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REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNALISTIC HISTORY-WRITING PROJECT OF NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY

Abstract

There has been a significant growth in journalistic historical writing since the start of the new millennium. Its “popular history”-approach also appeals to conventional historians, as well as literary scholars. Recent publication Forging unity, the first ten years of North-West University, fits into this historiographical genre.

In the execution of the project, the interpretation of the available evidence was bolstered by two strategies familiar to historians – the history of mentalities and the history of the present.

The project confirms an epistemological overlap between journalism and historiography, but the disciplines pose theoretical and methodical challenges when they are used in concert. Some potential epistemological conflicts emanate from the context, while others emerge in an increasingly complex world in which both journalists and historians have been rethinking their understanding and representation of the past, present and future.

In the article, the conundrum of historical and journalistic history comes under scrutiny in the field of corporate history, which, in itself, can pose a multitude of challenges to writing independent institutional history.

Keywords: popular history; journalistic history writing; corporate history; North-West University merger; historical present; history of mentalities.

Slutelwoorde: Populêre geskiedenis; joernalistieke geskiedskrywing; korporatiewe geskiedenis; NWU-samesmelting; historiese hede; geskiedenis van mentaliteite.

1. INTRODUCTION

The histories written by journalists have often been described as “popular history” – an umbrella term to describe attempts at writing historical content that is accessible or comprehensible. As a genre, history-writing endeavours by journalists, which often emanate from the “consensual ideology” in which they are anchored professionally, display common characteristics based on the topic, the depth of research and the width of the archive.

A journalistic history-writing project focusing on North-West University, both a corporate and commemorative project, confirmed and elucidated the challenges presented by this particular genre. As it will transpire in the discussion to follow, various theoretical and methodological issues have cropped up and will be addressed.

The article sets off by offering a glimpse at the increase in journalistic history-writing projects and the possible reasons for the development, which has been further accelerated by the ever-increasing immediacy with which news organisations report on events as expressions of recent history or the historical present. In South Africa, journalists have contributed to this genre with some of the most recent books, *Steinhoff: Inside SA's biggest corporate crash* by journalist James-Brent Styan (2018) and *The lost boys of Bird Island* by former policeman Mark Minnie and Chris Steyn, who is a journalist (2018).

It is in the context of an increase in history books written (or co-written) by journalists that a journalistic history of the North-West University was first commissioned. As a case study, it does not fall squarely within the typology and characteristics that have been used to distinguish between journalistic histories, but rather is presented as a hybrid that combines some of the features displayed by books in this genre. Theoretical perspectives, including the historical present and the history of mentalities, are outlined to both explain and outline how the topic was approached. Finally, the similarities and differences between the working methods of journalists and trained historians in gathering evidence, constructing an archive and presenting a narrative are discussed, reaffirming that journalists could contribute to history writing.

2. BACKGROUND TO JOURNALISTIC HISTORY-WRITING

Following on from Thucydides (Windschuttle cited by Lambie 2004:93; Henige, 1982:8), journalists have literally always been writing history. However, as of the 1960s their output of books increased significantly (Dickenson 2010:119). It was at the time that new journalism developed, a genre which applied writing techniques typically associated with nonfiction to report in greater detail and

more comprehensively on issues and events of the day. This form of journalism was criticized because of concerns over accuracy, rigour and balance. Yet the style pushed the boundaries of traditional journalism by using literary techniques, such as,

“realistic dialogue, vivid reconstruction of scenes viewed – even subjectively, through the eyes and minds of characters as well as recording everyday details – clothing, furnishing, gestures, poses that contained symbolic resonance” (Harrover 2010:120).

Journalists associated with new journalism included Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese and Michael Herr. In the 1970s Hunter S Thompson used the term “gonzo journalism” to describe his personalised form of new journalism (Hinrichs 2017), but the term is also used interchangeably (Conley & Lambie 2008:325).

Likewise, the American historian Sean Wilentz (2001), states that the histories produced by literary-minded journalists was a far cry from the often dull histories produced in many departments of history at universities. By the start of the 21st century, Wilentz describes history as having entered the, “golden age of popularization”. According to him, historians could include journalists, novelists, filmmakers, and the odd crossover professor. In Australia, Dickenson (2010:105) quantified a striking growth in political histories written by journalists: from 11 between 1933 and 1970 to 97 between 1970 and 2009 – an increase of about 800 percent.

Similarly, the American historian Thomas Bender (2015), points out that book-review editors in the US have turned to fellow journalists for historical articles and reviews. This is possibly because they may be able to communicate better with highly educated readers. He states that a count of contributors in the *New York review of books* shows that from 1988 to 2008 the number of essays by historians dropped slightly, while the number by journalists tripled.

Journalistic history writing has become so commonplace that the website www.goodreads.com has, for example, a page with the title *Popular History Journalism Books*, some of which date back to 1960 (Anon. 2016). In addition, the website’s *Best books by journalists* section lists 96 works, including several examples of journalistic history-writing (Anon. 2016).

In South Africa, journalists have also contributed to history writing, including biographies, organisational and political histories during the last few decades. To name only a few titles, dating back to the 1970s: *Die verkrampte aanslag* by JHP Serfontein (1970); *Vyftig jaar op die voorblad* by Piet Meiring (1970); *Ons politiek van naby*, by Jan J van Rooyen (1971); *Van Malan tot Verwoerd* by BM Schoeman (1973); *Vorster se 1000 dae* (1974) by the same author; *Brotherhood of power: An exposé of the secret Afrikaner Broederbond*, by JHP Serfontein (1979); *Die Keeromstraat-kliek: Die Burger en die politiek van koalisie*

en samesmelting 1932-34, by At van Wyk (1983), who later obtained a PhD in history; *Leierstryd*, by Alf Ries and Ebbe Dommissie (1990); *Choice not fate: The life and times of Trevor Manuel*, by Pippa Green (2009) and *Of warriors, lovers and prophets* (2004) and the sequel, *Of tricksters, tyrants and turncoats*, by Max du Preez (2009) to name but one of Du Preez's books. Other recent efforts include *Jan Smuts: Unafraid of greatness* by Richard Steyn (2015) and *God, spies and lies*, by John Matisonn (2015) and *The president's keepers: Those keeping Zuma in power and out of prison*, by Jacques Pauw (2017).

Several factors appear to have contributed to the increase in the volumes of journalistic history produced since the start of the millennium. A new world order, following the 9/11 attacks in 2001 on the Twin Towers in the United States, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria sparked a renewed interest in history as the world tried to understand these conflicts and their causes. This was coupled with dramatic changes in the media environment such as 24/7 channels demanding more and more content, including history series usually presented on channels that specialise in historical topics and documentaries (Jeffries 2002).

At the same time, a celebrity culture emerged and publishers, facing growing commercial pressures, started to turn to well-known faces, including those of journalists, to write books that could bolster sales (Dickenson 2010:117).

3. THE FORGING UNITY PROJECT

One can but speculate on the precise motivation for the project on the history of the North-West University (NWU), but fact is that this study, later to be titled *Forging unity: The story of the North-West University's first 10 years*, originated in the institutional office of the NWU in Potchefstroom. In the first half of 2012, former Vice-Chancellor of the NWU, Dr Theuns Eloff, commissioned a "popular history" of the institution. The publication of the book had to coincide with the NWU's tenth birthday in 2014 (Pretorius, 2015:10).

The NWU came into being in 2004, following a government-initiated merger of the then Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE) and the University of North-West (UNW). In addition, the Sebokeng Campus of the former Vista University was incorporated into the PU for CHE's Vaal Triangle Campus (Government Gazette 2003:5). It was one of ten mergers in the period 2004-2005 in an attempt by the new government, in the words of the then Minister of Education, Prof. Kader Asmal, to reshape, "the apartheid-induced spatial geography of higher education" (Asmal *et al.*, 2011:275).

The author of *Forging unity* was a journalism lecturer at NWU's School of Communication Studies on the Potchefstroom Campus at the time, and earlier worked as a full-time journalist. As an education reporter, she covered the higher

education sector extensively, including the mergers at several of South Africa's universities (Prinsloo 2012:1).

Eloff insisted that he did not want a "sugar coated" version or public relations account of the merger history. Moreover, the merger book would not be a "stand alone". It would be part of a larger project of which a former campus rector of the Vaal Triangle Campus, Prof. Piet Prinsloo, was the leader. The project would therefore consist of two separate but related processes and parts.

Prinsloo would be compiling a more "academic" book while the book Eloff had in mind had to be written in a more comprehensible, popular style. The project unfolded in a spirit of transparency. In fact, until after the publication of a proof copy on 20 November 2015, which was distributed to about 40 NWU council members (including the Institutional management) – this could be cited as a defining quality of the project (Pretorius 2016:4).

Furthermore, the finalisation of the book was delayed several times, significantly by events at the NWU late in 2013 and 2014. Prof. Dan Kgwadi was appointed as Eloff's successor. Shortly thereafter the Potchefstroom Campus came under fire for initiation practices including the use of a gesture similar to that of the Nazi *Sieg Heil* salute (Pretorius, 2015:10).

As a result the merger story itself was, in many respects, turned on its head. A joint decision by those involved in the project was taken that the book had to include these events. There was also a request (Prinsloo 2014) to wait with the publication until certain statistics on the NWU's research output was finalised. By the end of 2015, the organisational context in which the work was done became increasingly hostile (Anon 2016). The development of a new strategic plan for the NWU contributed in no small measure to the situation. However, the proof copy was printed at the end of 2015. A final copy, which incorporated some changes, was published as a First Edition at the end of 2017.

To better understand the project, we interrogate the journalistic history-writing genre further.

4. TYPOLOGY AND CHARACTERISTICS

Dickenson (2010:113) suggested a typology of political histories by journalists, the "quickie", the longer history and the investigative study. The differences between the three, apart from the length of shelf life, are their sources of evidence. The quickie, is "instant journalism and premature history", written as an event unfolds. It only scratches the surface and relies on interviews, newspaper articles and Hansard reports. The shelf life of such books tends to be limited. The longer history could be more influential, but is in essence the rehash of existing material. It also draws upon existing relationships for insight. The investigative book is

an exposé of what was previously hidden about a controversial contemporary political matter. There is a broader range of sources and context.

Although Dickenson's typology was based on research of journalists who write political histories, the literature of journalistic history shows that it could in some instances also be applied to other themes on which journalists write. If the typology is applied to the research for *Forging unity: The story of the North-West University's first years*, which formed part of a master's dissertation (Pretorius 2015) by the prime author of this article, it displays a mishmash of Dickenson's features. It was, in part, written as events unfolded; it presented existing material as part of the story, albeit only in one chapter; but in the main, it revealed information that had not been written about before.

This particular research work thus fails to conform to one of the salient category models and tends to be more of a hybrid nature. That is the way with typologies, they help us to understand, but often fail to provide a perfect fit.

Books written by journalists often display similar features. They tend to be based primarily on oral evidence, news reports, personal experience and insider knowledge (Van Rooyen 1971:3; Schoeman, 1973:5; Schoeman 1974:7-11; Ries & Dommissie 1990; Dickenson 2010:107; Matisonn 2015: 18). This does not exclude the use of other primary and secondary sources such as books, minutes of meetings, government publications, academic journal articles, lectures and speeches, archival material and previous historical research. In John Matisonn's *God, spies and lies* (2015:13-20) he explains his personal experience as a journalist, and also how he used previous research (interviews) done by the late *Daily Dispatch* editor, Gavin Stewart, aimed at obtaining a PhD (Matisonn 2015:431).

Other features of journalistic history writing are the tendency to focus on people, their pain, their failures, their triumphs, their battles and how they dealt with their personal war and peace accords (e.g. Van Rooyen 1971; Ries & Dommissie 1990; Matisonn 2015). This is the focus of *Forging unity: The story of the North-West University's first years* and emanated from one of the theoretical approaches adopted – the history of mentalities, which will be introduced later.

Journalists, by training, are also expected to have a writing style that is accessible, clear and entertaining. The narrative is often novel-like, with a punchy opening. According to the literature, journalistic histories could be weak on context and a reflection on the choices of methodology, sources and existing literature (Dickenson 2010:116). Richard Steyn (author of *Jan Smuts: Unafraid of greatness*) says he followed the lead of the American critic Nicholas Lemann and tried to write popular history, as opposed to the history recorded by academic scholars, in which the characters and the story are key elements and the argument secondary (2015:x).

However, historians disagree over whether the methodological overlap between history and journalism validates the work done by journalist-historians.

The historian Antony Beevar's (Higgins 2016) concern is simply that journalist-historians' "lack of academic rigour", both in terms of analysis and sourcing, is also responsible for the destruction of the archive. He explains how premature history often sparks the destruction of the sources that journalists use,

"Now, with journalists wanting to write history on the hoof (instant history) there is a tremendous pressure on people wanting to protect themselves and their reputations for the future; and they are weeding out information before it gets to the archive, or wiping the digital stuff, and I don't think historians are going to be able to get at material in the same way in the future" (Higgins 2016).

These difficulties could be more pronounced when a journalist writes an organisation's history. Corporations are fiercely protective of their reputations while journalists – viewed from the organisational socio-cultural frame – are socialised to value independence, truth and telling the story as it is.

While journalistic history-writing may in some instances be a quick compilation of news reports aimed at capitalising on the public interest generated by, e.g., a sensational court case, we argue that it can also be a serious, time-consuming project which is not in any way inferior to (or that different from) the work produced by professional historians.

Before discussing the specific challenges of the *Forging unity* project, which serves as a case study, we will explain the meta-theoretical approaches from the perspectives of journalism and contemporary history writing that were adopted in this project.

5. THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The study is an interdisciplinary study of journalism and history. Theoretical orientations from both fields of study are therefore included to anchor the research. Meta-theoretically the phenomenological and sociocultural traditions provide avenues into the study, perhaps most significantly through organisational culture and ethnography, branching into institutional ethnography.

From a phenomenological perspective, the study of the history of the NWU was unavoidably based on personal contact and observation as basis for description and interpretation (cf. Babbie 2007:300). The researcher was an employee of the NWU, which meant the institutional culture was within not only close range, but tangible. The experiences of other employees were, similarly, based on insiders' knowledge of the organisation. Their personal experiences of

the organisation have revealed aspects of the NWU's history, which otherwise would have remained hidden (cf. West & Turner 2010:31).

Institutional ethnography, a research technique in which personal experience becomes a tool for understanding an organisation, therefore, perhaps by default, became an approach to writing the history of the NWU. The ongoing interplay between the insider knowledge (as an employee and a researcher) of the culture of the organisation or an institution and outsider observation of the culture (as a journalist) represented an attempt to close the hermeneutical circle. As the study was characterised by dramatic events (see Chapter 21 and 26, Part 2), notably as a result of insiders wanting to protect some of the cultural traits of the organisation, the process of interpretation and reinterpretation intensified. Events changed on a daily basis and demanded new interpretations.

Similarly, the researcher's intimate knowledge of the practices and rituals of journalists – a profession she practised full-time for nearly two decades – influenced the manner in which she collected and treated evidence and made sense of the content. This flows from the sociocultural tradition, which postulates that individuals are part of larger groups who have their own idiosyncratic rules and patterns of interaction (Littlejohn & Foss 2008:323). This can also be applied to organisations, which have specific ways of doing things.

Organisational culture theory therefore stems from the sociocultural tradition, as it focuses on the reproduction of understanding through the use of rituals, symbols and other types of activity. This “collective understanding” gives rise to a specific organisational culture (Littlejohn & Foss 2008:263). Deuze (2007:162) calls this the, “consolidation of a consensual ideology among journalists in different parts of the world” which becomes entrenched in newsrooms. As the product of this very consensual ideology, the researcher primarily wore the hat of a journalist in this study.

Although history and journalism could be viewed as having related epistemologies, the empirical and methodological overlap between the two was not that clear. Lamb (2004:11) points out that this is a neglected area of study. A review of the literature shows that this continues to be the case.

As part of their socio-cultural identity, journalists have also been described as the historians of the present (Lavoinne translated by Motlow 1994:210). This description of journalists resonates with two approaches that exist under the roof of cultural history. These approaches are the history of the present and the history of mentalities (*mentalité*). The *history of mentalities* and the *history of the present* are two possible approaches, which can explain the presentation and interpretation of the *Forging unity* project.

5.1. History of mentalities

The history of mentalities appears to have surfaced prominently in the Annales School, which grew from the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, founded by Marc Bloch (1886-1944) and Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) in 1929 (Bloch & Febvre in Budd ed. 2009:188). Although the literature differs on the extent to which the founders of the Annales School intended to break with the traditional Rankean history establishment since the late 1920s, there is agreement that its influence, as an approach to historiographical practices, has been significant (Chartier in Kritzman *et al.* 2007:58). This approach, among others, shifts the focus from a history of the élite and politics, to history with an interest in ordinary people, their lives and their culture (Black & MacRaild 2007:113; Engebetsen 2012:98). This could include stories about cats, hygiene, clothes or sexual behaviour (Schöttler in Lüdtke, as translated by Templar 1995:74). The Annales School emerged in the 1920s, but only became internationally influential by the mid-century. The history of mentalities, of which Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie became a prominent exponent, deals with the mentality of people. The type of historical writing is based on a mental toolbox, consisting of fixed ideas about culture, feelings, thinking, emotions and attitudes of people – at the time in which they lived (Arcangeli 2012:35-30).

The history of mentalities is an acknowledged historiographical construct of understanding and interpretation. It has been an approach in the *Forging unity* project. The focus is on the mentalities of a spectrum of people and their mentalities in a variety of phases in which the university was first established and later became consolidated as a new organisation. In other words, questions such as the following are posed: How did people experience the merger emotionally? How did they respond? What kind of attitudes did they display?

By foregrounding people and their emotions, attitudes and responses, rather than the organisation's systems and its efficiencies, the author tried to glean the mentality of the time on which they made disclosures to her as researcher. Seen from another angle, the mentality at specific times in the period under discussion provides a narrative crutch for the book.

The book's discourse, which concludes at the end of 2015, also serves as an example of the capturing of events in "now time" amid an acceleration of history (Harootunian, 2007: 487). The history of the present therefore provided an added theoretical frame.

5.2. The historical present

Historians have, for some time, concerned themselves from the vantage point of the present. They have literally "encroached" on present time, according to Lavoinnie (as translated by Motlow 1994:220). This is, in no small measure,

the consequence of the changing nature of the mass media. Journalists were traditionally the professionals to break the news and did so through various platforms. In terms of speed, radio could clip television and print, but in the age of 24/7 news channels, the Internet (blogs, YouTube) and social media (Facebook, Twitter) the power over immediacy shifted. Moreover, journalists no longer had the upper hand over breaking news; citizen or grassroots journalists have been the first to record some big events in the past few years. An example is the American attack on the stronghold of Osama Bin Laden, leader of the militant group Al-Qaeda, on 2 May 2011. The event was live-tweeted by a civilian near Bin Laden's house in Pakistan (O'Dell 2012).

The speed of and access to new and social media have collapsed divisions between the past and the present, but also between the professional and the citizen journalist.¹ In the epoch of immediate or instant history, historians have described the "collision of temporalities" as the "historical present" (Harootunian 2007: 474). Quoting Amin, Harootunian (2007:478) describes how history as, "scene where the ghosts of the past co-mingle daily with the living ... in a habitus of a haunted house".

In terms of the historical present, history need not only be interpreted as if it happened in the past. History is also able to understand the present (Tempelhoff 2009:264). This is of particular relevance to the present case study. The empirical section of the research did not stop at the end of 2013 as was initially planned, but continued until the end of 2015. The author had to interpret and analyse events as they happened in the historical present. There was no historical distance. This influenced the type of sources used.

The history of mentalities and the historical present thus help to explain the approach to *Forging unity*.

6. JOURNALISTIC HISTORY

The historian Geoff Eley points out that some of the most creative histories have emerged from outside the academic community. He claims in *A crooked line: From cultural history to the history of society*,

"The boundaries between history's professional precincts and the wider realms of the public are far more porous than most academic historians might allow ... If we ask where a society gets its sense of the past, for instance, only delusions of grandeur could induce historians into claiming much of the credit" (Eley 2005:8).

1 The concept *citizen journalist* is contentious as ordinary people who report news may not apply traditional journalistic principles such as accuracy, balance and fairness to their content.

Journalism is one of the fields that contributes to history-writing and has done so for hundreds of years, if one takes the work of the Greek Thucydides' (424 BC) as the starting point. The difference between journalism and history is focused on the distinction of time lag or the past/present divide (Lavoine, as translated by Motlow 1994:207). Journalists are concerned with the present; historians deal with the past. The collapsing of temporalities, gives renewed credence to the philosopher-journalist Camus' (1913-1960) description of journalists as historians of the moment.

Journalistic history writing, for the sake of this study, refers to both the professional identity of the historiographer, but more importantly to the methods and practices journalists apply when they write history. Of relevance, from a socio-cultural point of view, is Deuze's description of journalism's "consensual ideology" as mentioned earlier.

Lamble, writing about the use of journalism as an academic research methodology, suggests that key concepts, emanating from the culture of the profession, have to be considered. They include,

"...the balanced, fair and accurate accounts of events; adherence to ethical standards; news values' research and investigation; seeking truth and providing a contextual interpretive framework by attempting to answer who, what, when, where why and how; reporting and storytelling thorough text, narrative and images, good writing; legal awareness; historic perspective; political awareness; information, education and entertainment; objectivity, public interest and public benefit" (Lamble 2004:11).

These key concepts, if summarised, appear to be similar to the phases of history writing: evidence, interpretation and narrative. Trouillot (in Nash 2014:93) sets out the process of historical production as four moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance). If these moments are placed parallel to the journalistic-history production processes, there are similarities. In journalism you find the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*, notes or collections of information); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives* or stories); and the moment of retrospective contemporary significance (the making of *history* news in the final contemporary instance).

The book *Forging unity* was indeed the outcome of these moments, which are similar, but perhaps not identical across the two fields: evidence was collected from a wide range of primary and secondary sources; an archive was constructed; and the available material was interpreted and packaged as

a discursive narrative. The differences in how a journalist and a history scholar work are therefore not discounted.

The treatment of evidence may be a case in point. Time pressures, which usually apply to journalists in the form of deadlines, are of lesser concern in this instance because the outcome was a book. Thus, the immediacy was tempered.

However, the corporate history of the NWU, as written by a journalist, remains within the parameters of the theoretical orientations referred to earlier. Corporate or institutional history provides an opportunity where these approaches could intersect. Hence, in this study, a journalist-historian, who is predisposed to human interest because of professional socio-cultural conditioning, and with the understanding of mentalities – including emotions, feelings and attitudes – has a historical orientation. The peculiar challenges of a corporate history is, however, excluded from this article.

7. NARRATIVE

Historians have long debated the nature of the historical narrative. Views range from an austere and strictly factual approach to the use of more literary, even novel-like, language (Curthoys & McGrath 2011:6-12). The historian Thomas Bender (2015) describes how analytical writing – an explanation of sources, methodology and findings – was primarily aimed at the “fellow specialists at our elbow” instead of the general reader. Journalists then stepped in to provide for the needs of ordinary people. Based on the professional culture in which they are socialised, journalists agree on how they should write – no matter what the medium. The writing has to be clear, well structured, balanced, and evocative – anything but boring.

However, the apparent narrative divide between historians and journalists is perhaps an over-simplification of the broader picture. There are, after all, always exceptions: historians who write beautifully and journalists who write atrociously.

This illustrates, as indicated before, areas of overlap between the two fields. There is ample evidence in the literature that both value an engaging narrative. Moreover, both professions foreground human interest, the suspense surrounding people and their actions and emotions. In addition, there is also some overlap in how journalists and historians select material and deal with bias (Tuchman 1981:29).

7.1. Dealing with bias

The prime challenge is bias, which is created by the selection (and non-selection) of material and their arrangement. Even if we reject the idea of “objectivity”

(which we do as it implies neutrality, in favour of a combination of accuracy, balance and fairness) the literature appears to suggest that the distillation of material is a more focused process for the historian compared to that of the journalist. As a journalist, one often experiences these choices intuitively, rather than deliberate and in service of balance and fairness (and deadlines). This is certainly part of the socio-cultural orientation of journalists.

It would mean putting forward all sides of a story and standing back for the reader to decide. This remains the case despite a swing in journalism towards commentary in the shape of blogs and even social media such as Twitter. In contrast, the literature on history writing suggests that the historian's voice has to be heard. McGrath (2011:157) explains,

“You need to decide what you think happened, and why and convey that decision to the reader. If you don't tell them, they will assume you don't know. You may be aware that your judgement is contestable and not final but nonetheless you need to present a strong authorial voice. There may be a complex construction of competing voice in your narrative, but in the end, people want to know what you think happened, and why, and how.”

Macaulay (quoted by Tuchman, 1982:62) says in this instance the “professional historian” as opposed to the history scholar, is in a better position, as he need not fear the “outstuck neck”.

The challenge for the history-writer, whether (s)he comes from journalism or academia, is therefore selection – selection of facts, of voices, of words and of silences. Selection should be done in such a way that the narrative is put together in a way that best serves the evidence and balance. If there is bias, and there always is, despite one's best efforts, declare it. We were therefore guided by Tuchman's (1981:59) view that bias is (only) misleading when it is concealed. For this reason and in line with the author of *Forging unity's* socialisation as a journalist, the potential of bias was declared (Pretorius 2015:11). By declaring bias, it is naturally suggested that this bias has to be taken account of – not merely acknowledged and then ignored.

Some statements in the book were contested based on some of the sources of evidence used, notably newspapers (Anon [email] 2016). Chapter 21 of the book was a particular case in point. On 19 March 2014, the Potchefstroom Campus Management Committee lodged a complaint with the Press Ombudsman about *Beeld* newspaper's accuracy and fairness in its coverage (mainly on 21 February 2014) of how first-year students used a gesture similar to the Nazi *Sieg Heil* salute (Media24, 2014). The NWU vice-chancellor, Prof. Dan Kgwadi, decided to withdraw the Potchefstroom Campus' complaint against *Beeld*, but certain issues related to the complaint were subsequently taken forward on behalf of the

campus by the civil rights organisation Afriforum Youth. The Press Ombudsman dismissed the complaint (Retief 2014).

Nevertheless, the use of newspapers as sources is problematic, in particular when working in the historical present when other sources of evidence may not yet be readily available. Tuchman (1981:42) warns how newspapers should be used for flavour rather than for facts, because facts may be denied the day after they have been reported. So, although newspapers were used throughout in the book project, they were rarely the only sources of evidence. Furthermore, the manner in which *Beeld* reported on the *Sieg Heil* salute has to be read in a much wider context, which is described in Chapter 21. For this purpose, various interviews were conducted and the author had considerable insider knowledge of events (which she declared in the introduction of the book). In this instance, personal experience had opened avenues, in an ethnographic sense, to interact with and interpret the NWU culture.

However, the criticism about the use of newspapers and a change in the terms of reference (Prinsloo 2013), which was not always documented in detail, laid bare the complexity of corporate history writing. Although the commission was for an uncensored history the prospect of its public release, upon completion, was contested at one point in time (Anon [email] 2016).

Of paramount importance is the trustworthiness and dependability of the book as historiographical project. As a corporate history project, it was bound to come face to face with many challenges, which is why special care has to be taken to ensure reliability and validity.

Babbie and Mouton (2002:646) relate reliability to the quality of the researcher's chosen method/s, while Flick (2006:371) refers to the "dependability" of each method. This means that material collected has to be presented in a way that it is clear. Flick advises that meticulous documentation of the research process will increase reliability.

Henning (2004:148), in turn, states that to validate research is to check for problems such as bias; to question all procedures critically; to theorise by constantly looking for theoretical questions that may come up throughout a study and to discuss and share research actions with peers. She even suggests testing the validity of an observation with research participants – something that could be done to enhance a study's validity. This was done extensively in the Forging unity project. Several critical readers, who were involved in the merger of the PU for CHE and the UNW and the establishment of the university, read the manuscript or proof copy. In addition, several other readers checked the particular sections and chapters in which they were quoted.

Golafshani's (2003:597) approach to reliability and validity within a qualitative research paradigm was also utilised. Reliability and validity, which examine the process and product of research, should be understood as the quest

for trustworthiness, rigour and quality. Moreover, without reliability no validity could be achieved. “Triangulation” (i.e. a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study) was indeed utilised to eliminate bias and increase truthfulness in pursuit of reliability and validity. Indeed, multiple sources (primary and secondary) were the basis for constructing a narrative. This created the necessary themes, but also reduced bias and increased dependability.

Thus, the validity of the study was ensured through the research process described. However, the reliability of findings cannot be guaranteed in a positivistic, natural science manner. While the reader could be reassured of the factual (including the contextual factuality) basis of the study via endnotes and the extended bibliography, the findings and conclusions have to read in the context of the genre, i.e. journalistic historiography. Readers are reminded of this.

As a journalistic history, *Forging unity* was the result of practices, which define in-depth or high-level journalism in particular. They include an attempt to provide an accurate and fair account of events, respecting ethics, applying news values, seeking truth and providing context, storytelling through images and a well-written narrative, legal awareness, providing a historic perspective and political consciousness and serving the public interest. When condensed these steps overlap with the phases of history-writing (also in a condensed format), namely the gathering of evidence, the creation of an archive, narration and interpretation. In this study the widest range of sources, which served as a personal archive, were collected and formed the base of the narrative.

Against the background of the theoretical, methodological and case study, we now make some conclusions about journalistic history-writing.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Journalistic history-writing has become an established historiographical genre with its own set of characteristics (which may overlap with what could be described as scholarly history-writing). Broadly speaking these would include topics and themes that would be commercially viable; a strong focus on human interest, i.e. people, their actions, emotions, triumphs, failures and misfortunes; a comprehensible and often colourful writing style; reliance on oral history and sources such as news articles in particular when a project is approached from an historical present vantage point (often the case with journalistic histories), the use of insider knowledge surrounding events which are written about as well as a lack of emphasis on theoretical and methodological matters.

This lack of emphasis is perhaps the most pronounced difference between journalistic and more traditional scholarly forms of history-writing. After all, the education and professional socialisation of journalists and historians are different.

However, since journalism itself varies in terms of whether it is published as serious, in-depth journalism or light, popular gossip-journalistic history-writing depends on the nature of the history-writing project. Journalistic history-writing as a genre could therefore be presented on a continuum.

On the one end are the instances where a project scratches the surface. This is similar to the quickie, to use Dickenson's typology for political histories by journalists, which are produced quickly and lack real depth. On the other hand, there would be histories, which stem from exhaustive research and incisive analysis of a topic.

Furthermore, journalists and historians tend to differ on how they create and manage the archives. The manner in which journalists create an archive may lack the organisational rigor of the trained scholarly historian, who is expected to record every footstep meticulously and ideally according to the broad guidelines of the academic discipline. This may be true in many cases, but it may not be a difference in principle and may well be merely a case of individual preferences.

It is important to state that any perceived or real organisational differences does not mean journalists are less concerned about the trustworthiness, i.e. the reliability and validity of their work, rather that the journalism profession do not have a single way or style of creating the archives. Each individual journalist will find his/her own way of working. This lack of formal training in archival creation may present difficulties later on when the referencing of sources has to be done, in particular because the volume of a history-writing project is bound to far exceed the volume of research a journalist would typically do – even for an in-depth report.

A further conclusion we would suggest concerns the volume of the historian's own voice. Commentary as a form of journalism has seen an upsurge in recent times because of blogs and social media platforms. However, the muted voice as an outcome of the socio-cultural socialisation of journalists – in other words the practice to present the facts and allow the audience or readers to decide – continue to be the norm in news reporting. (Analysis and formal commentary of course remain, as in the past, an integral part of the journalist's range of instruments.)

On the other hand, it is required of historians to allow their voices to come through when they write history. Therefore, journalists who turn into history-writers may have to grapple with turning up the volume of their own voices. However, this possibility is just that, a possibility determined by the background, style and personality of the individual and cannot be generalised. Historians, as is the case with journalists, come in many shapes and sizes, are

the products of various historiographical schools and practice and may therefore produce histories that differ. Currently there is a concerted effort amongst historians to write, “against the grain” and explore in detail cultural taboos of former times. The tendency is for historians now to work on long-term history and especially interrogate power and its status in society. Moreover, historians are increasingly urged to work in the field of contemporary history – an area where there exists a significant demand for long-term insights on the present. There is also a realisation that historical consciousness is no longer the monolithic discourse on a specific theme of history in time and space. There are too many divergent discourses with issues of contingency constantly usurping yesterday’s conceptions of causality. The world is increasingly becoming more complex – much the same as our understanding of what the past, present and future is all about. Forays into transnational and global history have significantly contributed to the systemic demise of conventional conceptions of traditions and culture. Moreover, culture itself comes under threat in a world that is self-absorbed with the integration of time and space in states of virtual reality (Guldi & Armitage 2014; Hunt 2014). Historians are probably more aware than most practitioners of historiographical discourses, that the past will always be rewritten. However, they also know, if history is good, it can stand the test of time. By focusing on contemplation and reflection of the past, their views often remain relevant in future. For obvious reasons their focus on detail and meticulous reporting, may not always have appeal for a reading public spoilt by a creative industry of journalists and media houses running on adrenaline and deadlines that provide for riveting real-time history of the present.

Finally, as journalistic historiography becomes more commonplace, in particular, on the in-depth end of the continuum of projects in this genre, it is expected to show more similarities in terms of process and outcome with the work done by trained scholars in historical studies. Journalists, concerned with fairness, ethics, context, balance, accuracy and who believe they are in service of the truth and the public when they write history, can therefore potentially be acknowledged as history-writers in their own right – providing they are good wordsmiths.

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