

WHAT MAKES A JOURNALIST? PERCEPTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE ROMANIAN STUDENTS

Conf. univ. dr. Liana IONESCU*

Abstract: *The present study is based on a research conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Task Force on Journalism Education in South East Europe. The survey was conducted among Journalism undergraduates and graduates in five countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Serbia. The Report regarding Romania was made up by the author of this article. The conclusions and recommendations set out are based on the opinions voiced by students and the analysis of their input.*

Keywords: Journalism education, KAS Media Program, Journalism studies, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

1. Short history of the project

In 2013, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Program South East Europe established a task force on journalism education to assess the current state of play of curricula throughout the region. A group of media professionals and academics was invited to join the first project, which aimed to map journalism education in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia. The outcome of this first initiative was a publication, in 2014, with national reports setting out the *status quo* of journalism training.

* Universitatea „Hyperion” din București, Facultatea de Jurnalism. I Rusch, Lina, Spahr, Christian, Zheleva, Denica and Zlateva, Manuela (eds.), *Journalistic Education in South East Europe*. Sofia: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Media Program South East Europe, 2014. National reports are available online under http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_39583-1522-2-30.pdf?141118150329 (20.07.2016).

The second Report, published in November 2016², sets out the outcomes of a cross-national survey focused on South East Europe, providing insight into the students' perspective on journalism education at universities. "The survey fills a gap in research, considering the lack of prior in-depth analysis of the attitudes of journalism students in a regional context."³ In contrast to the first initiative, the second publication contains empirical data on journalism education, collected on the basis of a survey conducted with journalism students in **Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Serbia**. The main purpose and objective of the survey was to analyse the motivation and attitudes of students to the system of journalist training and the ways in which it can be improved, using a bottom-up approach. For this purpose, the following research questions were asked:

- What motivates a student to pursue an education in journalism?
- To what extent are students satisfied with the learning conditions?
- What are their recommendations for study programme improvement?

2. Methodological framework

The research method used is a paper questionnaire survey, which contains 30 questions. The questions were clustered in five groups.

The first part contains general questions, such as the age and sex of respondents, the name of the university and faculty in which they are enrolled, the type of university, level and year of studies.

The second group is designed to appraise the motivation and requirements of students.

The third set of questions explores the expectations of the students and whether they have been met.

The fourth group of questions concerns the assessment of co-operation with local and national media outlets.

² Car, Viktorija, Radojkovic, Miroljub and Zlateva, Manuela (eds.), *Requirements for Modern Journalism Education, The Perspective of Students in South East Europe*, Publisher Konrad Adenauer Stiftung E.V., Berlin and Sofia, 2016.

³ Viktorija Car & Manuela Zlateva, Introduction: A profession in turmoil – the relevance of education reforms, in Car, Viktorija, Radojkovic, Miroljub and Zlateva, Manuela (eds.), *Requirements for Modern Journalism Education, The Perspective of Students in South East Europe*, Publisher Konrad Adenauer Stiftung E.V., Berlin and Sofia, 2016, p. 4.

The focus of the fifth group of questions is on the students' prospects for professional development. This cluster analyses whether students are willing to work as journalists following graduation, and the types of media and fields of journalism in which they would like to pursue a career.

The questionnaires were completed by the full-time students in February and March 2015. Data was analysed using SPSS at the level of the overall sample and for each country individually. The descriptive statistics was complemented by a cross-analysis necessitated by gender differences, comparisons between the universities, public and private universities, BA and MA students and further differences due to motivation and attitudes and the students' assessment of the balance between education and practice.

Notable, "the survey comes at a time when journalism education in SEE countries is under pressure to adjust to the new realities brought on by the ongoing technological evolution and the global financial and economic crisis, which have affected journalism at a global level. (...). Students' insights can help journalism educators to better understand the educational approaches that students prefer, enabling them to more adequately prepare students for their future careers."⁴

3. The sample of the Romanian survey

Students from four different universities with journalism faculties or departments participated in the survey. A non-probabilistic (convenience) sample was used. The sample is not representative but rather outlines Romanian students' perceptions of journalism education.

The research was conducted on a sample of 100 students of whom 60 were enrolled in a BA programme (three-year undergraduate programme) and 40 in an MA programme (two-year graduate programme). The representation of BA and MA journalism students corresponds to the actual ratio of students enrolled in BA/MA programmes.

The survey involved students from three public universities:

- Bucharest University, Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies (Bucharest)
- The National School (University) of Political Studies and Public

⁴ Viktorija Car & Manuela Zlateva, Introduction: A profession in turmoil – the relevance of education reforms, in Car, Viktorija, Radojkovic, Miroljub and Zlateva, Manuela (eds.), *Requirements for Modern Journalism Education, The Perspective of Students in South East Europe*, Publisher Konrad Adenauer Stiftung E.V., Berlin and Sofia, 2016, p. 8.

Administration, the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations (Bucharest)

- The “Al. I. Cuza” University, the Faculty of Letters, Department of Romanian Language, Journalism, Communication Studies and Comparative Literature (Iași)

And students from the private “Hyperion” University, Faculty of Journalism (Bucharest).

There were significantly more respondents who attended public universities (80 students) in the sample as compared to those who attended private university (20 students), which reflects the actual situation.

4. Students’ motivation and requirements

The motivation of students to enrol in university programmes of journalism varies. To assess that motivation students in the survey were given a list of options and multiple choice answers. Many students (45.1 percent) consider journalism a dream job. This perception dominates the imagination of young people. We can associate it mainly with their desire for celebrity and fame. Naturally, there are many other reasons to consider journalism as a dream job. The wish for societal or political engagement (27.5 percent) is another strong reason for choosing to study journalism, followed at some distance by money/salary and celebrity and fame (7.8 percent for each reason). The explanation for such a low percentage of students citing money as a reason is that salaries in journalism are generally low. The ‘celebrity and fame’ aspect is probably the main reason underlying the students’ perception of journalism as a dream job. Some students (4.6 percent) pursued journalism studies because they ‘did not know what to study’.

In our survey, we asked students, allowing them the possibility of choosing multiple answers, to consider which type of general knowledge was the most important for journalism. A total of 511 answers were given. We found that no specific area was dominant. Students did not have a consistent opinion about the type of knowledge needed to be well prepared for a future job in journalism. The list of the most important types of general knowledge thus includes

- Culture and literature, music, and theatre (17.2 percent),
- Politics and foreign languages (16 percent),
- History (12.5 percent), economy (12.1 percent), and law (10.8 percent).
- Less important for the general knowledge of a journalist are natural

sciences (3.1 percent), religion (4.9 percent), and philosophy (5.3 percent).

- In ‘other’ types of knowledge some respondents mentioned ‘Romanian language’, Romanian grammar.

5. Have the expectations of students been met?

In this section of the survey, we first aimed to find out if the students were satisfied with the learning conditions at their faculties (libraries, books, study rooms, laboratories, workshops and seminars). Half of the respondents reported that they were satisfied with the learning conditions at faculties, with the other half reporting dissatisfaction or being unable to provide an answer. It is interesting to note that 11 percent of students did not know whether they were satisfied.

A large majority of students in Romanian sample (68 percent) were not satisfied with technical equipment available for practical training while 30 percent reported satisfaction. The reasons for dissatisfaction might be related to the limited access to the existing technical equipment available for practice as per the next question (see graphic 7). Sixty-five percent of the respondents were dissatisfied with access to equipment, such as microphones, television cameras and mobile sets for audio-video editing. In reality, most faculties have proper technical equipment, but its capacity is insufficient to serve the high number of students enrolled.

To find out whether students were satisfied with the balance between theoretical knowledge and practical training within their study programme, they were asked to finish a sentence using one of the suggested answers. The sentence was as follows:

The faculty of journalism in which I am enrolled lacks: (1) Theoretical knowledge; (2) Practical training; (3) Theoretical and practical training; (4) There is a good balance of theoretical knowledge and practical training.

The large majority of the respondents in the Romanian sample (68 percent) reported that their faculty lacked practical training. Theoretical knowledge was not chosen as an answer by any of the respondents while 25 percent considered that there was a good balance between theoretical knowledge and practical training.

Most university programmes in journalism, even after the implementation of the Bologna rules, remain based on gaining theoretical knowledge about journalism, which is one of the disadvantages in journalist education at BA level. On the other hand, many improvements have been made toward adopting a more practice-oriented. Nevertheless, faculties still face financial and organisational problems. Rooms, laboratories and

equipment for practical training remain insufficient.

When asked about additional courses they would like to attend, students listed international affairs journalism, war journalism, and more classes on diction and, as elective courses, grammar, persuasion techniques and voice-over lessons. The problem is that universities do not have tutors for some of the desired courses or, in some cases, the demand for them is too small. Students in the sample also suggested that laboratories should be considered important an important discipline and conducted by more professors with a background in journalism.

In line with this, most students (87 percent) thought guest lectures (i.e. professional journalists or other media practitioners) were important. They agreed that such guests are a valuable source of important theoretical and practical knowledge. Only 4 percent disagreed and 9 percent stated that they did not know. From this perspective, faculties should organise more courses and workshops with professional journalists and other media practitioners as an excellent way to meet students' expectations and improve the practical aspects of journalist training.

6. Relations between education and practice

The academic rules mandated by the Ministry of Education emphasise the necessity for a stronger link between theory and practice in the new digital environment. In this section, the survey considered how students see the link between journalism education and practice. In addition to the opportunity to follow a practice-oriented approach through laboratories and seminars, the opportunity of internships in newsrooms was identified as an excellent practical approach for future professionals in journalism. Regrettably, there is no clear strategy for cooperation or common platform between universities and national or local media outlets. Neither are there any institutional agreements and standards for the evaluation of internships. Faculties are typically pushing media outlets to accept students for internships but, as a counterargument, media representatives claim that they do not have the time to monitor and supervise students.

For this reason, a significant number of respondents in the Romanian sample (48 percent) answered that they had no knowledge of cooperation between their faculty and media outlets. Twenty-one percent of the respondents stated that cooperation between faculties and media outlets was good, mostly taking into consideration individual approaches that do not rely on official guidance. There is a need for better organisation of mentoring and evaluation of student internships at media outlets.

Students were further asked to provide ideas about possible ways to improve cooperation between their faculty and media outlets. Faculties should thus strive to persuade media practitioners to consider students as potential applicants/future journalists. This might require a degree of promotion. Practical experience gained at different media outlets is a good way to foster better understanding of the fields of journalism that best fit individual students. Other suggestions refer to the contracts signed between faculties and media outlets as a sound framework for internships. According to respondents another way of improving cooperation was the joint organisation by faculties and media outlets of networking events with the participation of students.

More than a half of the students in the sample (55 percent) stated that they had applied the knowledge acquired at the faculty in practice, with 18 percent answering in the negative. Twenty seven percent of the interviewees had not had an opportunity to work in media yet.

It was encouraging to see that 64 percent of students in the sample had already gained some experience with internships at media outlets. No data is available as to whether the internships were arranged by the students or obtained with assistance from the university. Still a significant 36 percent of students had no experience with internships at media outlets.

Those 64 students were invited to evaluate their experience with internships by grading them from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). One student graded his internship as very poor and five students gave a score of 5 (very good) (the resulting average rate is 3.53, with standard deviation of 1.126). Students were generally satisfied with the internships, but noted that they only asked to assist working journalists without being effectively involved.

Twenty students in the sample reported that they worked in media in parallel to their studies (doing a proper job as opposed to an internship). The highest number (more than a half respondents or 53.1 percent) stated that they worked in media part-time, followed by those who reported not working (37.5 percent), and 9.4 percent who worked as freelancers.

The highest share of respondents stated that they work alongside their studies in digital media (38.5 percent), with the lowest share responding that they worked in radio journalism (7.7 percent). Digital media were quite popular among Romanian students: Internet affords easy access and high speeds. It should be noted that for newcomers to the newsroom digital media duties consisted mainly of selecting, re-arranging and posting information discovered on the Internet, and after gaining some experience, publishing original pieces. Radio was not found very popular among

students. This may be due to continually shrinking audiences and young people having a general preference for digital media, with TV watching being associated with older generations as suggested by the majority of answers received. It is worth mentioning that in Romania there is an 'inflation' of TV channels. This inevitably implies a link to opportunities for work in television available to future professional journalists.

Most students working with past work experience in media (multiple answers possible) stated they had worked as reporters (35 percent) and editors (30 percent), followed by TV or radio presenters (13.3 percent) (see graphic 13). 'Editor' must not be understood with its classical/traditional meaning as a senior journalist in the newsroom or on an editorial board but rather as the person who are selects and posts information online in a digital media.

7. Professional prospects

The career plants of most students in the Romanian sample involved work as journalists following graduation (57 percent). Sixteen percent were aware of the difficulty of finding a job in journalism due to media market saturation. They thus stated that they were prepared to work in any field in which vacancies were available. For students, this was a long way from their initial expectations at the time of enrolling to study journalism and simply the reality that developed during their studies. It should also be noted that 15 percent of respondents were strongly disoriented elected the 'I don't know' option as an answer. A minority of 8 percent stated that they would like to transition to a job in Public Relations.

Students in the sample were further asked about the type of media they would like to work for after graduation. They had to choose between print media, radio, television, digital media and cross-media (multiple answers were possible). Graphic 15 shows that a job in television was the most desired career in journalism after graduation (32.4 percent), followed by radio (21.2 percent), print media (20.7 percent), digital media, news portal, etc. (15.1 percent) and cross media (5.6 percent). A career in television fitted better with the respondents' motivation to study journalism, having been described as a 'dream job' and an avenue to fame and celebrity. Five percent of students in the sample did not know what type of media they preferred to work for.

In our survey students were offered a list of different fields of specialisation within journalism and asked in which field of journalism they would like to work after graduation (multiple answers were possible). The

most desired journalistic fields to work were entertainment (28.2 percent) and culture (27 percent). Almost 14 percent of students stated that they would like to work in the field of politics and 12.1 percent in sport. Thirteen percent indicated other journalistic preferences, such as lifestyle, press for women, travel, international relations, public affairs and investigative journalism. Students had the lowest interest in the economy, with only 5.7 percent indicating it as a preference.

When the students in the sample were asked about their motivation to study journalism (at the beginning of the questionnaire), the first stated reason was ‘journalism is my dream job’, followed by ‘societal or political engagement’. Following graduation students prefer to work in the fields of entertainment (28.2 percent) or culture (27 percent). Entertainment is attractive because it has a strong connection with television, which has the biggest audience with shows about celebrities, talk shows and reality shows. A big audience also means high salaries for journalists.

8. Differences between universities

Technical equipment. There were differences in the satisfaction with the technical equipment between different universities in Romania. Highest proportion of satisfied respondents attended “Hyperion” University (70 percent), while the highest proportion of dissatisfied respondents attended Bucharest University (87.5 percent). The private University “Hyperion” raised funds for building, for example, radio and TV laboratories with advanced, high-quality technical equipment in which students can put the knowledge acquired to the test. It is well known that the funding of State universities is insufficient to improve the equipment used in the learning process.

When we asked students if they were satisfied with access to the technical equipment we received almost identical answers. The highest share of satisfied respondents attended the “Hyperion” University (45 percent), with the highest share of dissatisfied students attending Bucharest University (80 percent). The dissatisfied students attending the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration had a similar percentage. The share of dissatisfied students could be examined in relation to the demand for more practice. However, sometimes there are objective reasons for limited access to technical equipment, such as the high number of students enrolled in journalism programmes. In Romania, public university funding depends on the number of enrolled students. Therefore, public universities ‘hunt’ for students, which has resulted in less rigorous

exam criteria.

Cooperation with local/national media outlets. There were differences in opinion as to faculty cooperation with local/national media outlets between the universities in Romanian sample. The highest share of students from the Hyperion University and the "Al. I. Cuza" University responded that they did not know whether their faculty cooperated well with local media. A small share of respondents from all universities thought that cooperation between their faculty and local media was good.

It is important for students to be able to apply the knowledge acquired at the faculty in practice, regardless of whether in newsrooms or another type of media outlet. Although the students were generally critical and complained about lacking practice, those from three universities stated that they had applied the knowledge learned in practice, the highest share comprising the group of students from Bucharest University.

Working in journalism following graduation. Students from the State Bucharest University (60 percent) and from the private Hyperion University (60 percent) had a strong motivation to pursue a career in journalism following graduation. That was predictable because both faculties have a strong focus on journalism studies. A large share of students from the "Al. I. Cuza" University (35 percent) answered that they did not know. This, again, is understandable because the sample comprised first-year students in who had probably had not yet planned for the future. In the sample, 15 percent of the students from the Hyperion University stated that would like to switch to Public Relations maybe because finding a job in the field is relatively easier. Ten percent of the students from the National School of Political Science and Public Administration stated that would also like to switch to PR, the motivation being that they are already working in journalism and a possible dissatisfaction with working conditions.

Conclusions and recommendations

The survey shows that journalism remains an attractive profession but the aspirations and career path of the new generations of students have changed. The old generations wanted to become journalists to change society, having a clear social and a political project.⁵ The new generation of

⁵ Ionescu, Liana, „Romania – Country Report”, in Rusch, Lina, Spahr, Christian, Zheleva, Denica and Zlateva, Manuela (eds) *Journalistic Education in South East Europe*. Sofia: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Media Program South East Europe, 2014, pp. 39-46.

students of journalism choose to speak about a ‘dream job’ — maybe a reference to celebrity status, fame and glamour association with the profession. Under the impact of the media industry labour market MA students somewhat more realistic, stating readiness to switch to PR or finding a job in another field following graduation. In Romania, many trained journalists are currently working as PR experts, journalism studies being a platform to become the spokesperson of a Minister or a member/chief of a communication bureau at a ministry. Faculties of journalism must follow this trend by offering PR trainings and seminars.

Most students in the Romanian sample (57 percent) plan to remain in journalism following graduation. Students have a strong interest in working for television and digital media. Other areas of specialisation within journalism in which they would like to work include entertainment and culture as the top preferences. Politics is no longer a favourite, and economy is totally absent from students’ preferences. The educational process and curricula could take into these options into account and provide corresponding contents and training methods, keeping the balance between the preferences of students and the needs and requirements for the profession.

More courses dedicated to digital and online journalism would be welcome. This should also be reflected by curricula. Moreover, all universities should offer internal practical training on multimedia / cross-media skills.

Students from public and private universities are generally satisfied with journalism courses and programmes at both BA and MA level. However, they have made numerous suggestions for improving the quality study programmes. For example, courses should be updated to keep up with current developments in the media industry; in addition to the concept of theory as a stand-alone concept, there are others that should be used in practice relying on technical equipment; courses should be understandable for the students and adapted to the profile of the faculty, e.g. English should be taught using examples from the field of journalism and media communications. Students ask for more open discussions during the classes and help to develop fluent speaking skills. They have also suggested improving theoretical knowledge with courses on psychology, public relations, and specialised journalism on justice, economics, and healthcare.

Students in the sample would like to attend additional courses, such as international affairs, war journalism, diction, and, as elective disciplines,

grammar courses, persuasion techniques and voice-over lessons. They also suggest that laboratories should be considered important disciplines and conducted by more professors with a background in journalism. In line with this, most students (87 percent) thought guest lectures (i.e. professional journalists or other media practitioners) were important.

According to the students in the sample the teaching methodology should be more engaging, with stronger focus on practice and examples from real journalism from media outlets. The balance between theory and practice is an important factor for better qualified graduates, but there are different opinions on how to best achieve this outcome. Predictably, a large majority of students in the sample (87 percent) were in favour of more lectures and discussions with the media practitioners to be offered by their faculties. Visiting professors, journalists and other prominent practitioners from media outlets should continue to be invited to share their experience. To further the achievement of the same goal, workshops with journalists and other specialised media workers can also be organised. Journalist internships, based on better cooperation between universities and media outlets, are recommended for improving practice-oriented approaches. Universities are currently more open to such cooperation than practitioners at media outlets.

The sector journalism education is still technically and financially weaker and is not yet playing an important role in equipping students with the necessary skillsets and practical knowledge. "Modern education must equip students with a skillset that enables them to maintain a high standard of journalism under increasingly difficult conditions, which must then be refreshed and adapted on a regular basis. One of the biggest obstacles is keeping up with the pace of technological development in the multimedia knowledge domain."⁶

Technical equipment in the faculty should be sufficient for all students and keep pace with the developments in journalism and society. The students should have an access to the technical equipment in order to be able to work effectively. Students from public universities ask for better material conditions, such as a well-equipped TV studio and radio studio.

An important indicator for the quality of journalism education is how far students can apply the theoretical knowledge acquired during their

⁶ Spahr, Christian, Foreward, in Car, Viktorija, Radojkovic, Miroljub and Zlateva, Manuela (eds.), *Requirements for Modern Journalism Education, The Perspective of Students in South East Europe*, Publisher Konrad Adenauer Stiftung E.V., Berlin and Sofia, 2016, p.v.

studies in practice. For 55 percent of the students who work/worked in media the knowledge acquired at the faculty was useful. This means that the faculties' programmes and training process are relevant to practice. The evaluation of the success and practical relevance of courses requires a systematic tracking of career paths and development. Universities need instruments to stay in touch with alumni.

To conclude, academic journalism education must adapt to students' expectations and media environment changes, to be coupled by improvements to both existing curricula and the quality of teaching.

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