

Out of ‘the mouths of babes’

– entry-level journalists and their perception of the challenges for ([South] African) journalism education and the newsroom

With journalism on a “tipping point” due to social, economic and technological factors, and in a time in which journalism arguably has a bigger than ever role to play to “save the world”, what do entry-level journalists feel was the most meaningful course – or what was lacking – in their education and training (E&T)? This paper presents the experiences of a group of South African beginner-journalists who were educated and trained at one of the best journalism schools on the African continent. What do they regard as the challenges for today’s media, and what do they identify as the challenges for journalism education and training? Do they feel journalism education in Africa have particular challenges? These were some of the foci in a questionnaire completed by newly employed young journalists who find themselves in the midst of an almost seismic event due to the challenges of media convergence and integration, coupled with political, social, cultural and economical pressures, resulting in, among others, the demand for “news lite”. This paper builds on existing literature with specific reference to journalism education and training in South Africa. It also addresses, although indirectly, the matter of “africanising”, or from another perspective, “de-Westernising”, the curriculum, with a question which tested the beginner-journalists’ attitude towards “African journalism”.

Key words: Africa, challenges, curriculum content, employment realities, journalism education and training, media, South Africa, questionnaire.

Author's name: Lizette Rabe

Institutional affiliation: Professor and departmental chair, Department of Journalism, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Address: Department of Journalism, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch 7600 South Africa

Phone number: +27 21 808 3488

E-mail: LRABE@sun.ac.za

Introduction

It is generally accepted that journalism is at a crossroads due to technological advances, coupled with socio-economic factors in what can be called a media-saturated, digitised, networked society. This has been highlighted in various scholarly and mass media publications. One practitioner-cum-academic describes it as journalism being on a “tipping point”, and that journalism needs to be saved in order to “save the world” (Beckett, 2008:2).

The founder of the American Committee of Concerned Journalists, Bill Kovach, recently was quoted that journalism should fulfil its role as follows (CCJ e-mail, 2010):

“...To survive in the long run we have to be in the business of using a journalism of verification to convert information into knowledge.”

One can describe these socio/economic/technological changes which are transforming traditional media/journalism as a seismic event in terms of a postmodern/post-everything world.

Various factors impact on journalism in a “neo media” society, with social media and “mobimedia” as some of its manifestations, and thus on journalists and their role, resulting in the news media, and media workers, to be redefined.

How should journalism E&T curricula address these changes? How should they be incorporated in journalism E&T? In (South) Africa, in particular, the question of “de-Westernising” journalism, or from an African perspective, “africanising” journalism, is also at issue. The previous South African president, Thabo Mbeki, in his address at the inaugural African Editors’ Forum in 2003 stressed the fact that African stories need to be told not from a Western perspective, but from an African one (Mbeki, 2003), with his statement of being Africans first, then journalists.

If journalism thus is at a cross roads, it follows that journalism education should find itself at the same cross roads. Also this fact is generally accepted, as has been described in a South African journal article following a national skills audit among entry level journalists. This comprehensive 76 page article also gave an overview of the state of education and training in this sector in South Africa (De Beer & Steyn, 2002).

The authors concede that journalism E&T and its challenges is not something new, and not something particular to South Africa. The authors refer to an article seven years earlier on journalism education (De Beer & Steyn, 1995).

Similarly, with the Mbeki call that (African) journalists should report from an African perspective, “Africanising” the journalism curriculum has also become topical. In his address to academics and practitioners from across Africa, the CEO of the leading South African media company with various operations in several African countries, also, e.g., called for the training of journalists with “a distinct African focus” (Groepe, 2008:2). At the same conference the editor of the *New African* magazine argued that African journalists should look after African “national” interests, and fashion journalism education not after inherited colonial models, but on indigenous knowledge (as cited in Dube, 2008).

Several other academic and mass media articles and chapters on journalism E&T, with specific reference to (South) African needs, have been published over the past decade. To name a few: Thloloe, 2008, 1997; Ankomah, 2008; Berger & Matras, 2007; Botha & De Beer, 2007; Mabweazara, 2006; Rabe, 2005, 2002; Steyn, De Beer & Steyn, 2005; Fourie, 2005; Wasserman, 2005; Berger, 2004; Deuze, 2004, 2001; Steyn & De Beer, 2004 and Claassen, 2001.

Accepting thus that journalism and journalism education are at a “tipping point” or a cross roads, or, indeed, is at a post-seismic event point, how, according to the perceptions of beginner-journalists, did their education and training (E&T) prepare them for a profession under pressure, what do they see as the media’s biggest challenges, and how should journalism education address this? And, finally, do they think there is a need for “African” journalism, and why?

Methodology

To find answers to the above questions, specific graduates of the Stellenbosch University’s (SU) Department of Journalism were targeted.

As a postgraduate journalism department, the department specialises in the education and training of journalists in its vocational, professional one year post-graduate degree in journalism (BPhil in Journalism), and focuses on research in its master’s and doctoral programmes (the MPhil and DPhil in Journalism).

The BPhil in Journalism selects only 25 students per year group from applications from across South Africa. In three surveys the department was mentioned as one of the best in terms of education and training of journalists. The first, the South African National Editors’ Forum’s Skills Audit, identified the department as a “centre of excellence” (De Beer & Steyn, 2002:81-82). In the second the department was listed as one of Africa’s top twelve journalism schools in the 2007 UNESCO survey (Berger & Matras, 2007). In the third, done by the

specialist media magazine *The Media* in 2007 among media practitioners, the department was placed among the top institutions by media individuals (Motloun, 2007:37).

For the purposes of this study, the target population was graduates from the SU BPhil class with limited experience. The source of data was a questionnaire with nine open-ended questions (Addendum A).

An introductory e-mail together with the questionnaire was e-mailed to alumni of the years 2001 to 2005. They were 101 in total, although it could not be established how many in fact were reached as the alumni archival records could have e-mail-addresses that were not in use any more. The questionnaire was in both English and Afrikaans, as the BPhil class is taught in both languages. There were 21 responses – more than 20 % of the population. One response was not complete. A total of 20 responses could be processed.

The first three questions asked demographic data in terms of which year they graduated (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 or 2005, in other words, how many years' experience they have), in which media sector they find themselves (journalism, public relations, related media industry or a non-media environment) and what her/his title/position is. Other demographic information (e.g. population group) was not requested.

The results of the first three questions will not be discussed for the purposes of this paper. Still, it demands one note: it was observed that some already occupied senior news management positions – an indication of the extent of the juniorisation phenomenon.

Questions 4 to 9 dealt with the following questions, and were numbered as 1 to 6 for the purposes of this study:

1. What is the one element/module that you can identify that taught you the most in the BPhil Journ course?
2. What were the things you felt you lacked when you began working in a news room (which in other words should be included in a journalism education programme)?

3. Which aspects do you think should a journalism education programme incorporate?
4. What do you think are the biggest challenges for journalism today?
5. What do you think are the biggest challenges for journalism education today?
6. Do you think journalism in Africa has specific challenges? If so, what are they?

These questions were analysed according to words/descriptions used, as a form of coding, in order to draw some conclusions from the answers. The students were each given a number as their responses were returned to protect their identity.

Context: the BPhil Journalism curriculum

SU's postgraduate journalism programme strives to deliver "multi-skilled, multimedia beginner-journalists" in an intensive, demanding one year course. It is a vocational course, striving to deliver professional entry-level journalists.

As an NQF course it is accredited on tier 7, the honours academic level, with 120 credits. These credits are divided between 7 modules, which are subdivided into 21 modules. These modules have both practical and theoretical components, with the emphasis on the practical. Prospective students are warned that they will be required to be dedicated and focused because of the programme's intensity and 24/7 commitment.

The skills which are to be acquired during the year can be described as conceptual (critical, analytical, thinking) skills, paired with practical skills, including technical skills. One can state that journalism is an applied science: theory without application is worthless for the journalism student. As per the German saying: "Die beste Theorie is die beste Praxis".

The curriculum's weight lies in Journalism Practice subjects, backed up by the necessary theoretical/academic components, as it is on the honours level, resulting in the "*thinking, doing*" journalist.

(Please see Addendum B for an overview of the modules, sub-modules and weighting of the modules.)

Discussion

Question 1: What is the one element/module that you can identify that taught you the most in the BPhil Journ course?

It seems the Journalism Practice module was deemed most valuable, as almost 50 % of the students mentioned their training in reporting and other practical skills. A third mentioned the skill of writing under pressure and within a strict deadline. A fifth of the students mentioned the Media Ethics module as being invaluable for their profession. Three students mentioned that the insight gleaned in the Media Literacy module was most valuable. Two students said “all” modules were important in shaping their career, and another two also mentioned how they could apply the practical and theoretical skills of Photojournalism. Other modules that were mentioned by the respondents are Computer Skills, Media Management (now omitted from the curriculum; it was replaced with a stronger multimedia E&T focus), Media and Society, language/writing skills which were honed in all modules, and, lastly, the weekly Friday seminar for which a guest lecturer is invited from industry.

Some of the responses :

Respondent 2: “I wouldn’t be able to point out a single element or module but rather refer to a combination thereof. The discipline of holding deadlines and writing ‘for print’ has been invaluable – and I think would be both in a journalistic and non-journalistic job. In terms of courses I would say computer assisted reporting, journalism practice and media management have given me a great head start.”

Respondent 5: “The unbelievable pressure on us to deliver quality copy in a protected but ‘pressurised’ environment was the biggest skill I could acquire.”

Respondent 10: “The practical elements – preparing for news broadcasts – finding news and interviewing sources; and story idea generation for feature writing, and writing news stories.”

Respondent 11: “I think all of the modules are important and have helped a lot in shaping my career.”

Respondent 19: “Media Ethics and Cultural Literacy stand out. Both taught me to develop my critical thinking skills.”

Question 2: What were the things you felt you lacked when you began working in a news room, which in other words should be included in a journalism education programme?

No one feature stands out as being generally lacking in the course as identified by these beginner-journalists.

The responses can be summarised as follows:

More focus can still be given to subbing/editing of copy (three students), an even bigger Journalism Practice module (three students) and more practice in interviewing skills (two). Two students said they cannot identify any shortcoming – respondent 8: “I had a front page story on my first day at the newspaper”.

Other features that could get more attention were the following (all got one mention): Rewriting, column writing, bigger multimedia focus, more “story experience”, more focus on hard news, more word processing skills, more focus on the procedures for interviewing, a stronger financial journalism focus, a health journalism course, interpersonal skills, how to be independent/maintain a balance in terms of sources, how to be more confident, as well as shorthand and the need for an indigenous language as being part of the course.

Some of the responses were as follows:

Respondent 10: “More news writing practice – it wasn’t fun at the time, but looking back, learning the basics of writing copy quickly and accurately was invaluable.”

Respondent 11: “Reporting experience, interviewing skills and also writing a tight and accurate copy/story.”

Respondent 13: “Experience and understanding of the environment (in my case, magazine environment) was missing, but that is something that only comes with time and actual real-life experience. Crozier Street, I think, gave me a very good foundation off which to spring into the ‘real’ newsroom. I had to learn to ‘toughen up’ and not take it personally when something I’d written was re-written or a new intro tacked onto it. Confidence. I still had a lack of confidence in picking up the phone and getting the story.”

Question 3: Which aspects do you think should a journalism education programme incorporate?

Three issues were each mentioned by three students. They were specialisation opportunities in terms of media platforms, multimedia skills and conceptual skills. Subediting skills and language proficiency were mentioned by two students. One student responded with “everything that the BPhil currently offers, perhaps with even more focus on practice” (Respondent 7).

Other responses were as follows:

Respondent 13: “The programme should probably focus on the practical, because I found that the most useful tool in ‘transforming’ me into a journalist. The critical thinking components are also important, because a journalist who doesn’t think deeper is a dangerous journalist! Some people might have preferred to do a little bit more ‘arts journalism’. The photojournalism course was fun for me personally and I think it’s important even for those who didn’t enjoy it – even if you don’t want to win any photo prizes, a journalist should (in an emergency) be able to get a decent, useable shot.”

Respondent 18: “Practice, practice and once again practice. This, in my experience, was the best training of all.”

Question 4: What do you think are the biggest challenges for journalism today?

Independence of the media and media freedom were two issues that were mentioned most. More than 25 % mentioned media independence as issues, with more than 20 % mentioning media freedom. Juniorisation was also mentioned as challenges by three respondents (and keep in mind, these are juniors), and journalism's integrity and credibility were mentioned by two.

Other issues that worry respondents are the following:

The infiltration of entertainment into news, people who are not capable of "doing the job", seniors who do not take juniors seriously, lack of general knowledge/point of reference, deadlines; fewer journalists doing more work; to understand target markets; the information tsunami and how to deal with it in the media; understanding context; news nose/news literacy; the influence of commercial imperatives/commercialism; ethics, technology; greener pastures; negative reporting; lack of training; "two camp-journalism" – on the one hand, journalists who are government advocates, and on the other, opposites "who focus solely on the negative".

Respondent 1: "Celebs! Just kidding. I think the most obvious threat for newspapers is that of media freedom. But, more worryingly, is the infiltration of entertainment in all our media. Everything has to be 'lekker' or 'nice' or something along those lines. Granted, there's a place and space for that but when it starts spreading to traditionally serious media it becomes problematic. The other thing I think we should be careful of is appointing people who are unable to do their jobs simply because they're a particular colour. Affirmative action has its place, yes, but for those who actually do work and try to move up the ranks by doing their work see how others who are only too happy to trade on their skin colour gets ahead."

Respondent 4: "To be relevant and authoritative and interesting amid what *Time* magazine described as the You-generation where user generated content is paramount."

Respondent 9: “The lack of older, experienced journalists with institutional memory in news rooms. Also, a lack of understanding by government on what the role of the media is, versus the role they want the media to play.”

Respondent 10: “Maintaining a reputation of impartiality and professionalism.”

Respondent 13: “‘Juniorisation’ of newsrooms: youngsters armed with pens going out into the world to interview ‘grownups’, and not understanding the bigger picture or full context of what they’re reporting on. Coupled with the arrogance of the young, this can lead to a distorted ‘first draft of history’. Greener pastures: many journalists leave the field because they feel they are not getting paid the money they deserve.”

Respondent 16: “A lack of training and academic background among journalists; journalists falling into one of two camps: those that blindly support the government and believe in ‘nation-building’ journalism, and those that are critical of everything the government does and focus solely on the negative things happening in South Africa.”

Question 5: What do you think are the biggest challenges for journalism education today?

Challenges for journalism education were wide-ranged, from illiteracy to a lack of integrity. The challenges can be summarised as follows: illiteracy (also cultural illiteracy), new media/technology challenges, together with challenges of media in society coupled with media ethics, increasing pressure in the news environment, time/self management, generic skills, to get a balance between theory and practice, multi-skilling, need for further training, integrity problems, newsroom realities, a lack of critical thinking skills.

Some of the individual responses were:

Respondent 1: “People who come from school who can’t read, write or spell. I know it’s not something you should do at postgrad level but journalists must be taught how to write properly. I also think blogging has changed the way people are thinking about journalism and

instead of sticking their heads in the sand (as many overseas news media have done), journalism schools should embrace blogging as part of the curriculum. If a student is taught ethics and responsibilities of blogging then perhaps it's better than to send them out and let them figure it out on their own."

Respondent 5: "The easiest way to provide and evaluate journalism education must be the written word in Arial 11 with 0.6 line spacing between paragraphs (I still do it!). With multimedia attention to personal news management, I mean how to stop with news collection and write the story, how do I make a call in terms of news management."

Respondent 10: "Sufficiently training journalists to generate their own story ideas and to work independently; establish and actively maintain a high standard of training."

Respondent 13: "Lack of time: mentoring could play an important role in developing young journalists, but the newsroom situation just doesn't allow time for older journalists to spend much time helping the younger journos."

Respondent 16: "Finding a balance between practical and academic training – too much of either is detrimental."

Question 6: Do you think journalism in Africa has specific challenges? If so, what are they?

The reaction on this question was an overwhelming YES! Journalism HAS specific challenges in Africa. It seems the respondents are unanimous in identifying journalistic issues in Africa as issues around democracy, media freedom, lack of investigative journalism, government interference, training issues, creating a local perspective, HIV/Aids, the violent nature of societies and the need for business journalism.

Some responses:

Respondent 3: "Training for journalists. I want to stress training in business journalism. The South African government and other international role-players work hard to stabilise the

continent politically. Where it has happened, chances for economic growth are better. But it must be supported by economic interest from within and outside the country. Business journalists can play an important role.”

Respondent 4: “To quote the film *Black Hawk down*: ‘to win back the initiative’. Fantastic as BBC Africa etc are, and which is used by local media, Africa needs local perspectives which are to be separated from nation building and other non-news agendas.”

Respondent 6: “Balance: whose interests? Those who can pay, the poor, the government? E.g., who is the SA society, and should African journalism not be developmental? Or is exactly this discriminatory, to treat Africa different than the rest of the world?”

Respondent 7: “In general Africa deserves better coverage in the developed world as currently is the case. It must be important that Africa’s media tell Africa’s good news stories.”

Respondent 9: “I think there is still the perception that journalism should follow the developmental or nation building model, rather than the watch dog model. Also, economic and business pressures sometimes supersede the newsworthiness of an article.”

Respondent 11: “Government censorship and very little freedom of speech in some countries is still a big issue. In most underdeveloped countries there’s a lack of resources to better equip aspirant journalists.”

Respondent 12: “It seems we should focus more on being a source of information – and not only a watch dog, especially in the light of HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, etc. Community media should also play a more important role.”

Respondent 13: “Vast differences in levels of income in many African countries are one problem area. This means that radio becomes the most important medium, with newspapers and magazines reaching only those who can afford them, which leads to a situation where disparities can arise between, for example, what is broadcast on radio (and perceived to be the most important news of the day by radio listeners) and what is printed in newspapers and magazines (perceived to be most important news by their readers). The stories that make it out

of that country are usually the ones printed in newspapers, not what's being said on radio. So the perception of the country that is sent to the outside world is skewed in favour of newspaper coverage, which doesn't necessarily always provide an accurate reflection of what's going on in the country.”

Respondent 15: “The media must be critical without being alarmist or pessimistic; it must give attention to positive stories on development, success – Africa is not only a place of poverty, famine and violence; we should cover local issues – news on our continent disappears on the inside pages; the media MUST fight HIV/Aids, crime, corruption, poverty – we have an important educative role.”

Respondent 16: “Of course African journalism has specific challenges! African journalists write about different issues to those in developing countries. I think with so much poverty, violence and the prevalence of HIV/Aids it is hard to find the positive. In many African countries censorship is also a huge issue and if you want to be a journalist in such countries you have to be completely uncritical of the government's actions – it is sad that in many African countries journalism has lost its watchdog role.”

Conclusion

It seems there is only one, and indeed, simple answer to the question of what the E&T of beginner-journalists should entail: practice. But then it should be qualified immediately: Practice with its foundation in critical, analytical, conceptual thinking skills.

It is clear from the above that many of these entry-level journalists found the basis of their education and training in the journalism practice modules, but that that certainly is not enough. This will only teach you the practical, technical skills: the doing skills.

For conceptual skills you also need conceptual, analytical, thinking skills, acquired through courses that will help one think in an analytical, critical way, based in what can be named critical media theory.

Understanding media technology is also essential. No journalism course can claim to be that without basing their courses on multimedia platforms, and furthering an understanding of technology from both a theoretical and practical point of view.

Lastly, a distinctly African point of departure is needed to report on Africa to record Africa's story from a new point of view.

The researcher intends to follow this study up with a similar questionnaire to a cohort of graduates from the 2006 to 2010 BPhil groups to be able to compare findings in terms of the ever developing question of what an ever developing journalism curricula should consist of, compared to what the needs of ever developing newsrooms are.

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Addendum A

From: CROZIER

Sent: Friday, December 15, 2006 9:29 AM

To: [names deleted to protect the privacy of the respondents]

Cc: Rabe, Lizette <lrabe@sun.ac.za>

Subject: Vraelys / Questionnaire

Geagte BPhil Joern-alumnus

Jy is nou al 'n aansienlike tyd weg van Crozierstraat, en ek is seker jy kan met groot kundigheid reflekteer op die opleidingsprogram BPhil in Joernalistiek. Ek het gehoop jy sal 'n paar minute kan gebruik en terugvoering gee oor hoe jy meen die kursus jou voorberei het op die joernalistiek - of nie voorberei het nie. Kan jy asb die kort vraelys beantwoord en teen 15 Januarie vir my terugstuur. (Onthou asb om te forward na my e-adres en nie net te reply nie.)

Baie dankie

Lizette Rabe

Dear BPhil Journ alumnus

You are now a considerable time away from Crozier Street, and I am sure you can reflect with a lot of expertise on the education and training programme BPhil in Journalism. I am hoping you can use a couple of minutes to give feedback on how you think the course has prepared you for journalism - or did not prepare you. Could you please answer the short questionnaire and send it back by 15 January. (Please remember to forward to my e-address, and not to reply.)

Thank you

Lizette Rabe



2006Opleiding.doc
(42 KB)

Addendum B



UNIVERSITEIT•STELLENBOSCH•UNIVERSITY
jou kennisvennoot•your knowledge partner

Departement Joernalistiek • Department of Journalism

BPhil (Journalism) 120 credits NQF 7

| | | Credit 120 | Percentage 100% |
|-----------------|---|---------------|--------------------|
| Module 1 | Journalism Practice (JP) | 26 | 23 |
| | JP News | 10 | 10 |
| | JP Features | 10 | 10 |
| | English for Journalists | 0 | 0 |
| | Afrikaans vir Joernaliste | 0 | 0 |
| | Internship | 6 | 3 |
| Module 2 | Broadcastmedia (BM) | 10 | 8 |
| | Radio Journalism | 7 | 6 |
| | TV Presentation | 1.5 | 1 |
| | TV Documentary | 1.5 | 1 |
| Module 3 | Journalism Technique (JT) | 10 | 9 |
| | Layout and Design | 5 | 4 |
| | Internet Journalism | 3 | 3 |
| | Computer Ability | 2 | 2 |
| Module 4 | Media Studies (MS) | 19 | 12 |
| | Media Ethics | 8 | 6 |
| | Media and Society | 8 | 6 |
| | Research Methodology | 3 | 2 |
| Module 5 | Media, Culture and History (MCH) | 11 | 8 |
| | Cultural Literacy | 8 | 6 |
| | Media History | 3 | 2 |
| Module 6 | Specialist Journalism (SJ) | 14 | 15 |
| | S&T Journalism | 5.5 | 5 |
| | Global Journalism | 3 | 3 |
| | Photo Journalism | 4 | 5 |
| | Financial Journalism | 1.5 | 2 |
| Module 7 | 25%-assignment | 30 | 25 |
| | Indepth Project | 30 | 25 |