

Welcome and opening address at the 12th Highway Africa Conference

8 September 2008

The officials of Highway Africa, officials of print and electronic media institutions, of national, continental and international media organisations, of state departments and the Makana municipality, representatives and members of organisations and universities throughout Africa and other parts of the world, the Heads of the Rhodes School of Journalism and Media Studies, Prof. Guy Berger and Prof. Larry Strelitz, Banda, Prof. Fackson Banda and Mr. Chris Kabwato, distinguished guests, conference participants, speakers, colleagues, compatriots and comrades: molweni, jambo, bonjour, born dia, good morning.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, the Makana District, and the Eastern Cape; and to guests from other parts of Africa and the world, welcome also to South Africa!

As a mark of my appreciation to those of you who have travelled long distances to be at this conference, I extend especially to you the lovely Irish greeting *Céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes!

The School of Journalism and Media Studies occupies pride of place at Rhodes University and on the African continent and we are honoured to once again host this 12th *Highway Africa* Conference. Over the years, the conference has become a key event of Rhodes University, and its Pan-African nature gels well with our aspiration to be an outstanding African university 'which proudly affirms its African identity', and is rooted in the aspirations, challenges and struggles of the continent.

Beyond welcoming you, I have been requested to also address the theme of this year's Highway Africa gathering, which is *Citizen Journalism, Journalism for Citizens*.

I am not a journalist, nor do I have any education and expertise in the field of media and journalism studies. My own discipline is sociology, and more specifically critical sociology, with a special attachment to the sociological imagination of the kind that C. Wright Mills was a great advocate. I leave it to you to be the judge of whether a critical sociologist can have anything meaningful to say about *Citizen Journalism, Journalism for Citizens*.

My life experience does, however, include some eighth years of very active involvement in anti-apartheid student and community media, culminating in three years,

between 1983 and 1986, as the co-ordinator of the Cape-Town based *Grassroots* community newspaper. And it is the narrative and experience of *Grassroots* that I wish to use to raise some, hopefully, pertinent and critical issues with respect to *Citizen Journalism, Journalism for Citizens*

In 1980 in the turmoil of a consumer boycott of a spaghetti manufacturer, a bus boycott and a boycott of schools and universities, anti-apartheid political activists in the Western Cape launched a community newspaper. It was simply, but aptly, titled *Grassroots*, and was to become an intellectual, media and organizational adventure the like of which was unknown previously. And nothing, in my view, quite like *Grassroots*, as both an organisation and as a newspaper, has been seen since after it voluntarily closed in 1990.

Today, there is no shortage of what are called 'community newspapers''- the by and large commercially produced, for profit, weekly wad of paper, whose content is difficult to describe, is of parochial and fleeting interest, and is eminently forgettable by bedtime. *Grassroots* was a community newspaper of a quite different kind.

Grassroots, and the other newspapers that it was to inspire or help launch within a few years of its own birth – *Ukusa* in Durban, *Speak* in Johannesburg, *The Eye* in

Pretoria, *Umthonyama* in Port Elizabeth, *Saamstaan* in the South Cape and *Bricks* in Windhoek – were a particular species of media. Given their aspirations, goals and workings, **popular democratic struggle press** is perhaps the best way to define *Grassroots* and its contemporary community newspapers.

The popular democratic struggle press had many distinctive features. In the first place, the names adopted by the community newspapers - *Ukusa* (Awake) *Speak*, *Saamstaan* (*Stand Together*) and *Grassroots* itself – were clear and unambiguous signals of the aspirations and intentions of these institutions and newspapers. Second, unlike the dominant South African media, which were largely under the control of the apartheid state or corporate capital, the popular democratic struggle press was initiated and controlled by anti-apartheid popular activists and organizations.

Third, as opposed to the commercial media, the popular democratic struggle press was a not-for-profit enterprise, often distributed free, or sold at a small nominal price. Fourth, the popular democratic struggle press depended on local fundraising, international donor funding and revenue from limited advertising by small businesses.

Finally, unlike the commercial media with their professionally trained and salaried staff, the success of *Grassroots* and the other newspapers depended on an altogether different personpower base. On the one hand there was a small core of staff that was paid extremely modest 'struggle salaries' – the term 'struggle' being appropriate in all senses of the word. All staff, irrespective of position earned equal salaries, and positions were not so much of a hierarchy as a specialist division of labour for the effective operation of the newspaper - hence, my own title of 'Co-ordinator' rather than 'Editor'.

On the other hand there was a large committed and dedicated volunteer force without whom the newspaper would have been a good idea but little else. This volunteer force contributed ideas for articles, wrote articles, assisted with production, gathered together to collate the newspaper as it came off the printing press, and bundled the newspaper. Above all, the volunteer force, alongside other activists of civic, youth, women's and student organisations and trade unions, distributed the newspaper door to door among township residents, at bus and train stations, at factories, and at educational institutions.

The rationale and principal ideas that animated *Grassroots* and its nature are nicely captured by the word '**poems**'. Elaborating on each of the letters of the word 'poems' will

help to convey the fundamental ideas behind *Grassroots* and the roles that *Grassroots* was intended to play in the South Africa and Western Cape of the 1980's.

To begin with, the 'P' in 'poems' stood for **Popularization**. The role of *Grassroots* was to **popularize** – popularize the ideas of freedom, justice and democracy; the ideals of non-racialism and non-sexism;; popularize the national, regional and grassroots civic, women's, youth and student organizations and trade unions and their aspirations.

The 'O' in 'poems' symbolized **Organization**. *Grassroots* was to be a catalyst for **organizing** the disenfranchised and nationally oppressed who were denied the freedoms and rights that are normally accorded to citizens, and were subject to a battery of oppressive measures designed to maintain white supremacy and privilege. *Grassroots* was to support the organizing of exploited social groups that were denied basic rights and valued only for their ability to labour and produce profits for the captains of industry. It was to help build mass democratic organizations among township residents, women, youth, students and workers.

The 'E' in 'poems' represented **Education**. The role of *Grassroots* was to **educate** the oppressed, exploited and

marginalized about the historical and contemporary sources and nature of their oppression and exploitation, and why it was possible for a small minority to maintain and reproduce its power. It was to educate about power and powerlessness and the reasons for wealth and poverty and prosperity and deprivation, about the state strategies of divide and rule, and of the velvet glove of reform and the iron fist of repression. At the same time, it was to also educate why it was necessary for the united action, and cultivate the desire for freedom.

The 'M' in 'poems' stood for **Mobilization**. *Grassroots* was to be a catalyst for **mobilizing** township residents, women, youth, students and workers to confront their hardships and oppression. It was to facilitate mobilization against the deprivations of township conditions, the intolerable conditions on the factory floor, the oppressive conditions on the farms and the greed of the bosses. *Grassroots* was to be a weapon for mobilizing people to oppose injustice in all areas of social life.

Finally, the 'S' in 'poems' stood for **Struggle**. *Grassroots* was to build the understanding and consciousness that nothing comes without struggle. It was to raise awareness of the targets of struggle and the goals of struggle. It was to be both an institution, alongside other popular mass

organizations, of struggle against apartheid and colonialism and a catalyst of struggle.

If *Grassroots* the community newspaper was to produce the 'poems', the intellectuals, students, youth, workers and township residents, men and women, hetro-sexuals, gays and lesbians, mature, middle-aged and young, and full-time paid staff and unpaid volunteers that populated *Grassroots* and constituted its backbone were to be 'poets' of struggle for citizen and human rights and national liberation.

The 'poets', however, were not to bamboozle the 'people' with over-clever, self-indulgent jargon, long unintelligible esoteric essays and opaque and mystifying tracts. The 'poetry' of *Grassroots* was to be lucid, precise and simple, though never simplistic. Articles in *Grassroots* were to be short, written in simple English (and occasionally simple Afrikaans and Xhosa), so that they could be understood by people with limited literacy, and were to be accompanied by thoughtful headlines, and abundant photographs and graphics.

Infused into *Grassroots* was a healthy dose of fearless, militant and inspirational determination, to borrow Barney Pityana's words, 'to push to the limits the bounds of possibility'.

This was necessary, for during the ten years of Grassroots its offices were fire-bombed by agents of the apartheid state, editions were regularly banned, volunteers were intimidated and harassed, staff were detained and subject to solitary confinement, assault and torture under terrorism and other security laws, and were banned and restricted to their homes.

With this brief historical narrative on Grassroots, I return to the theme of *Citizen Journalism, Journalism for Citizens*.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty says "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." "The question is," says Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." "The question is," says Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

Indeed! Is the case of Grassroots an example of 'citizen journalism' and/or 'journalism for citizens' or is it instead another kind of journalism or, to broaden the issue away from journalism, of public expression?

It, of course, depends greatly on how one defines 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' and distinguishes them from other kinds of journalism: do we define them

in terms of the human agency (citizens as distinct from the professionally category of journalists) behind such journalism, or in terms of their specific character, purposes, aims and objects. I deliberately use the plurals 'their' and 'them' because I do not wish to assume that 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' are necessarily one and the same activities.

We are all aware of the various problems associated with concepts, and some measure of conceptual precision and agreement is, therefore, clearly important if there is to be intelligent, reasoned and fruitful discourse on 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens'.

If, for the sake of argument, Grassroots *is* an example of 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens', it was, of course, a phenomenon of a particular historical conjuncture - pre-computers, cellular technology and the internet and the revolution in information and communication technology, pre the epoch of globalisation, and pre the orthodoxies of neo-liberalism.

The contemporary historical conjuncture is very different. Globalization has, through the ICT revolution, brought in its wake the compression of time and space, and a "market society" in which a rampant "culture of materialism" is in danger of transforming "a reasonable

utilitarianism...into Narcissist hedonism" (Nayyar, 2008:5).

The neo-liberal orthodoxy preaches that "the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and ...seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (Harvey, 2005:3). Importantly, it proposes that "if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary" (ibid:2).

On the one hand, the technological developments that are a feature of the new conjuncture clearly facilitate projects of 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens'. On the other hand, despite the promise of new technologies, aspects of the new historical conjuncture represent grave challenges for the advancement and assertion of human rights and the legal, economic and social freedoms that are associated with these rights. Further, in as much as the new information and technologies could facilitate human development and emancipation, they can also be harnessed in the service of authoritarian and repressive rule, becoming the 21st century version of Foucault's panopticon.

Recent developments, then, powerfully impact on citizens, citizenship and journalism and more generally on forms of public expression. Questions necessarily arise with respect to the meaning and character, trajectory and dynamics of 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' in the new historical conjuncture.

If, again for the sake of argument, Grassroots was indeed an example of 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens', an irony should not be lost on us – this was 'citizen journalism' developed and practised for the most part by people and oriented towards people who in the conditions of apartheid South Africa were *non-citizens* in the land of their birth.

What, then, are our assumptions with respect to the nature of the categories 'citizen' and 'citizens'? What is the place of those that we term 'foreigners' and 'aliens' in this journalism? How do 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' relate to nation-states and the 'imagined communities' that, in the words of Benedict Anderson, they constitute? Once more, this highlights the need for clarity with respect to key conceptual issues.

There are additional issues that 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' raise, if they are to be defined in

terms of the human agency of citizens, as opposed to that of professional journalists.

First, is that, all too frequently terms such as 'citizen', like the term 'community', flatten and homogenise empirical realities of difference and diversity of many kinds, and so obfuscate more than they illuminate. Not all citizens and members of the 'community' have equal access to the rights and resources – literacy, education, technology, networks and the like - that are a necessary condition for public expression or 'citizen journalism'. Thus, the ways in which citizens' opportunities to engage in 'citizen journalism' continue to be conditioned by class, race, gender, nationality, religion, language and geography has to be confronted.

Second, is 'citizen journalism' an unconditional public and social good, for it is not self-evident that all citizens are necessarily and always virtuous and driven by human rights norms and social justice. 'Citizen journalism' could also be the vehicle for the promotion of fundamentalist ideologies and the racism, sexism, ethnic nationalism, xenophobia and homophobia that have led to the massacre camps of Sabra and Shatila, the bloody streets of Kosovo, Gujrat and Soweto, the killing fields of Rwanda and Darfur and the destruction of countless lives.

However, perhaps 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' are *not* to be defined in terms of the human agency of citizens but, instead, by journalism of a particular character, and with particular purposes, aims and objects that distinguish them from other kinds of journalism - perhaps journalism that promotes the cause of local, national and global citizenship for all and the advancement and affirmation of the human, economic, social and political rights that are associated with citizenship and human well-being.

Perhaps too nothing in the notions of 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' are meant to imply that citizens are freed from the strictures, obligations and professional norms associated with the practice of journalism. Antonio Gramsci has observed that all humans are intellectuals but not all function as and play the role of intellectuals. Perhaps all humans are potentially citizen journalists but have to be provided the opportunities to function as citizen journalists. In this case, the implication is that citizens require a measure of education and training in the craft of journalism. Of course, interesting regulatory, governance and legal issues arise.

It may be that the concerns are really those of extending and deepening citizen's voices, advancing citizen rights to free public expression and to communicate, as recognised

by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as well as by the African Charter on Human and Peoples and Rights (ACHPR), and augmenting the communicative platforms through which citizens may assert and exercise citizenship rights.

However, perhaps the impulses behind 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' are *different and distinct* from these concerns. This implies a critique of traditional media and journalism. This should not be surprising, as movements seeking to extend and deepen democracy and human and social rights have extensively critiqued traditional media and journalism on a number of grounds. Are 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens', then, intended to be vehicles for addressing the shortcomings and failures of the traditional media and journalism, for complementing traditional media and journalism, or for eroding the hegemony of the traditional media and journalism? Whatever the intention, how and in what ways?

Bertolt Brecht concludes his well-known poem, 'From a Worker Who Reads', with the words "So many questions". That is how I too wish to conclude: So many questions!

And to return to Alice and Humpty Dumpty, can you "make words mean so many different things." And "which

is to be master". Perhaps with respect to the meanings of 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens', there need not be a "master". Perhaps we should "let a hundred flowers bloom", let a hundred notions and ideas "contend" (Mao).

So many questions! Yet, this is precisely the great and distinctive value of the Highway Africa Conference and why Highway Africa exists:

- To, in the first place, serve as a vital public sphere and place on the agenda of our continent's media theorists, academics, journalists, policymakers, state officials, business leaders and technology specialists, and our continents friends, critical issues related to media and journalism in the context of the challenges of social justice, democracy and development in Africa
- To, secondly, pose questions and stimulate lively debate and discussion on important themes, such as that of this year's on 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens'; and
- Finally, to the extent that the ideas of 'citizen journalism' and 'journalism for citizens' are fertile avenues to pursue, to ensure that the resultant

‘multilogue’ helps to give shape and content and effect to these ideas.

On the part of Rhodes University, the hosting of Highway Africa and the promotion of such debate among our continent’s media specialists and journalists, in all our rich national, cultural and linguistic diversity, and with friends from other parts of the world, is one of the means through which we as a University discharge our commitment to serving South Africa and Africa as a place of knowledge and excellence in teaching, research and community engagement.

In closing, I wish you an enjoyable and memorable stay at Rhodes University and in iRhini/Grahamstown, and a stimulating and productive conference that, drawing on the tremendous collective wisdom that is assembled here, deepens our common understanding of critical issues, and also lays the intellectual and organisational platform for next year’s Highway Africa Conference.

Enkosi, asanteni, merci, obrigado, thank you.