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| “I’m having an ontological crisis!” |
| The impact of alternative approaches to journalistic production on students’ notions of ‘professionalism’ and other aspects of journalistic identity in a praxis-based service learning course. |
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| In light of the extreme inequalities present in South Africa, journalism lecturers and students at higher education institutions in the country are forced to probe their political position in relation to their ‘professional identities’ and what journalists should stand for and against. This necessarily foregrounds the question of who they, as practicing journalists, ‘become’ and this ‘ontological turn’ undermines the narrow focus on the intellect by promoting “the integration of knowing, acting and being” (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007: 682). Students at Rhodes University’s School of Journalism and Media Studies are enrolled in a praxis-based, service learning course on Journalism, Democracy and Development, which destabilises the idea that there is a coherent, universally-accepted and superior way of practicing journalism. This course draws on alternative theories of journalistic practice (development journalism and public journalism) as well as with more 'alternative' approaches to media production (radical advocacy journalism and citizen's journalism) to encourage students to renegotiate the notion of journalistic ‘professionalism’. Many, if not most, students express a revelatory sense of purpose in being “allowed to take sides” and “make a difference” for the first time in their three-year degree, but some also report that they suffer an “ontological crisis” because the course poses difficult challenges to their pre-existing values and ethics. The paper argues that journalism educators should be willing to give their support to alternative conceptions of the democratic role of media, firstly because this has much to offer from a pedagogical point of view, and secondly because this could help to balance the skewed playing fields of journalistic (and democratic) practice, especially in developing countries. |

# Introduction

South Africa, like many ‘developing’ nations, is a country of vast economic inequalities. This social reality poses challenges for how we conceive of the role of both higher education institutions and media institutions in South Africa, and this, in turn, impacts on the intersection between the two: how journalism courses at universities are shaped.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, there has been a history of tension and even hostility between Media Studies researchers and journalism practice teachers in university journalism schools past (see de Burgh 2003; Deuze 2000; Medsger 1996; New York University 2002; Praeg 2002; Reese & Cohen 2000; Skinner et al 2000; Steenveld 2002; De Beer and Steyn 2004; Switzer & Ryan 2000; Turner 2000; Windshuttle 2000; Zelizer et al 2000). Media Studies, taught in the ‘academic’ stream of Rhodes University’s School of Journalism and Media Studies, proffers ominous and negative conclusions about the nature and integrity of South African journalism and is critical of the dominant epistemological frameworks of mainstream journalism. Indeed, criticism seems virtually to “accompany journalism’s every action” (Parisi 1992). In turn, however, the ‘production’ lecturers responsible for teaching the vocational stream of the degree accuse Media Studies of failing to assist students in developing an approach to their practice based in an alternative set of principles (Machin & Niblock 2006: 3; du Toit 2007: 7).

This paper explores the Journalism, Democracy and Development – Critical Media Production (JDD-CMP) course developed at Rhodes University’s School of Journalism and Media Studies (SJMS) in response to a perceived lack of congruence between the ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ streams of our undergraduate curriculum. This praxis course proceeds from Media Studies’ dissatisfaction with mainstream coverage of issues and with the epistemology of news. But, by exploring the relationship between ideas about journalism’s role and detailed normative practices of various alternative ‘journalisms’, the course aims to resolve the epistemic tension between the Media Studies and Media Production components of the third year curriculum. It challenges and destabilises ‘traditional’ Western notions of journalistic professionalism of objectivity by expecting students to actively engage in new ways with the wider, but more economically marginalised, community in the town and to produce hyper-local journalism with, for and about this community.

In asking students to consciously reposition themselves ethically and politically, the course aligns itself within what has been described as the ‘ontological turn’, which is concerned with the “integration of knowing, acting and being” in higher education (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007: 682). The paper examines students’ reactions – both positive and negative – to the ontological challenges thrown up by the course. It is argued, using the examples provided, that the course has destabilised, shaped and enriched, not only how students think about journalism, but their notions of what it means to ‘be’ a journalist. Some students report feeling ‘liberated’ by their experiences on the course, while others say it has engendered an ‘ontological crisis’.

# Context

Rhodes University is an internationally recognised institution situated in the Eastern Cape, South Africa’s poorest province. Grahamstown, the site of the University, is a microcosm of the inequalities faced across the country – with a minority of extremely privileged, highly-educated individuals contrasted with an estimated 70% unemployment rate for the majority of residents, whose living conditions differ greatly (Alebiosu 2006: 27). Despite its location, Rhodes University attracts thousands of predominantly middle-class students from across the country, and hundreds of students from other countries, who are not generally exposed to the stark contrasts between the wealthy and poor in their hometowns that are evident daily in Grahamstown.

Rhodes University’s SJMS operates within this context and the JDD-CMP courses that this paper discusses, ask students to engage with these conditions. The curriculum of the SJMS is centred on the socially-critical paradigm (Toohey 2001), which views knowledge as constructed and socially, politically and economically situated. Thus the purpose of a degree is not just about teaching students what journalism *is* currently doing, but about normative theories and what journalism in South Africa *ought* to be doing. The vision and mission statement for the School of Journalism and Media Studies articulates this purpose:

“The School of Journalism and Media Studies strives to contribute to the commitment expressed in the South African Constitution to "heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental rights; [and] lay the foundations for a democratic and open society…

Journalism and Media Studies aims to produce self-reflexive, critical, analytical graduates and media workers, whose practice is probing, imaginative, civic minded and outspoken.”

Before the introduction of the JDD-CMP course six years ago, it was not common for third year Rhodes journalism to strongly identify with the sorts of positioned, interventionist, alternative journalisms taught in this course.

# Traditional approaches to journalism and ‘professionalism’

Professionalism is a problematic concept, with attempts to define it often linked to specific interests (Reese, 2001:175). While Media Studies provides useful framework for critiquing the media, vocational training is influenced by the media industry. According to du Toit (2007: 7), “courses which draw on Cultural Studies/Media Studies may deconstruct the epistemological framework within which journalistic practice is based, but they generally also fail to assist students in developing an approach to their practice based on an alternative set of principles’” (quoted in Vorster 2010: 3).

By necessity, students exiting with a journalism degree need a solid understanding of how media conventions and expectations operate within the contemporary moment. Many of our students share notions of professionalism based on newsroom conventions and objectivity, ‘truth telling’ and distance, which they have learnt through their internships and experience of the media during the first years of their study:

“Before this course we were taught the ‘correct’ way to practice journalism. We had to be objective… we had to work with an idea of professionalism within certain guidelines… we did not get involved in our stories and had to remain neutral. There were certain ways we had to write a story (inverted pyramid), certain norms and values that were at the time to be considered by me unquestionable. It was not until this course …that I was even aware that other forms even existed. I no longer see myself as a ‘professionalising journalist’. I feel connected to the people we interviewed and worried about the problems they faced... this made me want to help and do something. I was no longer neutral and allowed myself to form opinions and take sides” (Student 1 exam response 2010).

The ways in which sources are cultivated and treated are closely linked to a cornerstone of traditional journalistic professionalism: objectivity. “By objectivity I mean …a frame of reference used by journalists to orient themselves... a set of beliefs that function as the journalist’s ‘claim to action’” (Glasser 1992: 176). This ‘claim to action’, however, obscures the fact that “news is created, not reported” (1992: 183) by individual journalists, who are moulded by their backgrounds and conceptions of their society. The majority of the students trained at Rhodes University come from the middle-class, predominantly ‘white’ minority of South Africa. Without being consciously aware of it, journalists become “managers of the status quo” because ‘objectivity’ is closely linked to reliance on ‘official’ sources (Glasser 1992). In South Africa, ‘experts’ tend to be sourced from the educated elite, which means that news practitioners frequently overlook the voices outside of this minority, narrowing the space for public debate.

# JDD-CMP and alternative approaches to journalistic practice

Taught over the past six years during the last semester of the third year of study, the JDD-CMP course problematises some of the cornerstones of ‘professionalism’ in journalism. The JDD-CMP course is premised on the idea that differing conceptions of democracy and development have implications for the way journalism is conceived, organised and produced, which in turn shapes journalistic form and content. By exploring this relationship between ideas about journalism’s role and the alternative assumptions and practices of various ‘journalisms’, the JDD-CMP course - through experiential learning (Luckett 2001) - introduces students to ‘messy situations’ in order to strengthen the problem solving skills they will later need as journalists.

During JDD-CMP, 120 students are organised into 8-10 multimedia groups, which are then challenged to produce journalism on a theme – for example, education, fatherhood, the local environment, crime, literacy – that will contribute in some way to the goals of ‘democratisation’ and ‘development’.

The JDD course maps out key theoretical, historical and conceptual contexts for the course, including critiques of classical liberal perspectives on the role of the media in development and democracy, and an exposition of various normative theories of the media, including the ‘monitorial’, ‘facilitative’, ‘radical’ and ‘collaborative’ roles developed by Christians et al (2009). The course goes on to accent a number of ‘reformist’ and ‘alternative’ approaches to journalistic production. Students are asked to choose either one, or a combination of, the following non-mainstream approaches based on their group’s vision/ mission and on the overall objectives they set for themselves:

* A **public journalism** approach which might aim to stimulate increased civic commitment to, and active citizen participation in, democratic procedures like public deliberation (Rosen 1999a, 1999b; Eksterowicz & Roberts 2000), as well as support processes of public problem solving at the local or micro level (Haas 2007).
* A **citizens’ or participatory journalism** approach which might encourage various local citizens to gather, record and express their own experiences and viewpoints (Gilmour 2005; Nip 2006; Deuze 2007).
* An **investigative journalism** approach which might expose wrongdoing and interrogate the effectiveness of public and corporate policies and practises in relation to the topic (Glasser & Ettema 1998).
* A **radical/alternative journalism** approach which might assist in the nurturance of opinion formation and agenda building amongst ‘subaltern counter-publics’ (Downing 2001; Atton 2002) and/or provoke, persuade, sway and mobilise audiences through the adoption of non-mainstream political positions related to the topic at hand (Atton 2002).
* A **development journalism** approach which might: assess the impact of the issue at hand on its human protagonists; turn away from objects/victims with “needs and deficits” and concentrate instead on subjects/actors creating sustainable livelihoods; report not only in terms of problems but in terms of positive programmes; focus not only on popular opinion but also on popular knowledge (Domatop & Hall 1993).
* A **social marketing** or **communication for development** approach which might produce media resources that could be used for social change purposes by community-based and non-governmental organisations working in the topic area (Melcote 2001).

Each year, the students’ multi-media groups are free to try their hand at one or more of these journalistic approaches in Term 4. However, in each year course lecturers insist that students first engage in research in Term 3 through a public/ civic journalism approach.

# Public journalism – uncovering a ‘citizens’ agenda’

One of the central critiques of mainstream journalism, offered by a wide range of media theorists, is its lopsided focus on the agendas and perspectives of elite actors (Manning 2001). Public journalism is presented in the JDD course as a reformist approach that attempts to overcome journalism’s elite bias by unearthing and engaging with layers of civic life buried under the official and quasi-official realms. To achieve this, some public journalists leave their offices to uncover the concerns and voices of ordinary citizens in ‘third places’ and ‘incidental spaces’, while others set up democratic ‘listening posts’ in the form of town hall meetings, focus groups and the like (Nip 2006). These strategies are aimed at uncovering a ‘citizens’ agenda’ (Haas 2007) – or perhaps more accurately, a set of competing ‘citizens’ agenda*s*’ – relatively uncontaminated by the perspectives and claims of elites, and less prone to influence by the agendas of other, more powerful, news organisations and the stultifying professional routines of their own newsrooms. Students are divided into groups and asked to do some preparatory, citizen-based research before embarking on their fourth term journalism projects.

This approach to research has yielded an unusually rich and sometimes surprising array of issues and concerns. The research transformed students’ perspectives regarding the real issues affecting local communities, helped them come to care about the issues they uncovered, and ultimately improved the depth and quality of their journalism. Students learnt to practice a new research skill and by taking time to listen to the views and ideas of local sources, the Rhodes students signalled that they were not simply parachuting into local communities to ‘get the story’. Through the reciprocal exchange of ideas and meaning, a more equal relationship of mutuality and trust developed between some of the Rhodes journalism students and the focus group participants – an alternative epistemology of news was opening up. In course evaluations some students reported that close contact with sources had been “an empowering experience”. Others said they had been moved out of their “comfort zones” and that it had “opened their eyes to the reality of the other communities in Grahamstown” – indicating that an alternative range of ontological positions was opening up, too.

In 2010, student groups were assigned to different municipal wards, where they embarked on a ‘civic mapping’ (Haas 2008) project to find stories and sources through engagement in a hyper-local area. As part of this process, many of the student groups held public meetings to discuss what the citizens’ agenda was. This research would form the basis of their news diary meetings in Term 4. The public meetings in this year had mixed success; however, as students who were given more affluent wards could not attract a suitable number of participants to their meeting, while other students found the abundance of social issues delivered by the citizens overwhelming. Two of the issues discovered during these meetings, which will be discussed in more detail later, were reports of sodomy within one of the local primary schools, and the municipality’s inaction in the reparations of government-sponsored, RDP houses struck by a tornado several years earlier.

# Achieving epistemological congruence through critique

Public journalism was the dominant approach used in the JDD-CMP course in 2008, when one of the student groups, ‘Common Ground’, was tasked with investigating Makana’s municipal commonage lands, which surround Grahamstown and provide many landless, urban residents with essential resources (for example, grazing land for livestock herders and wood for fuel). The group explored various issues affecting commonage users and other commonage stakeholders, including overgrazing, over-exploitation of certain plant species, poor management, inadequate infrastructure and the lack of a permanent water supply. The results of their efforts – including a ‘mockumentary’ and a variety of print media products (including pamphlets and a magazine) – were exhibited at a ‘Moo-vie premiere’ held at a university venue towards the end of the course. A diverse audience of over 150 people attended the event, including seven commonage farmers, various local government and environmental officials, community activists, academics and interested students.

Despite the irreverent tone of the mockumentary, a serious, solutions-oriented and animated debate followed the screening of the work. However, the event lacked a crucial ingredient – meaningful participation from any of the commonage users present. Towards the end of the event, two of the commonage users were eventually persuaded by the (student) chairperson to speak to the plenary. They obliged, but spoke very softly in isiXhosa, a language not understood by the majority of the people in attendance. Unfortunately, the JDD-CMP students (and their lecturers) did not have the foresight to hire either a skilled facilitator or an effective translator for the commonage debate. A translation was offered, but was not easily understood by the audience, and the deliberative process began to stutter and break down.

In theoretical terms the student journalists who organised the ‘Moo-vie Premiere’ were attempting to facilitate, following Habermas (1989), an open public sphere where all citizens had access and in which all opinions available could be articulated, deliberated and critiqued. The students hoped that the citizens attending the event would set aside social inequalities and interact as if they were social equals. While many of the people in attendance at the ‘Moo-vie Premiere’ were in theory willing, there was a glaring lack of participatory parity at the event.

These problems serve to alert us to Fraser’s (1990) critique of Habermas (1989) in determining what the goals of public deliberation might be, and which arrangements would best serve those goals. Fraser is critical of the idea that citizens should set aside social inequalities and focus on topics of common concern because this privileges the interests of dominant groups over subaltern groups. Instead, Fraser argues that citizens should explicitly articulate or ‘publicise’ inequalities. She would thus be critical of the students’ notion that the citizens attending the ‘Moo-vie premiere’ are part of the same community, bounded by shared values and interests. For Fraser this ignores how communities are fragmented into multiple social groups, “situated in relations of dominance and subordination, structured by race, class and gender” (1990: 65). Drawing on this analysis public journalism theorist and advocate Tanni Haas argues that journalists should help citizens reflect on their different, potentially conflicting, concerns (2007: 36). They can do this by making social inequalities the very subject matter or focal point of public deliberation.

To dwell on conflict may seem like poor advice in the context of South Africa’s immature democracy, where public discourse is already highly fractious. But, Haas’s point is that public journalism can penetrate the superficial conflict of public debate, by becoming a means through which citizens come to understand that they have vastly different and conflicting interests. In other words, poor, marginalised communities need to be heard, and citizens with more social power may be more willing to listen if journalists helped them consider how social inequalities may harm some citizens’ abilities to participate on an equal footing.

Part of the frustration of politics in South Africa is that elites speak on behalf of marginalised communities (“the masses of *our* people”), yet we seldom get to hear from these marginalised people speak for themselves. Journalists need to actively seek out these marginalised citizens in terms, at times, in languages and in places that would permit their participation. The ‘Moo-vie Premiere’ was not conducted on terms, in a language or in a place that favoured the participation of commonage owners.

It was clear, both from the student journalism presented at the ‘Moo-vie Premiere’ and by the failure of the commonage users at the event to articulate a coherent political position, that the commonage users had not in the past been well organised and had seldom, if ever, had the opportunity to deliberate with each other to work out a unified programme. They needed a more ‘exclusivist’ discursive domain rather than being forced to participate on unequal terms in an overarching public sphere.

Thus, following Fraser (1990: 65), our students could have made better use of their time and resources by nurturing a ‘discursive domain’ for commonage users where they could deliberate exhaustively amongst themselves, build some developmental power and create media products that articulate ‘oppositional’ intra-group positions to a general public, before deliberating jointly with other commonage stakeholders (Haas 2007: 40). Journalists would then, finally be in a position to produce journalism reporting back on these more encompassing *inter*-group deliberations (including the prominent display of commonage users’ positions), which would stand a better chance of helping audiences compare conflicting concerns, as well as “identify possible points of overlap that might subsequently form the basis for joint public problem-solving” (Haas 2007: 40).

By exploring both the theory and practice of approaches like public journalism, the JDD-CMP contributes to achieving better epistemological congruence in the SJMS curriculum. These approaches are predicated on the sorts of critiques of mainstream journalism that students usually encounter in the Media Studies or ‘academic’ curriculum. The primary value of studying and practicing non-mainstream approaches in the curriculum is in destabilising the idea that there is a coherent, universally accepted and superior way of doing journalism. Non-mainstream approaches achieve this destabilisation by deviating from the ‘objective journalistic stance’, foregrounding epistemology, emphasising the social construction of ‘facts’ and knowledge and striving to develop critical thinking and reflexivity. But, this paper argues that it does more than simply contribute to the intellectual growth and journalistic ‘re-skilling’ of students through the mutual constitution of conception and execution – it also helps to reshape the ‘professional’ and personal-political identities of many of the students, which will be discussed below.

**The ‘ontological turn’**

“Theory and practice, intellectual life and social intervention, academic endeavour and political action” are all seen as integrated in a praxis-based approach (see Mosco, 1996:38 cited in Wasserman 2005). Students and lecturers learn together through critiquing journalistic practice in the light of the rich theoretical frameworks on offer in the course. They are forced to go beyond the transfer and acquisition of knowledge and skills, because the course necessarily probe their political and ethical stances by asking questions like, “What do journalists stand for (and against)?”, and it therefore necessarily foregrounds the question of who they ‘become’. This ‘ontological turn’ undermines a narrow focus on the intellect by promoting “the integration of knowing, acting and being” (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007: 682). The paper presents evidence to suggest that the journalistic ideas and ‘identities’ offered by the course serve to destabilise the idea that there is a coherent, universally accepted and superior way of doing journalism:

“It challenged my understanding of journalism to come into contact with so many different approaches to journalism. The idea that journalism could extend beyond neutrality, objectivity and fair representation of fact was a far flung notion. It was the excitement of breaking rules and exposing injustice that made journalism appealing – but, in my mind the days for that had passed, at least in SA. In my mind the only thing left was sitting in a boardroom jotting down notes of government meetings and the comments of sleazy politicians – a job somebody else could have. But, to be show that something else was possible was like a window to a new world. Public journalism is not so far flung from professional journalism as radical journalism, but still different enough to destabilise my whole mindset – it was the start of something wonderful.” (Extract from student 2 exam response, 2010)

Many, if not most, students express a revelatory sense of purpose in being “allowed to take sides” and “make a difference” for the first time in their three year degree. Through the JDD-CMP students engage with the wider community and develop much stronger sense of attachment to Grahamstown and its problems. They develop deepened relationships with their sources which can lead to stronger feelings of empathy, solidarity and a better appreciation of diversity (Sheffield 2007):

“I could engage with the community I was working with in Ward 4, building relationships and challenging my values, ethics and ideas of social responsibility. I could experience diversity and re-engage the people whose stories mattered, not as statistics or objects like I had come to presume they must always be, but as subjects, as partners in their process of deliberation and debate. I began to reconsider my understanding that journalism must always be black and white: here are the facts, here are the requirements, get an official comment and get on with it. I reconsidered my entire professional and personal-political identity… Before embarking on JMS in first year I thought that everything we have been taught over the past six months was possible, but somewhere along the line over the past three years I lost that – I have found it again.” (Extract from student 3 exam response, 2010)

And all of this leads to a re-evaluation of their values, ethics and sense of social responsibility. Some students report that they are ‘surprised’ by the ideas underpinning non-mainstream approaches to journalism and that this led to the evolution of their journalistic identities:

“The JDD-CMP course made me rethink my relationship toward audiences, and gave me hope to let go of the notion of being detached from the people that I work with …the reason I wanted to become a journalist was to empower people and bring change… Public journalism and the other approaches make me question who I am as an individual in this industry and what will I actually use this degree for.” (Extract from student 1 exam, 2011)

“The amount of gratitude people in our ward had just because we had come to ask them about their stories, was surprising and overwhelming. It made me realise the deep need for a move away from the monitorial role. Often our claims of objectivity are actually just a cover for not having the desire or time to delve deeper into an issue. One thing I have struggled with a lot during my 3 years of doing journalism is the ethics of it. I have been a serial parachute journalist, and even though I felt uncomfortable about it at the time, I believed that was simply part of the job. (Extract from student 4 exam, 2010)

“The course also opened me up to the concept of societal justice …I feel that I now have a better understanding and consciousness of my identity not only as a journalist, but as a journalist in a social context with moral and important obligations to that society.” (Extract from student 1 exam, 2008)

It is perhaps unsurprising that students are surprised by the ideas underpinning non-mainstream journalisms, since these approaches are not well known, highly regarded or enthusiastically embraced by most journalists. But this does not in itself make them less legitimate or interesting. They are practiced around the world by significant numbers of committed media workers and documented and supported by a growing academic literature. They force students to probe their political position:

“At the beginning of the year, I would have described my identity as being more of a mainstream, investigative journalist who sought the bare facts and remain[ed] objective as well as impartial. As the year proceeded certain aspects of Radio caused me to start challenging myself as a journalist. …these different theories started to shift my idea of journalist to one who acknowledges their socio-epistemic background and cannot be objective …the CMP course… taught me to think about my own humanity when I come into contact with people. (Extract from student 2 exam, 2011)

The JDD-CMP encourages students to evaluate different theories and reflect on them in the light of meaningful personal experiences, practices and critical incidents. Students reported that, for the first time in a three year undergraduate course, the relationship between the theoretical and practical streams of the curriculum had finally begun to “make sense”:

“In first year journalism, when we moaned about learning about the printing press, we moaned about learning media theory, my tutors kept saying in the end will somehow all make sense. And while studying for this exam I came to the final conclusion that I was waiting for, the sense of it all…In this course I felt lost for most of it, but when I finally applied myself to the readings about what it meant to be a journalist I discovered how much power the media has. I can see now why there are so many debates about so many different types of journalism. Because as this course has taught me, there is no ‘one’ solution to a problem…The idea of being a journalist is the idea of how best to disseminate information. Who gets to tell you what, why, where and when and how? And for what purpose? This last question ‘For what purpose’ all came together in this course…In the end one’s identity is shaped by our perspectives and I wish to continually question my perspectives in order to become a fair and good journalist, promoting good change in whatever light. The issues in the CMP course have taught me that I am able to do this through a multitude of choices.” (Extract from student 2 exam, 2008)

However, while many students embraced the challenges of the JDD-CMP course and found the experience transformative, others reported suffering an ‘ontological crisis’ because the course poses difficult challenges to their pre-existing values and ethics and also to their sense of agency as journalists and as citizens. For them, the questioning of ‘traditional’ notions professionalism while confronting issues of violence and poverty was uncomfortable and even traumatic. As lecturers, we may have provided students with the basic epistemological framework required to rethink the role journalism in a developing country, but had not considered the students’ ontological positioning in relation to the course material. The next part of the paper will examine the different circumstances that have brought about ‘ontological crisis’ and the students’ responses to the course.

Given the limited space in this paper, we will focus on only a few poignant examples from 2010 and reflect on these in light of the aims of the course itself. In 2010 focused on creating hyper-local content for each of the 12 municipal wards in the city. The examples are drawn from incidents where:

* two students helped repair a roof of their interviewee, whose house had been struck by a tornado;
* two different student groups reacted differently to discovering cases of sodomy in the primary school in their ward, and took different approaches with mixed success.

## Maintaining ‘proper distance’ under extreme circumstances

One of the most difficult issues on this course that a group of students were challenged with was the appropriate response to reports of sodomy in their municipal ward’s primary school.

Glasser (1992) argues that objectivity is merely a ‘commercial imperative’ that has been utilised to orient journalists. While this claim has validity, objectivity can also be viewed as a means of protecting journalists by enabling them to create distance between themselves and the subjects of their stories. Given ‘traditional’ journalism’s adherence to news values, such as ‘bad news’, the sources journalists interact with are largely chosen because of their status as ‘victims’. One of the shortcomings of the JDD-CMP course, other courses within the School of Journalism and Media Studies and all on-the-job journalism training at present, is that they fail to adequately psychologically prepare future journalists for traumatic situations of brutality, especially sexual violence.

Part of the ‘ontological crisis’ referred to in the title stems from the fact that, for some students, the JDD-CMP course is their first encounter as journalists with the ‘other’ or off-campus community. When faced with issues of stark poverty and violence on the one hand, and the high-minded normative ideals of the alternative ‘journalisms’ on the other, several students feel overwhelmed. Two of the multimedia student groups reacted to this issue by adopting different journalistic approaches: one group withdrew and chose to a ‘traditional’ journalistic approach in which only ‘official’ sources, such as the school principal, were consulted. Students stated that they created this production for a ‘broad’ audience, as a purely informative piece based on traditional news values. Even though the school and the ward it was based comprised isiXhosa and Afrikaans language speakers, the journalists created a piece in English. The students’ decision to revert back to traditional news routines to handle a topic as complex as sodomy is reasonable.

In contrast, the second student group adopted a communication for development approach on top of the public journalism they created for the local newspaper, *Grocott’s Mail*. They created a range of multi-lingual pamphlets with graphics for parents, which were distributed in schools and Grocott’s, as a means to provide public education and facilitate public debate on the issue.

In the field, students and journalists confront issues of trauma and violence, but does the responsibility to prepare them for these situations lie with the SJMS or with the journalist themselves? As lecturers, we believe we are compelled to prepare and equip students with the tools to respond to social crisis in a respectful and responsible manner which is not harmful to either the journalist or their source. In his book, *Media and Morality,* Silverstone proffers an ethics of care, which “is predicated on a particular politics of representation of otherness which he calls ‘proper distance’” (cited in Chouliaraki and Orgad 2011: 3). Far from advocating objectivity, which is laden with the journalist’s own subconscious biases, ‘proper distance’ posits the notion of imaging the other on his or her own terms while being consciously aware of our cultural and social differences.

“Being accustomed to parachute journalism (and experiencing a crisis of conscience as a result), I was happy to give something back to the community that I’d been a parasite on for three years. Instead of merely siphoning facts from sources and putting them in an ‘objective’ story, it was rewarding to take Haas’s ‘public philosophy’ to heart and take sides, take a stance against issues this community faced… A quote from Haas stuck in my head throughout the course and – to paraphrase – it was: The power of your reporting stems from your attachment and connection to the public, not the distance you keep.” (Extract from student 5 exam, 2010)

“Another big thing is that public journalism forced me into an environment (i.e. the township) with which I was quite unfamiliar and sceptical. I, like many others, had been duped into viewing the poorer neighbourhoods of SA as being defined by violence, crime, drug abuse and general degeneration. My experience changed this and I got to accept and even admire the nuances of township life and the solidarity and strength in community.” (Extract from student 6 exam, 2010)

## Mending bridges and repairing roofs

The ethics of sending student journalists into challenging social situations are debateable. On the other hand, as lecturers, we ask no more of our students than editors require from journalists in the field – the ability to interact with diverse sources under difficult social conditions, and a university would be remiss in not adequately preparing students to face South Africa’s socio-economic problems. In interviews conducted with staff members involved, many cited similar reasons for the continuation of a service-learning course like JDD-CMP:

“The community (and this is a problematic term) focus in term four should be retained… because the nature of the work we do is about people or clients and about audiences**. Interacting with clients and audiences is important,** and the danger of staying in our building is that it doesn’t give students mechanisms with dealing with people…We have a responsibility to make sure that our students remain ‘comfortable with discomfort’ …I think **people need to be exposed to the multiple realities of the life that we live**... We should be preparing them for change. (Staff interview1: Garman 2012)

However, as academics in a small town, we have a responsibility not only to our students but to the citizens of the town. Each year, approximately 580 students compete with each other and the town’s professional journalists to interview a small pool of residents and experts for stories. Unprepared or discourteous students, who ‘parachute in’ to create stories that are offensive, incorrect or simply never circulated back into the local community, create resentment between local townsfolk and the University. In 2010, several students stated that their attempts to gain the wider community’s trust were met with suspicion and even outright rejection. While studying the possibilities that alternative approaches to journalism provided when engaging with communities, student journalists faced the reality of a fairly hostile environment to practice in. Local residents were quoted as feeling overused and undervalued by the students, and did not see the benefit in journalism (this was aligned with political hostility toward the media at that time) nor in ‘helping students with their projects’. Any reformist approaches to journalism would need to start by gaining the trust of residents and ensuring that students followed through with any promises made.

Preparation for the 2010 ward-based project began with public journalism through community meetings in each municipal ward, after which students were encouraged to select a journalistic approach that best suited their ward. In one of the ward meetings, residents complained that the municipal disaster relief fund set aside to repair houses severely damaged by a tornado two years previously had not paid those affected. In response, the students assigned to this ward decided to adopt a facilitative approach and create human interest stories about one of the tornado ‘victims’, which could be taken directly to the municipal councillors responsible as a means of inducing change through awareness. While the students hoped to hold the municipality accountable, the goal was to choose a narrow audience, who could directly intervene on behalf of the affected residents. In opposition to the ‘monitorial’ role, the ‘facilitative’ and ‘collaborative’ approaches are non-confrontational. Unfortunately, at the pre-arranged meeting between the students and the municipality, the municipal manager dismissed the journalists and refused to view their productions. This unexpected rebuff had a the potential to further exacerbate already-strained relationships between the community members and students, as several students had assured residents that they would report back after the meeting with the Makana Municipality officials. The group of students who had wished to use their journalism to advance the tornado relief project began to question the role of a journalist as a ‘monitor’, ‘facilitator’ or even a ‘collaborator’ in a situation where the government was dismissive and unresponsive.

“It is one thing for Christians et al to theorise about the roles of journalists but another entirely to bring it to life when you are dealing with unwilling government and a demoralised populace. The community has cultivated feelings of anger and animosity towards government officials and rightly so, and now we are stationed in the firing line of false promises, abandoned elderly citizens and desperate circumstances with nothing to protect us but a notepad/camera/recorder? … This course has left me despondent and heartbroken about the state of affairs in South Africa and the adversity which confronts journalists. I am not sure what would have equipped me for coping better with this course, but three years of learning about the Utopian ideals of journalism certainly did not” (Hollis on student blog 2010).

Theorists outline the possibilities of alternative journalisms, but not how to manage the potential setbacks and failures when put into practice. Students were understandably despondent and angry. Having, in some cases, promised to help sources through collaboration with the Makana Municipality, students felt a burden of responsibility toward their sources.

This particular group reconceived their role as journalists in this situation and, by basing their journalism on the realisation of a goal – to fix a tornado-damaged house in this case – rather than simply creating journalism with the purpose of informing others, they reworked their production as a piece of social marketing. The reworked audio-visual production is a narrationless story about the daily life of a woman who struggles to raise her three children in their one-roomed house that has only a partial roof due to the tornado-damage. This production was taken to local businesses and residents to gather donations. The students gained the sponsorship of a local building company, who repaired the house, and the final audio-visual production was released as a corporate social responsibility video, in which a narrator explains the role of building company in bettering the lives of the woman and her children.

On reflection, while this strategy was effective at a hyper-local level, and helped establish a positive rapport between students and members of the wider Grahamstown community, it does raise several concerns about the role of journalists and the role of government. In context, the two students managed to induce civil society to repair one house out of several, and this may eventually ‘shame’ the municipality into fixing the other houses, but it also may have no effect. Is this kind of ‘journalism’ suitable in this context? The role of the journalist has shifted from facilitator and storyteller to advocate and marketer. This shift engenders a change in the ‘professional’ codes used by the journalists in question.

It is arguable that this kind of ‘journalism’ is unsustainable, given the limited number of local businesses willing to support these projects. However, the value of students problem solving in the ‘messy situations’ that experiential learning provides outweighs several of the concerns in this case. This value has been stressed by students in each year the course has run:

“By having the ability to change and improve the lives of others made me grateful that I had learnt such a skill at university. This course completely changed my view of journalism and what it means to be a journalist. I was able to create my own identity through the ideas that were taught to us over the period of JDD and CMP.” (Extract from student 3 exam, 2008)

## In whose mind, littered with idealistic thoughts?

The ideas explored in the JDD-CMP may have theoretical force, but the notion that journalists – especially inexperienced student journalists drawn from South Africa’s more privileged social classes – should be responsible for the nurturance of alternative journalism that advances the cause of public problem solving in a town with high levels of unemployment and poverty and an extremely weak civil society, may seem a daunting, time-consuming and even inappropriate burden for student journalists to have to bear. This notion was vehemently reiterated by one of the students in the 2010 class:

“Although the course began with a burst of optimism, I believe that the gravity of the situations in which many local citizens are forced to live soon hit home and greatly demoralised those of us who weren't completely overtaken by the fallacious ideas of a readily-developing public sphere… The fact of the matter is that many people are living in appalling conditions to which no human being should be subjected…In one of Makana's wards, *there are schoolchildren that sodomise other schoolchildren.*  
In what ways are student journalists, who have been plied with vague direction in their vocation by three years of below-par university instruction and (on average) two weeks of work experience, supposed to deal with this? …In whose mind, littered with idealistic thoughts, are we prepared to successfully deal with reporting on, and helping members in that community deal with, issues of that magnitude? Let's be frank here: there are no "soft issues" here… Again I ask, how is a group of outsider student journalists equipped to deal with this?

Sure, there are many positive things we have done, including helping out a few very worthy establishments, and giving an audience to Ward 5's community policing forum, and these are things to be satisfied about. … Sure, all of us have probably learned a lot in terms of skills and, hopefully, their outlook on the very real issues that South Africa faces. Was this process necessary to do that? No. Were these the intended outcomes of the course? Hopefully not. It's romantic to suggest that we could have ever affected any sort of far-reaching change given our working context: a group of 20 students to cover 10 000 people who we know very little about in the space of 4 months, punctuated by holidays and other work to do? Fat chance.

And if you think that's pessimistic, I suggest you start to get your hands dirty, you know, like the rest of the few remarkable men and women on the ground that we have met over the past few months.” (Mulgrew, student blog response 2010).

This student’s critique is valid and poignant. How should universities prepare journalism students to face these challenges? Should we abandon projects like these entirely, provide theories and abstract ethical debates and leave students to face these ‘messy situations’ (Luckett 2001) if they choose to work in a newsroom environment that would care about these communities’ stories? As a journalism school, can we achieve our aim of producing “critical, self-reflexive” graduates who are “equipped to act as thoughtful, creative and skilled journalists” (JMS Vision Statement) without exposing them to the daily lived-realities of the other 80 per cent of South Africans? We argue that we can’t, but that other ways of adequately preparing students for a course like this need to be considered. While even the strongest student voice in opposition to the course, expressed a few positive aspects, the course is laden with other significant barriers to achieving this in practice (not least, the limited time available to students completing a semester-long university course). Time was the primary constraint, which both students and staff identified in interviews about the course. Students were provided with a variety of alternative theories that advocated long-term relationship-building with Grahamstown residents, but were given less than six weeks to practice these approaches. While the majority of the students were comfortable with what they achieved in that time, a few stated that the ‘unrealistic’ timeframe and expectations of the course ‘set them up for failure’:

“When the JDD-CMP course began in July I was overwhelmed by what we had to try to achieve in this short space of time…The objectives of this course also seemed impractical and unrealistic considering we had to learn the theory and then apply it almost simultaneously” (Van Doorene – student blog 2010).

“This course will always be a learning curve and thus should make room for students to critique their work and the manner in which they conducted themselves. Therefore, I think it is necessary to have an introduction to the theory before producing media but the theory should also be looked at in more detail the outputs are produced. I think we missed out on learning from the experience and our mistakes” (Student course evaluation 1: 2011).

This constraint is echoed by many of the lecturers interviewed, but several felt that it would be inappropriate to take time from other aspects of their teaching:

“The notion of the CMP course is incredibly valuable …but I think it is overambitious and the consequences are that students don’t get the opportunity to try and fail and retry… Long-term deadlines aren’t necessarily going to help, but maybe lower our expectation of the quantity of work – a smaller quantity of good quality work that students can have two attempts are improving – this is not parachute journalism” (Staff interview 3: Garman 2012).

# Conclusion: training students to become new kinds of journalists

Interviews and course evaluations indicate that the praxis-based JDD-CMP course provides students with both valuable knowledge of the alternative journalism practices and greater insight into how these practices can be incorporated into their identities as journalists. Theory and practice, intellectual life and social intervention, academic endeavour and political action are all seen as integrated. However, as this paper argues, while the course can be transformative, more time, ‘scaffolding’ (Wood, Bruner & Ross 1976) and support are required to enable the students to adequately produce journalism that engages with the inequalities in our society.

Theories that could support this course come, not from Journalism Studies or Cultural Studies, but from ethics and Service Learning educational theories. Sheffield defines a “three-part service framework – mutuality, solidarity and diversity” (2005: 50) for service learning, which student journalists in the field could adopt:

“If students are to serve successfully, they must have some understanding of the “strangers” they encounter…. Diversity is the realization that we have an ethical responsibility to connect with each other through community service and thereby know the diverse and numerous others that make up a community in a moral democracy—a system based on creed rather than history or ethnicity” (Sheffield 2005: 52).

With additional scaffolding, much can be gained – both theoretically and practically – through the introduction of more ‘facilitative’ and ‘radical’ conceptions of the media in higher education. By allowing students to experiment with alternative journalistic practices, JDD-CMP aims to contribute to more than just the intellectual growth of students, in many cases it helps to reshape their ‘professional’ and personal-political identities.

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