

Teaching journalism to produce “interpretive communities” rather than just “professionals”

Abstract

Debates about whether journalism is a “trade” and can only be learnt “on the job”, or whether journalism should even be taught at universities, are no longer fruitful or even interesting for teachers in tertiary environments. The far more important discussion around the teaching of journalism should be on the approach which focuses too exclusively on its nature as a “profession” and so ignores the critical function of journalists in the world as “interpretive communities”. This approach spends too much teaching time on ethics, media law and the inculcation of professional norms and skills (believing that these alone might lead to excellent practice), and therefore does not easily lend itself to integration with the theoretical approaches of media studies which position themselves critically vis-à-vis the practice of journalism. It is argued that a shift should be made to locating journalism as an “interpretive” practice, which then would require a requisite shift in the teaching so that integration with media theories becomes a necessary part of refocusing journalism’s place in a wider world of culture and dissemination of social meanings.

Keywords: Education, epistemology, interpretive communities, journalism, objectivity, pedagogy, performance, practice, professionalisation, South African media, training.

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