The UKZN Griot. Of Journalism And Cyberspace

BY:

Keyan G Tomaselli

Everyone knows that serious papers are declining in circulation while the salacious tabloids are skyrocketing. What do the readers of these rags know that is not known to the "mainstream" titles? Hey, man I read *Business Report* every day and I advise my stock broker accordingly.

I also read *The Sun*. Its stories of witchcraft and crazy people are just up my research alley. These occult-laden topics make wonderful studies for our cell-phone addicted students. The occult is real-world – like the financial markets. If you don't believe me, watch "Zeitgeist". This film argues that if all the money listed on the world's computers was withdrawn by its owners on a single day, that the paper currency spat out would be only 20% of the total. Let's not even talk about the virtuality of stock markets, bonds and other chimerical financial instruments which are simply interacting genres of a foolish volatile video game. Where does the 80% go? Money is an imagined entity. Reserve banks manage imagination, not hard cash. When money is no longer virtual, it will no longer exist. This is one of the few instances where the illusion is real. Funny, economics and accounting text books don't discuss this virtuality much.

Talking about where the hard currency went, what I really want to know is where have so many of the good journalists gone? Critical financial analysts are now in the Zeitgeist machine, churning out bland government press releases that have nothing to do with reality as us ordinary folks experience it.

Conversely, folks like Chris Merrett who were once academic administrators, are now incisive writers for the media. We need to find work for former librarians like Chris because the students lost in cyberspace don't know what or where these facilities are anymore. Such writers infuse implicit theory into their journalism, while others like my old film industry buddy, Stephen Coan, get provincial awards for writing about Zulu cinematic history in *The Witness*. That's *The Witness*'s forté – cutting edge social commentary, history and literature that makes a difference and that grabs

readers. I remember Ray White's sports journalism. His stories read like thrillers. The way that he examined South African cricket – especially its mad hatter administrative characters – was riveting.

So where did some of the journalism talent go? Well, some years back, a Professor of Journalism undertook a study of what media students read and watch. The results were distressing. Not as bad as one third year UKZN Media student who once innocently asked, after my berating the class for not reading newspapers, 'But Prof, where can I get one of the papers that you are always talking about?' The other Professor learned that film students don't watch movies, journalism students don't read newspapers, and TV students don't watch TV. Actually, in some cases, this also applies to their lecturers.

The electronic occult is to blame. PCs and then Internet killed history – everything is now experienced by digital natives as occurring in the perceptual present. All one has to do is to press buttons and the digital magic will do the rest. If it's not on the Net, it doesn't exist.   Neither do students exist who can write functional sentences – those who can are a rarity.

The two above examples occurred about 10 years ago before Web 2.0, smart phones and social media took us off the streets and into cyberspace. So what were they doing when they were not doing anything?   Perhaps it's better if we don't ask.

Financial genius Warren Buffet recently bought a whole slew of newspapers in the US.   He must know something. So too do the unemployed, the under-employed and the employed across big and small towns in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and elsewhere. These folks rent their newspapers that are stacked on display frames from street hawkers. They read two or three a day. They know where to buy their newspapers. They read for entertainment, they read because they want to participate in the public sphere, and they read because they want to read, they read also because they are bored. Now, that's novel, as most South African students only read because they have to pass an exam (and get only 30% for matric). In the pre-politically correct days, these kids were called pupils and those who got 30% were called failures. Now, by sleight of hand they are hailed as "learners" (all they have done is to have learned how to write exams, not how to learn). Shades of George Orwell's *1984,* sales of which were massively boosted by the exposé of a private spook who revealed the USA National Secret Service Prism surveillance programme to the world a year ago.

Besides, the Net is just another "platform", a ghastly new word that the geeks invented to describe all the new screens, earplugs and beeping things that everyone around me are using all the time. No longer do they hear the birds, the bees or the muggers, so absorbed are they in their imaginary digital world. Platforms, schmatforms, all they do is re-cycle predictable and usually banal content lit up via a back screen. I mean, where's the romance in reading off a Kindle while contemplating the ills of the world while on the lav? The Kindle can't bend or fold over, and one can't easily thumb an instant tactile spatial overview of the state of the world by paging though it. Paper remains king. It smells and it has texture. Support your local street vendor, teach him to shout 'Read all about it'. Buy the paper. Make his day.

'Sir, where can I find a newspaper?' With Durban now served by no less than seven daily and weekly titles, it shouldn't be too difficult.

* Keyan G Tomaselli is located in the Centre for Communication, Media and Society, and once featured on the infamous salacious back page of *The Sunday Times* that reported on a lecture he once gave on the impending technology of cybersex (in 1976), way before anyone had anticipated the Net. He was well ahead of his time. Still is.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.