

Journalism Education: Gap between theory and practice

EXPERTS DEBATE IN TIRANA ON THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG JOURNALISTS – STUDENTS ARE OFTEN DISSATISFIED WITH THE LEARNING CONDITIONS AT THE UNIVERSITIES

On the 22th of April 2015, media scholars and NGO experts from six Southeast European countries exchanged views and opinions about the quality of journalism education in Tirana. The conference was held as a part of an international KAS Task Force on the same subject which was founded in 2013 on initiative of the KAS Media Program South East Europe.

The occasion of the conference was a current survey among students in South East Europe on their motivation to study journalism. It was conducted from February to March 2015 in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Serbia. In total 531 students from state and private universities participated in the survey. First outcomes were presented on the following day in a public panel discussion in Tirana.

First transnational survey on journalism education in South East Europe

34 percent of the respondents defined journalism as their dream job. Another 34 percent declared their motivation to study journalism with the possibility to take part in social and political processes. However, the career perspectives in the field are discouraging: Only half of the students want to start working in journalism after their graduation. The respondents in all examined countries estimated the study conditions and the technical equipment of the faculties as critical. One in three is dissatisfied with the seminar rooms, lectures and course books. Every second declares that the universities are insufficiently technically equipped. Moreover, the majority of the students think that

the offered practical exercises are not enough.

The current study was a starting point for the panel discussion on the following day. Speakers were Sami Neza, Vice-Chairman of the Albanian regulatory agency (AMA) and lecturer at the University of Tirana, Viktorija Car from the University of Zagreb and Orlin Spassov from the University of Sofia.

The discussion was opened and moderated by Christian Spahr, Head of the KAS Media Program South East Europe. In his speech he pointed out, that professional journalism education should have highest priority for politics, media management and the universities, because high-grade journalism is an important precondition for a viable democracy.

The AMA Vice-Chairman Sami Neza gave an overview on the Albanian media environment and explained that political influence on the media is the gravest problem. The media market is based on the interest of different elites rather than on market-based principles.

The journalism education in the region is facing many challenges, said Viktorija Car, lecturer from Zagreb. The academics should deal more intense with the relation between theoretical knowledge and practical exercises in the curriculum. The current KAS survey approves that the students also share this view.

Actual reforms in the journalism education are happening really slowly, said Car. She

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expressed concern that since the Bologna-process and the division of the university courses in Bachelor and Master, just few reforms were made in regard to the content and conditions of the study programs. This presents another challenge for the academic community.

Gap between studies and labour market

Nevertheless Viktorija Car emphasized that the quality of journalism education in the region has increased in the last years. The number of journalism university courses has risen. Though there's a big information gap between the educational institutions and the labour market. In Croatia, for example, the number of alumni is higher than the actual demand for journalists. Car said that this explains very well the unemployment in the media sector.

A question from the audience initiated a discussion about the understanding of journalism and public relations (PR). Car explained that in Croatia and in other Southeast European countries many trained journalists are working as PR experts. This is the case especially in the sector of politics. According to Car, it is problematical for a democratic society, when journalism and PR are increasingly merging. Her colleague from the University of Sofia, Orlin Spassov added, that the students should become more familiar with the difference between journalism and PR. Moreover, many journalism students want to specialize in the field of PR. And the faculties follow this trend by offering increasingly such seminars.

Spasov was talking on the status quo of journalism education in Bulgaria. He explained that media are often not working in the interest of citizens, but by order of advertisers or other interest groups. This results in discrepancies between journalism education and the professional practice. In his opinion the media situation in Bulgaria makes it difficult, to equalize the education with the requirements of the media market.

The attempt to make young people familiar with democratic values is limited, because

the media market features undemocratic structures. Spasov pointed out, that insufficient transparency of media ownership is an essential cause for this phenomenon. Students are confronted with the reality on the media market, which doesn't correspond to the standards of their education.

Ethical aspects of journalism profession should be a greater topic of discussion

Christian Spahr was confident, that a better coordination is necessary between the providers of journalism courses, the employers and the politicians. In his opinion self-employment would be an option for professional fulfilment of young journalists. Spahr said that a greater debate on ethical aspects of the profession is important in order to adjust the discrepancy between societal requirements and practice. The Head of KAS Media Program South East Europe underlined that not only scholars and journalists should take part in these debates in order to push reforms, but also media managers and politicians. For that reason, the Media Program will publish further publications on this subject, to provide a basis for more public debates.

The panel discussion evoked not only the interest of media experts and journalism students from Tirana, but also from other cities in Albania. The conventions of the KAS Task Force take place in changing venues in the region.