



THE FUTURE IS BUILT ON THE PAST: A call to include journalism history in journalism curricula

A recent article in a weekly newspaper asked whether a shared South African history is a fallacy (Burrows and Fazel 2014: 8). One might conclude that in a country with so many contested histories, a “shared” history will remain a pipe dream. But to ensure the South African citizenry embraces a certain South Africanism – instead of dividing -isms such as tribalisms and nationalisms – the media can and should take the lead to support a specific South Africanism with reportage sprouting from such a world view.

By Lizette Rabe

Journalism
EDUCATION

This can be done by teaching a new generation of journalists – irrespective of which platform they will eventually work on and what they will call their type of news dissemination – to write from a layered understanding of our country’s history in order to deepen democracy, in what can only be described as a still struggling, post-colonial, post-apartheid democratic dispensation.

This is especially important in the disruptive digital economy, where reporting is becoming shallower because of various factors. To counteract this, a new generation of journalists should at least begin their career with an understanding of our layered, contested past, and that they need to be cognisant of innumerable complexities.

This might sound an insurmountable challenge, especially in light of the “here and now” needs of the newsroom where “doing” journalists are more valued than “thinking” journalists. It seems a journalist who can push all the right buttons, in other words a technically-skilled journalist, is more preferable than a thinking journalist, in other words a conceptually-skilled journalist. The answer of course is that information operations (previously known as the media) need both higher order and lower order skills in journalists.

Therefore, journalism curricula should as a necessity include a module based on cultural literacy in order for journalists to have an understanding of time, space, civilisations, etc. This article further argues that within such a module an important sub-module specifically focusing on journalism/media history is a necessity. The contents of such a sub-module can be described as a “shorthand” understanding of our country’s history, as our media history is an exact reflection of certain stages and eras in our history.

Just two examples: a journalism history curriculum can begin with the development of media in what later became South Africa by focusing on the despotic Charles Somerset, in an era with no press freedom and thus no freedom of expression. That period, in other words, also highlights colonialism and what that -ism was all about. Another focus can highlight the period under the Afrikaner Nationalist apartheid government, where a multitude of laws restricted media freedom – simultaneously explaining what that -ism was all about.

At a superficial glance this might seem simplistic, but a thorough, well-conceptualised media history module will not only give beginner-journalists an understanding of the development of their own profession, but they will gain, as bonus, an understanding of the development of the different eras and stages in our country’s history *and* build their analytical skills.

This will facilitate a layered understanding of the past as it presents itself as the present, and the ability to think inclusively by facing inward and outward at the same time. By including such a sub-module in curricula, it will serve as a conceptual or higher-order tool to enable journalists to report with insight on political, social, cultural and economic realities for their various audiences, taking into account continuous interactions

between politics, economics, culture and technology.

One can argue that this is especially crucial in one-party-dominated “democracies”. In such fragile democracies, contested histories are significant factors having an impact on daily narratives. Understaffed newsrooms further hinder comprehensive reportage in fragile post-colonial democracies – such as is the case in South Africa. Hence the need for journalists to have an understanding of their own profession and its role in past and present realities.

It is accepted that in young democracies the important role of a free and independent media can never be overemphasised. In many cases, media freedom is the only guarantee for individual freedom, as the other sectors of an unstable democratic environment, namely the legislative, executive and judiciary powers, can all be influenced, at best, and corrupted, at worst, by a political party that has a massive majority. Therefore, to prepare journalists for their difficult task of being independent and informed citizens of the Fourth Estate, they not only need to be prepared with the expected practical and conceptual skills for their profession, but journalism curricula also need to go one level deeper in terms of higher-order conceptual skills that might not be regarded as a priority at first glance in the light of other pressing skills. As said, this important element is media history.

One can argue that Weber’s notion of “verstehen” will be supported by such a curriculum component, as journalists will only be able to “understand” by understanding the contexts of current events in terms of a media historiographical understanding. To strengthen the argument, one can say that with the media industry currently experiencing a crisis because as a ‘profit-making machine [it] has broken down’ (Conboy 2010: 411), it also follows that curricula urgently need to revisit their function and content. A number of reports have already been published on journalism schools/curricula, amongst others the recent report by Folkerts, Hamilton and Lemann (2013).

A revision of j-curricula is imperative, not only to strengthen the technical education and training that may seem to be the priority requirement, but *especially* to produce *conceptually* fit beginner-journalists. It is under these conditions, with an almost monocular focus on technical abilities and the “here and now needs” of newsrooms, that media history as an important component of curricula is overlooked.

With a revisiting of the necessary elements in curricula, this author argues that we now have the opportunity to include media history as a sub-module in such curricula. In order for students to gain more from such a module, it should preferably be as part of a fourth year or honours level (NQF8) programme.

In what can be called a technologically driven news era, with media companies struggling to maintain profitability as the traditional print media (or “non-digital” media) try to transform themselves into digital media, it is easy to dispel the need to incorporate such a sub-focus in curricula that already are stressed to embrace all other basic, and necessary, practical and conceptual skills. Tucher, for example, describes the

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course of the Columbia Journalism School as an already “jam-packed one-year curriculum” (2012: 531). The same can be said of the one-year postgraduate vocational programme at Stellenbosch University.

Still, one can argue that history as a “past reality” (De Villiers 2012: 198), or a “present past” (Verbeeck 2000: 387), is of utmost importance in a South Africa in which the effects of a colonial-apartheid past are a daily, lived reality for many. An historical understanding of a profession as specific and crucial as the media, especially in their role as “Fourth Estate”, is then especially obligatory.

One can say that particularly in such contexts, “historians, like other people, are shaped by fashion” (Brown 2003: 1), as it is also accepted that history is (re)written by the conqueror or victor. Or, phrased less politically-punitively, because “views of and theories about people and society continually keep changing, historical interpretations of any given subject also keep changing” (Berger 2011: 156).

This is supported by what can be called “refractions”, and that, “consciously or unconsciously”, history “reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question [about] what view we take of the society in which we live” (Carr 1961: 2). In effect, facts “never come to us ‘pure’ since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form” (Carr 1961:16). Facts, in essence, are “always refracted through the mind of the recorder” – all the more reason why journalists should have an understanding of their own profession’s “refracted” “past reality” to be able to function fully as competent professionals.

Foci in a media history course

In South Africa (and probably in the majority of developing countries) journalism/media history remains a relatively understudied sub-discipline within journalism and media studies (Wigston 2007: 4-5). Thus, as a fairly recent phenomenon in media research it is not regarded as a vital component



of j-curricula. Yet in the political North, journalism history is emerging as one of “its most fertile subfields” (Conboy 2012: 506). This article therefore argues for developing a syllabus and course material that will help develop a vital higher-order skill to give young professionals in the political South an equal understanding of the layered contexts with which they have to deal. Indeed, media history can have a two-way use, namely in the way journalism makes use of history, and the usage of its own history in preparing journalists for their profession (Conboy 2012: 507).

A typical university syllabus, especially on NQF level 8, should encase two main foci: firstly, theoretical points of departure and relevant methodologies to understand the “present past” on a meta-level, and secondly, both should be applied as tools to study aspects of the “present past”. In terms of the former, various applicable theories could be included in order for students to have the necessary meta-level grasp on what they will uncover when researching aspects of history in their coursework assignments (the second component).

In terms of situating media history as a field, one can begin with a foundational point of departure in the classics – even though this can be criticised as (typically) Eurocentric. However, in a globalised environment, to make a decision based on Afro-centrism instead of a holistic view, is short sighted. Unquestionably, the departure point would still be that South Africa’s past of colonialism, unionism, apartheid and a democratic dispensation from 1994 demands the recognition that history up to the 1990s, including media history, was mostly recorded according to a Western, colonial point of departure. This necessarily resulted in specific Eurocentric constructs in terms of socio-political, cultural and economic issues, implying a paternalistic, racialised colonialist history up to a certain point, which naturally calls for a “new historicism” and should be addressed in the curriculum.

The number of theoretical foundations to be included will depend on the time allocated to the sub-module. These are points of departure: The four notions of history, consisting of technology studies, organisation studies, cultural studies and political studies (Nord 1989: 310), which include the

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different views about the nature and aim of historical research and distinguish between two main approaches, namely a humanist/positivist (or idiographic [particularising]) and a scientific/idealist (or nomothetic [generalising]) approach. The humanist historian (and approach to communication history) is concerned with the study “of unique events or sequences” in order to understand an event by understanding its context in a particular space and time, whereas the social science historian is interested in “general processes” and hopes to construct generalisations and theories “to explain classes of events without regard to space or time” (Nord 1989: 293–294). This can spark a discussion of how journalism studies includes, *per se*, the binary qualities of the humanities and social sciences.

It can also lead to in-depth understanding of positivistic and critical approaches in communication research as the “two grand theories from which all mass communication research depart[ed]” (Fourie 2007: 145). According to Fourie the positivist approach focuses on the scientific method and empiricism, and the critical approach on ideology and power, “aiming to expose the misuse of the media by a power elite”. Historiography is in essence a combination of the two approaches, as it uses what is to be found through empirical research and what must be interpreted from those factual findings. This leads to a fusion of paradigms, as positivistic research “tends to be supplemented with critical interpretation and evaluation, while critical researchers often back up their assumptions with empirical proof”.

Other approaches which can be followed include history as record of progress (Berger 2011: 167), the media evolution theory (Stöber 2004) or the continuous variables approach (Nord 1989: 293). Although the broad historical research method, as a qualitative method, is usually the methodology of choice, one could design, for example, a study specifically around what Dahl calls ‘deep-drilling’ as opposed to ‘episodic’ approaches (as cited in Wigston 2007: 5).

The above should merely function as a foundation for the second part of such a media history course, as the real focus should be on empirical research projects, in which the student uses theory and method to research various aspects of journalism history, be it censorship/media freedom, the development of “black” media, or community journalism, or any of the myriad foci waiting to be researched.

Conclusion

To deepen democracy, professionals within the realm of the Fourth Estate should be armed with knowledge of their own profession's history in order to interrogate the events of the day with more insight and “verstehen”, and thus to serve their publics better in every respect

of modern society. It is hoped that more curriculum developers will understand the importance of the media sector's own history, and develop courses for their specific needs, so as to deepen democracy through a new generation of well-prepared journalists – as, indeed, the future is built on the past.

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