

African journalism educators connecting

Keynote address, Guy Berger

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[African Journalism Educators' Network](#) (AJEN).

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Connect. Connect. Connect. That's my theme. If you want to recall what I speak about, that's easy. Connect.

So let's tackle a few questions to think about connections for journalism educators and trainers.

1. Connecting with the working world of journalism – who amongst you practices regular connections?
2. Connecting with NGOs - who has connections? Press freedom groups?
3. Connecting with experts - like colleagues who understand business issues, data science, climate change?
4. Connecting systematically / institutionally with each other – other journalism educators? In country, within Africa, internationally.

I'm asking these questions, to get a rough sense of strengths and gaps. It's significant because the theory of social capital is this: the more your meaningful and diverse connections, the more social benefit results. And the fewer your connections, the less rich for the teaching of new African journalisms. When I led the Highway Africa conference at Rhodes over a dozen years, it was clear that networking African journalists, and deepening their links to journalism educators, was an exciting and enriching connection for all. I wrote about this in the [African Media Studies Journal](#). Here's an idea: do a quick inventory of your key connections within your work as a journalism educator – rank them in terms of their current status, and separately give each of them a grade out of 10. Any connections that are a priority to improve? Any connections missing that you would like to record in a year's time?

We can probably agree that journalism education is a means to an end. The end is enabling people to enter, or do better in, the world of actual journalism practice. So connections to that world would seem to be a top priority.

Perhaps like me you can see two barriers to productive connections between yourselves as educators and the world of journalism practice. *One of these barriers is where journalism educators feel **inferior** to journalists.* The other? *It is where journalism educators feel **superior** to journalists.*

On the feeling of inferiority, you may be aware of the derogatory adage: those who can do journalism do it; those who can't teach. This is very simplistic. First, it creates a binary – you can only do one of the two things, and second there is a prejudice against the teaching side. Third, the adage implies that teaching is easier to do, than is journalism. Really? Is it?

True, you don't have the same risks to your personal safety as a journalism educator, as compared to when you are working as a journalist. But teaching is not a walk in the park. You can't teach in the dark – you need insight into learning processes, at the very least. True?

Someone can be among the best journalists, but yet be unable to teach the next generation.

The point of this is to say: you journalism educators are NOT second class citizens compared to journalists. By embracing a sense of pride in being a professional journalism educator, you affirm the value of achievements in this field of endeavour.

Turning to the other barrier to connections: which is when journalism educators feel superior to media practitioners. Here, these are people in the academy who regard themselves as an elite. As a cut above those doing the more menial and unreflective (or captured) work within the media industry. This where external intellectuals can see the huge problems in the media, and who criticise accordingly - and very often appropriately. But this one-sided interpretation of the role of academics as superior will often have very little relevance or resonance outside an ivory tower. Worse, it can even play into the hands of those authorities wanting to beat up on the media, and who accuse even quality journalism of being "irresponsible" – when in fact it is rather the case of this being inconvenient to interests in keeping certain information away from the light.

All this is why both inferiority and superiority complexes can serve as barriers to connections.

You will get the respect that you deserve from the practitioners, when you treat them with respect for their efforts – even when they fall short. If you want sustainable connections to those in the industry, you have to build the connection as equals – with shared interests.

Moving on: Let's look at why we as journalism educators are connecting today. You all, as well as me here. That calls for a bit of explaining what I've done and learnt about connections. Here's the story. Nearly 50 years ago, I enrolled as a journalism student at Rhodes University. Some 30 years later, I went back to head up the journalism school there. This role ran from 1994 to 2010, which was the year that I was able to ensure that Africa hosted the 2nd iteration of the [World Journalism Education Congress](#). Many connections are what brought in the resources and the journalism teachers to meet and network African counterparts with peers from many other parts of the world. This Congress is still being held somewhere every four years, under the auspices of the World Journalism Education Council. African associations like AJEN should really connect with this body to benefit from the benefits of enhancing offshore connections.

At the same time, my time at Rhodes saw me use a sabbatical to connect with UNESCO in 2006 on the topic of African journalism education. This partnership entailed a mapping of the schools around the continent. In another step, it saw collective development of teachers and trainers for criteria about [what constituted excellence in African journalism education](#). One could say that in effect, this was a structured exercise in decolonizing journalism education in Africa, because it really surfaced what African journalism educators saw as the key elements relevant to the continent, and it was far from an unthinking and wholesale adoption of what worked in the west or even aspirations to those systems. For example, while much Western journalism education positions itself in relation to media's role in democracy, the African educators went further to include focus on how journalism training and practice could also have significance for development. This promoted possibilities for African journalism education to address issues like media and poverty, investigative journalism and

exploitation, linguistic marginalisations, childrens' rights, etc., within research, curricula and learning exercises.

The connections bore fruit. The result of this UNESCO exercise was the recognition of 19 schools as having potential to reach – in different ways – aspects of their shared broad vision of excellence, and financial resources being channelled accordingly. In 2011, I changed careers and joined UNESCO fulltime, where I worked with many people on many, many things, but including with Fackson Banda who continued the African j-school work. But when only 12 of the 19 schools had capacity to respond to a survey about the impact of UNESCO's initiative, it became hard for us to maintain the then resource flows to African j-education.

But that didn't mean dropping the cause entirely. We then switched focus to producing [syllabi of value to journalism teachers](#) in Africa – and indeed elsewhere. These included model handbooks on key topics for Africans like teaching coverage of migration and reporting on terrorism. Another book covered reporting on climate change in Africa, and yet another tried to meet the challenges of doing journalism about violence against women and girls – a global issue with Africa not being outside this loop. Let me pause to reject a few well-meaning criticisms that global curricula mean Western-oriented curricula and syllabi, or at least are far from what is needed for the Global South. These accusations miss that UNESCO by mandate respects all human cultural diversities and differences, while at the same time insists that human rights are universal. These rights include freedom of expression, press freedom and media pluralism, gender equality, language, privacy and others – which apply equally for journalism education practice in both the global north and the “majority world”. What the criticism also mistakes is that a global knowledge resource like the UNESCO materials by necessity has a level of generality and specification of commonality across different regions and countries, and of course can and should be adapted to more local circumstances and needs. Still, connecting to the criticisms is valuable in provoking more reflection on the resources at hand.

In the past two years, though retiring from UNESCO, I was able to bring to publication two new topical handbooks for journalism teachers: one on how to teach students to cover AI; the second is on teaching journalism remotely – lessons from the Covid period for the future. You can easily find these online, or by searching for UNESCO and “journalism education”. Connecting with UNESCO's resources, and networking with their national or regional offices, is another value-generating linkage. I commend these all to you, naturally not as sacred texts, but as artifacts for adaptation as may be appropriate – or not.

A few years ago, while still at UNESCO, it occurred to me that after a lapse of 15 years, it could be a chance to fund-raise again for African journalism education. In fact, with many changes since 2006, it would also be important to revisit the original view of criteria for excellence in j-education in today's Africa.

To that end, I was able to fundraise \$250 000 from [Google News Initiative](#), and the project was rolled out this year. Thanks here to Wits and Rhodes, and Alan Findlay, who implemented the project. Hopefully, ten schools later this year will receive financial grants towards becoming more excellent as per African criteria. You can find out more about what the participants have defined as contemporary excellence for African journalism schools. Connecting to those insights will give you inspiration and ideas.

Although I'm retired from UNESCO's journalism education activity, I'm still connected to the cause. One avenue is with a group of friends of the late South African media activist, Jeanette Minnie who died in 2016. Through [Stellenbosch University](#) in partnership with the [Namibia Media Trust](#), we will shortly be offering a cutting edge and free online course on Media and Digital Policy in Africa. If you want an African-centric view of contemporary issues like AI, encryption, internet shut-downs, and media viability, this 8 week learning with 3-5 hours a week, is for you. It is a unique chance for expert empowerment in the burning issues for African journalisms. Another great connection to make. Watch the Ajen email, for when this very topical course kicks in (late October).

So, that's me. A personal history highlighting some relevant experience of connections in my life . That's what I bring to this connection with you. And, I am looking forward hearing what you are each bringing to this Ajen meeting. You've already shared some points about your connections map and where you may have gaps. But now you need to connect with individual selves in different aspects, so we can better see what you are bringing to the table here and now, today – and hopefully tomorrow:

1. Who here brings direct journalistic experience to their teaching? Does it enrich your multiple connections?
2. Who here brings academic qualification and research publications to their teaching? Does that add value to your practice and impact as a journalism educator?
3. Who here has a key connection that has enriched you along the journey that brought you to your current status as a practitioner in journalism education and training?
4. From your personal history, who here has a story to tell a colleague about an excellent experience you have had in teaching journalism?

Now, please having connected or re-connected with yourself, please connect with your neighbour and share that experience– 2 minutes each. Something you are very proud of, that worked very well.

And please share with me and others about that connection experience.

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In conclusion: please keep connecting with others, and especially with each other, as you go forwards after this event. Connect with industry, connect with students, connect with the African conception of excellence in journalism education. And connect with UNESCO and its resources, as well as connect with the upcoming MOOC on media and digital policy in Africa.

Now, a message from me as an archivist who has seen a number of connections between African journalism educators come and go. The point is that Ajen is only as strong and as sustainable and valuable - as each of you make of it. It is up to each of you to own it you support it, raise resources for it, you put time into its activities. Because Ajen is nothing without its members proactively connecting.

To end therefore where I began: connect, connect, connect. And may Ajen be a conscious and conspicuous part of those connections.