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News

Locating

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Imagine after working for seven years as a magazine writer and editor, Rhodes University offers you a place to study for an MA and your first assignment is a critique of a Stuart Hall article.

After thorough preparation, involving burning the midnight oil so to speak, the course professor dismisses your presentation as “not making sense” and advises you to “stay with the text” and not try to impress the class with what you know but what is being argued in the chapter you are reading.

If you have a humpty-dumpty ego it crumbles, and like a humiliated dog, you put your tail between the legs and whimper to the nearest seat waiting to hear where you went wrong. Yes, this is the experience that you go through in the Africa Media Matrix because the “readers” make little sense to you in the early weeks, but with more reading a whole new media world unfolds in front of you.

Like most students, in the early days I had a woolly understanding of the media, and issues of ideology and discourse – which I consider central to media debates today – were conspicuous by their absence in my conceptualisation of journalism and the media.

I suppose this is the logical result of journalism approaches that overemphasised the nuts and bolts: how to produce media without taking into account that the media were socially constructed and

my media DNA

involved in the symbolic construction of meanings through news and other products. I learnt that journalism was an interpretation of selected events at the exclusion of others and that there were multiple interpretations.

Notions of “professionalism” that equated journalists to doctors and lawyers were ripped apart; they were like “poets said” studies. Objectivity was a strategic ritual said Tuchman (1978). The bible was an “ideological discourse” to be understood within its context; and news was a genre just like fiction. “Under Foucault’s penetrating gaze all that is seemingly solid in social life [...] truth, authority and social identity [...] melts into discourse” (Tehrani and Arno 2000: 1). In this academic swamp what became imperative to me was to locate myself within the field and try to make sense of that location.

Otherwise it was easy to get lost. However, determining your roots after coming from an academic wilderness is a difficult task especially when all you have considered knowledge is turned on its head.

While locating yourself might imply immersion into the field it also means identifying your philosophical preferences from cultural studies, political economy and sociology of news – and other approaches that draw from diverse disciplines.

Sometimes you discover that it is strategic to negotiate through the texts from your political position and to select elements from other analysts to bolster your arguments.

Studying after years of working gives you an opportunity to relate and locate your experiences to theoretical frameworks. This can only happen with some work experience in the media industry. Even though that is the case the linkages are never clear cut and require some analytical skills. Fortunately, this is one of the things that a masters degree gives to a student – incisive skills to critique the media; especially not to see the media and journalism with fixed rose-tinted lenses but to understand the nuances.

Coming to Rhodes was for me a way to upgrade my skills – so I thought. Not having gone to formal journalism school but acquiring skills on the job, I thought the MA would close the gap and formalise my qualifications.

So you can imagine the shock that went down my spine when we were told the MA did not offer production skills or the “how” of journalism but the “why”. So instead of those skills you had to learn to cite sources and build bibliographies.

And it was after a few visits that I began to realise that the courses were taking me to a more exciting destination that would transform my understanding of the media.

After working in Zimbabwe I look back in amazement at the binary nature of my understanding of journalism and media then. Thinking of the field as existing in only two prototypes with nothing in-between: state-owned media that toe the government line and commercial, privately-owned media also referred to as “independent” in opposition to government. Today I question such categorisation or even the deployment of the notion of independent.

The dilemma with this naïve understanding was when views thought to be “independent” appeared in the state media or when the privately-owned media sang songs in praise of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Then you would hear complaints from one side accusing the other of stealing an agenda. It was their idea in the first

instance argued one side. One would then ask if an agenda or ideas could be caged to belong to one group alone and whether it would not benefit society if progressive ideas were adopted and pursued. Then the state media would choose to be mum on political violence. Not to mention conflation of issues.

I reminisce at freedom of the press debates as defined in liberal-pluralist terminology of “market place of ideas” where the role of the media was more watchdog than anything else.

Thrown into the dustbin were critical approaches and anything to do with Marxism. After all, the Soviet Union had collapsed with the end of the Cold War, celebrated the pluralists. Such analyses tended to look at the media without addressing the issue of power.

It is all about power, of course. In the end. The power the media have to set an agenda. The power they have to destroy one. The power they have to influence and change the political process. The power to enable and inform. The power to deceive. The power to shift the balance of power: between state and citizen; between country and country; between producer and consumer (Silverstone 1999: 133).

Looking back would I say I was short changed by the MA course design? Far from it would be my response because as a mid-career journalist I needed to look at the media in a different and more analytical way.

References

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