

Quality journalism - alive, dead, or dying?



By [Marion Scher](#)

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I was once asked by a media organisation to run six-month journalism courses, after which I was informed the 'graduates' would be able to call themselves journalists...

I turned down this offer as I felt then, as I do now, that you certainly cannot become a journalist in six months.

This was, however, in the days before citizen journalism and news produced by aggregators, not news reporters. Many like to call themselves journalists but they generally suffer from a complete lack of common protocols of mainstream journalism. This of course doesn't stop them blogging and using other social media platforms to spread their words, far quicker of course than traditional media.

What this also means is that often this reporting is highly flawed, filled with factual errors, unacknowledged conflicts of interest, and generally poor communication skills. Let's not even mention media law...

The answer?

The public, who hang on to any printed or electronic word they read, are finding themselves unwittingly cast out into an information wilderness where real stories and those a little blurred around the edges are indistinguishable.

So what can be done to save this situation? Perhaps the answer is for journalism schools to offer more flexible certificate programmes, encompassing blogging and social media, so that at least the basic tenets of good journalism can be addressed. What is and isn't ethical would be a good place to start and before you all dive for the comments section, yes, I know that applies to some of our journos too, but generally not.

Fact checking would also be a good idea, and again I know that many of our media houses need this also - but somehow on social media this doesn't even come into the picture.

This brings me to the topic of quality journalism - does it still exist in any form? Most certainly yes! You only have to look at many of our award-winning journalists, Mzilikazi wa Afrika and his colleagues, Rob Rose and Stephan Hofstatter of the *Sunday Times*, Sam Sole of the *Mail & Guardian* and many of the superb Carte Blanche producers, without whom many stories of fraud and corruption would never see the light of day.

They don't just sit down and knock off a story. Their articles sometimes take months of careful investigation before one word is put to paper - or screen.

A passion to tell a good story

Many people ask if journalism today is dying - quite the contrary, it now has more platforms and journalists are learning to straddle these, breaking out of their positioning as simply print journalists to encompass electronic and internet media.

To be a good or perhaps I should say a great journalist, takes more than just a good idea for a story. It takes a thorough understanding of what goes into researching, checking, and putting together an honest, balanced account of a happening. And bear in mind the journalist is toiling away at their work for the usual pittance afforded to our profession, often coupled with burnout and frustration. The point is that above all this they have a passion - to tell a good story that will make their audience sit up and take note.

I'm not writing this looking for sympathy for poor journalists, but rather for an appreciation of what goes into producing someone who can truly call themselves a journalist. After all, would you call yourselves a heart surgeon because you can use a stethoscope or a plumber because you know how to change a washer? Exactly. Both these professions take time and experience to perfect. No more or no less than any other...

ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher (www.mediamentors.co.za) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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