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## Professorial Inaugural Lecture

Making media matter:  
on truth, dignity and love

**Prof Herman Wasserman**

Departmental Chairperson: Journalism  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

# 2024

## Professorial Inaugural Lecture

**Making media matter: on truth, dignity and love**

**Om media te laat saak maak: oor waarheid, waardigheid en liefde**

Inaugural lecture delivered on 23 July 2024

**Prof Herman Wasserman**

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Stellenbosch University

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## Biography

**Herman Wasserman** is professor of Journalism and chair of the Department of Journalism at Stellenbosch University (SU). This is also his alma mater, where he obtained a doctorate in literature and a postgraduate degree in journalism. Wasserman worked as a newspaper reporter before embarking on an academic career. He previously taught at the universities of Sheffield and Newcastle in the United Kingdom, Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town, and has been a visiting professor at the universities of Munich (Germany), Indiana and Houston (United States), Utrecht and Groningen (Netherlands) and Tsinghua (China).

Wasserman has published widely on journalism ethics, media, conflict, and democracy and disinformation in Africa. He has published 94 peer-reviewed articles, 56 book chapters and 17 books. The latter include *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa* (Indiana University Press), *Media, Geopolitics, and Power* (University of Illinois Press) and *Media, Conflict and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford University Press). His latest publication is the co-edited volume *Disinformation in the Global South*. This book ties in well with his current role as principal investigator in a multinational study on information disorder in the Global South, undertaken with support from the Canadian International Development Research Center.

He is a fellow and board member of the International Communication Association and an elected member of the Academy of Science of South Africa. In addition, he serves as an expert on the International Panel on the Information Environment, as well as on the scientific committee of Reporters Without Borders. As a consultant, his advice has benefited organisations such as UNESCO, the World Health Organization, Deutsche Welle Akademie, Digital Public Square, Africa Check, the Center for International Media Assistance, and Open AI.

Wasserman is editor-in-chief of *African Journalism Studies* and *Annals of the International Communication Association*, associate editor of *International Communication Gazette*, and also serves on the editorial boards of several other international journals.

His scholarly achievements have earned him a number of awards. These include a Fulbright fellowship, the Georg Forster Research Award (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation), the Neva Prize for Journalism Theory (St Petersburg State University) and the Stals Prize for Communication Science and Journalism (SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns). He also holds an A-rating by the National Research Foundation, denoting a leading scholar in his field internationally for the high quality and impact of his research outputs.

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# Making media matter: on truth, dignity, and love

Prof Herman Wasserman

## Abstract

At a time when the media globally is experiencing a crisis of credibility, sustainability and relevance, what is the purpose of teaching and researching journalism and media studies? Amidst a global polycrisis of war and conflict, social polarisation, rampant disinformation and a climate emergency, how can the media contribute to a better life? In a country marked by persistent inequality, a fragile democracy and the legacies of injustice, what principles should guide the media to remain relevant, resilient, and responsive to society? Drawing on insights from journalism and cultural and media studies, this lecture considers how the research, teaching and practice of media can be approached as a public good – with the purpose of making media matter.

## Introduction

This lecture formally marks the start of my new role as professor at Stellenbosch University. It presents an opportunity to look back on my career and, especially, look towards the future challenges of this position.

I will share some of what I have learned so far, but mostly, I will be posing questions to which I have yet to find answers. This is the privilege of being an academic – making a living by constantly learning, discovering new things, having your own ideas questioned, and, sometimes feeling the rug of your assumptions pulled out from under you during peer review (especially by that unreasonable, anonymous “reviewer number two“!). But what a privilege this ongoing critical engagement with fellow thinkers and questioners from around the world has been.

I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to make a career out of what Hannah Arendt (1977) called “the life of the mind”. One of the gifts of an academic life is that colleagues often end up being close friends and fellow travellers through this “one wild and precious life”, to borrow from poet Mary Oliver (1992). This is the real reason, I think, why the collective noun for scholars is a “community”. Therefore, although evenings such as these typically celebrate an individual, an inaugural lecture is a good time to remember the Newtonian saying we can see further only because we stand on the shoulders of giants. I want to emphasise that these giants on whose shoulders I stand include not only fellow scholars, but also the administrative colleagues, service workers, family and friends who have supported and inspired me in various ways over the years. Many of them are here tonight or have tuned in online. To single out people is always risky, as I will inevitably leave important people out. I do however want to acknowledge my parents who are here tonight – it is from them that I first learnt about truth, dignity and love and saw those values embodied. I also want to thank my family for their patience and support, and bringing meaning to my work. If I ever managed to sound cool in front of a class by citing pop music lyrics, referencing cutting-edge TV shows or funny Tiktok memes, this was thanks to my wonderful children - Lukas, Daniel en Sophie.

And speaking of home, my colleagues in the department of journalism here at Stellenbosch have made me feel so welcome and supported. I also appreciate working in a Faculty with such a supportive Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Wim De Villiers, and a Dean, whom I also count as a friend, Prof Anthony Leysens. And a special thank you to my former colleagues from UCT and Rhodes, Tanja Bosch and Anthea Garman, who have travelled especially to be here tonight. And there are so many others. To all of you – thank you.

I appreciate all these relationships deeply because collaboration, dialogue and especially critique are what scholarship is all about. As academics, and as human beings, we should never be too content with what we think we know. In a country as unequal as South Africa, academics occupy a very privileged position in society, and therefore, part of the academic challenge is to “unlearn our privilege as a loss”, in the words of the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, who also cautioned scholars to “learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard it as bullshit” (Danius, Jonsson & Spivak, 1993:24). The older we get, the more important it is also to learn from younger generations, and I am grateful for all the encounters I have had with students over the years.

Apart from all my boring dad jokes, my children are probably just as tired of hearing my two favourite mottos. The first is Eleanor Roosevelt's (2009) encouragement to "do one thing every day that scares you" – a prompt to get out of one's comfort zone and not be afraid of making mistakes. The second comes from the composer Pierre Boulez, who said: "Curiosity is life. If you're not curious, you're in your coffin" (Hoehl, 2016) (I have this block mounted in my office and always take it along to my first class in research methodology, as curiosity is the fuel of research ) In the South African context, such an openness to learning and new experience especially means acknowledging different sites of learning and knowledge outside of the university and beyond one's own limited experience.

Recognising the privilege of making a living out of curiosity, I feel both grateful and humbled to stand here tonight where my academic career started back in 1990 as a wide-eyed first-year student. I am still just as amazed that something as wondrous, rich and exciting as a university can exist. But today, I am perhaps more aware of how vulnerable these institutions are. They are vulnerable precisely because ideas can be dangerous things. We know this by the way in which authoritarian societies often target dissenting scholars. This was the case when the apartheid government denounced and spied on dissident academics and students at this and other universities in the 1980s (Hugo, 1977). Attacks on scholarship are unfortunately not something of the past. While South Africa is a much better place for academics now, as we sit here tonight, all twelve universities in Gaza have been wholly or partly destroyed by Israel in what has been termed a "scholasticide" (Desai, 2024). Universities are also vulnerable because their value cannot always be quantified and monetised immediately, despite the increasingly neoliberal global university system's best attempts to do so. The humanities, in particular, are often first in the firing line of marketability. The value of scholarship as a public good needs protection and, where appropriate, fierce defence. Therefore, tonight is also a good opportunity to remind ourselves of the Dutch poet Lucebert's well-known lament (2002): "Alles van waarde is weerloos" (Everything of worth is vulnerable).

But, especially in a place like Stellenbosch, we also need to carefully discern between protecting that which is a public good and preserving that which is merely tradition. On the other hand, change just for the sake of change can be superficial if it is simply a branding exercise that is more interested in adding bells and whistles to the educational enterprise than in fundamentally challenging the status quo.

## Continuity and change

This tension between continuity and change is all too familiar to scholars and practitioners in my discipline: journalism and media studies. In our field, too, we constantly have to distinguish between those skills, formats and practices that have become outdated, and those core values that need protection and preservation.

Very few disciplines probably experience change and dynamism as acutely as journalism and media studies does. When I started my first year here at Stellenbosch University in February 1990, it was from the front page of a printed copy of *Die Burger* newspaper, brought to our first-year campsite by one of the senior students, that I first learned of Nelson Mandela's release from Victor Verster prison, not very far from Stellenbosch. If he had to be released today, we would probably first learn of it via News24's WhatsApp Channel, as a breaking news Tweet on X or an Instagram reel. (It is interesting to note, in this regard, that President Joe Biden recently chose to announce via a tweet that he would no longer contest the US elections). In the 1990s, *Die Burger* had a circulation of more than 100 000. Today, with a circulation of just over 24 000, it is the only Afrikaans newspaper considered profitable enough to sustain a print edition – the other Afrikaans print editions are all to be closed down and amalgamated into an online site (Cronje, 2024).

Many of these changes have been driven by the rapid development of digital technologies.

As a student in Dagbreek residence down the road, I used to queue for a spot at the "tickey box" pay phone to call my parents; these days, my mom sends me a WhatsApp voice note and even a few emojis.

When I started teaching in the early 2000s, we thought we were cooler than our older colleagues because we used PowerPoint instead of transparencies. These days, our students pretend not to use ChatGPT for their essays, and we invite prospective student applications using our departmental Instagram and TikTok accounts.

I could go on.

The point, however, is that these technological changes do not merely make for quaint anecdotes that betray our age. The digital disruption poses an existential problem for the journalism and media industry, and by extension, for journalism and media studies.

It is this tension between change and continuity, between changing practices and enduring values, that I wish to explore tonight. I want to examine why we should be teaching and researching journalism and media studies at a university, and how we, as scholars, can respond to the changes around us. In doing so, I will draw on my own research, mainly in the areas of media ethics, media and society, and disinformation studies.

## An extinction event?

In February this year, Clare Malone, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, asked her readers: "Is the media prepared for an extinction-level event?" (Malone, 2024). Making no bones about the prospect of the media going the way of the dinosaurs, the article covers what is now familiar, and often depressing, terrain for those who have witnessed the implosion of the legacy media's business model, the ongoing layoffs in the industry, and the demise of smaller local news outlets. As a result, mainstream media are forced to chase page clicks by reverting to what she calls "sensationalism, salaciousness, and slideshows" (Malone, 2024). To these challenges can be added the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the form of large language models, which can easily replicate the more generic, routine bits of journalism cheaply and at speed. The rapid growth of AI has made automated interfaces and chatbots possible, which may further reduce flows to news sites, while users flock to platforms such as Instagram Reels, YouTube and TikTok as alternatives to news channels (Reuters Institute, 2024).

Once the extinction of the current media has played itself out, the article suggests, a new landscape of consumer-driven, more niched products will take shape.

She then argues:

Even if past experience has taught journalists that change is often a destructive force, the crisis is here, and it needs solutions if we're going to keep recommending, in good conscience, that promising young talent join the media's ranks.

The South African media industry has not escaped this tsunami. For years, budget cuts, increasingly precarious employment contracts and the downscaling of expensive forms of journalism have been a feature of the local media landscape also.

## Closure of newspapers

As I mentioned earlier, Media24 recently announced that it would be shutting down the print editions of several Afrikaans newspapers as well as *City Press*, *Daily Sun* and *Soccer Laduma*. (It should be noted that aspects of this move has since been put on hold while the company is considering offers from other companies to buy some of the titles) Apart from the human impact of the closure – 400 employees are likely to lose their jobs (Cronje, 2024) – its symbolic impact on the social capital of Afrikaans has caused considerable public dismay. But the move is hardly surprising, given that print newspapers and magazines have been on a steady decline globally for at least a decade. The closure of *Daily Sun*, hailed as a revolution in the South African journalism landscape a mere decade and a half ago (to the extent that I actually wrote a book on it, which has now probably also attained dinosaur status [Wasserman, 2010]), is perhaps an even more dramatic indication of the decline of print. When *Daily Sun* launched, it sold around 500 000 copies a day. Its circulation now stands at less than 12 000. The fact that the public outcry has focused largely on the closure of the Afrikaans papers rather than the township tabloid also says something about the imbalances in our public discourse about the media.



Media companies blame Big Tech platforms such as Google and Meta for undermining the news industry by taking the lion's share of advertising income. During an inquiry by the South African Competition Commission earlier this year, media companies argued that this posed an even bigger problem to press freedom than government interference (Brederode, 2024).

## Trust

But while these problems of sustainability pose an existential threat to the media as an *industry*, the media's relationship with *society* presents even deeper problems. Globally, more and more people report that they actively avoid the news because it makes them depressed or anxious (Toff, Palmer & Nielsen, 2024). Related to this is a decline in trust in the media. The latest research (Reuters Institute, 2024; Coster, 2022) shows that only 40% of people around the world trust the news, with a similar percentage (39%) saying that they often avoid the news as a result of information overload. This crisis of trust and news avoidance has been a growing topic in media and journalism studies research. It has given rise to the exploration of alternative approaches to reporting, such as "solutions journalism" or "constructive journalism", which may offer more optimistic approaches or make audiences feel more empowered to do something about the state of the world, although South African journalists are still cautious about these new trends (Fölscher-Kingwell & Wasserman, 2024).

Latest figures (Reuters Institute, 2024) show that although trust in South African media is relatively high compared to the rest of the world, it, too, has been slowly declining. South African media consumers' interest in politics has also dropped by more than ten percentage points (from 81% to 70%) in the past three years.

There are many reasons for this global decline in trust. Let me name just three.

## Reasons for decline in trust

One is the global rise of political populism that has fuelled distrust in institutions such as the media. During his 2016 campaign for president of the United States, Donald Trump popularised the term "fake news" to discredit media credibility, sparking new research into disinformation. Similar trends have emerged in European elections, where right-wing populists delegitimise mainstream media to gain support. As a result, organisations such as Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists have highlighted the ongoing threats to journalists worldwide, including in Africa, where the decline of democracy has resulted in increased surveillance, harassment and internet shutdowns. Here in South Africa, a history of media repression persists, from apartheid-era censorship to contemporary attacks on journalists, especially women journalists, including harassment and disinformation campaigns targeting critics.

A second reason for low trust in the media stems from audiences feeling excluded from news agendas. International research indicates that marginalised groups distrust the media if they do not recognise themselves in media representations (Arguedas et al., 2023). In research that I conducted with colleagues in Makhanda, we found that while young people recognised the importance of the media as an institution, they saw it as irrelevant to their daily lives, thereby missing out on a chance for civic engagement (Malila et al., 2013). These young people felt that the news overwhelmed them, without offering any workable solutions. This finding seemed to confirm South African political scientist Steven Friedman's observation that because the news media seeks out lucrative audiences in an attempt to survive, they tend to report on the world as viewed from the suburbs (Friedman, 2011).

Paradoxically, the digital disruption has also facilitated the growth of more agile online media outlets that serve niche audiences. Ironically, this increasingly bewildering array of digital media platforms has also contributed to the third reason for the disconnect between audiences and the news media: the deluge of disinformation.

## **Information Disorder**

Scholars call the combination of a fractious, populist, polarised political environment that has undermined trust in not only the mainstream media, but in democratic institutions in general an "information disorder" (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). This phenomenon is characterised by disinformation, fake news, rumours, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and orchestrated campaigns of deception. This phenomenon has become a major area of global research in the last number of years, although the Global South has arguably had a longer history of these practices (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022a).

Social media platforms and messaging services such as WhatsApp have enabled disillusioned media users to retreat into online "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles". Here, their views are confirmed, misconceptions can go unchallenged, or they find the safe space of belonging that is lacking in other media outlets (Udupa & Wasserman, 2025, forthcoming).

Disinformation has a profound impact on political life. Foreign influences in domestic African politics include electoral disruptions stage-managed by teams of hackers (Kirchgaessner et al., 2023), strategic narratives promoted overtly by Chinese and Russian media outlets, and the covert use of local influencers.

The best-known example in South Africa was the "white monopoly capital" campaign orchestrated by the British public relations firm Bell Pottinger. But we have also seen more recently how local groupings such as the Radical Economic Transformation (or #RET) faction and the new MK party benefit from foreign support – drawing on historical loyalties between liberation movements and Russia or China, as well as growing anti-Western attitudes (Morales, Wasserman & Ahmed, forthcoming). A new weapon in the arsenal of political disinformation is generative AI, which can create so-called "deepfakes" or generate false grassroots campaigns, also known as "astroturfing".

Disinformation not only has a deleterious impact on democracy, but also on public health and the environment. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization expressed concern about an “infodemic” of false, misleading or harmful information relating to vaccines (WHO, 2021), while the United Nations has warned that “rampant climate disinformation online” is delaying action against the climate crisis (Fleming, 2022).

South Africans are among the nations with the highest number of people who express concerns about the veracity of the information they receive: According to the most recent Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Reuters, 2024), 81% of people reported such doubts, which is in line with the high level of perceived exposure to disinformation in several African nations we found in our own research (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

Raising greater awareness of the problem through media literacy campaigns is, however, not always the best response. Speaking to university students across South Africa as part of our research for the fact-checking organisation Africa Check (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022), we found that they had been made so hyper-aware of the dangers of social media, that they were no longer merely sceptical about information they encountered, but had become completely cynical about what they could believe. This, in turn, resulted in a sense of disempowerment and being overwhelmed.

When we look at all these developments together, it is hard to deny that the media is in deep crisis – a crisis of sustainability, of trust, and of connection. At the same time, paradoxically, we live in a media-saturated world. It is hard to think of any terrain of the world that our graduates will be entering – from politics to commerce to science – where they would not benefit from an understanding of how the media operates, how to navigate a mediated world, and how to use the media to help seek solutions. Because we live in a time when solutions are sorely needed: We are experiencing what has been called a polycrisis (WEF, 2023) – a combination of major geopolitical conflicts, deep social polarisation, and an environmental catastrophe. There is a war raging in Ukraine, a plausible genocide in Gaza, and an ascendant global radical right wing. Moreover, indications to date are that this year will be the warmest on record (Copernicus, 2024; Georges, 2024), bringing storms, wildfires, floods and other catastrophes. We need reliable, trustworthy information to design solutions, but we also require meaningful narratives and imaginative stories, images and sounds that can help us develop resilience and build communities.

In other words, we need media that matters.

## Reform vs Revolution

For the media to navigate its way through this storm, it will have to find ways not merely to *reform* to survive, but to radically rethink the current crisis as a *revolution*. This is an idea put forward by Barbie Zelizer, Pablo Boczkowski and Chris Anderson (2021) in their book *The Journalism Manifesto*. The choice between reform and revolution also has implications for how we teach media at university. If we were to merely *reform*, we might simply add more frills to the skills we teach our students, tell them to reassert their authority as “professionals”, and encourage them to innovate more glitzy, whizz-bang media products to try and give audiences what we think they want.

In contrast, should we embrace *revolution*, we would have to accept that the media landscape has already changed irrevocably and that the mainstream media, especially journalism, will continue to be de-centred as a particular genre and mode of communication, with journalists increasingly serving as one particular interpretive community. Instead of reasserting the authority of journalism and media professionals (a problematic notion in any event [see Garman, 2005]), we would seek to redefine journalists' and media practitioners' relationship with their publics and use their technical skills to find new ways of building connections.

These existential questions are nothing new. Already in the early years of the development of journalism studies as a field, and back when we still referred to digital media as “new” media, Jane Singer (2006) entered the – now somewhat tired – debate on “who is a journalist”. By then, the realisation had already set in then that journalists' older roles as gatekeepers were redundant. Also, claims by politicians and officials were being fact-checked by communities of users online. This raised the question: What defines the act of journalism? Singer concluded that the answer was a normative one – that journalism was the choice to commit to responsibility, to act as a trustworthy source of information that serves the public interest. In other words, the answer is rooted in ethics.

If we want to ensure that the media still matters as a public good, especially in the context of the current polycrisis, our teaching, research and theory-building agendas would have to be defined by a sense of ethical urgency. One of the most influential figures in my own training in literary theory and later in media studies was the British-Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall (1992). He captured this ethical imperative well when he asked: “Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?” Hall reminded us that representations, texts, discourses and theories matter. The field of cultural studies (and by extension, journalism and media studies) “has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death”.

If, then, we accept that the point of journalism and media studies is not to be let anyone off the hook, critically or ethically, the next logical question that arises is: What are the values that could guide us in this endeavour?

## Protonorm

One of my main research areas has been in the field of media ethics, in particular the possibility of finding a set of globally applicable ethical norms for the media. I'd like to devote the last part of my talk to a concept from the literature on global media ethics that I think might offer a helpful framework when we think about how a commitment to ethics could secure a place for the media as a public good in a radically changed ecology.

The media ethicists Clifford Christians and Kaarle Nordenstreng (2004) encourage us to move ethics beyond a media-centred paradigm to a citizen-centred paradigm. They suggest that the media should be guided by the "protonorm" of the sacredness of all human life, which comprises three core principles: truth-telling, human dignity and non-maleficence.

## Truth

The principle of *truth-telling* has always been central to journalists' occupational identity. In the current context, marked by the double dilemma of rising disinformation and dwindling trust in the media, this tenet has again become a talisman for the beleaguered media to highlight their important role as purveyors of trustworthy information. From our own past, however, we know that this is not always unequivocally true. In our own history, alternative newspapers such as the *Weekly Mail*, *Grassroots*, *South*, *New Era*, *Saamstaan* and *Vrye Weekblad* spoke truth to apartheid power, while others, especially the Afrikaans media, remained largely complicit with the Nationalist regime (Claassen, 2000). There have more recently also been some major ethical lapses, for instance the *Sunday Times*' false reporting of a SARS Rogue Unit, police killings in Cato Manor and illegal reporting of Zimbabweans which led to an inquiry led by former judge Kathy Satchwell.

But, by and large, during the past three decades of democracy, we can be proud of, and thankful for, the truth-telling investigative journalists who have exposed corruption and state capture – and there have been many such stories in recent years: from the Gupta Leaks to the Steinhoff scandal, from the Thabo Bester escape to the murder of Babita Deokaran to the VBS Bank heist, and many more. We owe these courageous journalists a debt of gratitude for their contribution to the resilience of our democracy.

The past number of years have also seen a rapid increase in fact-checking organisations around the world to counter the problem of disinformation. Nevertheless, the limitations of relying on fact-checking alone are becoming more evident as it becomes increasingly clear that the roots of disinformation lie in social attitudes and political polarisation, rather than a mere lack of access to correct information. Facts only become truths in context. Without understanding the underlying attitudes, anxieties or fears that attract people to conspiracy theories or disinformation, efforts to debunk and correct false information by simply inundating people with more information, or to "pre-bunk" falsehoods with the inoculation methods that have recently gained ground in the field of disinformation studies (see for instance Roozenbeek, Van der Linden & Nygren, 2020), will have limited success. It is important to increase trust in the media by making sure that media narratives resonate with people's everyday lives. In South Africa, community radio stations, websites such as *Groundup*, tabloids such as *Daily Sun* as well as soap operas (Ponono & Wasserman, 2017) have played an important role in this regard.

## Dignity

*Human dignity* as an ethical principle for the media has its roots in struggles against oppression, as was the case in the liberation struggles against colonialism and apartheid. The emphasis on human dignity and development also served as a basis for the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum (2000) and Amartya Sen (1999), which defines human dignity as the fulfilment of a set of criteria for a decent human life and human flourishing. In the context of the media, this ethical norm means taking people's stories seriously and letting them know that their voice matters (Couldry, 2010), regardless of their social standing. This implies thinking about people not as statistics, but as agents. The recent enthusiasm for constructive and solutions journalism (see for instance Bro, 2018; McIntyre, 2019) has signalled audiences' desire to feel empowered to do something about the polycrisis they are experiencing, and not simply be told its extent.

This principle of dignity demands of journalists to think about how their own position influences the way they see and report on other people. This is why, in our journalism course, we have recently introduced a module in narrative journalism, encouraging students to reflect on their own identities, backgrounds and social position before they interview people from communities different from their own. We do this in keeping with the theoretical concept of an ethics of listening (Bickford, 1996; Dreher, 2009; Wasserman, 2013), which stimulates difficult conversations to build robust democratic institutions across the faultlines of difference. When the media tells stories and shows us dignified pictures of the resilient widows of Marikana (as in the case of Niren Tolsi and Paul Botes' 'slow journalism'), or how shack residents take action to survive winter flooding in Cape Town (as *Groundup* did recently) while connecting individual resilience with broader structural failures of the state and business, they can avoid turning us into what Lillie Chouliaraki (2006) called 'spectators of suffering'. Instead these stories help us see how 'they' could also be 'us', and encourage us to see ourselves in the face of another (Levinas, 1981; Christians, 2004). Through this act of imaginative solidarity the media can help us build a democratic public life (Nussbaum, 2010).

## Love

This brings me to the third and final ethical principle of *non-maleficance*. In media ethics codes, this often takes the form of rules against doing harm through stereotyping, violating people's privacy, disclosing children's identities, and the like. I, however, would want to adapt this notion from the passive idea of avoiding harm to a more active one.

Instead of limiting the media's responsibility to the passive stance of not doing harm, we could reframe it as an *active* demand to contribute to the ethical aim of "the good life". A value-free stenography is not only undesirable, but impossible. As Desmond Tutu said about the Palestine question: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." The old adage that the media only "holds up a mirror to society" is a moral cop-out. We can think of the media's active commitment to social justice and change as an ethic of care when it assumes a commitment and relationship between the media and its subjects. As the feminist scholar Carol Gilligan has shown in her work, this relationship of care, when rooted in deep listening, is powerful and radical, as it upsets the hierarchies of patriarchy (Gilligan, 1982; 2003, 2014).

Digital technologies can help in this regard by giving audiences the opportunity to speak back to media agendas and help develop new forms of connection between media and audiences. Already, there are some interesting examples, such as *Daily Maverick* that invites their readers to share ideas for stories, or *The Herald* in Gqeberha that worked with activist organisations to listen more closely to the voices of marginalised citizens (Garman & Malila, 2018). As scholars, we also need to listen more carefully to the voices of young people. These can often be heard outside the mainstream media, for instance in the demands by the #FeesMustFall and #OpenStellenbosch movements which were largely communicated on social media, or in other modes of expression such as the documentaries, for instance *Luister* and *What the Soil Remembers* about marginalised histories of Stellenbosch.

The future of the media will have to be more participatory and welcoming of a range of communities of practice, such as civil-society organisations, fact-checkers and media literacy educators. Media practitioners will increasingly have to be gate-openers rather than gatekeepers (Carpentier, 2011). Carol Gilligan agrees when she says:

If we are serious about recognizing and respecting differences, then we need to hear and encourage the full range of voices within and around us by becoming a society of listeners. Active listening means asking, how might I call forth a voice that is held in silence, a voice under political or religious or psychological constraint?

When we move non-maleficence from a passive avoidance of harm to an active commitment, we can also call it "love". Like "listening", "love" in this context should not be understood as a sentimental, easy option that avoids conflict or achieves false consensus. In communitarian media ethics, love denotes a steadfast, radical and unalterable commitment to fairness and the interest of others (Craig & Ferré, 2006). This resonates with Alain de Botton's (2021) idea of love as a civil virtue:

We associate the word "love" with private life. We don't associate it with life in the republic; with civil society. But I think that a functioning society requires (...) love and politeness. And by "love" I mean a capacity to enter imaginatively into the minds of people with whom you don't immediately agree, and to look for the more charitable explanations for behaviour which doesn't appeal to you and which could seem plain wrong.

With this view, De Botton' echoes Gilligan's similar point (2014) when she says: "The ethic of care in its concern with voice and relationships is the ethic of love and of democratic citizenship". Gilligan brings us back to the question of trust which we discussed earlier: what we need is to learn how to listen "in a way that creates rather than destroys trust".

## Conclusion

This, then, is how I hope to profess journalism and media studies at Stellenbosch University – by developing in myself and my students a critical thinking ability, a contextually responsive imagination, a listening attitude, and ethical values. This is how we will meet the current moment of crisis. When teachers of journalism and media studies at university embrace change, are courageous enough to choose revolution over reform, and unequivocally commit to the public good over short-term self-interest, we can help make media matter. Because it is when our task is most urgent that we can be at our most creative. And it is when a species learns to adapt that it manages to survive.

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