

Title: From vibrancy in African journalism education to realizing a sustainable community of practice in journalism education.

Guy Berger, 8 February, 2022

Keynote speech at SUB-REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON FUTURE OF JOURNALISM EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN EASTERN AFRICA, Maseno University, Kenya.

Your event covers the important topics that impact on both journalism teachers/trainers and professionals, including people working in less traditional spheres like NGOs outside of universities and colleges. These are: research, global threats, tech, and sustainability.

Summary and intro on this intervention:

- Vibrancy of African journalism education
- UNESCO support over decades
- UNESCO and Google News Initiative project
- Creating a community of practice

Let's begin by introducing you to a most incredible African journalist – a man who died at 56 years old, more than 90 years ago. During his life, he was a serial entrepreneur – starting three newspapers published in both the Tswana language and English. Fluent in 7 languages, he operated an international news exchange with scores of partner publications around the world. On the side, he translated Shakespeare into Tswana, was the first black South Africa to publish a novel in English, and bicycled around the country to chronicle the terrible impact of the 1913 land act which dispossessed black South Africans of more than 2/3rds of their land. Oh, and he was also a founder of the ANC, and an accomplished pianist – a recording exists in 1923 of him playing the national anthem of several southern African countries: Nkosi Sikelele Afrika – God bless Africa. Did I mention that my former University where I was journalism teacher has a Media Leadership Institute named after him?

There was a gap in my journalism education. It didn't tell me about Sol Plaatje. I found out later. But imagine an exercise for journalism students today: what media start-ups would Sol Plaatje be initiating if he was alive today? This reflection prompts a wider question: what do current journalism school graduates emerge with, in terms of understanding the history of African media and the inspiring significance for the future of the people like Plaatje who made for vibrancy in journalism against the odds?

With that introduction, let me unpack further what we can understand by vibrancy in journalism education initiatives in Africa. In 2022, the researcher Alan Finlay identified a total 178 African journalism schools/centres on the continent. So there is quite sizeable constituency in this business. Other research by Finlay has highlighted inter alia:

- how colonial and language linkages continue to shape African journalism schools; (which has positives and negatives, but also many omissions of relevance to African situations).
- How the economic crisis in African media is shrinking the number of journalistic jobs.
- predominance of women students in j-schools.
- links between j-schools and radio stations, enhancing training.
- provision of short-courses and diplomas to working journalists.

- slow, but emerging, offers of e-learning and hybrid options stimulated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- the educational landscape includes not just university-based j-schools, but also instances of private training centres (some of which are also linked to religious interests), various NGOs that offer journalism training amongst their overall activities, and regulatory media councils as active stakeholders, and state-owned media offering internships.
- the ongoing importance of donors¹. I would add to Finlay's info here by saying that the range of international actors has expanded, including geopolitically, in the past decade – showing growing “soft power” interest from abroad in the shaping of African media via journalism education and training.

These developments and the possibilities they afford us, highlight that there is significant dynamism in play in African journalism education, even though there are huge challenges of press freedom, a lack of economic resources, and the viability of the news industry.

UNESCO's record in African journalism education

In this dynamic context, we are here today at a UNESCO-convened dialogue. I worked at UNESCO for the last 11 years, where the work done around journalism education and training is mainly the “baby” of a specialized committee of 39 ambassadors called the IPDC. In full, this acronym is the International Programme for the Development of Communication, and I served as secretary.

Most of UNESCO's activities in journalism education area have been encouraged and supported by the IPDC, and by the sterling field presence of colleagues such as those in Nairobi who worked hard to help make this current conference happen.

Let me go back some 15 years to a time when UNESCO's IPDC contracted different experts and developed an influential universally-relevant model curriculum for journalism education, translated into some 16 languages around the world. In the wake of this success, a specific focus was developed for African journalism schools.

Thus, in 2007, UNESCO started a programme that ultimately led to the recognition of 20 African journalism schools as potential centres of excellence and reference. At the time, I was head of the school of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in South Africa, and on sabbatical. This gave me the time and a small grant allowing me to co-lead the UNESCO project's research and consultations towards agreeing on criteria of excellence in journalism education. Kenya, along with Nigeria and Ghana were among the countries where I was able to visit and interview journalism teachers.

The process enabled UNESCO to enable the identification of the 20 schools, convening of meetings amongst them, and the allocation of funds for improvement towards achieving or deepening “excellence”.²

¹ Unicef, UNESCO, Sida, Nida, Hivos, Osisa, the Ford Foundation, the Embassy of Finland, the US Embassy, the German Embassy, Deutsche Welle Africa, the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development (Norhed), the Media Challenge Initiative and Tanzania's Media Foundation (for innovation), the European Union Delegation in Uganda, and the Natural Resource Governance Institute. Other global groups mentioned were: Committee for the Protection of Journalists, the Global Investigative Journalism Network, Thomson Reuters Foundation, Internews, UN Department of Safety and Security, and Acos Alliance. (A evident gap in the research are Francophone institutions). Especially missing in this inventory are initiatives especially by China, and other non-traditional countries in this space).

² See writings by Guy Berger: 2008. Towards defining 'Potential Centres of Excellence' in African journalism training. *Journalism Practice*, 2(2), 147-162

At one meeting held at Rhodes University, still my place of work at the time, some participants called for UNESCO to support the formation of an African association of journalism educators. This was opposed by UNESCO officials back then, who assessed that going this direction would detract from programmatic improvement at each j-school, and instead could stimulate jockeying for positions and perks.

UNESCO therefore shaped its role as being one of background support for individual and joint initiatives among African journalism educators, rather than one of supporting the establishment of a formalized network. A number of further gatherings were held - such as at the then Namibia Polytechnic and at Stellenbosch University, with UNESCO and other support. In 2010, Rhodes also hosted – with participation of UNESCO African field officers - the 2nd iteration of the World Journalism Education Congress. This Congress is an initiative of the World Journalism Education Council, which federates a number of national and regional associations of journalism teachers, rather than drawing together individual journalism educators. WJEC members from Africa are few: only associations from Nigeria and South Africa are direct members. The CESTI (Senegal), ISTC (Cote D’Ivoire), ESSTIC (Cameroon) and University of Antananarivo (Madagascar) are present in the Reseau Theophraste which in turn has WJEC membership. This picture helps us see the relative marginalization of African journalism educators, when considered globally, and contextualizes the value of UNESCO involvement.

Let me turn to cover a bit more of the history and lessons from the UNESCO experience in relating to African journalism education. In 2012, an [internal review of the centres](#) by UNESCO (through an employee and a former journalism professor, Dr Fackson Banda) yielded interesting information. On the one hand, only 12 of the 20 institutions contacted responded to a questionnaire he sent out, suggesting most likely that they lacked sufficient capacity to give attention to this – even though it would have been in their interests to do so, in terms of further relations and potential further funding from UNESCO. Changes in leadership personnel and poor handover at the journalism schools themselves may have been a factor. The 60% response rate showed indeed that many schools were still evidently in need of capacity development. But this response rate did not facilitate further fundraising for the initiative. Nevertheless, of the 12 who responded, one of the achievements of the Centres initiative was the provision of increased provision of Master’s and Ph.D. programmes.³

These mixed outcomes, i.e. shortfalls and successes, led to the supersession at UNESCO’s IPDC of the African Centres initiative⁴ by a broader and more general worldwide initiative, termed the “Global

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2007. Towards defining “potential centres of excellence” in African journalism training. Presentation at World Journalism Education Congress. Media, education and development: the quest for new paradigms. 25 – 28 June, 2007 Singapore.

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³ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000222728>

⁴ See 2014 57th Bureau meeting agenda item:

Initiative for Excellence in Journalism Education”⁵. Here the IPDC focus became largely one of producing key handbooks for use in all parts of the world, not specifically for Africa - although there was one regional customization in a resource that focused on reporting climate change on the continent. These valuable handbooks of global relevance, and with some translations into kiSwahili for special relevance to Africa, have covered topics like teaching the issues around reportage on migration and refugee issues; dealing with disinformation, and the topic of violence against women and girls.

Meanwhile, a number of UNESCO’s African field offices maintained good relationships with leading local/regional journalism schools, and engaged them for example in researching for Media Development Indicator studies – as in Ghana, Malawi, Sudan and Ethiopia which have been published in the past year, and in Kenya - which study is to be launched during this conference.

The UNESCO field offices have also worked to encourage the involvement of journalism teachers and students in observing key events of relevance for journalism education. I hope you will know some of these: World Press Freedom Day, World Radio Day, International Day for Universal Access to Information, and the International Day to end impunity for crimes against journalists. If you haven’t heard of these special days, again, we have gaps in journalism education.

Coming up this year is a new UNESCO initiative, about which there will be more said later in this conference. I refer here to the **UNESCO Google News Initiative project**.

This project is on the cards because the IPDC secretariat successfully secured a grant from Google News Initiative for renewed work with African journalism educators, with the aim of expanding the achievements of last time - and helping advance sustainable momentum around excellence in terms of what it means in these new and different times.

The project will see pan-African activities being co-ordinated by a consortium which won a competitive UNESCO bid to implement the project, and which is made up of the j-schools at Wits University and Rhodes University in South Africa. They will be reaching out to 100 African j-schools, leading to possibilities for ten grants of 10K USD each for schools hoping to move closer towards excellence.

A “stretch goal” in the contract between UNESCO and Google is for the project to “stimulate a pan-African “community of practice” amongst journalism educators and their institutions”. The question is: can this unfolding phase of UNESCO and African journalism schools pull off this ambition of feeding sustainable “community of practice”. Here’s the answer to this question. It is only you, the journalism educators and your students, who can do the heavy lifting to build **an enduring community of practice** of African journalism educators.

In the long run, it is such a community that can be a sustainable and lasting effective empowerment that raises the impact and resourcing of African journalism schools, internally and internationally. And your individual efforts can contribute towards it. The new project may be able to support some of your efforts, yet it is you who have to run with it. Fortunately, there is already some momentum.

Building a community:

There are several existing impressive initiatives around the continent which contribute to the potential of a vibrant, living, breathing, thinking and doing pan-African community of practice in journalism education:

- The East Africa Communication Association covering scholars in the sub-region over past decade.
- The African Council of Communication Education has an active Nigerian chapter (with a 23rd annual conference expected in 2022⁶) with some sub-regional participation in its events.
- The South African Communications Association (SACCOMM) which convenes national conferences each year.

These initiatives in East, West and Southern African Anglophone-influenced countries are primarily research-oriented. While indeed very important for journalism education, they do not necessarily include the practical side of teaching journalism (as distinct from supporting knowledge of the wider context in which the practice takes place). But rounding out the practice(s) of journalism education, are several other initiatives:

- The Namibia Media Trust, in partnership with DW Akademie, organized in 2022 the third iteration of its annual conference on “The Future of Journalism Education in Southern Africa - Supporting the next generation of African Journalists”. This innovatively combined online with physical events in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Malawi, bridged between types of journalism schools, created a Whatsapp group for networking and put podcasts on the teaching curriculum. The NMT has also produced, with support from UNESCO’s IPDC, a handbook for journalism educators called [Teaching Media Policy in Africa](#). This handbook was based on a civil society-initiated annual MOOC – Massive Open Online Course - that drew extensively from UNESCO knowledge resources and which over four years reached more than 1000 active learners – many being journalism teachers and students.

Let me pause at this point to introduce you to another South African journalist, a star in whose honour the MOOC linked to the Namibia Media Trust was created. This is an Afrikaner born in 1955, almost a quarter of a century after the demise of Sol Plaatje and died just over six years ago. This pipe-smoking, hard-living, woman journalist energized the South Africa union of journalists, then ran the country’s Freedom of Expression Institute. There she was a tour de force behind the non-racial democracy changing the SABC away from being a government mouthpiece, and helped to drive the concept of an independent broadcast regulator that would shortly be set up and give out licenses for scores and scores of community and private radio stations. Not stopping there, the woman I am talking about led the Media Institute of Southern, out of Namibia, campaigning for the Windhoek Declaration on a free, pluralistic and independent African press to become a reality across the whole southern region. It was this Declaration, emerging from a UNESCO organized conference in 1991, that gave the globe a special gift from Africa: World Press Freedom Day, recognized by the UN General Assembly exactly 50 years ago this year. Oh, and did I mention that the same person was key to setting up an international network of NGOs, called the Global Forum for Media Development? Her name was Jeannette Minnie. But in most journalism education in South Africa, her role is absent? However, I do need to ask you to reflect on whether the Windhoek Declaration itself is in all curricula around the continent. Because it should be...

⁶ <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/11/24/unizik-mass-comm-dept-hosts-acce-agm-solicits-support/>

Returning to the review of who-is-who in the dynamic continental landscape of organised journalism teachers, who are assets in favour of building a pan-African community of practice, besides the efforts of the Namibia Media Trust already mentioned, there is strong outreach by South Africa's Wits University, culminating in the African Journalism Educators Network (Ajen). [An Ajen roundtable in September](#) 2022 – primarily in person in Johannesburg - covered perennial topics like relationships between classroom and newsroom, and digital issues, but also gave new focus on journalism teachers decolonising their practice and addressing the diversity of languages spoken around the continent. The meeting also elected a steering committee from around 40 journalism teachers from 25 institutions across the continent, representing some 15 different African countries.

Ajen, and all the other initiatives mentioned, are individually, and together, highly commendable achievements against many odds. Can they amount to more? Can they be the basis of building fully-functioning global “community of practice”? Can UNESCO help here? To address this potential, and to envisage a ramped up and sustained pan-African “community of practice” in journalism education, one can unpack the notion to gain more insight.

What would such a community of practice look like?

According to [one website](#), a COP is a group of people who share an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals. The members “are [the] **actual practitioners** in this domain of interest”, for our purposes this means actual teachers and trainers of journalism in Africa – and their students!

Let me take a short detour here, to address the role of students, who of course are transitional members of the community, but who are key to converting the current vibrancy into a higher stage of a community of knowledge in journalism education. This because journalism teachers and students working together for knowledge creation, is essential for an actual community. It means that journalism education has to firmly go beyond the pedagogy of “knowing” teachers transmitting what they have previously learnt to their students who are by definition newbies to the discipline. This is because neither side alone can “knows” the practice of journalism education; each has a different learning experience. Further, each side brings a different knowledge proposition to the engagement, based on different age group, life experience, socialization, etc. And especially important, because no one really knows how journalism, pedagogy, and even epistemology are evolving in the current period.

Perhaps you have heard of Artificial Intelligence and ChatGPT in particular. These may seem very far away from African conditions. But AI is already what organizes your social media and your search results on your phone, and even more powerful AI is coming. Now, the way the newer AI technologies work is to use machine learning on tons of published data, to be able to produce informed and plausible products – like essays, speeches, company reports, some journalism, etc. At present, the underlying data is very skewed towards Western and English information resources ... and it reflects these in its outputs. In fact, not so different to a lot of our journalism education which builds on this heritage and lacks input and adaptation arising from different heritage.

I don't know what ChatGPT can tell you about Sol Plaatje and Jeanette Minnie, since the website's server said it was under too much demand to take new queries. Perhaps when its functionalities are fully integrated into Microsoft's Bing search engine, as is unfolding, it will be easier to get access. But if I asked Bing how to design an African journalism curriculum, I would be pretty surprised if,

unprompted, it would volunteer how Plaatje and Minnie could be relevant to journalism school courses.

Similarly, I have to wonder if I could chat with ChatGPT meaningfully about the polka-dot bow-tie wearing Kenyan editor George Githii who once said: “For governments who fear newspapers there is one consolation. We have known many instances where governments have taken over newspapers, but we have not known a single incident in which a newspaper has taken over a government.” What inspired him to coin this witticism? A human needs to find this out, since as far as I know, it’s not recorded and therefore not being presented by AI interfaces.

I wonder too about Hilary Ng’weno, who passed in 2021, the first Kenyan appointed as an editor-in-chief in this country, and an amazingly prolific journalistic entrepreneur. Would AI be able to explain how he turned away from a Harvard education in nuclear physics to work in media? Or would it be mere speculation if there is no record in its database about what really drove his passion?

Looking shortly ahead, even if AI will be able to give you a write up based on synthesizing already known and published information, it is still key for journalism teachers and students to assess these systems that are not quite as magical or positive as may seem.

First, Artificial Intelligence does not assess truth, so whatever it outputs is often not gospel – illogical syntheses are frequent. Human and journalistic judgement is still needed to check veracity. Second, and even more importantly, ChatGPT does not know what is not known and recorded somewhere. This poses an exciting challenge to journalism educators and students: what NEW knowledge can be generated? What more can be dug up about Plaatje, Minnie, Githii and Ng’weno? what about the millions of people whose ongoing stories are not yet recorded! Engaging with this means considering how journalism going ahead can do better than AI! Without adding original data to the pool, the system will just keep generating known content online – learning from this, and further repeating it for future chats. And included in the uses of AI to generate content at low costs will be actors trafficking in disinformation, which will circulate online, and be incorporated in future generated content. Current disinformation is a mere trickle compared to the deluge to come. Perhaps things may pan out differently – but the point is that neither journalism teachers nor students know. And part of how things may evolve depends on how they try to address current limits and problems as something that is as essential as exploiting opportunities.

It is therefore against this backdrop that a community of practice cannot just be a passive network with members just playing the role of recipients, givers and exchangers of knowledge. It has to also involve joint creation of knowledge if journalism education ahead is going to be equal to, and better than, AI.

Way forward and conclusion:

It is evident that a community of practice is not something that can be created or generated outside the stakeholders who could comprise it. Thus, outside parties like UNESCO can only support if there are joint initiatives and leadership emanating from within the ranks of African journalism educators themselves.

To boost the community of practice and help it be of benefit to journalism in Africa, each person here needs to act. Act differently, and/or act more. Because without the agency of each stakeholder to maintain and grow the achievements to date, the existing efforts can easily wither and fade.

My parting call therefore is to you to identify one very concrete and specific thing you will do, to strengthen a community of practice. Maybe it's an email to a colleague elsewhere about this conference, maybe it's a briefing to your students about insights arising here. It could be making contact with AJEN, or research into the legacy of the Windhoek Declaration, and its 2021 successor the Windhoek+30 Declaration on Information as a public good. It could be about organizing students to contribute Wikipedia articles about Africans who have made journalistic history on the content. Perhaps it is about using a course to identify key gaps about African knowledge which AI doesn't plug, and then about doing reporting and publishing which will enrich the world's available data.

But it should be something.

And if you bring it to the attention of UNESCO officials, who knows what might be the next steps?