

# NEW SCHOOL MEETS OLD SCHOOL

## journalism education in Africa's newest country

By Peter du Toit

**S**outh Sudanese journalists have a critical contribution to make in promoting peace, development and democracy in Africa's newest state, but many lack the training and skills to fulfill this potential.

The need for advanced training was raised in the UNESCO Interim Assessment of Media Development in South Sudan published in 2015<sup>1</sup>. This assessment included recommendations for a university-level journalism curriculum and the development of locally relevant training materials.

While it was not captured in this assessment, the media development NGO Internews-South Sudan had already risen to the challenge. Internews recognised the importance of developing a new cadre of journalists and also that of providing working journalists with formal qualifications<sup>2</sup>. For these reasons, they facilitated a partnership between Juba University and the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University. The principle objective of this partnership is the development of a two year diploma in broadcast journalism which responds to the complex social and political context that exists in the world's newest state.

The republic achieved independence in July 2011 but has been wracked by a brutal civil war that started just 18 months after independence. This conflict between forces aligned with the former deputy president Riek Machar and government

forces aligned with President Salvador Kiir<sup>3</sup> has continued unabated despite ongoing peace talks.

The partnership brings together Africa's newest journalism school with one of the most established on the continent. The University of Juba's School of Journalism and Communication Science (SJCS) was formally established in July this year, while the Rhodes Department of Journalism (now the School of Journalism and Media Studies) has been educating journalists for almost 45 years.

In working to develop this curriculum the partners are acutely conscious of the need to complement each other's strengths. On one hand, the Rhodes School of Journalism and Media Studies (JMS) has years of experience of designing, refining and redeveloping its journalism curriculum. On the other, its Juba-based partners understand the intricacies and complexities of teaching and learning in an environment characterised by significant underdevelopment.

Driven by a team of JMS lecturers working in consultation with the SJCS academic leadership and Internews trainers, the curriculum development process has involved reciprocal visits between campuses during which partners have reached key decision on the overall focus and structure of the programme.

In the first phase of this process, JMS staff held wide ranging consultations with stakeholders with

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1. UNESCO. 2015. Interim Assessment of Media Development in South Sudan. Available: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002327/232709E.pdf>

2. Internews is responsible for a network of community radio stations in South Sudan and provides support to other stations and humanitarian communication project in IDP camps.

3. Some have estimated that this conflict has already resulted in the deaths of up to fifty thousand people, although no official death toll is available. It has also seen more than two million civilians displaced. UNHCR. 7 July 2015. More than 2.25 million now displaced in South Sudan and across its borders. Available: <http://www.unhcr.org/559bdb0e6.html>

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an interest in media development in South Sudan. During a week-long visit to Juba organised by Internews, Rhodes radio studies lecturers Jeanne du Toit and Shepi Mati conducted in-depth individual and focus group interviews with academics, journalists, editors, media support NGO workers and civil society groups.

Participants were asked to identify aspects of the South Sudanese social context that should inform the design of the diploma, how radio journalism can contribute positively within this context, and what knowledge and skills journalists need to develop if they are to make a positive impact.

Responding to these questions participants stressed that the curriculum needed to take into account South Sudan's long-standing history of violent conflict that is often misrepresented as a consequence of primal ethnic antagonisms. Journalists, they argued, need to be equipped to question such deterministic assumptions to look for the social and political explanations that make these conflicts possible.

Participants pointed to the need for journalists to contribute to nation building in South Sudan and to help build bridges of understanding between 63 different ethnic groups that are spread out across 10 different states. They also argued that journalists need to build bridges between citizens on the ground and those in power with the responsibility to serve communities.

Many stressed the challenge that journalists face in covering developments within a very new nation where social and political systems are still emerging. South Sudan is currently governed under a transitional constitution and it's unlikely that a final constitution will be concluded in the near future. Journalists need to be able to report on this transition and to explain complex processes to



Professor William Hai Zaza, Head of the School of Journalism and Communication Sciences at the University of Juba, speaks about the partnership between the University of Juba and Rhodes University during his visit to Rhodes in June 2015.

audiences who have previously had little involvement in political processes.

Participants noted that there is a critical need for information across South Sudan and that this is exacerbated by the fact that only 27% of the population is literate. They explained that the vast majority of people live in rural areas and that many are reliant on media, particularly radio, for information about government programmes and processes. People needed to be informed about issues relating to peace initiatives, food security, education and issues of public health.

Journalists, the participants stressed, needed to be prepared to go beyond the objective reporting of facts. They should also be equipped to educate the population about how, by participating in civil society activities within local communities, they can contribute to peace building and development.

The conditions in which journalists were operating were often hostile. Participants observed that journalists faced restrictions with regard to the way in which they covered the civil war. For example, journalists are not able to use rebel voices on air. They also face the prospect of intimidation if they expose or challenge people in power.

Many participants also suggested that reporters often lack a strong enough sense of their own professional identity and that this meant many lacked confidence when it came to asking challenging questions of people in power. Some said this was often evident in the way in which reporters allowed important sources to take control of interviews.

Journalists also frequently have difficulty in persuading people to speak to them. The participants suggested that this refusal to engage with journalists could often be traced to a general lack of faith in journalists to accurately represent the facts.

Participants generally agreed that by offering journalists a chance to complete a professionally

relevant qualification the planned diploma could contribute towards addressing several of these problems. Qualified journalists are likely to have more confidence when it comes to asking hard questions and they are likely to inspire more confidence in source by getting stories right and adhering to professional ethics.

In the second phase of the partnership, the SJCS leadership, Internews – South Sudan and the JMS team have developed the overall structure for a broadcast journalism curriculum that responds to the needs of both working and aspirant journalist in South Sudan.

This curriculum, which involves eight modules offered over two years, has been designed to accommodate people who are already employed at radio stations and to meet the needs of new entrants with no experience in journalism.

Each module includes two weeks of intensive classroom engagement followed by a month or more of experiential learning at a radio station. Working journalists will be able to complete their experiential learning at their own stations and to incorporate learning tasks alongside their professional duties.

In the first year students complete a module dealing with media and society in South Sudan and a second focusing on journalism, development and democracy to strengthen their knowledge of the social context in which journalists work in South Sudan. They then take two more practical modules to develop their foundational knowledge of radio broadcasting, dealing respectively with the basics of radio production and basic radio journalism skills.

In the second year students continue to study the social context of journalism and strengthen their journalistic practice. They first complete a module in conflict sensitive reporting and thereafter explore how radio journalists can take advantage of digital technologies and social media for telling stories. In

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the penultimate module students learn to facilitate debate and discussion shows. The last module is project-based and encourages students to experiment with what they have learned as they tackle a major project of their choice.

In the next phase of the project JMS staff will complete the process of developing content that will be integrated into the different modules, and the assessment and teaching strategies that teachers can employ when presenting these to students.

The curriculum will need to be approved by Juba University's senate and once this is done JMS staff will provide support SJOJ lecturers as they prepare to deliver the curriculum. They will also work with these lecturers as they revise the curriculum based on the experience of teaching it for the first time.

It is anticipated that the partnership between Africa's newest journalism school and one of its oldest will continue to provide opportunities for teachers from vastly different contexts to share ideas about innovative approaches to journalism education.



Chapleyn Kara Yokoju talks to Ettione Ferreira about the workshop held at Rhodes University in June 2015, aimed at strengthening the curriculum for the University of Juba.



*Peter du Toit co-ordinates the Rhodes School of Journalism and Media Studies curriculum development partnership with Juba University's School of Journalism and Communication Science and Internews – South Sudan. He is also a media trainer who specialises in providing conflict sensitive reporting to journalists in conflict-affected countries. [p.dutoit@ru.ac.za](mailto:p.dutoit@ru.ac.za)*