

Reporting international justice

Robert Brand

Should South Africa's former President Thabo Mbeki be charged with genocide at the International Criminal Court for denying HIV/Aids sufferers access to anti-retroviral drugs?

When Young Communist League leader Buti Manamela made such a call, it led to weeks of debate in the media – and what became clear was that few journalists understood the law relating to genocide and the international criminal justice process involved.

How many South African journalists have even heard of the Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court and which defines concepts such as "genocide" and "crimes against humanity", let alone bothered to look it up?

Recognising the role that journalists play in educating the public, a group of journalists, educators and jurists met in Salzburg earlier this year to develop a curriculum outline on reporting international justice and human rights.

The project, by the Salzburg Global Seminar (<http://www.salzburgglobal.org/2009/index.cfm>) and the International Centre for Media and the Public Agenda (<http://www.icmpa.umd.edu/index.html>) at the University of Maryland, with the support of the Open Society Initiative, is aimed at giving journalism students a better understanding of international criminal law and institutions, and to help them identify stories and analyse events.

The three-day Salzburg workshop, held at the historic Schloss Leopoldskron, focused on the needs of journalism programmes in universities in countries that have wrestled with covering stories about justice and rights: South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Participants identified the core topics, cases, issues, and documents – national, regional, international – that need to be covered in courses on international justice and human rights.

The workshop participants also assessed how to best teach the skills the next generation of journalists needs to identify key stories and appropriate sources, and developed a curriculum outline that can be adapted to suit a wide range of institutions and regions.

The outline takes account of international law; history and institutions of international justice; and journalistic skills. Participant academics will devise detailed syllabi and teaching resources, which may be shared on the group's website.

The conversation in Salzburg took account of realities such as new institutions in the field of international justice, such as the International Criminal Court and war crimes tribunals; new digital technologies as well as new and cross-platform media institutions that provide a much wider range of delivery and engagement methods; and various players in the field, including journalism schools and other institutions which increasingly teach students who may practice journalism or quasi-journalism in non-traditional news institutions such as NGOs and social networking and citizen journalism sites.

The draft curriculum outline is available on the group's website (<http://justicereights.wordpress.com/>) together with other useful resources.

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