

IAJ back with vim, vigour - and talking to Wits about joining forces

 By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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When I was a salaried hack, I skipped off in giddy delight to courses run by the [Institute for the Advancement of Journalism \(IAJ\)](#). To spend a week thinking and jawing about the craft of journalism with your peers was much-needed time out from the hectic newsroom and you were really lucky if you got on to a course with one of the American journalists from the Florida-based [Poynter Institute](#) - with whom the Johannesburg-based IAJ has had a special relationship for many years.

All the Americans - many of them Pulitzer Prize winners - I did courses with were hugely experienced, incredibly thoughtful and very generous with their knowledge. You came away inspired, amazed that the Big Cheese Journos from the US were so similar to us on the poorer side of the Atlantic but, most importantly, you left full of passion for journalism again and ready to throw yourself back into the newsroom with vim and vigour.

This was all before the recession came and ruined the party. These days, training budgets are scrutinised carefully and staff complements are lean after the retrenchments and restructuring of the recession, so it's a big ask for a news editor to take a reporter or two out of commission for an entire week for training. More's the pity, as the gruelling demands of smaller newsrooms grind down people quickly and a spell of training would bring much-needed reinvigoration.

Back on track

And so I was pleased to discover recently that the IAJ - an NGO started in 1992 by former *Rand Daily Mail* editor Allister Sparks - is back on track after drifting in the doldrums for the past couple of years.

Partly because funding took a dive in the recession and partly because it lacked a dedicated director for the past year, the institute seemed to have fallen off the map. But now it has a new full-time executive director, Michael Schmidt, a seasoned reporter who worked for the *Sunday Times* and other newspapers for many years before going into training at the [FrayIntermedia](#).

He joined the IAJ in September last year and has been busy making all sorts of plots and plans that can only reinvigorate the institute, namely:

1. Visiting editors and managers across seven centres across the country, finding out what kind of training they would like from the IAJ.

2. Embarking on a radical restructuring programme that has seen everyone's posts - including Schmidt's - made redundant. The staff complement had outstripped its revenue stream by far and many were from an NGO, rather than a journalism, background.

Further, the various departments were organised in quite an old-fashioned manner that had become out of step with our converged times. Now - as part of the process of everyone having to re-apply for their jobs - the jobs themselves have changed. Instead of print and broadcasting training departments, for instance, there will now be writing and audiovisual training units. "So now we're divided up according to the format of the message; not the format of the platform," says Schmidt.

3. Rethinking all the courses and introducing new ones in new forms so, instead of week-long training courses that take place outside the media houses, there will also be mentorships and shorter courses on offer that take place in the newsroom - and even lunch seminars.
4. Strengthening the relationship with Poynter to jointly leverage donor funding for training in the SADC countries, as Poynter is keen to do more in the region.
5. Most exciting of all is that the IAJ is negotiating with Wits University to become part of the highly regarded [journalism school](#) run by [Prof Anton Harber](#), though it would remain an independent institute along the lines of the SA Institute of International Affairs, based at Wits. The IAJ and Wits Journalism would complement each other rather nicely, with Harber's school training largely young graduates and the IAJ focusing mostly on the mid-level. Further, the combined powerhouse credibility would go a long way to securing funding.

Innovative thinking, strategic industry knowledge

"So it's not just a cost-cutting exercise," says Schmidt of the changes. "It's really a repurposing and a restructuring - making sure we've got the right people on board and making sure they have the right skills set for the industry and where it's going... What's required is innovative thinking and strategic industry knowledge."

Because new-media knowledge and skills are becoming more integral to newsrooms, online will become part of almost all training so, for instance, one of the new programmes the IAJ will be offering is a four-cornered news-editing mentorship that will cover traditional aspects of newsdesk, that is, news-diary management but also managing digital convergence, budget logistics and people management.

The IAJ has proposed to the [South African National Editors' Forum](#) that they partner on seeking donor funding for this mentorship programme that will be done in-house and tailored to the specific media houses' needs. The news-editing mentorship, says Schmidt, was something that all the newspaper editors he canvassed were especially keen on, while one of the biggies for the broadcasting industry was for courses on legal knowledge, especially for journalists doing live reports.

"There's a lot of crying out [across the board] for training in the basics, which often comes down to story conceptualisation, being able to spot what is a story, being able to accurately and judiciously assess a plethora of sources in order to establish fact and then there's the writing side of the story - the actual story-telling," Schmidt says.

Lot of exciting things to come

So there's a lot of exciting things to come from the IAJ (including a revamped website). It will fill a much-needed gap in South African newsrooms, as there is very little of quality training on offer for the mid-career hack.

Independent Newspapers and Avusa's cadet schools, for instance, are for the newbies, while Rhodes University's [Sol Plaatje Institute](#) is aimed very much at the top level. There is, of course, FrayIntermedia but, quite frankly, there's nothing to beat the Poynter people, so it's great to welcome the IAJ back.

"I don't want us just to be chasing our tails, doing this stuff to make a bit of money while we're at it," Schmidt says. "We're actually here to help advance journalism. We've got a purpose. "

For more:

- IAJ: www.iaj.org.za
- Facebook: [IAJ page](#)
- Twitter: [@iaj_za](#)
- Poynter Institute: www.poynter.org
- Journalism.co.za: [IAJ faces major restructuring](#)

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