KUHLE – IMIZAMO YETHU – HOUT BAY, CAPE TOWN: from the series Life under Democracy – Dale Yudelman

Journalism
EDUCATION

STILL THINKING ABOUT
journalists' thinking

Since the discourse about journalism education in South Africa in *Rhodes Journalism Review* in 2005, and after 20 years of democracy, little has changed. South African politicians, economists, educators, journalists and the media are more boisterous than ever about democracy, yet our politics, economy, society and education have deteriorated.

By Pieter Fourie

This is probably because South Africans tend to think of democracy mainly in terms of having and wanting rights and not so much in terms of what to do with and how to use the rights and the advantages of democracy to improve human living.

In the case of journalism educators, this human living includes improving the quality of journalism as man's dominant symbolic form of public communication and to increase the role of journalism in democracy. It also includes the democratic right not to be dictated to by the so-called needs and skills of the industry, but to focus on journalism as a *communication phenomenon*; on the fact that a phenomenon (such as journalism) precedes skills and that only through a sound knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon can a phenomenon be improved.

There are more journalism programmes (often dubious) and more private and public institutions (often dubious institutions) offering journalism programmes than there were in the already overcrowded market of 2005. he emphasis continues to be on journalism skills training, the industry continues to complain about the lack of skilled graduates, there are less employment opportunities, and most of all, the quality of journalism continues to be questioned and mistrusted by the public.

It was in this context and it continues to be in such a context that I argued and continue to argue that the skills-theory debate among educators and between industry and educators does not contribute to a better quality of journalism and the esteem of journalism as an academic discipline[1]. The possibilities of digitalisation and an increased focus on journalists' (and would-be journalists') digital and multimedia skills, and for the industry to grasp going online as a magic wand for solving the profession's problems, have not restored journalism's trustworthiness[2].

Without thinking about the skills and without theoretically interrogating journalism skills towards a better understanding of and an improving of journalism as a communication phenomenon, the problems will not go way. I am thus back at what I argued in 2005, namely that the criticism of Kierkegaard, Mill, Tocqueville, and Ortega in the 18th and 19th centuries can be applied to today's journalism. They, among others, argued that the secularity, mundaneness, triviality, the ephemeral nature of journalism, and journalism's lack of intellectual depth, contributed to the decline of 19th century society. Bad journalism contributed to the rise of the tyranny of the masses and the creation of a public sphere conducive to risk-free anonymity and idle curiosity. It undermined a responsible and committed public, destroyed qualitative distinctions (also between people), and contributed to a nihilistic "so-what" life and worldview. Today, critics add that the internet creates a space in which it is difficult to distinguish between relevancy and irrelevancy, fact and fakery, the authenticity of identity and the authenticity of community.

Ongoing political, economic and sociological analyses of journalism reveal a concern with the misuse of journalism for economic, political and social gains. This happens to the detriment of journalism serving its purpose to inform

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objectively, understand, interpret and guide. There is a serious concern about the shallowness of journalism ethics. Ethical decisions and behaviour are often justified and based on a professional code which is not rooted in (a) moral philosophy. The professional codes are elevated to the level of journalistic ideology, which has become an ideology in and for itself. There is also concern about journalism practices and professional codes being accepted as "the only way of how we (journalists) do things" and of such practices being accepted as unquestionable and unchangeable. All this contributes to what is being expressed as *the journalism malaise* and a general mistrust of journalism as an authentic representation of an objective truth.

As far as journalism and democracy is concerned, it is often argued that journalism is inadequately giving a public voice to civil society; is not expanding the scope of public awareness of voices outside of the agendas of the elites; and, is not counteracting power inequalities found in other spheres of the social order. It seems as if the democratic failure of journalism lies in its lack of emphasising equality. Such emphasis should begin with equality on community level up to the highest forms of democracy and democratic rights in a society.

In previous work[3] I dealt with the impact of the new information and communication technologies on journalism and the consequences of multimedia, multimedia approaches and the convergence of public communication media on the ways in which journalism is practised today. In general it has brought about a kind of McDonaldisation of journalism, sound bite, image bite, titbit, celebrity, and tabloid journalism to the detriment of in-depth interpretative journalism. Although new digital skills are important, teaching seldom addresses how the new information and communication technology has almost redefined key

constructs in journalism such as time, space, objectivity, factuality and authenticity. The danger is that we (also as educators) have grown so accustomed to the new kind of glitzy, sassy, so-called "to the point journalism" that we seldom question the value and quality of it. That is why such questioning should be an important part of the curriculum.

Where does the above criticism leave journalism educators? I conclude with what I have previously written, namely that a theoretical and philosophical education rather than an emphasis on journalism skills should be the foundation of South African journalism education. With "theoretical" and "philosophical" I mean a focus on the nature of journalism as a semiotic construct. With "semiotic construct" I mean journalism seen and experienced primarily as an instrument for the production and dissemination of meaning.

This entails that, apart from teaching skills, educators will equip students with a sound knowledge of journalism as a discourse and as a dialogue (understanding how discourse(s) and dialogue(s) work), journalism as rhetoric (understanding the power of journalism to influence people's opinions, perceptions and behaviour), journalism as a powerful linguistic and visual way of giving meaning to something and someone with significant (or meaningless) consequences for something and someone, and journalism as representation (journalism as an agency and journalism as a mirror of the world, a society, organisations, people and their behaviours).

Discourse, dialogue, rhetoric, meaning production and representation should form the meta-theories and epistemological and ontological foundations of journalism education. Such an approach could (hopefully) contribute to a more responsible and intellectually satisfactory kind of journalism.

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Endnotes

1. **Fourie, PJ. 2005. Journalism studies: thinking about journalists' thinking.** *Ecquid Novi* **26(2): 142-159.**
2. **New York Times Innovation Report. 2014. What if quality journalism isn't? Baekdal Plus.** http://www.baekdal.com/insights/what-if-quality-journalism-isnt
3. **Fourie, PJ. 2010. 'New' paradigms, 'new' theory and four priorities for South African mass communication research.** *Critical Arts* **24(2):173-192; The past, the present and the future of South African journalism research, or: in search of a meta-theory for South African journalism research.** *Communicatio*, **36(2):148-172.**