


Riding the waves

Journalism Education in South Africa in 2016

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Since 1994 South African journalism education at universities has, like most of South Africa's institutions, had to adjust and reconsider all its programmes and purposes to align with a new vision of a democracy that not only serves all South Africans but also takes account of redress for the errors of the past (notably the narrow and elite public sphere).

This has resulted in waves of introspection about curricula and methods of teaching as educators try to relate with carefulness to both the media industry and the ANC's attentiveness to and strident criticism of journalism in South Africa

The most recent challenge to journalism educators came at the end of last year when students across the country rose in a movement to challenge the high costs of education and to demand “decolonisation” of curricula.



THE CONTEXT

A high-angle, aerial photograph of a group of about eight surfers riding a large, powerful wave. The surfers are positioned in a line across the width of the wave, each on their own surfboard. The water is dark and turbulent, with white foam and spray rising from the breaking part of the wave. The surfers are wearing wetsuits and are in various stages of riding the wave, some appearing to be in more dynamic or difficult positions. The overall scene conveys a sense of action and challenge in a natural, outdoor setting.

The need for a free flow of independent journalism *with* the educating of independent-minded journalists *with* the transformation of the media terrain out of its lingering trifurcation of the public sphere (Afrikaans language media read by white Afrikaans speakers, and English language media aimed at white English speakers and black South Africans) has dominated the media landscape since the transition to democracy.



Since the transition to democracy, the pressing question has been how indigenise and Africanise journalism and journalism education so that they address themselves at democratisation, the restoration of dignity those oppressed by apartheid, and the important documenting of political and social transition, without losing the public role of calling power to account.

Attempts to root theory and intellectual resources in Africa and the South African context have also been made (see Christians 2004, Fourie 2007, Wasserman 2011).

1. RIDING THE DIGITAL WAVE

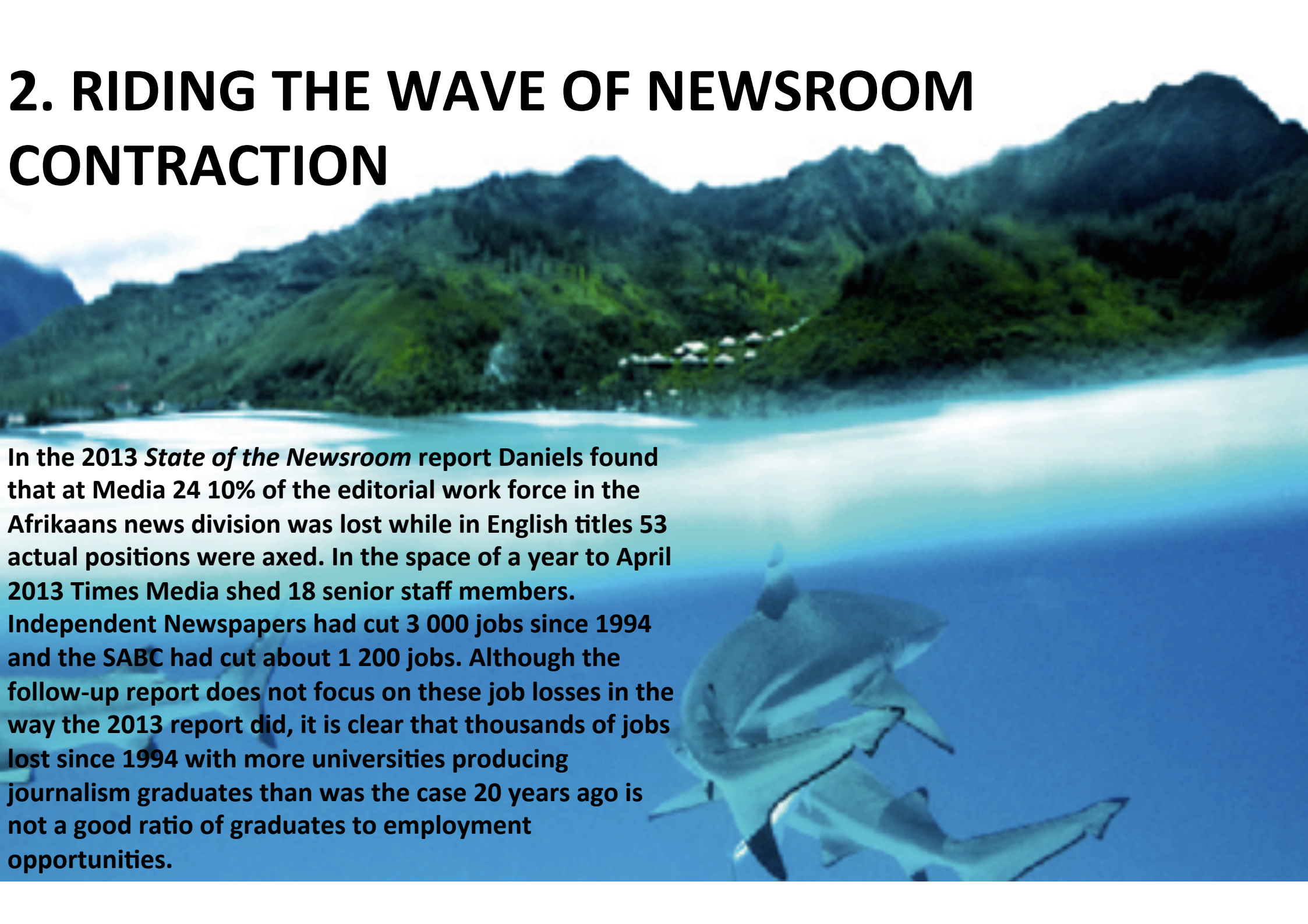
“Disruption in our newsrooms opens up opportunities as it shakes up institutions and leadership which may have become complacent, rigid and defensive. It can also be challenging and punishing, costing jobs, creating fear and uncertainty and sacrificing skills and experience.” *State of the Newsroom* report 2014.



By shifting to digital journalism we have experienced that the loss of an audience/readership has been the most profound impact of the social media platforms and one which we have had to grapple with as educators. The term now used to describe this loss of loyalty as a social shift is “platform agnostic” (Daniels 2014: 2).

2. RIDING THE WAVE OF NEWSROOM CONTRACTION


In the 2013 *State of the Newsroom* report Daniels found that at Media 24 10% of the editorial work force in the Afrikaans news division was lost while in English titles 53 actual positions were axed. In the space of a year to April 2013 Times Media shed 18 senior staff members. Independent Newspapers had cut 3 000 jobs since 1994 and the SABC had cut about 1 200 jobs. Although the follow-up report does not focus on these job losses in the way the 2013 report did, it is clear that thousands of jobs lost since 1994 with more universities producing journalism graduates than was the case 20 years ago is not a good ratio of graduates to employment opportunities.



Independent newspapers under Tony O'Reilly (as an example of globalised media)

- Trade union MWASA: "From a high of 5 223 at the time of the initial transaction in 1994, employee numbers have been reduced steadily to a current level of around 1 500" (2011).
- Dirk de Vos, writing for the Daily Maverick, claimed that R4-billion was sent back to Ireland (2016).

Effects of this:

- Under our Irish owners we have witnessed the slow demolition of our capacity to deliver quality journalism.
 - Newsroom posts have been frozen or stripped away.
 - We rely far more than we should on cadet reporters and interns, taking risks we should not be taking.
 - Some of our titles have NO supplements or features editors or even writers.
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- We have no travel budgets to speak of.
 - We have lost access to essential wire service pictures and copy in a bid to cut costs.
 - Our online arm, IOL, is too short staffed to be able to offer newspapers much help with their websites.

STUDENTS AND JOBS

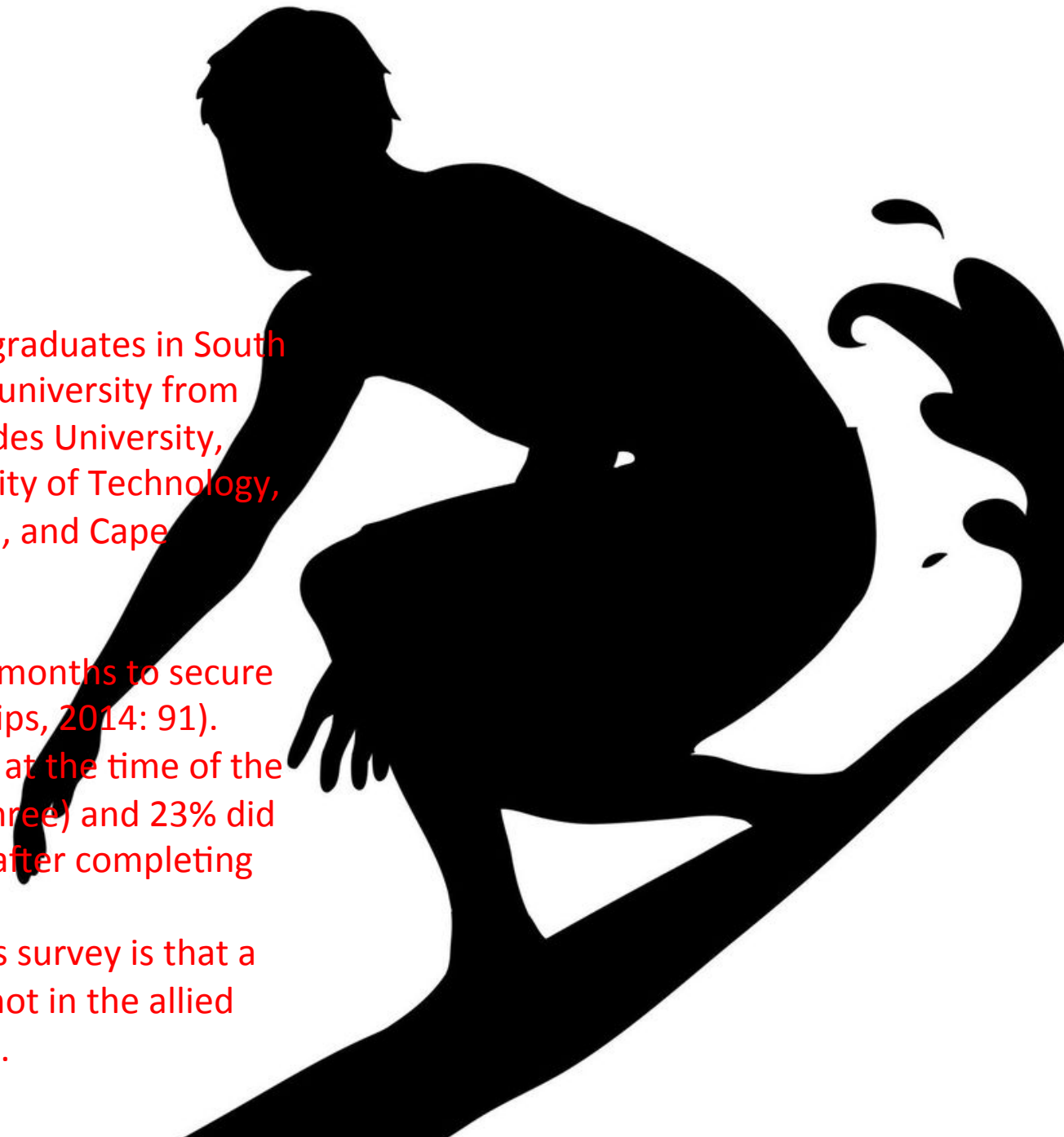
For the 2014 report Daniels surveyed journalism graduates in South Africa with 146 responding, most of who had left university from 2010 to 2013. These students had studied at Rhodes University, Wits, North West, Stellenbosch, Tshwane University of Technology, University of Johannesburg, University of Pretoria, and Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Daniels found that:

- Employed graduates had taken on average 15 months to secure their first full-time job (as opposed to internships, 2014: 91).

- Eleven percent of this number had internships at the time of the survey, a small number were self-employed (three) and 23% did manage to secure a full-time job immediately after completing their degree.

The maybe surprising but pleasing result from this survey is that a majority with jobs are actually in journalism and not in the allied communication fields or elsewhere entirely (60%).



3. RIDING THE POLITICS WAVE

The ongoing fractious relationship between the ANC government and the media since 1994 has been well documented and is monitored by a number of proponents of free speech and free media (see Berger 1999, Duncan 2011, Strelitz and Steenveld 1998, Tomaselli 1997, Wasserman and De Beer 2005).

The more insistent politics that South African educational institutions are being subjected to right now is the wave of protests that started on UCT's campus last year in March (see Leuscher-Mamashela 2016). At first the demands related to the removal of the statue of the British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes from a prominent place on the campus but they soon engendered protests right across the country and on every campus about the very high costs of higher education and about curricula that do not root themselves in African thought and experiences.

The issues that this generation of students is insisting be addressed in higher education range from the material (costs of education, the realities of ongoing poverty and unemployment in the families they come from), to the symbolic (universities are steeped in western, liberal, agonistic and individualistic practices and spaces), to the intellectual (they dispute the value of sources of knowledge rooted in western and northern contexts and the universalisation and generalisation of that knowledge).

ENDING THE NEW POLITICS WAVE

Students have sought to validate their own experiences and their own contexts as sites for the valuable creation of new knowledge.

In their protest actions and statements they have upset the rules of dialogue and the liberal western understandings that underpin the public sphere and its usual modes of operation. They bring anger, aggression and challenge into spaces of discussion.

They have renewed debates about race, the place of women and liberal feminism.



They have questioned the position of English as a lingua franca and in public spaces have “code-switched” using African indigenous languages to unsettle and discomfort mono-lingual English speakers.

They have made their own media, disseminated their own messages and created a parallel universe called “black Twitter”.

Twitter has been used across the country as an extremely effective organising mechanism similar to the way social media was used in the Arab Spring (see Tanja Bosch on this matter 2016)

This new wave of young activists have a primary aim: to see a decisive break with the apartheid past because they feel there are too many continuities today which speak of a revolution which was compromised resulting in a shallow form of democracy which is more surface than depth.




This year's protests (which deal primarily with sexual violence on campuses and the uselessness of university responses to them) have made very clear that the organisational culture of the universities of South Africa are founded on a high degree of violence within the system. This stripping away of the layer of respectability which lies over the academic project has made it extremely difficult to return to business as usual.



FINAL WORDS

“Disruption in our newsrooms opens up opportunities as it shakes up institutions and leadership which may have become complacent, rigid and defensive. It can also be challenging and punishing, costing jobs, creating fear and uncertainty and sacrificing skills and experience. “ Harber and Kruger, *State of the Newsroom Report 2014*.



Harber and Kruger remind us that moments of crisis and cataclysm also hold opportunities for those brave enough to believe in them. This is a truism. My own experience of the last three years of teaching journalism in South Africa is that digitisation combined with newsroom contraction because of hyper-capitalisation combined with the resurgence of a political movement demanding justice and change has upended and unsettled all my certainties about my work and its purpose. I still believe in the value of storytelling for the purpose of enhancing human lives and making justice and equity a reality but I am no longer sure quite how to do that in a classroom in which all these external factors mix together in extremely volatile ways.