

**Reflections on writing about writing media history,
or,
the mapping of certain paradigms and certain philosophies
in researching a media historiographical project**

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Introduction

In media history, the relatively understudied sub-discipline within journalism and media studies,¹ what could be the point of departure when faced with the task of researching the history of a complex media company so vast it is known as a “technology and e-commerce platform”,² as it celebrates its centenary?

Starting from an accepted point of departure that no useable model “to undertake an all-encompassing historical study of the media environment exists because media history is a fairly recent phenomenon in communication research”,³ what paradigms, philosophies and approaches – or guiding principles – need one be cognisant of in attempting to recreate the history of a communication company? This is purely an academic exercise for the sake of the researcher involved, and the integrity of the research process and product, because an academic approach as a matter of course is not critical when researching the typical company history.

Taking into account that historiography can also be interpreted as a “present past”,⁴ it is necessary, when formulating questions on points of departure and working towards answers, to accept that “historians, like other people, are shaped by fashion”.⁵

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1. D. Wigston, “A History of South African Media”, in P.J. Fourie (ed.), *Media Studies: Media History, Media and Society*, 2nd ed., (Juta, Kenilworth, 2007), p 5.
2. Description on the website of the Naspers Group, see www.naspers.com (2013). This company is the focus of the research project, a South African-based global conglomerate, officially registered as Naspers in 1998. Formerly Nasionale Pers, it was founded in 1915 as De Nasionale Pers, a Dutch/Afrikaans press company. For the next almost seventy years, it functioned as an organ of Afrikaner nationalism, the purpose for which it was initially founded. Although its journalists were critical of certain aspects of the eventual execution of Afrikaner nationalist philosophy that led to the apartheid policy, especially since the introduction of overt apartheid legislation from the 1950s, it did not distance itself officially from the National Party (NP). Eventually, however, it weaned itself off the NP as it morphed from a homogenous parochial Afrikaner press company into a “national press”. Instead of remaining a “Nasionale Pers” it also embraced diversity (with its first commercial magazine publication in English in 1965) and technology (especially when the founding of M-Net in 1985 catapulted the company into a multimedia company). With an almost paradoxical combination of both conservative management yet risk-taking entrepreneurship during every decade of its existence, the company grew to have the financial muscle to be at the forefront of technology in the era of print, or digital technology in its last quarter century.
3. Wigston, “A History of South African Media”, pp 4–5.
4. G. Verbeek, “A New Past for a New Nation? Historiography and Politics in South Africa – a Comparative Approach”, *Historia*, 45, 2, November 2000, p 387.
5. R.D. Brown, “Microhistory and the Post-modern Challenge”, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 23, 1, Spring 2003, p 1.

We prefer to understand ourselves to be above the passing fancies of intellectual life; to stand for a more enduring perspective on our subjects. But we live in the world, and in the academic world at that. Historians may be slower to take up the latest intellectual fashions than scholars in literary studies, anthropology, sociology, and political science. But take them we do, sometimes so belatedly that we earn scornful condescension from our colleagues in sister disciplines.

Or, as Berkhofer wrote, because “views of and theories about people and society continually keep changing, historical interpretations of any given subject also keep changing”.⁶

In terms of postmodernity, it should also be remembered that more than a century ago the controversial American historian, Henry Adams, like later postmodernists, had already recognised “that for all its posturing as ‘scientific’, historical writing is finally a subjective, imagined construction”.⁷

Simultaneously, this caveat should also be taken into account, namely that historians “are periodically being told – without really heeding the warning – [that] there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ fact”, and that “historical fact is an intellectual decision”.⁸

Of course, one can also start the journey with Carr’s “What is History?”, as in his now classic George Macauley Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge. He answers this rational point of departure by stating that the answer “consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question [on] what view we take of the society in which we live”.⁹

In fact, Carr states that facts “never come to us ‘pure’, since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form”. Facts, in essence, are “refractions” – “they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder”.¹⁰

How then does the researcher embark on a study of such extent as the project at hand,¹¹ while trawling through a myriad of applicable theoretical paradigms as possible points of departure to revisit a certain “past reality”?¹² This has to be done in the full knowledge that there are as many “past realities” as there are lived experiences in the social, cultural, political and economic realities of the history of what today is South Africa – a country moulded by a legacy of almost 250 years of colonialism (1652–1910), followed by 50 years as the Union of South

6. Cited in A.A. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods* (Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011), p 156.

7. Cited in Brown, “Microhistory and the Post-modern Challenge”, pp 2–3.

8. F. Furet, “Beyond the Annales”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 55, 3, September 1983, pp 403–404.

9. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (MacMillan, London, 1961), p 2.

10. Carr, *What is History?*, p 16.

11. More details on the Naspers project per se than those provided in footnote 2 are regarded as unnecessary for the purposes of this article. This is because the focus lies not on the subject of the research project, but on the processes involved in the approach and execution of research in this and similar projects in the still mainly uncharted field of media history, especially in South Africa.

12. J. de Villiers, “Geskiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika: Moet die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis Herskryf Word?”, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 52, 2, June 2012, p 198.

Africa under white minority rule (1910–1961), overlapping with and then followed by apartheid rule (1948–1994; from 1961 as a republic), followed by a democratic dispensation in 1994.

Which approaches can be guiding principles in attempting to locate facts when researching the history, or “story”, of a media company, one that is inextricably linked with the development of a people, a nation, a country and, as globalisation became an agent of change, eventually a global environment? The terms history/story are relevant, especially if one takes into account that the first definition of the word “story”, as it appeared in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*, reads “history; account of things past”.¹³ How apt is this description in terms of a media company in which a voluminous number of “stories” and “histories” were mediated over its ten decades, in several manifestations of media. History is indeed also described “as meaning imposed on time by means of language”, and it is stated that “history imposes syntax on time”.¹⁴ It then becomes evident just how intertwined, entangled even, maybe even ensnared with one another, the notions of story/history, journalism/media and a media company are.

The aim of this exercise, as stated, is a personal expedition for the researcher to clarify some terminologies and to map some paradigms and philosophies, both in terms of media historiography and for the purposes of the research project at hand. It can also be described as a personal philosophical exploration of certain processes and approaches influencing the writing of media history, and in this case, specifically as an attempt to formulate a guiding principle for the impending study.

In a sense, four sub-streams of journalism history all coalesce in this study. They are, according to Nord, technology studies; organisation studies; cultural studies; and political studies.¹⁵ As the impending study will prove, it is indeed all about technological, organisational, cultural and political change.

Accepting that it is important to study history¹⁶ and the history of the media as social phenomena, how then does the media historian depart on a journey to record the history of one specific South African-based media company and trace its transformation over the period of a century; a company, moreover, which has outlasted all contemporary formations of media companies in the region, and which, indeed, is regarded in its tenth decade as one of the top global media companies?

Which approaches can be regarded as relevant and must be considered when providing a foundation for the validity and integrity of a research project of this scale?

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13. Cited in N.F. Partner, “Making up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History”, *Speculum*, 61, 1, January 1986, p 91.
 14. Partner, “Making up Lost Time”, p 97.
 15. D.P. Nord, “The Nature of Historical Research”, in G. Stempel and B. Westley (eds), *Research Methods in Mass Communication* (Prentice-Hall, Engelwood Cliffs, NJ, 1989), p 310.
 16. In brief: As an attempt to understand the present, which means one needs to understand what influenced the past, although this is by no means meant in a simplistic way.

The research process

To introduce one construct in terms of a point of departure for a research project, Berger's rather simplistic answer to the above question is clear: "From the immense amount of material available to historians, they have to select relevant and important sources."¹⁷

However, this simplistic approach encapsulates the typical dialectic, or even paradox, in that it emphasises the complexity of the issue, which can only be reduced to "relevant" and "important" once certain paradigms are defined.

The question that needs to be clarified is how the historiographer can differentiate between what is *relevant* and *important* in terms of a media company that was a social, cultural, economic and, most importantly, a political agent of empowerment of an exclusive ethnic grouping in at least its first half-century, given the complex South African society after the Anglo-Boer War. The company was then transformed into an agent of transformation *itself* when the realisation dawned, early in its second half-century, that the nationalistic idealism that had morphed into a nationalist ideology was immoral and inhumane.¹⁸ In fact, leading Afrikaner journalists and intellectuals such as Piet Cillié, Schalk Pienaar and N.P. van Wyk Louw began to question not only the practical outcome, but also the moral base of apartheid – even before the company's 50th jubilee in 1965.¹⁹

In other words: one could already state, right at the starting point, that the subject's complexity might be so overwhelming as to be an obstruction in its own right to determine what is *relevant* and *important*.

These were just some of the initial concerns that engaged this researcher in attempts to reflect on the processes and approaches that could inform the research project in an attempt to understand the processes and approaches in researching and writing media history.

This article will now proceed to trace and record some paradigms and philosophies in current discourses on media historiography. This was deemed imperative, especially for the South African context in which, as has already been stated, the field of media historiography is understudied. One could even argue that there may be a need to formalise a specific unpacking of approaches and paradigms for the needs of the subfield of media historiography, especially since specific lacunae exist.

In terms of the requirements of the project at hand, what is the point of departure for a study on the founding and development of a media company over a hundred years, so as to do it justice and not to impose the iniquity of misinterpretation, oversimplification, or even the sin of presentism onto the mass of collected and collated data? This is necessary, especially because the study

17. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 155.

18. This article does not focus on the morality of the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism, which was cause and effect for the founding of Naspers, but reflects on the processes of historiography and, in this case, specifically on media historiography.

19. Several sources are relevant here, among others, B. Naudé, *My Land van Hoop* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1995), p 52; J.J.J. Scholtz, "'n Nuwe Tydvak Breek Aan", in W.D. Beukes (ed.), *Oor Grense Heen* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1992), p 21; and Stellenbosch University Documentation Centre, A220 M 4 (2/2), P.J. Cillié Collection, "Verwoord: Die Mitologie", an unpublished collection of essays entitled *Momente*, dated 1993.

concerns an entity that was founded with its so-called “twin”, the National Party. Together they have been described as the “first nationalist liberation movements in Africa”.²⁰

For Berger, research means “to investigate something thoroughly, to search for information, to try to find out about something that is of interest”.²¹ According to Berger, the basic questions that academic researchers ask, namely who, why, how, what, when, which and where,²² can be compared to the basic tenets of journalism or news writing. They are the so-called five Ws and one H – who, what, when, where and why, followed by how.

The difference is that the product of each approach (that of an academic research project, and that of journalism) is produced in different registers, styles and presentations, to form different constructs for different audiences and consumptions.

For Berger, some of the characteristics of “formal research” involve more systematic and structured observation tested against “concepts”, or theories, to “make sense of things”, together with being objective (“or try[ing] to be”), and the correct interpretation of findings or conclusions.²³

For journalism, the register and style are those required and prescribed by the mass media, in other words independent, verified and objectively collected and collated facts, with attributions according to the principles of mass media.

Journalism and media clarified

For the purposes of this exercise, some clarification is needed of the terminology of *journalism* and *media*, because the research subject covers both these fields.²⁴

Journalism can be regarded broadly as a field within mass communication that records the events of the day. It disseminates content on any given news platform, be it in print, broadcast (radio or TV) or digital, mobile format. Journalism is a subfield of media, the plural form of medium, suggesting the “channel in and through which messages are communicated, whether by written, spoken or otherwise semiotic means”.²⁵

To clarify: the research project will not concern itself only with *journalism* history per se, but with *media* history, the broader field within which it is situated. This is an important clarification, because the original newspaper company that is the subject of the research project not only did “jobbing” (commercial printing work), but soon branched out into publishing magazines and books. Eventually, with the advent of electronic media (in its seventh decade in the 1980s) and the

20. *Die Burger*, 26 July 2010.

21. A.A. Berger, *Media Research Techniques* (Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1998), p 3.

22. Berger, *Media Research Techniques*, pp 4–6.

23. Berger, *Media Research Techniques*, pp 8–9.

24. This researcher would like to motivate that it is not necessary to discuss these topics at length, as they are not the foci of the article. They are nevertheless part of the field in which the researcher wishes to investigate some theories, paradigms and philosophies in the relatively young research area of media history in South Africa.

25. B. Franklin, M. Hamer, M. Hanna, M. Kinsey and J.E. Richardson, *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies* (Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 2005), p 143.

digital era following that, its development towards a multimedia company began. One might even call its e-commerce platforms today “e-jobbing”.

In other words, the focus is not merely on an exclusive *journalism* history, but an inclusive *media* history. The term media history in this article therefore will include the term journalism history.

Journalism and the history of the field clarified

It is, however, also relevant to argue the case for journalism, journalism history and media history within the field of journalism studies and media studies. To stake the claim for journalism history or media history, as a subfield, this argument will also be supported by a brief discussion that will show the binary qualities shared by journalism and history.

Journalism has been studied at university level for more than a century, and its “academic pedigree” has been under discussion ever since.²⁶ It has been viewed, among other things, as a “hybrid, interdisciplinary mix of the humanities and the social sciences”.²⁷ Partly professional and partly academic, it straddles theory and practice. This questioning of its academic pedigree was motivated because journalism was seen to be lacking a formal academic methodology, and as something of “a bastard orphan discipline”.

Lamble builds on the argument by Medsger that this has been the case especially since the 1950s, when “a new force” took root in some journalism programmes that eventually “permeated” them – in fact, it “colonised” journalism.²⁸ This “new force” was communication studies, which led to the “changes and confusion that dog[ged] journalism education”. This uniting of communication studies and journalism, according to Medsger, grew out of a mix of “bureaucratic expediency and a lack of understanding of journalism”.²⁹

With uncertainties regarding journalism within the broader and less specific field of communication having been briefly clarified, and with journalism studies being sanctioned within the broader field of media studies, as having an academic heritage, it can be stated that the validity of journalism studies as a *field* should no longer be doubted. One can even add, as Medsger postulates, that “journalism itself is the study and synthesis of everything else, of all disciplines”.³⁰

26. S. Lamble, “Documenting the Methodology of Journalism”, *Australian Journalism Review*, 26, 1, 2004, p 85.

27. S.D. Reece, “The Progressive Potential of Journalism Education: Recasting the Academic Professional Debate”, *The Harvard International Journal of Press Politics*, 4, 4, 1999, pp 70–94.

28. B. Medsger, *Winds of Change: Challenges Confronting Journalism Education* (The Freedom Foundation, Arlington, VA, 1996), p 55.

29. This confusion arose when communication studies and critical theory studies conflated as a field within certain schools of thought, leading to a view that also regarded journalism studies with some contempt as a lesser field and as occupying itself with empirical studies as opposed to the meta-approach of critical theory studies. This will not be discussed for the purposes of this reflection as it is not deemed relevant.

30. B. Medsger, “Getting Journalism Education out of the Way”, *Essays*, available at <http://journalism.nyu.edu/publishing/archives/debate/forum.1.essay.medsger.html> Accessed 10 January 2014.

Indeed, journalism studies as a field is now also supported by publications such as Sage's *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies* (2005).³¹ Furthermore, the First International Conference on Journalism Studies, focusing on the impact of the social, economic, political, technological and educational changes in the practice of journalism and its professional identity, was held in Santiago, Chile in 2012.³²

Lastly, it might be opportune to conclude this section with the words of Nord, namely that "[j]ournalism historians would be remiss if they were to limit themselves to the study of the communication aspect of journalism and ignore the infinite variety of journalism history".³³ Thus, also relevant to this reflection, a brief discussion of journalism and history will follow.

Journalism and history clarified

It is expedient to revisit the Lambie argument that in terms of scholarship (and thus as a discipline) journalism stretches "at least as far back ... as the Greek philosophers".³⁴ Yin, in particular, argues that there is a close relationship between journalism and history, in that the who, what, when, where, why and how questions are relevant, but that the why and how questions "have special relevancy to the history of journalism".³⁵

Lambie also refers to Meyer's now well-known phrase about journalism being "history in a hurry".³⁶ This builds on a notion argued as early as 1949, namely for the relationship between journalism and history, and that

... the journalist is himself [sic] the historian of the present, and the record which he puts together will, when used with critical discretion, furnish valuable source material for the scholar of the future who delves into the history of our times".³⁷

As Lambie quotes Windschuttle:

The origins of journalism lie in exactly the same place as the origins of history. The first true historian is widely known as Thucydides [about 455-400 BCE], the Athenian who wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War* ... This is all first-hand observation and, to my mind, there is no doubt it is journalism. In short, as well as the first historian, Thucydides should be recognised as the first journalist.³⁸

Thucydides may be regarded by some as the first journalist *and* historian because of his eyewitness accounts of the Peloponnesian War; for other scholars,

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31. B. Franklin, M. Hamer, M. Hanna, M. Kinsey and J.E. Richardson, *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies*.
 32. 1st International Conference on Journalism Studies, available at <http://www.isracom.org.il/upload/1st%20INTERNATIONAL%20CONFERENCE%20ON%20JOURNALISM%20STUDIES.pdf> Accessed 27 February 2014.
 33. Nord, "The Nature of Historical Research", p 310.
 34. Lambie, "Documenting the Methodology of Journalism", p 90.
 35. R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (3rd ed.), (Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2014), pp 9–10.
 36. P. Meyer, *Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction* (2nd ed.), (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1979).
 37. M. Wilkerson, "History and Journalism Research", in R. Nafziger and M. Wilkerson (eds), *An Introduction to Journalistic Research* (Greenwood Press, New York, NY, 1968), p 11.
 38. K. Windschuttle, "Journalism and the Western Tradition", in *Australian Journalism Review*, 21, 1, 1999, pp 50–67, quoted in Lambie, "Documenting the Methodology of Journalism", p 94.

Herodotus (484-425 BCE), who recorded the Persian Wars, is regarded as the *pater historiae*.³⁹

Indeed, the same academic tension in historiography, namely that of whether the discipline falls within the humanities or the social sciences, is applicable to journalism studies. Still, Nord concedes that distinctions such as the divisions between history as idiographic (particularising) and nomothetic (generalising), a controversy well into its second century, is a “very bad one”, because the “distinction is necessarily blurred”. Like all typologies, the distinction dichotomises “what are really continuous variables”. According to Nord, in practice, “historians have never been completely idiographic, nor can they ever be completely nomothetic. They move back and forth from the particular to the general, borrowing ideas and methods from any source available”.⁴⁰ Historians have “rarely clustered at the extremes of these categories”, but have “scattered along their full range”. Indeed, for Nord, since the 1980s there has been a “time of convergence of the humanities and the social sciences [within historiography]”.⁴¹

After these brief clarifications of and foundational constructs relating to journalism and media, and journalism and history, this researcher will now proceed with the conceptualisation of a “guiding principle” in terms of the project that elicited these primary observations and reflections on journalism/media and history.

After accepting the challenge to write a history of a media company of such extent and complexity, it was deemed necessary to revisit some processes in studying history, or, in journalistic terms, the *what* and *why* of historiography (in this case, media historiography), before embarking on such a study.

Some notions on (media) history and historiography, or the *what* and *why*, will now be unpacked, including, firstly, a brief discussion of history/historiography. This will be followed by a revisiting of some relevant approaches, or the *how*, of studying and writing historiography (in this case, media historiography).

History and historiography in general

Before proceeding to some relevant examples of theoretical approaches, it is expedient to ground the discussion of the basic tenets of history (broadly defined as the narrative of the past) and historiography (broadly defined as the recording or writing of the narrative of the past).

For Sonderling, historiography can be defined as the study of history as a particular scientific field of inquiry defined in the most general way “as the study of the past”.⁴²

Lamble refers to mass communication theorists Startt and Sloan, who contended that “historical study contains at least three elements: (a) evidence, (b) interpretation, and (c) narrative”.⁴³

39. De Villiers, “Geschiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika”, p 199.

40. Nord, “The Nature of Historical Research”, p 293.

41. Nord, “The Nature of Historical Research” pp 293–294.

42. S. Sonderling, “Historical Research in Communication”, in G.M. du Plooy (ed.), *Introduction to Communication* (Juta, Cape Town, 1995), p 90.

43. Lamble, “Documenting the Methodology of Journalism”, p 97.

This of course echoes the Rankean “programmatische dictum”⁴⁴ of “simply to show how it really was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)”⁴⁵ as “probably the most famous of all pronouncements about the nature of history”.⁴⁶

A more recent and South African definition of historiography describes it as “human science” (and thus part of the humanities) and as an attempt to mine the “accessible sediment, reports, and analyses of events in the past”.⁴⁷

In revisiting the work of some relevant scholars of communication history, one can start with Berger’s statement, which encompasses the complexity of history rather simplistically: “First, when we think of history, we think of studies of the past, and in that respect, history is about the past.”⁴⁸

Sonderling believes that history is “a set of human actors, activities and events that have occurred in [a] particular place and at [a] particular time in the past”. But: history is “more than a list of dates, names and places or facts that *speak for themselves*” (emphasis original). For him, historical research “involves the study of the records of the past and reveals what people *chose to communicate* about their world” (emphasis original).⁴⁹

Partner regards history as “a hermeneutic expressed in narrative constructed under special, severe constraints”. These “special constraints” on “the finding and handling of evidence, previous scholarship, argumentation [and] provisional and declarative statements, constitute the epistemological (and artistic) foundation of history”.⁵⁰

Nord writes that there are different views about the nature and aim of historical research, and distinguishes between two main approaches, namely a humanist/positivist (or idiographic [particularising]) and a scientific/idealist (or nomothetic [generalising]) approach. But there is a growing realisation “that for history (perhaps for all knowledge) the distinction is necessarily blurred”. For Nord, the humanist historian (and approach to communication history) is concerned with the study “of unique events or sequences”, in order to understand an event by understanding its context in a particular space and time, whereas the social scientist historian is interested in “general processes” and hopes to construct generalisations and theories “to explain classes of events without regard to space or time”.⁵¹

Fourie regards the positivistic and critical approaches in communication research as the “two grand theories from which all mass communication research depart[ed]”.⁵² For Fourie, the positivist approach focuses on the scientific method and empiricism, and the critical approach on ideology and power, “aiming to

44. R.S. Stroud, “‘Wieeeseigentlichgewesen’ and Thucydides”, *Hermes*, 115, 3, 1987, p 379.

45. Carr, *What is History?*, p 3.

46. Stroud, “‘Wieeeseigentlichgewesen’ and Thucydides”, p 379.

47. De Villiers, “Geschiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika”, p 198. Quotation translated from the Afrikaans.

48. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 155.

49. Sonderling, “Historical Research in Communication”, p 90.

50. Partner, “Making up Lost Time”, pp 112–113.

51. Nord, “The Nature of Historical Research”, pp 293–294.

52. P.J. Fourie, “Approaches to the Study of Mass Communication”, in Fourie (ed.), *Media Studies*, p 145.

expose the misuse of the media by a power elite". Historiography, in essence, is a combination of the two approaches, because it must make use of what is to be found through empirical research and what must be interpreted from those factual findings. This also leads to what is called a fusion of paradigms, because positivistic research "tends to be supplemented with critical interpretation and evaluation, while critical researchers often back up their assumptions with empirical proof".⁵³

Sonderling, in terms of his view, mapped out a series of theoretical approaches to communication history. He chose to categorise the broad approaches to theories of history as the cyclical view of history, the providential view and the progressive view. With regard to specific approaches in communication history, he distinguishes between the Intellectual History School, the Social History School, the Cultural History School and the Rhetoric of History School.⁵⁴ Irrespective of all approaches, "all our information about events in the past is indirect and is available to us only through a reconstructed account of past events".

To summarise, historiography as science attempts to *re-create* a certain "past reality", although such a postulated "reality" can be approached in manifold ways and, equally, be interpreted in as many ways, which will be discussed next.

The matter of interpretation

Following the process of collecting and collating data about past realities from the point of departure of certain paradigms, the matter of interpretation of such sets of data also needs to be addressed. Manifold constructs of interpretation of historical research exist. As Babbie and Mouton write, "[b]ecause historical ... research is a qualitative method, there are no easily listed steps to follow in the analysis of historical data". They refer to Weber's notion of "*verstehen*" – "understanding", meaning that the "researcher must be able to take on, mentally, the circumstances, views, and feelings of those being studied, to interpret their actions appropriately".⁵⁵ According to McDowell, the social sciences approach to historical research combines narrative with the details of events and analysis, placing "those events in a broader social, economic or political context".⁵⁶

Still, historiography can only contain "part truths", because the complexity of the past reality remains unattainable.⁵⁷ Indeed, a postmodern interpretation can be that there is no final answer, as there is no final "reality". These "realities" are subject to those who are writing the history, in other words, the historians/historiographers themselves.

For the purposes of the research project at hand that prompted this reflection, it is imperative to note that "[o]ne purpose of good history is to provide understanding of *change*", as Lamble quotes Startt and Sloan (emphasis added).⁵⁸

53. Fourie, "Approaches to the Study of Mass Communication", p 145.

54. Sonderling, "Historical Research in Communication", pp 92–94.

55. E. Babbie and J. Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), p 403.

56. W.H. McDowell, *Historical Research: A Guide* (Pearson, Harlow, 2002), p 16.

57. De Villiers, "Geschiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika", p 198.

58. Quoted in Lamble, "Documenting the Methodology of Journalism", pp 85–106.

It is important to bear this element of change in mind, because the media company that is the subject of the research project can be described as the epitome of an entity that at times in its ten decades of existence was an agent of change, and at times the result of change. This change concerned technological, organisational, cultural and political issues, to apply the four “sub-streams” as categorised by Nord.⁵⁹

This article will now limit its focus to media historiography, in other words, a “particular scientific field of inquiry” in terms of the media, and will discuss methods of data gathering – or, in journalistic terms, the *how* of data collecting.

Relevant applicable methodologies for media historiography

How then to create, or *re-create*, a hypothesis/antithesis/synthesis in terms of the history of a media company over a century? What are the *modi operandi* of the media historiographer in terms of collecting data?

Berger’s rather rudimentary answer needs to be recalled, namely that historians, from the immense amount of material available to them, have to select relevant and important sources.⁶⁰

The starting point for a methodology is thus as simple as this: to select what is *relevant*, and what is *important*.

But how does one distinguish “relevant” and “important” issues in such a way that they will not be subject to the historiographer’s own views, because what one “sees” depends on where one “stands”.

The simple answer is that it is impossible. Consequently, it is imperative that the researcher’s own point of departure must be acknowledged and scrutinised. For Sonderling, the worldview that the researcher brings to her or his studies, “consisting of beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and values that influence the interpretation and analysis of historical data and the writing of the research report” must of necessity be considered.⁶¹

This is complicated by what Brown calls “fashion”, and the complexities of certain “fashionable” approaches⁶² in specific times and spaces, as already referred to – or, as Berkhofer suggests, that views and theories keep changing.⁶³

Sources and their validity are another matter, because it must be ensured that a document is authentic as well as accurate. For Mouton, sources of error are, for example, drawing inferences from data that are not supported by data sets that are sufficient or relevant; or the biased interpretation of data through selectivity by attempting to prove a hypothesis without proper consideration of rival hypotheses or alternative explanations.⁶⁴ Berger quotes Berkhofer:

59. Nord, “The Nature of Historical Research”, p 310.

60. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 155.

61. Sonderling, “Historical Research in Communication”, p 91.

62. Brown, “Microhistory and the Post-modern Challenge”, p 1.

63. Cited in Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 156.

64. J. Mouton, *How to Succeed in your Master’s or Doctoral Studies. A South African Guide and Resource Book* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 2001), p 171.

Historians do not recapture or reconstruct the past when they analyze history; they interpret it according to surviving evidence and conceptual frameworks. All of the past reality can never be known to them because not all evidence remains. Furthermore, historians do not choose to deal even with all the facts derivable from the available evidence. They confine their interest to man's past, but not even all of that concerns them, for they further select from these data those parts that can be organized according to some interpretation or theory. Thus an historical synthesis is a highly selective account of a postulated past reality. Theory in the most general sense is crucial to every phase of historiography.⁶⁵

To Berkhofer it was also clear that history is written, and rewritten, according to each era: "Every step of producing history presumes theoretical models of man and society, which in turn seem to change in terms of the shifting conceptions of man and society occurring in the historian's own society."⁶⁶ Commenting on this formulation, Berger felt obliged to stress that the role of women in history must also be acknowledged: "[F]or example, were Berkhofer writing today, he quite likely would have added the words 'and women's'." Furthermore:

It is natural to use our knowledge of the past to try and understand the present because we believe the past has influenced the present. That is one of the things history teaches us. How the past has influenced the present and what impact the past may have on the future is a different matter. To the extent that future developments in social thought shape the consciousness of historians, we can also argue that the future influences the past as we learn to interpret and understand it.⁶⁷

With regard to the interpretation of historiography, this issue is even more topical in present-day South Africa, as is the subject matter of the research project discussed here. At a symposium in which the country's struggle history was overemphasised – although it was acknowledged that previous approaches were almost exclusively Afrikaner and "white-centric" – a prominent Afrikaner academic stated: "Dan skryf ons self 'n geskiedenis" (Then let us write a history ourselves).⁶⁸

Indeed, to the extent that future developments in social thought might shape the consciousness of historians, one can argue that the future influences the past as it is interpreted and understood.⁶⁹

But back to the research project at hand and the exploration of appropriate approaches and processes: How then does the media historian go about gathering data?

The simple answer: According to the same method used not only by historians, but all researchers, when doing research: by collecting data from sources from within specific points of departure or theoretical paradigms and gathering it with specific methodologies applicable to the subject and field.

The broadly defined qualitative historical research method is the obvious starting point to revisit the past and to attempt to understand a certain so-called

65. Quoted in Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 156.

66. Quoted in Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 156.

67. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 164.

68. F. Pretorius, "Inleiding", in F. Pretorius (ed.), *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika. Van Voortye tot Vandag* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2012), p 9. There is also a recent English translation of this work: F. Pretorius (ed.), *A History of South Africa: From the Distant Past to the Present Day* (Protea: Pretoria, 2014).

69. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 164.

“past reality” – accepting that no “past reality” can ever be complete. It can only suggest: this is what the researcher came across, which in turn will be determined by a specific point of departure.

The “communication of the people of the past” is to be found in documents containing historical data, which are, as generally accepted, broadly divided into primary and secondary sources.⁷⁰ Primary sources “originate in the historical period that is being studied, for example original documents, reports and eyewitness accounts”. Secondary sources are “further removed from the historical events being studied” and include (historical) publications, research articles and books written about earlier events.

Primary sources include “those that you have collected yourself”, or which already existed in one form or another:

It is usually available in one of two forms: textual information or numeric information. Textual examples are documents, transcripts, autobiographies, diaries, letters, annual reports or mission statements. Secondary sources refer to written sources, including the internet, “which discuss, comment, debate and interpret primary sources of information”, e.g., also articles or books.⁷¹

Another methodology is to distinguish between what is called “deep-drilling” as opposed to an “episodic” approach, as Wigston cites Dahl.⁷² “Deep-drilling” implies that the interactions between technology, politics, economics and culture at one particular point are studied to “untangle” the shifting relationships between the media as institution, the government and the public. The latter, the episodic approach, is executed in a chronological way.

Again, as is the case in terms of positivist and critical approaches, or idiographic/nomothetic approaches, both can be applied simultaneously by “drilling deep” in a certain era, but by doing so over a period of time to get an episodic glimpse of the “interactions between technology, politics, economics and culture”.⁷³

Towards postulating a possible paradigm for the research project at hand

If one organising principle of historiography is “history [as] record of progress”,⁷⁴ it also echoes in the approach of historiography being an episodic, chronological development. For this researcher, this, in turn, fuses with the theory of media evolution formulated by Stöber.⁷⁵ In other words, one can postulate that history, including media history, and thus the history of a media company, is all about *evolution*, or *progress*, or *change* – Nord’s “continuous variables”⁷⁶ – and for this researcher, a key with which to unlock the vast data surrounding the history of a media company.

70. Sonderling, “Historical Research in Communication”, p 90.

71. Mouton, *How to Succeed in your Master's or Doctoral Studies*, pp 70–71.

72. Cited in Wigston, “A History of South African Media”, p 5.

73. Wigston, “A History of South African Media”, p 5.

74. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 167.

75. R. Stöber, “What Media Evolution Is. A Theoretical Approach to the History of New Media”, *European Journal of Communication*, 19, 2004, pp 483–505.

76. Nord, “The Nature of Historical Research”, p 293.

Stöber's media evolution theory is an attempt to understand the past as more than a series of "random events".⁷⁷ He argues that the media are not only a product of technical innovation, but also of social institutionalisation. For him, institutionalisation is the interaction between four sub-systems, namely technology, law and politics, culture, and economy. These systems bring about change because of "dissatisfaction with the status quo".⁷⁸ Stöber's theory of media evolution consists of three stages:

- The invention stage, with fundamental changes in the media, usually "an improvement for an original purpose".
- The innovation stage, when a new framework is established to legitimate changes. "Society is introduced to the new scenario through changes in media content." As soon as the new dispensation is accepted, debates on new laws and policies begin. The stage ends with the establishment of new functions, economic models and legal regulation.
- The diffusion stage, which "is the period of acceptance, or tolerance", of the new scenario.

Wigston describes South African traditional media in terms of this model as being in the "innovation" phase with new economic models.⁷⁹ According to him, the Afrikaans press (or more accurately, the Afrikaans media) sees the emergence of the promotion of Afrikaans as a distinct culture as a new function. This of course is highly debatable, but not at issue for the purposes of this article. It has been said that it is difficult to predict how long the innovation stage will last in South African media, because matters such as Black Economic Empowerment are still "unresolved". "What we can say is that the current cycle of media development can be considered the most complex of all the cycles in the history of the South African media."⁸⁰

Stöber concludes that one cannot use the past to predict the future, because it is impossible to say which of the four sub-systems of media institutionalisation will be the driving force. Still, in terms of the value of analysing the history of the media, it is important that "[o]nly when we look back do the historical developments seem to have been rational and straight-forward".⁸¹

One thus can ask: in "looking back", how "rational" and "straight-forward" was the development of media in South Africa, particularly traditional Afrikaans media, and specifically the subject under research?

Stöber's media evolution theory and Berger's history as a record of progress⁸² resonate in what De Villiers describes as the ancient Greco-Roman cyclical view of history, which in the twentieth century was echoed in the rather pessimistic view of Spengler, namely that all "complacent cultures" must go through a specific cycle and will unavoidably not be able to escape a catastrophe.⁸³

77. Wigston, "A History of South African Media", p 54.

78. Stöber, "What Media Evolution Is", pp 483–505.

79. Wigston, "A History of South African Media", p 56.

80. Wigston, "A History of South African Media", p 56.

81. Stöber, "What Media Evolution Is", p 484.

82. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, p 167.

83. De Villiers, "Gesiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika", p 199.

One should also ask exactly how much history was made by media companies themselves. The 75th jubilee historian of the media company under discussion, the historian C.F.J. Muller, who has been described by Verbeeck as practising “Nationalistic Afrikaner historiography”,⁸⁴ wrote that “[t]he influence of the press is usually difficult to measure”.⁸⁵

When this official 75th jubilee version of the company’s history was written, the instruction, as given by the then company chairperson, was to write it “warts and all”.⁸⁶ No “homage” was expected, but rather an “objective representation of a really significant phenomenon in the history of our country”.

One can say that such a formulation/instruction was already laced with subjectivity. The Instruction was given to a historian known for his Afrikaner nationalist worldview, so a narrative written within a certain paradigm in terms of the interpretation of collected and collated data, as well as the overall history, could be expected.

“Don’t let change leave you behind”

Taking South Africa’s past into account: a past embracing colonialism; a British dominion with a unitary government; apartheid (including a republic, independent of the Commonwealth, declared in 1961); and a democratic dispensation from 1994, it can be accepted that South African history up to the 1990s, including its media history, mostly, although not entirely, was recorded according to a Western, colonial point of departure, resulting in specific Eurocentric constructs in terms of socio-political, cultural and economic issues. As a matter of course, this implies a paternalistic, racialised colonialist/nationalist history up to a certain point.

This researcher acknowledges this, and therefore one goal was to address this issue, and to mainstream, where and when applicable, the voiceless and marginalised during the full period under research, simultaneously being cognisant of not forcing such a construct.

To raise Berger’s notion once more of historians reflecting their own time in their work, one would need to state that prevailing notions in historiography will ensure that the researcher is cognisant of, for example, feminist/womanist views. In other words, one would have to be mindful of an inclusive perspective in being sensitive of gender, and of other previously marginalised groups, and how the colonised/suppressed were represented in earlier narratives. This is precisely why history is “more than a list of dates, names and places or facts that *speak for themselves*” (emphasis original).⁸⁷

Indeed, one can describe a commemoration of South Africa’s Press Freedom Day (the commemoration of the 1977 banning of publications and the arrest of journalists) as precisely why history is more than “dates, names and places or facts”.

84. Verbeeck, “A New Past for a New Nation?”, p 389.

85. C.F.J. Muller, *Sonop in die Suid. Geboorte en Groei van die Nasionale Pers 1915–1948* (Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1990), p viii. Quotation translated from the Afrikaans.

86. C.F.J. Muller, *Sonop in die Suid*, p vii. Quotation translated from the Afrikaans.

87. Sonderling, “Historical Research in Communication”, p 90.

Indeed, this second commemoration of Press Freedom Day in October 1995 in the “new” South Africa provided an “axis moment” of “dates, names, places or facts” that tied past and present together. Just more than one year after the first democratic election, a struggle leader, as guest speaker at the meeting, said:

South Africa has experienced a new dawn – one heralded by the new rainbow nation whose conscience, for the first time, has been unchained to utilise its intellectual capacities to the full, to think, speak, articulate and write freely. The media in general has been freed to remain the focal point of the nation’s conscience.⁸⁸

The speaker concluded with the image of a “changing” South Africa, “a changing story, a changing environment, and inevitably a changing media”. Finally: “Don’t let change leave you behind.”

These words presented this researcher with a final meta-theoretical key for unlocking a point of departure for the Naspers project, because they contained a meta-narrative to history, not only as a possible media historiographical approach applicable to the research project, but also as a general approach to media history.

Indeed, *it was all about change*, on all levels, from cultural-political-ideological to technological-innovative – Stöber’s theory of media evolution – in a “new South African” version.

This then led to the final insight in terms of finding an organising principle to construct a (chrono)logical narrative for this century-old media company, for its people, its nation, its country, and its world, by combining the theory of media evolution and the concept of the *agency of change*.

To take the concept of evolution to its origins: it was all about the Darwinian dictum of the “survival of the fittest”.

In summary

After visiting and revisiting paradigms and philosophies informing media historiography, some of which resonated in this article, in an attempt to find an organising principle to validate the integrity of a study of this extent, a final conclusion is that *evolution*, or *change*, is the constant factor, also in the recording of history.

The British philosopher Oakeshott, among others, postulated the idea of change as a paradox because it incorporates both the element of transformation as well as the inclination to remain the same. “Change thus is nothing but inherent continuity.” Historiography and research must therefore always be dynamic.⁸⁹

This can be distilled into what finally can be formulated as a “morphing media” theory – also as a metaphor for the company that is the focus of this research project. This theory might be especially applicable to the subject, which,

88. T. Sexwale, “Changes in the South African Press Environment”, *Ecquid Novi* 17, 2, 1996, pp 306–311.

89. De Villiers, “Gesiedeniswetenskap en die Nuwe Suid-Afrika”, pp 201 and 203. Quotation translated from the Afrikaans.

over a century, has almost anthropomorphically developed from a parochial press company into a gargantuan global media company – something that other South African media companies could not do.

The above may even demonstrate why media historiography is not only of concern to media historians, but to the public at large, because the specific narrative of this media company is not only that of a media company. It extends much further, because it reflects the exclusive history of one group and its ideal to realise its cultural, economic and political goals, morphing from that entity into an organisation reflecting an inclusive history of a country and its people as a whole.

As a last supposition, it is to be accepted that researchers differ in their assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon of historiography, the nature of historical research, the explanation/interpretation of historical events, and also about historicity and how it is being shaped by fashion.

Essentially, this means that the circle of historical research, and therefore the result of historiography, remains ever open, and ever widening – an eternal cycle. It is important to realise that history and historiography, including that of the media, must be revisited, re-analysed, re-evaluated, re-interpreted and re-written continuously, not because earlier versions are not “good”, or because later attempts may arrogantly imply that they set a “standard”, provide “new” insight, or even are judgmental about previous studies. But simply and finally: because life is cyclical and evolving. And so is the historical narrative that reflects life. Indeed, history itself should be seen as a morphing, evolving organism as it attempts to be a “true reflection” of certain “past realities”.

Abstract

When confronted with a media historiographical research project of vast scope, both in terms of period and subject, which approaches should the researcher take to ensure that the end result is a relatively “true reflection” of a given “past reality”? Which paradigms first need to be explored and understood before embarking on such a journey in order to stay focused, remain *en route*, and not lose one’s way in terms of a myriad of potential data, sources, approaches, processes, philosophies and theories? This article attempts to reflect on the writing of media history by visiting and unpacking some relevant paradigms and philosophies in order to find an applicable approach, an organising principle, or “road map”, within the field of history/historiography, specifically media history/historiography, so as to be able to construct a history of a South African media company, the subject of the research project at hand.

Key words: History; historiography; journalism and journalism history; media and media history; theoretical approaches to conducting research.

Opsomming

Gekonfronteer met ’n omvangryke mediahistoriografiese navorsingsprojek, beide in tydperk en onderwerp, watter benaderings kies die navorsers om te verseker die eind resultaat is ’n relatiewe “ware weergawe” van ’n gegewe “verlede werklikheid”? Watter paradigmas moet eers ondersoek word voordat op so ’n reis vertrek word sodat die ondersoek gefokus en *en route* bly, om nie as ’t ware te verdwaal nie te midde van byna eindelose data, bronne, benaderings, prosesse,

filosofieë en teorieë? Hierdie artikel probeer besin oor die skryf van mediageskiedenis deur verskeie relevante paradigmas en filosofieë te besoek in 'n poging om 'n toepaslike benadering, 'n organiserende beginsel, of “padkaart”, binne die geskiedenis/ historiografie, spesifiek mediageskiedenis/ mediahistoriografie, te vind, in 'n poging om 'n geskiedenis van 'n Suid-Afrikaanse mediaaatskappy, die onderwerp van die studie, te konstrueer.

Sleutelwoorde: Geskiedenis; historiografie; joernalistiek en joernalistiek-geskiedenis; media en mediageskiedenis; teoretiese benaderings tot navorsing.