

In the Department Media Technology experiential learning has always been of the utmost importance. Even though Experiential Learning is a credit-bearing component in the undergraduate Journalism and Communication Technology Programme, it was felt that a Campus media outlet would ensure that such practice-oriented training would be available throughout the Programme. The Campus Media outlet in essence became the in-house training facility for trainee journalists prior to entering the journalism profession. In September 2004 – just prior to the National and Presidential Elections in Namibia – the *Echoes* News Agency was piloted. The aims of this agency were:

- To foster freedom of expression, diversity, non-discrimination, gender equality and accurate and balanced reporting in and through the media. Its target audience is the Namibian people.
- To bring to the attention of the nation the issues and news which affect the majority of the Namibian people.
- To access the voices and perspectives of women and men, girls and boys as the primary sources for its news-gathering.
- To shift the criteria of what is newsworthy from events to issues, and from those in positions of prominence and power, to the experiences of people in communities throughout Namibia.

Five years have passed, and 2009 meant another election year in Namibia. It was decided – along with the Department's print media partner, *The Namibian*, and

Missing the beat: mainstream media mirror relevance of community media in election coverage in Namibia

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Gender Links – to replicate the 2004 study. Since the Namibian media are primarily capital city focused, *The Namibian* (an English daily newspaper) sees the need for coverage which is issue- rather than event- oriented and originating in various parts of the country. Of significance in the 2004 pilot project was that newsworthiness became not so much event- but issue-focused. In this form of reporting the sources were not selected because of their prominence or power, but because they could speak with an informed voice on the issues members of a particular community were experiencing. It is this aspect which in 2004, resulted in the following comments from the Department's stakeholders:

"We decided to use copy from *Echoes* for two reasons. Firstly, we saw it as part of our social responsibility to encourage young and up-and-coming journalists. It also gave added dimension to our election coverage." (Jean Sutherland, News Editor: *The Namibian*).

Responding to the question "Is there scope for future cooperation between *The Namibian* and *Echoes*?", Tangeni Amupadhi,

the Political Editor of *The Namibian* said:

"Definitely, especially if *Echoes* is able to provide the kind of material that *The Namibian* is unable to source as happened during the elections."

In response to the question "What did you think of the issues that were brought to the fore by *Echoes*?", the Regional Manager: Freedom Monitoring for the Media Institute of Southern Africa, Zoë Titus, said: "It was genuine community journalism done from an extremely human interest angle. One of the most important things for me was that it brought a human face to the elections, something we would otherwise not have got from mainstream media."

According to Graham Hopwood, another senior journalist in Namibia, responding to a question concerning the *Echoes* page carried in *The Namibian*, it "definitely added to their election coverage. It gave a voice to often-forgotten communities, allowing them to raise their concerns and issues. It also gave political parties an idea of what the issues of the people were."

In addition to formal training through

course-work in the under-graduate journalism programme, an intensive workshop is organised for the *Echoes* journalists prior to travelling to towns in the north, south, east and west of Namibia. Approximately 19 trainee journalists participated in the training, directed by Patricia Made, a seasoned media trainer, which prepared them for utilising the two days to be spent in the identified Namibian towns effectively.

Discussions with senior staff at *The Namibian* newspaper served to direct decisions regarding the type of content for the 2009 coverage. As was the case during the 2004 coverage, it was agreed that the stories would essentially capture the views and expectations of community members about the elections, and what their needs are in relation to service-delivery, governance, economic issues, gender-mainstreaming and gender-based violence, and HIV and AIDS. To facilitate access to the communities, a local government facilitator accompanied a team of three or sometimes four *Echoes* students.

The training programme included:

- The key issues in community journalism
- The newsworthiness of issue-oriented reporting
- *Echoes* Election coverage: the Value the *Echoes* News Service brings to Namibia's mainstream media
- Politics, Governance and Elections: Namibia's governance and elections systems
- Election coverage focusing on communities: The Stories we look for – an Editor's Perspective
- News-gathering techniques: Sources; Verification of information; Interviewing
- Focus group discussions: developing interview/focus group questions
- Field-interview questions
- Photo-journalism: Capturing the right images
- Logistics for the *Echoes* field teams.

Gender Links, as the main development partner in this election-coverage project, provided funds for the travel, meals and accommodation of the trainee journalists. According to the HIV and AIDS and Gender Baseline Study, approximately 30% of sources who speak on general topics are women and 70% men in media surveyed in the SADC region.

Therefore, the stories gathered were told primarily through the perspectives of women *and* men; the experts (for example local councillors) were used to respond to questions such as “Why does the problem exist? What is being done about it?”, or

Examples of topics covered by *Echoes* trainee journalists just prior to elections

TOPIC	FOCUS
Health and Housing Plague in Arandis	Lack of development in health and housing sectors
Bucket System Blues	Poor sanitation
Proximity of Clubs to Schools: A Crime-field	Abuse of alcohol and other drugs amongst the youth
Maintenance of Rural Roads: A Priority for development	Unless rural roads are well maintained, certain communities would be cut off from the rest of the nation
Government absent in Arandis development	A lack of involvement in community projects in Arandis
No Trust – No Vote	Characteristics of Party candidates determine whether to vote for them or not
Unemployment – The Harsh Reality	Levels of unemployment on the rise

simply to allow for ‘right of reply’. Of importance too in terms of the newsmakers and sources used by the *Echoes* trainee journalists were:

- Women were given access to expression in the stories, as well as being accessed as ‘experts’.
- Many of the men were accessed as citizens. In the mainstream media the converse is often the case – men are sourced as experts/and or in positions of power/authority, while women are sourced as caregivers, victims or citizens. The women experts sourced included politicians, leaders in civil society, parliamentarians and leaders or senior staff in the private sector.
- In several stories, too, the youth and the elderly were accessed as sources – these groups are often not sourced in mainstream media.

Not only is the main focus of the *Echoes* news stories different from mainstream coverage; the angle in terms of the sources accessed is different. ‘Who speaks?’ in *Echoes* is often a diverse group of individuals – women and men; young and old; employed and unemployed.

In the three mainstream newspapers, if it is not a representative of the Electoral Commission who is the main source of the story, then it is a political candidate such as members of the ruling Party. *Echoes* trainee journalists are taught that single-sourced stories make for poor journalism – yet it seems to be the order of the day in the mainstream media.

Upon arrival in a particular community, the *Echoes* trainee journalists would approach members of that community with a pre-designed questionnaire. Each student would be required to get about

10 people who would agree to respond to the questions. The issues identified by the respondents in the questionnaire, would serve as the basis for the story ideas. If the issue identified in one questionnaire recurred in the questionnaires completed by other respondents, this would then be indicative of the significance of the issue identified. Amongst the sources, therefore, would be a member of the Local Authority, who would be asked to comment on why the issue exists and what had been done about it.

Community journalism – as undertaken in the *Echoes* election coverage project – becomes a model for ensuring sound journalistic practice. Various sources are consulted – both women and men – and issues covered hold relevance for the nation. The approach also necessitates a response from the appointed local councillors, especially in terms of how the issues identified are being addressed, if at all. Appointed leaders, therefore, are held accountable, bearing in mind that the period prior to the elections is usually characterised by promises of a “better life,” especially for the masses. The reality and pertinence of the coverage, therefore, also brings issues of governance to the fore.

For the journalism educator it becomes a model for an effective story structure:

- Research around the story idea;
- Identifying several (diverse) sources – ordinary voices can be primary sources;
- Ensuring that gender is mainstreamed;
- Various issues relating to life within a community;
- Issue- rather than events- or speech-focused; and
- The medium carrying the stories becomes a national- rather than a capital-city focused medium. ■