

Book review

Forbes, Derek. 2005. *A watchdog's guide to investigative reporting: a simple introduction to principles and practice in investigative reporting*. Johannesburg: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. 131pp. ISBN: 0-9584936-6-9.

One cannot envision a democratic polity without the searchlight of investigative journalism. Which makes this particular book by Derek Forbes a significant contribution to the rather infinitesimal corpus of knowledge on media and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

The book, commissioned by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), is based on 'comment, anecdote and case studies' (p. v). The book first attempts a definition of investigative journalism. Second, it lists the 'essential attitudes and skills required of an investigative journalist' (p. 8). Third, it discusses ideas for investigative stories. Fourth, it gives a 'simple plan' -- a 'methodical fitting together of apparently unrelated pieces to reveal the big picture' -- for conducting investigative enquiries (p. 15). It then introduces readers to the mechanics of 'sourcing the story' (p. 27). Next, the book discusses the barriers to investigative reporting and gives tips about how to overcome these (p. 47). It also analyses the ethical dilemmas that face investigative reporters, concluding that some questionable methods for extracting information from sources can be used in 'the public interest' (p. 55-58). Furthermore, the book addresses the types of laws that affect the practice of investigative journalism.

The rest of the chapters tackle such questions as: (i) the state of Southern African Development Community (SADC) media laws and (ii) useful online web sites, tools and databases.

To start with, the reference to other African countries seems to be an after-thought. As Mr. Forbes admits: 'The original aim was to provide a practical guide...with a special focus on South Africa. KAS later asked that the perspective be broadened to cover the region of southern Africa and cater for a wider audience' (p. v). While this is a commendable effort, it probably explains what seems to be a rather cursory reference to anecdotes from some other countries. This robs Mr. Forbes' analysis of that rich and chequered cross-cultural experience that students of investigative journalism must acquaint themselves with, especially in an age of cross-border corruption.

Next, this book is but 'a simple introduction to principles and practice in investigative journalism'. Therein lies its major weakness. Its scope of enquiry is limited to a mere cataloguing of 'the nuts and bolts' of the practice of investigative journalism; there is thus no social-theoretical framework underpinning the analysis. To be sure, KAS is not an academic institution and their terms of reference for Mr. Forbes may well have de-emphasised a discussion of the kinds of society-and-media theories that inform the practice of journalism, let alone investigative reporting. This is to be lamented, because Sub-Saharan African journalists need some more 'theorising' about their role *vis-à-vis* democracy than just a compendium of how to do investigative journalism. After all, investigative journalism is appropriated as *praxis* from democracy-and-media theorising.

This lack of critical theorising does not allow the author, an academic himself, to deconstruct liberal-democratic theory in some detail and interrogate its deficiencies in accounting for a culture characterised by little political participation by citizens. It does

not allow the author to analyse the political economic implications of media commercialisation for the practice of serious investigative journalism. There is, in the book, an allusion to the inhibiting influence of market considerations on journalism when Mr. Forbes, in a rather polemical style, asserts that 'of all the risks, those that threaten a media organisation's financial viability need to be taken most seriously' (p. 52-53). This observation is reinforced elsewhere when Mr. Forbes refers to the legal defence strategy adopted by the *Mail & Guardian* and concludes that 'this tighter legal vetting system has helped the newspaper to control legal costs by preventing the escalation of any legal situation, and *has contributed to the newspaper's recent financial turnaround*' (p. 84) (my emphasis). Such a seeming a-theoretical approach does not allow the author to interrogate the economic constraints placed upon media institutions and the repercussions of those constraints on the investigative journalism project.

Nor does such an approach allow the author to critically assess the concept of the 'public interest'. One may invoke the concept to justify journalistic intrusion into the privacy of a public official. But what, really, is the 'public interest'? The author uses the yardsticks articulated by the British Press Complaints Commission. The Commission justifies 'underhand' methods in the event of (i) a crime or serious misdemeanour; (ii) the protection of public health, safety and other rights; and (iii) misleading statements or actions of those who use public money or who are in the public eye (p. 56).

'Theorising' would have allowed the author to question these yardsticks for measuring the 'public interest'. The author would have reflected on the complexities inherent in ethical decision-making. There is some solid literature on this subject, written from an African perspective. This is important given the fact that investigative journalism is politically and intellectually contested. There are those who contend that 'gossip' is sometimes 'dressed up as investigative journalism' (see O'Neill, B. 2005. When reporters cloud the facts. *British Journalism Review*, volume 16, number 2: 49-54).

Two minor presentational points to raise: Firstly, there seems to be too much repetition (see chapters 3, 4 and 5, for example); secondly, the text could have benefited from some rigorous editing (there are a number of typographical errors).

These shortcomings notwithstanding, this book is a worthy read, especially for novice journalists seeking inspiration from the commentary, case studies and anecdotes used in the study, and for those wishing to learn a few tricks about the craft. It is also a welcome reminder to the would-be perpetrators of corruption that the media is indeed a 'watchdog'. Mr. Forbes, especially in his 'postscripts' to cases reviewed, does not mince his words; he names and shames those who have somehow evaded the long arm of justice. By so doing, he epitomises what 'civic journalism', the very bedrock of investigative reporting, is all about.

Reference

O'Neill, B. 2005. When reporters cloud the facts. *British Journalism Review*, volume 16, number 2: 49-54.

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