

Bridging the divide between study and the real world of African journalism

Francois Groepe

Professor Lizette Rabe, Head of the Department of Journalism at Stellenbosch University, Mr Joe Thloloe, Press Ombudsman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured to address you on the occasion of this conference that coincides with the 30th anniversary celebrations of the Department of Journalism at Stellenbosch University.

The department and our organisation, Media24 and Naspers, share a long and proud partnership that spans the full 30 years of the department's existence. The department was, in fact, started by Piet Cillié, a former editor of *Die Burger*. Many other personalities involved with the department have also had close ties to our organisation including Johannes Grosskopf (former editor of *Beeld*), George Claassen (former deputy editor *Die Burger*) and Lizette Rabe (former editor of *Sarie*).

When one reaches such milestones, it is appropriate to pause and reflect, in particular on the challenges facing the Department of Journalism, as it celebrates its 30 years of journalism studies. A key question to ask is to what extent are we producing journalists for this country, for this continent and for today's world?

Situated here at the southern most tip of our continent behind what many refer to as the 'vine curtain', it is easy to forget that Somalia is part of our continent and our lives, that Nigeria is as African as the wine from the many wineries just outside this institution.

Yet these countries, and many others, such as Mauritania which suffered a recent coup, or Mauritius, which has the highest economic growth index on the continent, are as African as any. Their stories should be told.

How does Stellenbosch University ensure that the journalists it produces are sufficiently broadminded in their understanding of the world, and of themselves as Africans, that they are able to enlighten and enrich the African continent?

It should start with the staffing of the department. Care, for example, must be taken to ensure a wide spectrum of views that will give weight to the curriculum. It also means ensuring research that will help students learn more about themselves as Africans.

It should also extend to the curriculum. The subjects covered, the books used, the examples of discussions, the experts invited and quoted, and the assignments given, must encourage students to look for answers beyond our continent, and to look for answers within our continent.

In this regard, I wish to acknowledge the *African Edition* of the *Global Media Journal*, sponsored by the department and edited by Gabriël Botma (yet another former colleague of *Die Burger*),

which has as its goal to address diverse interests of media and journalism scholars, researchers, teachers, students and institutions engaged in international activities – but with a distinctly African focus.

As a media company, we are recipients of the products of Stellenbosch and the many other

institutions that teach journalism. We have found reason to augment the training that these students receive and hence have established the Media24 Journalism Academy. It is intended that this academy will serve as a bridge between study and work and as a finishing school to prepare for the harsh realities of the hard core world of real journalism.

A strict selection criterion requires that applicants write a feature article on a topic chosen from about 10 suggestions. The applicant is expected to research the subject, collate information and then write. In this endeavour, the issue of the African contextualisation of our journalism is not forgotten: amongst the issues that applicants have to address is the ongoing exhibition of the Timbuktu manuscripts that opened in Cape Town recently and which is now at Tshwane. How manageable would a Stellenbosch graduate find such a topic, having learned that Timbuktu is not 'some far away place' as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* states, but a centre of learning that predated colonialism?

The Media24 Journalism Academy aims to ensure that journalists who work for us are prepared to serve what is effectively a world company rooted in locality.

We remain committed to our role in ensuring that training material is indigenous. This is why, when SANEF approached us to help with funding the book on editing, we gladly agreed.

The newly-launched book, written by working editors about specific areas of their work, is a reference book, a handbook for trainee editors. But what is even more important, is that the book is not comprised of American or British editorial advice - people in far away countries talking about situations we may never encounter in our African lifetime.

This is a book by our own editors talking about the daily experiences of the work and media we know and live with. It is, in other words, an indigenous knowledge production which feeds into the localisation or Africanisation of our journalism. I cannot help but boast that one of the editors of the book, is our own employee, Liz Barratt, Managing Editor of *City Press*, whose slogan is 'Distinctly African'.

The department, however, also operates within a broader societal context, and, reflecting on the events within the broader socio-political context of our country over the last few months, the words of Charles Dickens resonate: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.'

The perceived erosion of institutions and institutional power (the very cornerstones of our democracy) is of great concern. One example is the unprecedented level of attack on the judiciary. The severity of these attacks often exceeded the levels of acceptable public comment and criticism. The harm caused may not be immediately apparent, but the long-term damage could be both crippling and structural. The law of unintended consequences may yet deal us a cruel hand!

It was John F. Kennedy, who once said: 'There is a terrific disadvantage in not having the abrasive quality of the press applied to you daily. Even though we never like it, and even though we wish

they didn't write it, and even though we disapprove, there isn't any doubt that we could not do the job at all in a free society without a very, very active press.'

Press freedom is one of the cornerstones of our democracy and any attempt to curtail this freedom will eventually weaken our fledgling and hard-won democracy. All committed to the ideal of democracy should strenuously resist attempts to erode a free press.

So in many ways the words of Dickens can be used to describe the state of our nation today as we continue the journey of transforming ourselves into a modern African democracy. The responsibility to ensure that this noble objective is achieved rests on this department and indeed on all of us. These responsibilities represent both a moral and ethical duty.

In conclusion, allow me to congratulate the department on its 30th anniversary, and I hope that you will continue to create, influence and shape the journalism landscape in South Africa, the continent and the world at large. May you continue to produce editorial trailblazers in the mold of Tim du Plessis, Irna Van Zyl, Marita van der Vyver, Barbara Folscher, Pearlie Joubert, Melanie Gosling, Esmarie Weideman, Ingo Capraro, Bun Booyens, Stefaans Brummer, Ainsley Moos, Mohammed Shaik and many, many others.

About the speaker

Francois Groepe is CEO of Media 24.