

The State of Journalism since COVID 19

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Release Date: 10 November 2022

The Impact of the recent global pandemic on different aspects of life, has led to a rapid transition from traditional media to an introduction of a new focus in mass media. During the Jozi Book Fair festival held by Khanya College, from 29 – 30 October 2022, media veterans formed a panel to discuss challenges journalists face; the use of propaganda. Restrictions of investigative reports, the digital divide, and the contrast between mainstream media and local journalism.

Siyabonga Mviko, Sub-Editor at the Karibu, moderated the hybrid-physical hybrid session featuring Hassen Lorgat from Bench-Marks Foundation; former Aljazeera journalist Thembisa Fakude who is a director and senior research fellow at Africa/Asia dialogue (Afrasid) and freelance journalist (formerly with New Frame), writer, media consultant, researcher and editor, Gwen Ansell. The speakers were given four minutes each to speak on two rounds, and another five minutes each to answer questions from the audience.

In his opening speech, Lorgat acknowledged how history plays a significant role in the marginalised groups and shares his proud sentiments of the Jozi Book Fair, how it has managed to survive the pandemic.

Logart spoke about blind journalist Sanjeev Benji who was retrenched at a community radio station. He spoke the activist writings and the Benchmarks monitors who write critically about the experiences they face on daily basis. He contrasted mainstream journalism and activists, saying the latter form of journalism must include advocacy to bring about real change. He gives examples in which Al Jazeera exposed the prevalence of false narratives are mainstreamed in media houses such as BBC News.

Fakude admitted that the issue is an sensitive discussion and required more time. Fakude said the speed with which news are being disseminated on digital platforms as a challenge to the traditional forms of reporting. The Afrasid research fellow highlighted that newsrooms and studios are turning into empty spaces as discussions are shifting to Zoom and other digital platforms. As result retrenchments become common. Make-up artists and other staff members are no longer needed. Fakude also mentioned that older journalists are missing out on the new digital landscape on how they can adapt to new media and utilise the new channels of communication to share their content.

Manchester-based Ansell, argued that the new trends that are alleged to have shaped the reality of journalism post Covid-19 are not really new. They are simply revelations of the developments that were taking place before Covid-19 .The transition to advertising through print media to broadcast media then online markets is what could be seen as a vehicle to shareholders profits, according to Ansell. Newsroom training and the quality control that put in constant resources into copy editing has been neglected. The veteran

freelancer reported that localised and specialist reporting in most South African media houses got stripped.

There are no environmental specialists anymore. Few journalists who remain in the mainstream newsrooms work on eight or more stories a day. She stressed that online independent news are inaccessible as more than 40% of SA people cannot afford to buy data, also struggle with network signal and electricity (outages). Ansell suggests that how people owning media intensified and accelerated the problems seen in media today but that, she added, things do not have to be the way they are now. Technological determination is not an inevitable fact, news on electronic platforms can have different value.

After the audience put questions to the panel, first respondent, Lorgat, said that the questions were critical. He people traditional reporting was designed to hold those in power accountable and warned that social media is also owned by capitalists just like traditional mainstream media. For Lorgat, digital platforms are not neutral and the working class people should struggle for space in them too. "Reporting community stories and movement building journalism does not have to be guided by the rhythm of technology," said Lorgat. "We should build alternatives not through professional journalists but the critical consumers [of media]."

Fakude explained that, "Most of us spend most of our time doing journalism and we forget the need to make money to run news business. The absence of conscientised funders has contributed to the current state of journalism."

"Funding television business requires deep pockets," said the Al Jazeera English veteran. He further explains that Comrades are forced to search for people who have the capital to invest in their programs and thus get themselves captured under capitalist dictatorship. He argues that the advent of social media need not be ignored as it consists of billions of people within the platforms. "We need to be looking at how to penetrate and feed them proper information diet."

Gwen argued that the working class has to create its own platforms which would require changes in national policies. She spoke of a need for an anti-monopoly legislation, to break out and campaign as masses on an international scale. National legislation that will put media houses under control and getting them to pay their taxes.

"Who owns the media is the same as who owns other capital enterprises," reflected Ansell. She reiterated that everyone can write and be their own journalists instead of worrying about big platforms. The working class should start thinking how to better news and questions asked at a local level.

On repression within journalism, Lorgat stated that communication is a right and journalist should be seen as an extension serving public services. Reporters who do proper work get killed by sniper bullets. "Without the right to organise the right to free

speech is pointless,” added the delegate from Bench-Marks. He that the recently killed Shireen Abu Akleh joins a list of 25 reporters that were assassinated more recently.

Fakude talked about his memories of a colleague, a camera man who got killed by an explosive during a news coverage in Iraq. He also added that there were at least 15-20 journalists that were killed from his institution by governments all over the world. According to the researcher, government and prominent figures are the biggest challenge. Reporters often face threats when in a position to expose a story. There is also a rise in the use of bribes to censor information which leads journalists to be gatekeepers. “We need to train a new cadre of journalists.”

In conclusion of the session Mviko spoke about the training project of the Forum of Activists Journalists (FAJ) chiefly through workshops done by Khanya College. The moderator also headed the launch of the FAJs’ book *The Best of Journalism since Covid-19*. The contributors, some of whom were in attendance shared the stage and told stories about their writing activism.

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