

South Africa is frequently referred to as an “emerging democracy” and it is often argued that the media have a critical role to play in fostering this anticipated democracy.



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# Teaching FUTURE NEWSMAKERS

By Nicola Jones

**I**n a higher education context, journalism is located at the nexus where the twin imperatives of intellectual knowledge relevant to the field and vocational training meet – demands that are frequently reduced to a crude dichotomy of theory versus practice (Prinsloo, 2010).

Because these fields of study generally seek to be both vocational as well as socially relevant, a new journalism education discourse appears to be emerging – one which is defining a new academic identity for journalism education, and in some senses “extricating itself from dependency on Western orientated models of journalism education and training” (Banda et al, 2007).

But some of the major challenges and issues in this regard include the introduction of curricula that are far more concerned with providing market-related skills for future journalists than with challenging their preconceptions and broadening their horizons; in other words, institutions can more easily “sell” vocational skills aimed at a specific career. What we are failing to do at South African universities in general and in journalism courses in particular, is to educate young minds broadly in critical thinking, ethics, values, reasoning, appreciation, problem solving, argumentation and logic. “Locked into single-discipline thinking, our young people fail to learn that the most complex social and human problems cannot be solved except through interdisciplinary thinking that crosses these disciplinary boundaries” (Jansen, 2010).

This is aggravated by the fact that as more people turn to the internet for news and information, the importance of training future journalists in online and mobile journalism grows increasingly important, as otherwise graduates are simply not equipped to operate competitively in a 21st century newsroom.

Changes in both the state and media landscape in South Africa after apartheid have impacted on the discourses about journalism education, with two discourses being influential in this regard: transformation, and private-public partnerships (Banda et al, 2007). Consequently since 1994, there has been a marked shift in the way that journalism education has taken place. “Professional education has largely become driven by industrial and commercial imperatives, rather than the more civic-minded and critical approach of a university-based education, resulting in a functionalist approach to learning – as ‘training’” (Banda et al, 2007: 165). Two contextual issues are important here, the first

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being that although there have been important shifts in media ownership since 1994, these changes together with globalisation and the concentration of media have not necessarily led to social changes in content. In other words, the question remains: are journalists being taught to engage critically with the stories they produce? Secondly, the current relationship between the ANC government and the media is adversarial to say the least, following the exposure by journalists of corruption and abuse of power by political figures, and this has led to renewed threats against media freedoms in the country. It is of some concern that although these pressing contextual concerns are apparent, little has been done to address these concerns through the education of future journalists.

South Africa is understood to house the longest running journalism education programmes in Africa, beginning in 1959 at Potchestroom University (now University of the North-West), and then followed in the 1970s by the introduction of programmes at Rhodes University, the University of South Africa (UNISA), Rand Afrikaans University (now University of Johannesburg), and the University of the Orange Free State (now University of the Free State); as well as significant programmes at previously black-only universities such as Fort Hare, the University of Zululand and Bophuthatswana (now University of the North-West) (de Beer and Tomaselli, 2000; Banda et al, 2007). The following three decades saw the introduction of journalism streams at most of the country's leading universities and former technikons, with some (predominantly former English-speaking universities) emphasising a more cultural and/or media studies approach, than a strictly skills-based or communication science approach.

However, in recent years a more functionalist approach has become especially evident in the plethora of private institutions which offer a number of diplomas and short certificate courses concentrating on journalism practice and training, such as the Independent Institute of Education, College Campus, Damelin, Birnam Business School, Intec College, Boston City Campus and City Varsity to name a few. Such vocational schools adopt a more functionalist approach in their material and equip students with skills that facilitate practical market and journalism techniques. They deviate from the neo-Marxist approach, adopted by many universities, which aim to consider the socio-political aspects of journalism which identify how “historical materialism and semiotics [offer] a route to understanding how meaning is generated in specific historical contexts” (de Beer and Tomaselli, 2000).

This decided contrast could be considered as one of the greatest dilemmas faced by South African journalism education. Universities, on the one hand, tend to create an environment that teaches both vocational and critical skills, often incorporating aspects of other disciplines to ensure that students acquire a broad understanding of the socio-political environment within which journalism and media studies is situated. Private colleges, on the other hand, are less concerned with this approach and concentrate on teaching

students only the necessary skills required to achieve in a professional newsroom. In addition, they tend to offer more desirable services to students, such as small classes and a constant tutored environment – made possible by the concomitant higher fees and quicker throughput of students.

What is encouraging in the South African context is that in spite of the perceived “theory versus practice” divide, there is lively and continuing debate on the issue, and signs of a new journalism education discourse emerging. There is fairly broad agreement, for example, on the need for journalism education to include the cultivation of an informed and critical mindset as well as the honing of skills at universities. Although the market-driven imperatives of corporate media remain, some media and cultural studies educators continue to problematise journalism education curricula's relationship to the market; there is awareness of the impact of problematic political systems and an over-reliance on Western influence on journalism education in the region; and there is also awareness of the impact of lack of resources, capacity and infrastructure on journalism education.

The latter is most apparent in the acknowledgement that in order for journalism education to continue to demonstrate its contemporary relevance in both its profile and practice, it needs to ensure continuous innovation in the world of new media. There is wide agreement, for example, that South African future newsmakers need to be conversant with new technologies in information gathering, processing and distribution, and to understand the ethical implications of using these technologies (Banda et al, 2007). Although this can be problematic in terms of resources and access to new media, most journalism schools are aware that they need to broaden their range of training topics – and, perhaps, their range of students, by offering not only undergraduate and postgraduate courses, but also courses aimed at professional journalists seeking to upgrade their qualifications and obtain new skills, as well as topical courses for citizen journalists, and perhaps even news or information literacy courses for the general public.

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