

NWU Principal and Vice-Chancellor's notes for the National Press Club

NWU's journalism training and the importance of the industry as illustrated during the pandemic and with reference to state capture

Protocol list:

The Gauteng Province Premier, Honourable Panyaza Lesufi

Deputy Minister for State Security, Honourable Zizi Kodwa

Chairperson of the National Press Club, Ms Antoinette Slabbert and her team

Members of the North-West University Management and staff

Associate Partners

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press

Distinguished colleagues

Good evening. It is good to be here.

The North-West University has a long-standing relationship and affiliation with the National Press Club. Many of our alumni are previous winners of the Journalist of the Year awards. Therefore, it is an honour to be part of this glamorous event, especially due to the fact that this is the relaunch of the organization. I want to believe that our mutually beneficial relationship will continue and become even stronger.

Why journalism matters

Journalism matters because it is all around us. The definition proposed by Steensen and Ahva (2019:38) is wide-ranging and shows how deeply entrenched journalism is in society:

“Journalism covers and shapes all aspects of society, from politics to fashion, from business to everyday life. It influences, articulates, and produces culture. It is the first draft of history, and it is where history can be found. Journalism is language, rhetoric, genres, and discourse. It is legitimized and limited by law. It is in industry, civil society, and the state. It is labor, it is management; it is commercial, non-profit and idealistic. Journalism is technology. It is media and communication. It is local and global. It is about ethics. Journalism is epistemic, as it produces knowledge about the world. In other words, journalism is so multifaceted that it has been studied from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, including, but not limited to, sociology, political science, cultural studies, history, language studies, philosophy, economics, management, business, science and technology studies, and communication.”

Apart from its important role in society, journalism training also teaches students life skills. In 2008, a former Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) host, Robert MacNeil, called journalism education probably “the best general education that an American citizen can get” (Gillmor, 2016). While he was talking in a North American setting, this is equally relevant in South Africa.

Worth noting is that the importance of journalism in society was recognised by North-West University as its Potchefstroom campus (then, the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education) became the first university in South Africa to offer journalism as an academic subject in 1959 and set up a journalism department in 1963. Professor Gert Pienaar championed this development (Malherbe/mediamense.com, 2022).

Of course, this is the period in which journalism played an important role in exposing the atrocities of the apartheid regime in our country. How can we not acknowledge the great work of luminaries such as John Langa Libalele Dube (founder of the Ilanga laseNatal newspaper), Ruth First (who was the editor-in-chief of the The Guardian newspaper and the Fighting Talk journal), Aggrey Zola Klaaste (journalist and editor of the Sowetan Newspaper), Donald Woods (editor of the Daily Dispatch, and friend to Steve Biko), Percy Qoboza, Journalist and editor of The World Newspaper, and many others?

Democratic South Africa owes a lot to the journalism profession and its role during the past dark days. During apartheid, the oppressive regime constantly harassed, suppressed, and instilled fear in journalist through oppressive laws and clandestine activities. We thank the media and journalists for championing the inclusion of Section 16 of the South African Constitution, which guarantees the press and related freedoms. The South African journalists and their colleagues on the continent also played a crucial role that resulted in World Press Freedom Day.

I know I am talking to people who know this history, but it is important to reiterate the importance of these issues. World Freedom Day was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993 as a response to a call by African journalists for the development of a free, independent, and pluralistic press. It serves as a reminder to governments across the globe to respect their commitments to the freedom of the press and provides an opportunity for the media professionals to reflect about issues related to press freedom and professional ethics. Ladies and gentlemen, I do hope that, on Press Freedom Day, you do reflect and introspect about your work and ensure that we consume credible news that assist us in making informed decisions about our lives, as citizens. I have full confidence in many of the South African investigative journalists. These are journalists who investigate and raise the flag on issues that ultimately affect our bread-and-butter issues. We must continue to support them and all media professionals who ensure that we remain informed and engaged citizens and participants in our democracy.

Within the context of higher education institutions, journalism skills empower students to become informed citizens who can evaluate information critically and make ethical decisions based on facts and not fiction., in other words, they develop information literacy skills (Swart, 2021) and more specifically, news literacy skills which is about a critical understanding of news and news processes (Vraga *et al.*, 2012). During the Covid-19 pandemic, fake news and disinformation spread quickly. Journalists were often the people who had to sift through the facts and separate truth from fiction. Students with the critical thinking attitude that journalism entails may be better prepared to do this.

The realities of the digital era are that many journalism students do not necessarily end up working for the legacy media. But, perhaps more significantly, many university students who do not study journalism, end up doing some of the work that journalists do. There is a new digital world of information where the barriers to entry have been lowered and many new actors now do what journalists used to do, alongside traditional journalists (Hermida, 2019). This is another reason why journalism training could help *all* students to become informed citizens who question and interrogate as critical thinkers.

One could argue that students in the humanities should all receive at least introductory training in journalism, as so many young people now create and distribute information on digital platforms. These new actors operate outside the traditional boundaries of professional journalism, but they sometimes do what journalists do, “in ways that challenge and complement journalists’ traditional role as sole arbiters and purveyors of information” (Mabweazara & Mare, 2021:1). That is why a TikTok influencer who makes videos about the Covid-19 pandemic (as many have done) should know some basics about journalism to do his or her “TikTok job” well, and that is why there is a strong argument for some journalism training in many humanities degrees.

The digital era has led to what is often called “news deserts” in local communities around the world because many larger media houses have withdrawn from smaller communities due to financial challenges. Journalism training and student journalism projects can help fill this gap, as is clearly illustrated by the student news website run by NWU student journalists.

Journalism training at NWU

The Journalism and Media Studies specialisation area at NWU helps students develop a deep understanding of journalism, its role in society and the ethics of journalism, while also providing much practical training and real-life journalism experience through its teaching model where senior students are immersed in a real-life digital newsroom. This provides students with practical skills and a reporting portfolio. Feedback from industry has shown that this model succeeds in preparing students to enter the world of digital journalism seamlessly, as they have already gained real-life practical experience by

running a student newsroom themselves, under the guidance of lecturers, and publishing their news stories on the **three streams media** website.

The students publish real news stories for a specific community (the wider NWU community and stakeholders), filling a gap in the community news market. This is in line with global trends. Digital platforms have made it possible for many ordinary people to do what journalists used to do, by becoming journalists themselves. In many countries around the world residents have taken over some of the functions of journalism (Oremus, 2021; Nygren 2019), especially in smaller towns where traditional mass media have lost influence and closed their bureaus because of financial challenges. In a real practical way NWU students fill this gap in local news and provide a clear service to the community. The fact that they are students who receive training and guidance means that they do this work in a professional way, which is not always the case with citizen journalism projects. This is yet one more reason why NWU's journalism training plays a significant role in local journalism.

As such some of the practitioner academics who teach journalism annually adjudicate the Forum for Community Journalists annual competition as a service to the community, where several alumni have been rewarded for the work they do as community journalists in various towns and dorps across South Africa.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic students covered events extensively on three streams media, despite being isolated at home. Information about new cases were published regularly. Student journalists also informed their peers about vaccines, vaccination procedures, addressed issues around distance learning and published many stories about the return to a sense of normality when in-person classes resumed. In 2020 and 2021 the threestreamsmedia website garnered more than 50 000 views from over 30 000 unique visitors, mostly from South Africa. One can assume that many of these readers visited the site to find updates about the pandemic, as many of the stories published during this period were pandemic related. This shows clearly how NWU journalism students played a very important role as trusted information providers to a

specific student community during the pandemic. The student public were hungry for truthful news, and they clearly trusted the student news website as a source.

Currently students on the Potchefstroom and Vaal campuses participate in the student news project, while plans are afoot to also include Mahikeng students in future. The only reason why Mahikeng students have not been included so far is because the modules that feed into the student news website are not presented at Mahikeng. But we are working on other ways to include the Mahikeng students. In a society such as South Africa journalists can play a transformational role (Rodny-Gumede, 2018) and a community-based student news website, such as threestreamsmedia can make a real difference in their community, by becoming a platform for the voices of students. The types of stories that students publish often focus on issues that are close to their hearts, such as LGBTQ+ issues, money matters, mental health, and student achievers.

Apart from practical teaching and learning in different journalism genres and platforms, all journalism students on the honours level also complete a mini research dissertation on a journalism and media studies topic. This dissertation forms part of the 32 credit module aiming towards equipping students to conduct independent research by using relevant theoretical lenses and appropriate scientific methods. As such, this module also forms the basis for those students who wish to continue their postgraduate studies if that interest arises sometime in the future. Each student has a dedicated supervisor who facilitates the mini dissertation throughout the academic year; hence students learn from experienced, expert academics and researchers how to also reflect on various journalistic and media studies phenomena and practices. Students also gain the opportunity to not only independently do research on a single project identified by the specialisation group, but also to work with their peers during the academic year on the chosen theme. In this way, students also gain valuable peer support and the necessary soft skills to work with team members on a project.

Well-known alumni

But it is not only in local communities that the NWU's journalism training is contributing to a more informed citizenry. Journalism training, as mentioned earlier, prepares students to

be critical thinkers, which is essential in their work to expose corruption such as state capture and other corruption at municipal, provincial, and national levels. Many former alumni have done just that.

Pauli van Wyk, an alumna of the NWU, and a journalist with Daily Maverick's Scorpio investigative unit, has been at the forefront of extensive coverage on aspects of the state capture.

For her work, Van Wyk, has been threatened with rape and hanging. When she covered the EEF/VBS story the party's leader called her a Satan. (<https://witsvuvuzela.com/2019/10/29/threats-on-women-journalists-in-africa-unabating/>)

Although Van Wyk has been directly involved in coverage of state capture, other alumni through their work in the news media have been actively sharing news with South Africans as news readers, bulletin writers, reporters, researchers, and investigative reporters for news organisations at national and local level.

We have many other alumni working for various media houses, including:

- Douglas Mosadi (Motsweding FM)
- Suzanne Paxton (RSG)
- Thomas Ngoloyi (Ngoloyi Consulting)
- Daniëlla van Heerden (eNuus)
- Lesley Mofokeng (Sunday Times)
- Oshebeng Koonyaditse (Motsweding FM)
- Dane Beisheim (OFM)
- Johanna van Eeden (first woman to edit Volksblad)
- Tebogo Phakedi (SABC news)
- Itumeleng Bahetane (Motsweding FM)

Young journalists, who have graduated in the last few years, are also making their mark:

- Mpho Koka (Sowetan)
- Ayanda Mthetwa (previously Daily Maverick, now in corporate communication)
- Marita Herselman (Volksblad) and Linzetta Calitz (Laevelder/Lowvelder)
- Arisa Janse van Rensburg (Netwerk24)
- Eduan Roos is a well-known cricket reporter, who now lives in Australia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to point out that as in many other disciplines, the training of journalists needs to respond to calls for the Africanisation or decolonisation of the curriculum. We must ensure that the students know about the role that journalism played during colonial and apartheid times. The role played by luminaries that I mentioned earlier must never be hidden from them in pursuit of embracing new media. In addition to learning about journalists and writers on the African continent, our students must learn about journalists, writers of African diaspora. The role of media and journalists in our democracy remains crucial as many citizens are increasingly doubtful about the sources of information due to the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation campaigns by unscrupulous characters. On the other hand, approximately 15 million South Africans who are eligible to vote are reportedly not registered. The media and journalists have a responsibility to create awareness about the importance of citizens' participation in democracy. The media must learn from the COVID-19 pandemic experiences and find ways and means of closing the information gap within communities.

Of course, as journalists you continue to lead us in keeping our leaders in both private and public sectors accountable. Please continue to ask difficult questions that are aimed at making us a capable and accountable country. As the principal of a university, I want to leave you with a few questions for you to ponder.

- What is the role of journalists in today's world of misinformation and disinformation?
- How do journalists meet the expectations of a democratic society amid constrained financial resources?
- How can universities design journalism and media studies curriculums that appreciate and respond to the needs of Generation Z in terms of news consumption?; and
- What is the role of the National Press Club and other organisations in making sure that people trust the content published in the media space?

You can submit answers to these questions via Three streams media website within 12 hours.

Thank you for your attention.

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