittingly and unwittingly, evolved over time. As a result, the reporting of the continent is often formulaic, risking a dangerous cultural homogenisation of a continent that is in reality geo-culturally multifaceted and fascinating in many ways.

In this light, the syllabus is an attempt at addressing the paucity of teaching and learning materials on reporting Africa. It is meant to provide a conceptually-relevant and practically-sophisticated basis for reporting a culturally diverse continent in continual flux.

The syllabus consists of four courses: political history of African journalism; journalism ethics in Africa; development journalism in Africa; and indigenous language media and democracy in Africa. Clearly, courses on the political history of African journalism and journalism ethics in Africa can be taught as core courses in any African national journalism curriculum, but they can also be taught as standalone electives or workshops, following the recommendation in the Unesco model curriculum.

What this means is that such courses can be injected into the main curriculum with flexibility. For example, a generic course on journalism ethics would be enriched by considering how aspects of African philosophy could be used as a lens for analysing African journalism ethics. Such an approach would have the advantage of grounding students in a particular intellectual and social-cultural context.

Considered as a whole, then, the key objectives of this four-course syllabus on reporting Africa are:

- to root students in the African historical context of journalistic production;
- to engender a self-reflective journalistic ethical decision-making approach that is grounded in a critical appreciation of the social and historical context of philosophy and morality;
- to promote a critical understanding of the development contexts and priorities that African journalists must grapple with; and
- to experiment with culturally and linguistically innovative media forms which lend themselves to a more democratically engaged journalistic practice.

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