The Judges: a meeting of representatives of these two parties. It was in trouble. And it could only happen with the Constitutional Court in particular. Constitutional democracy, and the crucial role of the Constitutional Court in particular. That was the only way that citizens would come to understand the special nature of a court of the previous era. Locked together behind closed doors in a mountain venue for two days, judges told the editors how much they were unable to communicate to the public, rather than the justices. Judges were writing summaries of their constitutional Court's rulings in plain language and making these available on their website at the same time as release of their full rulings. At least some of these summaries, which were crucial to the editors, were covering their courts for a month of trial coverage, only to find that that little use was made of the opportunity and it only provided TV news with pictures of judges filing in and out of court buildings of the previous era.

Before judges began to change their style of communication, judges were traditionally imposing and intimidating court procedures and decisions. Judges felt that editors were letting the side down. Junior and inexperienced people were assigned to cover important and complex cases, and the reports were often sensational stories with no single story that more directly affects the young (or the poor/distant). At least some of these summaries were written about technology. If that was not appreciated, democracy was in trouble. And it could only happen with constitutional democracy, and the crucial role of the Constitutional Court in particular.

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impact on social life, politics and policy, health, economy and democracy.”

Other criticism leveled at coverage is that a lot of ICT journalism simply covers the news of the day – which is dictated by corporate agendas and marketing. Alastair Otter, editor of Tectonic, a website dedicated to technology, says: “I don’t believe that ICT journalism in South Africa is anywhere near as good as it could be … We don’t have an industry that exposes wrongdoing in the ICT sector with regularity.”

To do the job, journalists need to be well informed about all aspects of the story – not just knowing the difference between kilobytes and kilobits (size versus speed), but also issues around policy, legislation and regulation – and how these relate to consumers and citizens. Journalists need to be willing to learn and to spend time researching a topic, says Duncan McLeod, associate editor at the Financial Mail. “Even in an interview situation you need to be able to admit that you don’t have a full understanding.”

Passion and interest are essential too. “I would go so far as to say that if you’re not interested in it, you shouldn’t be covering it,” says McLeod. But it’s not just individual journalists who should take the blame. Editors and publishers can be shortsighted in how they handle technology stories too. “ICT journalism is very often marginalised in mainstream publications,” says Otter. “It is seen as the domain of a handful of ‘geeky’ writers with no real impact on the broader world.”

Otter maintains it is also the beat assigned to more junior writers as it is often perceived to be easier than others in business-focused publications. “With exceptions, of course. But where it is taken seriously, it is very often not because of an interest in technology but rather the business behind technology.”

The perception that ICT journalists are younger and less experienced has a negative impact on the industry as a whole. And this situation is not helped by the “geeks” and other technically trained people who enter journalism because of an interest in technology. And while their background is helpful, they don’t have the training to write – especially news.

“To avoid becoming a geek when you cover the beat. Unfortunately, many tech journaux start out as geeks and never get the kind of rigorous journalism grounding that moves more traditional news journalists,” says Tabby Shapshak, a previous winner of the Telkom ICT Journalist of the Year and currently a columnist for The Times. “Very often a business or general news reporter ends up covering a specialised beat and they tend to unquestionably accept what they are told by tech or telecoms companies.” Apart from not having a solid grip on the technical stuff, there’s also a limited approach to understanding the impact of the story.

What is glaring to an ICT journalist is how frequently people get their facts wrong, says Shapshak. “Blindly accepting anything told to you by any source – even if they are the world’s largest maker of software or cellphones or iPods or plasma TVs – is bad journalism. All claims must be checked and verified. If someone claims they have the world’s first whatever, many general reporters blindly accept that as true. It may well be, but it has to be verified. That is our job as journalists.”

Berger believes ICT journalism in South Africa is “too silo-specific” and fails to make links to ICTs and communications more broadly.” “Telecoms is one beat, media is another – but what happens when they coincide or have mega-implications for each other?” he asks. “Some journalism is gadget-style PR, without any critical reflection. A lot lacks the ease of understanding that you would find in [US technology writer] Dan Gilmour’s work, or in the Financial Times. The coverage of government policy is weak – driven one-sidedly by industry perspectives, with little consideration of consumer or development issues.”

But this boils down to a lack of skills in the industry, which remains only as strong as the reporter’s skills set. “When it comes to mainstream media without a specific technology focus there is very often a simple acceptance of technology news issued by the larger and more dominant ICT players in the country. So, for example, when vendor XYZ says that software piracy is costing the country so many billions of rands every year, writers simply accept this as true and publish it.”

In this way, PR spins the public domain and becomes fact. Interrogation and intelligent reporting can reveal so much more. “The increasing take-up of broadband in South Africa, the web is truly objective point of view. I write from a belief that free

Over all, the ICT arena is only getting bigger. And, as McLeod points out, there are enormous opportunities for people interested in writing about technology. “With the increasing take-up of broadband in South Africa, the web is becoming a huge publishing medium.

Rhodes Journalism Review 27, September 2007