Developing relevant Journalism curricula in changing times:

Experiences from East Africa

(Draft: Not to be cited)

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Abstract

This paper presents different concerns in developing and reviewing curricula for undergraduate journalism programmes in Africa, with a focus on the East Africa region. The paper draws from the experiences of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda to discuss where journalism training in this region has been, what changes have taken place in the environment since the 1990s and their implications for curriculum development and journalism education. The paper briefly engages with the notion of "African" journalism curricula, as well as the specific practical concerns for curriculum development in this region. Some of the issues the paper engages with include the relevance, shortcomings, levels of preparedness of university journalism graduates for the current media market and the practicality of focusing attention on specific areas such as language and computing skills with limited time and other resources. The paper also highlights the dilemmas of balancing core and cognate subjects, whether or not to aim at producing niche journalists or generalists, and whether to prepare journalists to work across platforms rather than specialize in print, broadcasting etc. The last part of the paper zeros in on how Makerere University in Uganda between 2005 and 2009 has tried to resolve these puzzles concluding with lessons learned. In the preparation of this paper, the author participated in the WJEC PrepCom (2009) that brought together academics from the different regions of Africa to discuss the Africanization of journalism curricula. In addition the author conducted key informant interviews with 7 academics (two from Uganda, three from Tanzania, one from Kenya and one from Rwanda). The author also consulted four practitioners working with the print and the electronic media in the region. Finally, the author relied on her experience of 15 years in journalism education and curriculum development for graduate, undergraduate and mid-career levels.

1990 is seen as a watershed period for East Africa as this marks the point where global economic and political changes pushed governments in the region to open up to multi-party political activity as well as to liberalize the broadcast sector that had remained under state control since independence. Prior to the 1990s journalism training where it existed in the region focused on training people to serve in the state media. The emphasis was mostly practical skills. In the case of Rwanda, according to a lecturer at the National University of Rwanda in Butare, there was hardly any journalism training in the country and the handful of people that worked for the national media were trained in Belgium. In Tanzania, because of the *Ujamaa* policies that governed Tanzania for the first three decades after independence, journalism training was not only geared at serving the state media but was also ideologically bent towards the predominant socialist ideology.

In the 1990s, a number of political, economic and technological developments altered the situation with regards to journalism training. Governments in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania opened up to multi-party political activity. Owing to developments on the global scene, the media industries in the three countries were also liberalized. The rapid developments in communication telephony on the global scene did not leave the region unaffected, and in a liberalized media environment, this spawned a large number of privately owned radio and television stations to join the existing newspapers. There was also an influx of media content from the West facilitated by liberalization as well as by satellite technology. Digitalization made convergence possible, creating more opportunities for employment of journalism graduates but also creating new challenges for journalism curricula designed to produce journalists to serve an analogue industry. In the meantime, audiences, largely because of these developments, are more information hungry and savvy, and are much more critical of whatever the media have to offer. All this has implications for journalism education and curriculum development.

The force with which development in technology and regulation have hit the African media scene has often been seen as an assault on the industry's African-ness. In recent debates there have been concerns expressed about journalism training in Africa either

lacking or losing its African-ness to Westernization. Some scholars have maintained that there are some essentially African values relating to the practice of journalism that do exist and should be protected (Skjerdal and Ngugi 2009[i]; Mfumbusa 2008)[ii], as well as proponents of Ubuntuism. Asked whether he believed there was such a thing as Africanized curricula, one senior academic in journalism at a private University in Kenya said,

> That is a debatable point but I want to believe so. Africa is at a stage of socio economic development that is different from other countries and this should be reflected in the practice of journalism in the region.

To a great extent academics in the East Africa region interviewed on this matter were of a similar view. They argued that certainly the texts we use should reflect African realities. The courses we teach should reflect the socio-economic conditions of Africa. Issues like conflict, corruption, disease etc. may not be peculiar to Africa. However, curriculum at African universities should equip students to be able to see the links between a reluctance for governments to link political power, and rising levels of corruption, or between rising levels of corruption and deteriorating socio-economic conditions for the ordinary person in an African context. Similarly the link between ethnicity and violence may not be peculiarly African, but the specific historical circumstances that gave birth to the genocide in Rwanda or that are fuelling the conflict in Darfur should not be glossed over in the name of training "global" journalists.

A senior media manager in Uganda puts it this way:

> Our development needs are such that training needs to be contextualized in our broad society. Our reportage needs to address the whys of our development needs – standard reportage may render us irrelevant to the big needs of our communities.

Some argued that it is imperative that curricula at African universities equip upcoming journalists to report in the local languages (rather just in English or French) and that they equip budding journalists to debunk stereotypes about Africa in the international media.

Another area where nearly all those interviewed thought there may be something specifically African to impart through journalism curricula is ethics. One academic from Tanzania argued that if cultural values in Africa are different, it follows that what is "right" and "wrong" is also different. This of course raises the question of whether or not there are any "African" or indeed "Western" cultural values any more.

It also emerged that the existence of Draconian laws and a culture of silence in many African countries challenges journalism educators to equip students with special skills to enable them not only to obtain information from government sources, but also to stay alive while they are at it. All this notwithstanding, though, Skjerdal and Ngugi (2009) sound the following warning:

> I would …suggest that the scholar looks deeper into the terminology instead of drawing a simplified Western vs. non-Western distinction. The discipline should rather be seen as operating in the interplay between particulars and universals within each cultural and media context (Skjerdal and Ngugi 2009:28-29).

What key areas then, would undergraduate students at African universities today need to be equipped in to remain locally relevant and at the same time be relevant and viable globally? Some key areas that emerged from the interviews included a need to:

- Continue providing a broad liberal arts base for journalism students;
- Equip journalism students to work as comfortably in the local/regional languages as in the global languages;
- Prioritize computer skills training;
- Prepare students to engage in practical projects from an early stage to increase their employability;
- Consult with the industry and other stakeholders in developing and reviewing curricula;
- Prepare students to develop content for different platforms and to appeal to a wide range of audiences to make them more marketable upon graduation;

One other issue that emerged was the need to engage potential employers to address the fact that while universities continue to churn out large numbers of graduates, media houses continue to employ non-graduates.

Interviewees were asked to comment on what they saw as the most critical gaps in journalism curricula in their countries. Top on the list was investigative and analytical skills, language proficiency (particularly in English); writing skills; computing skills and lack of depth in cognate areas such as political science, economics, sociology and literature that help place both local and global events and trends in context. Both journalism educators and media managers interviewed also mentioned the lack of preparation for doing journalism in the local languages. This was particularly raised by trainers in Uganda where although there are over 30 languages and dialects, both the print and broadcast media operate mostly in English. Private radio uses 4 or 5 of the more commercially viable languages. State radio in Uganda uses 24 of the indigenous languages, but further analysis indicates that most of the local languages have only token representation. This in a context where more than 50% of the population have little or no English skills owing to the fact that they have not had opportunities for a formal education[1].

There was also consensus on the fact that the average journalism graduate in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania or Rwanda is ill-prepared with the necessary practical skills upon graduation. This was attributed first to inadequate training equipment. It was noted that even when universities can obtain equipment, the pace at which the industry is moving is such that by the time the equipment gets here, it is obsolete. However the lack of preparedness in practical skills among undergraduates was also attributed to weak links with the industry[2]. Furthermore, interviewees pointed out that even where good

[1] Almost the same list of gaps had emerged when the author conducted a training needs assessment for media training in Southern Sudan in February-March this year.

[2] The Nation Media Group based in Kenya and Mwananchi Communications in Tanzania routinely send graduates back for re-training upon recruiting them, sometimes for as long as one extra year.

relationships with the industry exist, some of the people most qualified to impart practical skills do not meet the minimum academic qualifications for recruitment at universities. There was the feeling that universities ought to relax some of their criteria. This issue emerged particularly in Uganda and Tanzania.

Another challenge training institutions in the East Africa regions have is the difficulty of retaining good staff. The terms and conditions of employment at universities in the region simply are not competitive, and people find it more meaningful to take up employment with big media houses or other organizations in the region or elsewhere where they are better remunerated. At Makerere University in Uganda for instance, seven people have left for PhD training in the last 10 years. So far, only three have returned to become full-time members of staff. One more may or may not return in the next two years. The others have either abandoned the PhD programmes or been hired on more lucrative terms elsewhere. There are three senior lecturers, three assistant lecturers, and two teaching assistants, with a student population of approximately 400. The position of lecturer remains vacant even though it has been advertised twice. So far there is nobody at the Professor or Associate Professor level.

Another challenge undergraduate journalism programmes in the region face is growing numbers. With governments scaling down support to university education, most of the universities in the region have launched "parallel" (or private) programmes mostly for purposes of generating revenue. In 1996, Makerere opened up to privately sponsored journalism students and first year admission figures shot up from 25 to 80 that year, and to 150 the following year. The average class is now 80, without the commensurate increase in resources because most of the revenue from tuition fees goes to subsidizing lecturers' salaries. In Rwanda, the National University of Rwanda revalidated their curriculum in 2007 turning it modular. According to a lecturer and former deputy director of the programme, class sizes grew from 25-30 per class to 75 and above. Parallel programmes tend to have lower entry points and to attract large numbers. This puts pressure on the student: lecturer ratio as well as on space, equipment and other resources.

All this has implications for curriculum choices as well as for the effectiveness of journalism education endeavours.

There is a different set of dilemmas facing undergraduate journalism programmes in the Eastern Africa region. For instance, with the changes in technology, is it more prudent to offer ICT courses as stand-alone courses, or to integrate ICT into the "traditional" journalism courses? Views on this are varied. Some argue that at undergraduate level, journalism students only need a basic exposure to ICTs and therefore there would be no need to crowd the curriculum with stand-alone courses. Furthermore, they argue, it seems more practical to encourage as many staff as possible to de-mystify ICTs for themselves and their students by making them part of their courses. This, it is argued, would also reduce dependence on one or two experts. However, one strong argument for stand-alone ICT courses is that the changes in technology are so rapid, in order to keep up with them, one needs courses that can be frequently reviewed frequently without disrupting other content.

The industry in East Africa has had to face the reality of convergence. Media conglomerates like the IPP Media, the Nation Media Group and the Vision Group are expanding their reach in radio, television and newspapers. Under these circumstances, is it more realistic, in light of these developments, for the African media market to train cross-platform journalists or to continue training specialists in print or electronic media. There seems to be consensus here that the cross-platform graduate has more chances of being employed in the current market. However, some media educators interviewed also propose that undergraduate journalism programmes should not lose sight of the need for people to excel in the traditional tracks: print, radio, TV, photojournalism and lately online journalism. The challenge for curriculum development is to make sufficient room for students to master a "track" while at the same time developing the requisite versatility to work across platforms.

A related dilemma to this has to do with whether to train "niche" journalists in say health reporting, environmental reporting, sports reporting etc., or to expose undergraduates

equally to as many areas as possible during their training. Senior managers interviewed seem inclined towards the "niche" journalist, because, as one editor says, he/she has the depth to engage critically with a particular area of reporting, a skill that is lacking in many graduate journalists. However, the journalism trainers interviewed fear that this could curtail employment opportunities for new graduates.

The case of the Department of Mass Communication, Makerere University

Between 1995 and 2009, the Department of Mass Communication conducted extensive consultations to enable them to review their undergraduate curriculum in a way that would make it more suited to emerging needs and that would enable them to maximize their resources. The consultations involved an external examiner from South Africa who worked intermittently with the Department for four years; three senior professors from the United states who worked with the Department each for approximately one month; a curriculum expert from the United States who facilitated curriculum development workshops for one week involving media educators from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi; and two consultative meetings involving representatives of government, civil society and the media industry from Uganda. The UNESCO Model Curricula for New and Emerging Democracies was also consulted. It should be noted though, that there was little direct consultation with students. Informed by the consultations, the key considerations in the new curriculum included preparing students to:

- Appreciate their context
- Be technically savvy and versatile
- Ask good questions
- Combine speed with ethics and efficiency in an increasingly complex world
- Analyze, evaluate and process data/information from vast and complex sources
- Write well and accurately for increasingly sophisticated audiences
- Be locally relevant yet aware of global key global developments

The resultant curriculum looked like this:

Undergraduate Curriculum: Department of Mass Communication, Makerere University

Year one, semester 1, Cores
BJC 1101 Basic computer skills
BJC 1102 Economics
BJC 1103 Introduction to Journalism and Communication
BJC 1104 Political Science
BJC 1105 Writing for the media

Year one, Semester 1, Electives
BJC 1106 CIT
BJC 1107 Language
BJC 1108 Literature
BJC 1109 Sociology

Year one, semester 2 Cores
BJC 1201 Economics
BJC 1202 Information gathering techniques
BJC 1203 National and international institutions
BJC 1204 Political Science
BJC 1205 The media in historical context

Year one, Semester 2, Electives
BJC 1206 CIT
BJC 1207 Language
BJC 1208 Literature
BJC 1209 Sociology

Year Two, Semester 1, Cores
BJC 2101 Communication theories and models
BJC 2102 Introduction to broadcasting
BJC 2103 Introduction to Communication for development
BJC 2104 News writing and reporting
BJC 2105 Research Methods

Year Two, Semester 1, Electives
BJC 2106 CIT
BJC 2107 Economics
BJC 2108 Language
BJC 2109 Literature
BJC 2110 Political Science
BJC 2111 Sociology

Year Two, semester 2, Cores
BJC 2201Communication for Development: Cases and strategies
BJC 2202 Computer-Aided research and reporting
BJC 2203 Introduction to Pubic Relations

BJC 2204 Introduction to visual communication
BJC 2205 Writing for the electronic media

Year Two, semester 2, Electives
BJC 2206 CIT
BJC 2207 Economics
BJC 2208 Language
BJC 2209 Literature
BJC 2210 Political Science
BJC 2211 Sociology

Year Two, Recess Term
BJC 2212 Internship

Year Three, semester 1, Cores
BJC 3101 Communication regulation
BJC 3102 Editing
BJC 3103 Online journalism
BJC 3104 Photojournalism
BJC 3105 Public Affairs reporting

Year Three, semester 1, Electives
BJC 3106 Organizational Communication
BJC 3107 Public Relations Writing
BJC 3108 Radio production
BJC 3109 Television production

BJC3110 CIT
BJC 3111 Economics
BJC 3112 Language
BJC 3113 Literature
BJC 3114 Political Science
BJC 3115 Sociology

Year Three, semester 2, Cores
BJC 3201 Advertising
BJC 3202 Contemporary issues in Journalism and Communication
BJC 3203 Media Ethics
BJC 3204 Public speaking and presentation
BJC 3205 Specialized writing

Year 3, semester 2, Electives
BJC 3206 Investigative Journalism
BJC 3207 Multi-media production
BJC 3208 CIT

BJC3209 Economics
BJC 3210 Language
BJC 3211 Literature
BJC 3212 Political Science
BJC 3213 Research Project
BJC 3214 Sociology

Year Three, recess term
BJC 3215 Internship

The curriculum aimed to give students a balance between the conceptual and the practical right from the start of the course. To this end we included a compulsory internship component. We also prioritized context hence the inclusion of courses in history, national and international institutions, history, political science, economics etc. Having weighed the options, we went for the stand-alone ICT courses option. Our goal was that the expertise to teach these would be outsourced from the parent departments, because we had experimented with developing customized courses and teaching them in house and this had been fiercely resisted by the University administration. First year students would take introductory courses in Political Science, Economics, Literature, ~~Soicology~~Sociology, the Languages and Computing. The other key feature of this curriculum is although we fiercely debated the option of splitting the degree into two, with one focusing on journalism and the other on communication, we thought this was not feasible with our current resources so we opted for making these specializations within one degree. This, we agreed, would give our graduates broader employment opportunities.

To address the need for serving the local language media, we included Language as one of the cognate subjects. This would enable students to choose and specialize in a language (whether it be English, Kiswahili or one of the Ugandan languages). This was an improvement on the previous curriculum which assumed that we trained only for the "English media." We also beefed up the public speaking course to include presentation. This was to cater not only for public speaking and presentation in the realm of public relations, but also for a growing need particularly in the broadcast industry for good presenters.

Interviews with academics and practitioners in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda reveal a great similarity in challenges for curriculum development and review. Although the revised undergraduate programme for Makerere University is yet to be approved by all the university organs, there are some important lessons learnt from this specific curriculum development experience:

1) While it is important to provide as wide a knowledge base as possible for journalists in training given the increased need for a widely informed professional, this has to be considered in the context of available resources including space on the time table, physical space and expertise. It also signals synergies with Departments outside Journalism/Mass Communication Departments;
2) University policies to ensure quality of staff may not always take cognizance of the peculiar needs of journalism education/training, where practical experience is at least as important as academic qualifications. It may therefore be necessary therefore to continue making a case for the hiring of adjunct staff with specific expertise.
3) Successful provisions for practical experience such as internship continue to depend on building strong relationships with the industry. Even where there are numerous media houses, not many media houses may be open or able to take on student interns. Journalism/Mass Communication Departments need to invest in building strong, mutually beneficial partnerships with the industry;
4) While developing a curriculum focusing on journalism alone would create more room for journalism courses, resources may dictate that journalism majors in the East African setting continue to co-exist with communication. This compromise challenges the designers of the curricula to clearly distinguish between courses that would best benefit a journalism major as opposed to a communication major to minimize confusion.

[i] Skjerdal, T. S. and Ngugi, C.M. 2009. Between journalism universals and cultural particulars:challenges facing the development of a journalism programme in an East African context, *Journal of African Media Studies*, 1(1): 23-34.

[ii] Mfumbusa, B. 2008. A case for minimum standards in journalism training East Africa: A case study of Tanzania. Paper presented at the Regional Conference on Media Laws and Ethics, Nairobi, 27th-30th February, 2008.