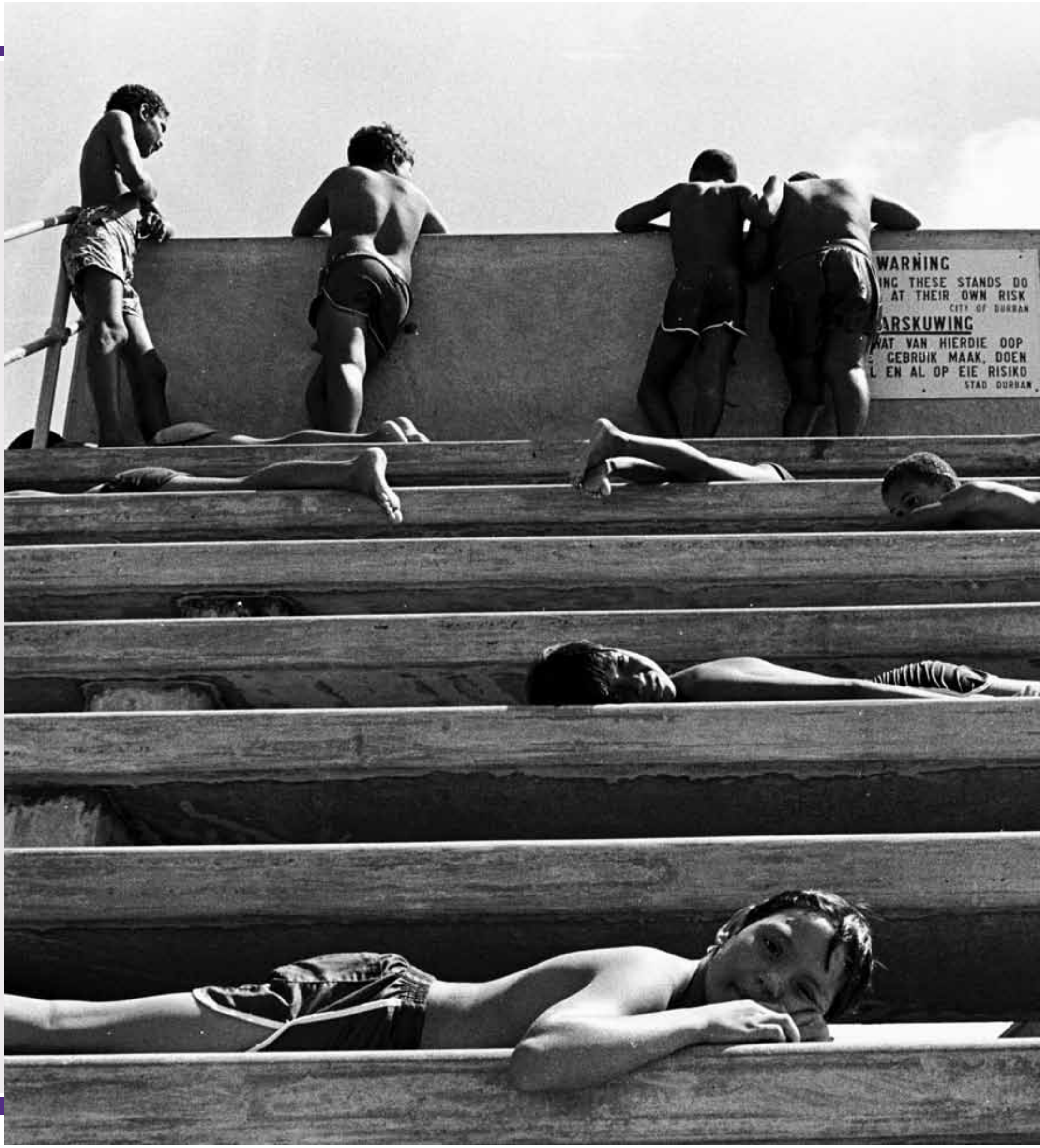
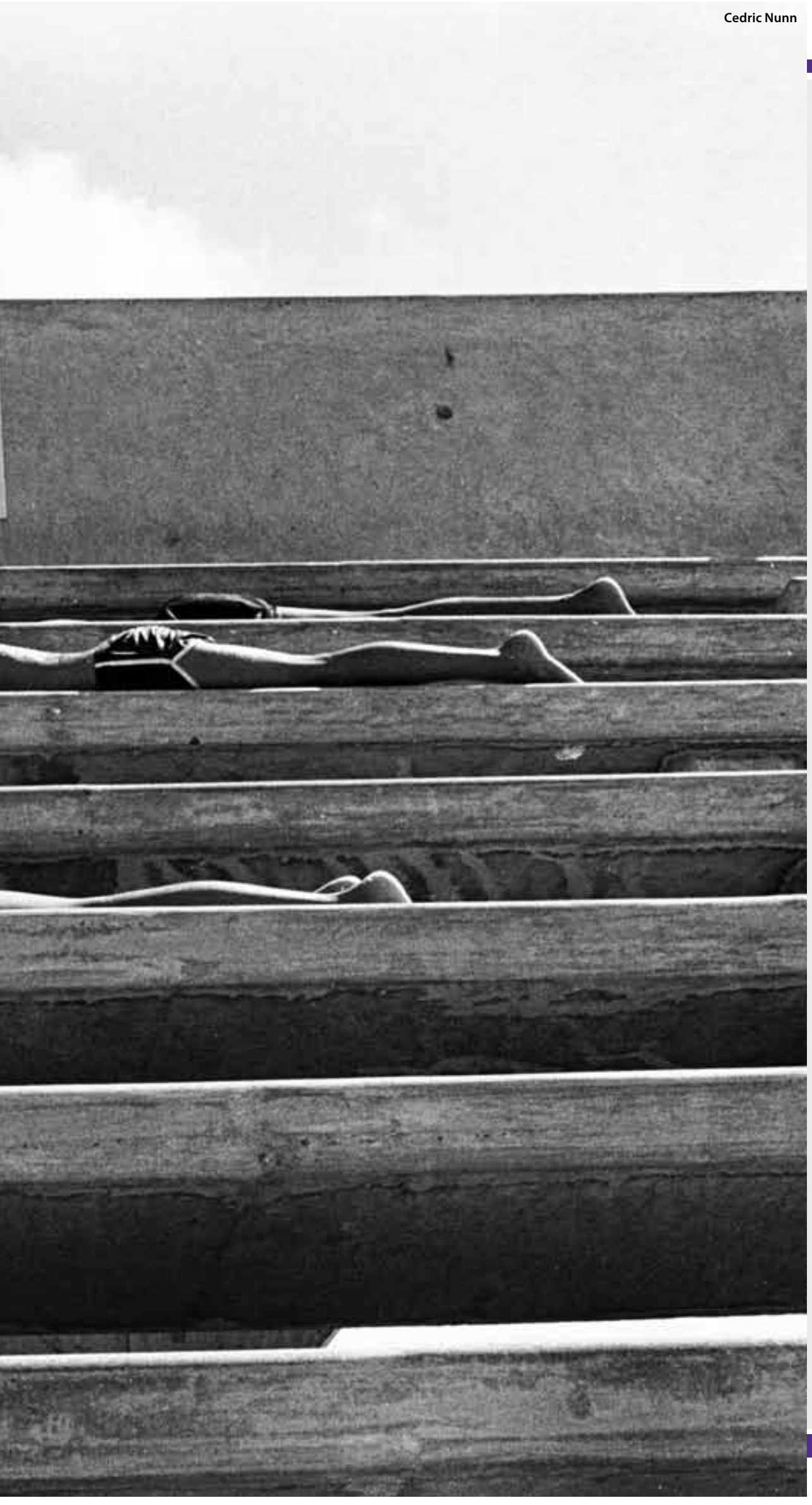

WARNING
ING THESE STANDS DO
AT THEIR OWN RISK
CITY OF DURBAN
ARSKUWING
WAT VAN HIERDIE OOP
GEBRUIK MAAK, DOEN
L EN AL OP EIE RISIKO
STAD DURBAN



Cedric Nunn

"AS SOCIETY CHANGES, AS **JOURNALISM CHANGES,** SO MUST THE WAYS **IN WHICH** JOURNALISM **IS TAUGHT.** FOR JOURNALISM IS AS MUCH ABOUT **ADAPTABILITY** AND **INNOVATION** AS IT IS ABOUT **INFORMATION** AND **ACCESS."**

TUMBLRED, TEXTED AND TWEETED: THINKING ABOUT CHANGE AND ADAPTABILITY

BY ROY ROBINS

Earlier this week, I read in the newspaper that the South African rhinoceros may be extinct by 2015. I thought: How long before the traditional, print newspaper is extinct? 2025? 2030? How long can it conceivably last? Here you have an article about a creature threatened by extinction, appearing in an outlet itself threatened by extinction.

The article was quickly posted online, where it will live forever, poached and picked-at and plagiarised, Tumblred and texted and Tweeted and tweaked, tossed between mobiles and modems and MacBooks and more, dissected and disseminated, independent of its author, belonging at once to no one and to everyone.

When we lose the traditional newspaper, what else do we lose? Or, of equal importance, what do we gain, in this transformation in what we read, how we live, who we are? As society changes, as journalism changes, so must the ways in which journalism is taught. For journalism is as much about adaptability and innovation as it is about information and access.

In South Africa, and everywhere else, technology, modes and means of communication, and ideas about society, authority, infrastructure, politics and even capitalism are changing, rearranging, and doing so literally before our eyes, as much on our screens as on our streets.

As economist Robert Reich recently wrote in the *Financial Times*: "Technologies are outpacing the capacities of democratic institutions to counterbalance them." Indeed, one wants to add: Technologies are also outpacing – and, in some instances, exploding – the capacities of non-democratic countries and institutions.

Despite all this, despite even the cell phone boom that has quietly – or noisily, depending on your point of view – revolutionised Africa over the last 10 years, it is important to remember that 90% of South Africans do not have access to the internet.

Recently, a small spat in my province, the Western Cape, illustrated the division between assumptions of wide-scale civic access to technology and the more humbling reality. The Cape Metro Health Forum accused the national health department of not revealing to the public information about the NHI. The health department countered that key documents had been published on their website. To which Cape Metro Health Forum chairperson Damaris Kiewiets responded: "In this country, when access to the internet is so limited, how can you claim that you have communicated with the masses when these people don't have access even to a computer?"

Since democracy, South Africa's historical racial divisions have morphed into a more class-based divide, and this divide manifests itself in our technology – cell phones and computers being a curious amalgamation of information, communication and commodification, as much symbolic accessory as crucial social tool. In the desire to own an iPhone, with its canny branding and unmistakeable aesthetic appeal, acquisitiveness and inquisitiveness are ingeniously intertwined. As Teddy Wayne noted in the *New York Times* in March: "Fifty-eight percent of 25-to-34-year-old [Americans] own smartphones. And in certain social strata, to not own one is the mark of an outsider."

Nor is the deep and perhaps even dangerous divide between the technological haves and have-nots unique to Africa. Writing recently in *The Diplomat*, the journalist Zhang Lijia argued that, "Ultimately, China's leaders will have to grant the same rights to those who make iPhones as to those who use them."

Ours is a strange moment of increased liberalism and emerging restrictedness. According to a recent Reuters report, South Africa is undergoing

Roy Robins was formerly the online and associate editor of *Granta* magazine in London. He has also edited *New Contrast*, South Africa's oldest literary journal. royrobinsny@hotmail.com

a 'confidence crisis'. A South African Institute of Race Relations review released in February registered a decrease in civil liberties, government effectiveness and accountability from the previous 2008 review. More than half of South Africans believe political leaders are not concerned about them, according to an Institute of Justice and Reconciliation audit published earlier this year. Of the 183 countries and territories surveyed by Transparency International in 2011, South Africa was ranked the 64th most corrupt. In a separate survey, 60% of respondents said corruption had increased in the country over the last three years. All of this, of course, makes public-interest journalism vital, although some in the government would no doubt disagree.

The government does not much care for journalism that does not much care for it – or, perhaps, that cares for it enough to uncover the truth. There are the challenges to our constitution. There is the not-yet-dead media appeals tribunal. There is the ongoing and deeply depressing information bill saga. If anything is to become extinct, I hope it is the information bill. As one citizen said at a recent information bill hearing in Mamelodi: "Do you still remember those days we used to read newspapers hiding under carpets? We do not want those days to come again. Look at countries like Zimbabwe that have such laws. Their people have fled to our country."

One is reminded of the centre-right Greek politician Antonis Samaris who, during February's debt negotiations, protested that Europe was "asking for more recession than the country can take." It sometimes seems as though our government believes that South African society is asking for more democracy than the country can take. At best, our government seems to have a frequent, fundamental misunderstanding about what journalism is.

What is journalism? That is a good first question in teaching the subject. It is a good last question, too. I do not think there is one right answer, but there are certainly many answers, and they each deserve discussion.

In an interview in 2006, SABC board member Thami Mazwai argued that the role of the broadcaster should be one of 'guide dog' rather than 'watchdog'. What, then, should be the role of the independent press? Guide dog? Watchdog? Hound at the gate or poodle on the lap? Some local media critics suggest that the independent press is reflexively critical of the party in power. To continue the rhino analogy, these critics suggest that the press exhibits altogether too much horn. But even if the American-style ideal of objectivity is an impossibility, uncovering corruption, complicity and illegality remains a necessity.

What is journalism? That is a good first question in teaching the subject. It is a good last question, too. I do not think there is one right answer, but there are certainly many answers, and they each deserve discussion.

Almost every day brings bad news about the SABC. To paraphrase a famous quote by the Cape Town-born diplomat Abba Eban, it seems that lately the SABC never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity. And this is the organisation that journalist and former SABC board member Allister Sparks has called "one of the most powerful broadcasting organisations in the world".

Of the broadcaster's upcoming digital migration, which will apparently boast 18 channels, almost no substantive information has been released. What will these channels feature? Who will supply the programming? Who will supply the funding, outside of the loan for R1.2 billion that the SABC recently requested from the government? When will the organisation delineate the difference between state and public broadcaster, and determine exactly which animal it is?

The lack of information is astonishing, not least from an organisation that last year began to advertise itself as "your partner in democracy". Perhaps the SABC considers transparency to be unworkable, undesirable, much like the analogue satellite system it disastrously marketed in 1997.

If South Africa's aspiration these last 20 years has been diversity, perhaps now we can concentrate, at least in technological terms, on hybridity. The history of journalism – the solid lessons of the past – remain as important as its newfangled future.

Some of the most innovative blogs use traditional journalistic methods of sourcing and reporting. Conversely, too many articles in local newspapers – articles about Charlize Theron's adopted son and the amorous affairs of Joost van der Westhuizen – read like chatter on some teenager's blog. South African tabloid media is vibrant and valuable, and certainly has its place, but I sometimes worry that it is beginning to displace other forms of journalism.

Today's media equation is an endless, open buffet, rather than a desultory choice of chicken-or-beef on your next domestic flight. Ours is a multi-platform world, one of unification through fragmentation. New and traditional media co-exist, engage with and inform each other. This is what media theorist Dan Gillmor means when he talks about news consumption being one of *and* rather than *or*.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, Sasha Frere-Jones refutes the "pernicious fallacies" that "non-traditional forms of expression can wipe out existing ones, and that these forms are somehow impoverished. The variables unique to the internet – hyperlinks, GIFs, chat comments – have enabled new writing voices with their own distinctive syntaxes. But we are not dealing with fungible goods – the new forms will never push out older ones because they're insufficiently similar".

The Pew Media Centre's exhaustive *State of the Media 2012* report, released in March, notes that near-constant access to equipment like iPads and e-readers (just as cars used to come with built-in, standard-issue cigarette lighters, they are now manufactured with the internet) have revitalised interest in more traditional journalism, like long-form reportage, daily newspapers and weekly magazines. The report found that online news grew by 17.2% last year, while newspapers declined by 4%. Pew researchers note that "news is becoming a more important and pervasive part of people's lives" and that "could prove a saving factor for the future of journalism".

Traditional media outlets, according to Pew, remain "the most popular sources for digital news." Meanwhile, the new Media Tenor report, also released in March, notes that South African newspapers and magazines are increasingly sourcing new-media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. The report also notes the diminishing prominence and influence of the Afrikaans press.

Journalism has always had to adapt to social change – this is nothing new. One could even argue that there have been instances when society has adjusted to journalistic change, or to revolutions borne in print. The question is not whether traditional media will survive, but in what forms.

Not so long ago, with the advent of television, it was widely thought that radio would become obsolete. But radio remains a vital medium – far more important in South Africa today, in terms of scale and reach, than TV. The people who now listen to radio on an iPod, iPad, iPhone, or who stream it live on their PC – a means by which South African expatriates around the world can keep up with local stations and points of view – are refashioning old forms with new tools.

Meanwhile, anyone with a computer and access to enough bandwidth (which, admittedly, is no small thing) can start a radio station in their bedroom. With new freedoms come new problems: the threat to intellectual property rights, piracy, propaganda, libel, hate speech, disinformation. The new-media landscape accomodates everyone, for better and worse.

One of the ironies of our age is that democratisation and monopolisation are not too far apart. Vertical integration is a global problem, as the technology companies that have surpassed old-media conglomerates begin to purchase or merge with producers of content. It seemed a long time ago when we worried about the dominance of Disney, Viacom and Fox – Facebook, Google, Amazon and Apple are the threats of today.

Journalism is at a critical moment. The state of education is at a critical moment – the ANC itself calls it a "crisis". But through this convergence of quandaries, great journalism can emerge. As President Obama's former Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, is fond of saying: "Never let a crisis go to waste."

Teachers of journalism should thread together the past and the present, with an eye to the future. Embrace the uncertainty. Engage with the uncertainty. For journalism thrives on uncertainty, and good teachers do, too. Ask uncomfortable questions. Get uncomfortable answers. Interrogate everything. Teach journalism as interactively as possible, by which I don't just mean using technological tools (indeed, an over-reliance on gadgets in the classroom can be counterproductive), but interacting with the class, having the class interact with the text, with their community and with unfamiliar communities, and, as importantly, with each other.

President Zuma recently called the constitution a "living document". When you think about it, is there a better definition of journalism?