

Research Paper

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New paths in journalism, a crossroads for education

Abstract: The professional field of journalism is changing rapidly – and so is journalism education. This study takes the Austrian educational institutions as an example to show which challenges journalism education currently faces and how it responds to them. In addition, the analysis of the course programs and guided interviews with program developers give insight into how the digitalization of journalism has been integrated in the curricula and how the status quo fits into current international debates about an adequate journalism education.

»There are very few professions for which no training is required: They include publicans, advisors, journalists, and politicians« (Kocher 2006: 10). If one believes this quote from political theorist and health economist Gerhard Kocher, one could gain the impression that there is no need to analyze the status of journalism training in Austria. And in principle he is not wrong: »Journalist« is not a legally protected professional title in Germany or Austria: »Anyone who wants to« (Hoeffacker/Meier 2017: 1) can call themselves a journalist. Yet this is not the whole story. On the one hand, journalism has always expected certain skills, which are taught in schools of journalism, university courses, and traineeships. On the other, the demands of this increasingly complex professional field are rising all the time, driven by digitalization, technologization, interconnectedness, and economization (cf. Otto/Köhler 2017: 18).

There are numerous examples: Production and distribution processes are becoming ever faster. Interaction with the audience via social networks is becoming more important. The boundaries between different professional fields such as journalism, public relations, marketing, advertising, film production, and media design are becoming blurred. New technologies in communication and media are changing working processes and making the relevant technical and

journalistic skills a necessity. At the same time, new business fields that do not depend on advertising revenue are growing up, each demanding further adaptation from journalists. There is good reason why the *Tagesspiegel* journalist Sonja Pohlmann described journalism in relation to the convergence of text, video, and sound as an »egg-laying woolly dairy sow« (cf. Pohlmann 2012: no page number).

Media companies are not the only ones having to deal with these changes. Journalism education also needs to readjust, given that it sees its role as preparing the next generation of journalists for the professional field. In today's world, that means »a lifelong journey of adaptation in a relentlessly changing media landscape« (Pavlik 2013: 215).

In Austria, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that the market for initial and advanced journalism training has become increasingly fragmented over the last two decades (cf. Dorer et al. 2009; Hooffacker/Meier 2017). Unlike in Germany, there is no distinct degree in journalism or school of journalism in Austria, although journalism studies has been integrated into the academic education provided by the degree programs in Communication Studies at the Universities of Vienna and Salzburg (and later Klagenfurt) since the late 1960s. These university programs were joined in 1974 by the foundation (as a social partnership) of the Kuratorium für Journalistenausbildung, a college offering regular courses for young journalists. The Katholische Medienakademie also began offering journalism training in 1977.

In a second phase beginning in the second half of the 1990s, the education on offer was broadened significantly by structural changes as part of the Bologna process, the expansion of options for initial and advanced training outside universities (e.g. from *fjum/forum journalismus und medien*; APA-Campus), and the foundation of universities of applied sciences. From a content point of view, this change was driven particularly by the establishment of new studies such as journalism, media design, media and informatics, marketing, and PR at the universities of applied science (cf. Dorer et al. 2009). In terms of structure, although the media sector has had a strong focus on the Austrian capital, Vienna, the range of training on offer has become increasingly regionalized as universities of applied sciences offering degrees related to journalism have been set up in the federal states Burgenland, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Styria, and Tyrol. This trend was continued in 2012, for example, with the foundation of the *Tiroler Journalismusakademie*.

In view of the developments in journalism and the diversification of journalism education, the research project *Die österreichische Journalistenausbildung im Kontext einer veränderten Berufswelt* [Journalism training in Austria in the context of a changed professional world] (Kirchhoff 2019), funded by KommAustria/RTR, looked to chart this landscape by recording what is on offer and discussing the challenges faced. As well as noting the structure and the didactic and content-related design of the courses on offer, it also looked at the objectives of an appropri-

ate journalism education and recorded the specific skills that curricula for modern initial and advanced training for journalists need to teach today. In addition, it investigated which challenges the education institutions face and which ideas and concepts they use to tackle them.

Method

The research project was conducted based on a three-level investigation. In the first stage, the course programs of all the institutions offering initial or advanced training for journalists in Austria were subjected to a content analysis. Totalling 31 institutions, they included universities and universities of applied sciences, journalism academies, and advanced training courses offered by private, political, and church-based providers, as well as three examples each of teaching editorial offices of large media houses and citizen media, known as free radio/TV broadcasters. As there is no journalism studies program in Austria, the university sector was covered by looking at all communication studies and other media-related programs whose curricula include journalistic content. When it came to academies and training courses, however, only institutions who themselves stated that they are aimed explicitly at journalists and those interested in journalism were included.

In total, the 31 institutions offer 67 programs, in which aspects including structural factors (such as target audience and registration requirements) and content-related, didactic factors (such as skills taught, application and course topics) were recorded for $n=1818$ courses in the period September 1, 2018 to August 31, 2019.

Building on these findings, 29 qualitative interviews were conducted with people who either led the facilities or were responsible for planning and implementing the courses. The topics covered in these interviews included what forms the core of contemporary initial and further training, what role it plays or should play in relation to the media sector, which challenges it faces due to the digital transformation, and how these challenges can be addressed. The interviewees played a dual role in the survey, both giving an insight into their respective institutions as interview subjects and, in their positions as experts, asked to give their estimation of developments in initial and further training.

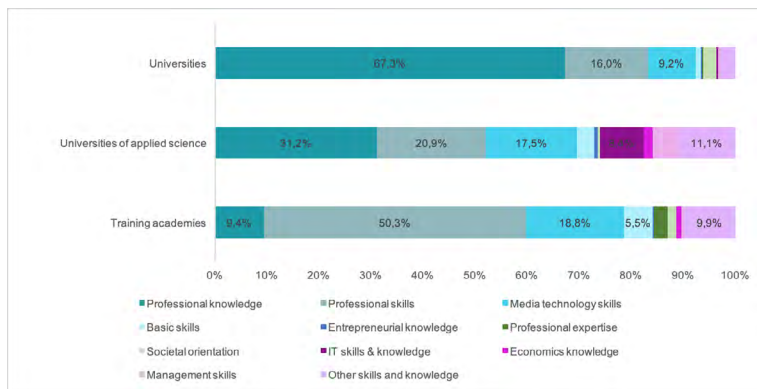
Content and practical application of the courses

There is a huge range of initial and further training on offer for journalists in Austria. The differences between courses generally correspond to the different fundamental focuses of universities, universities of applied sciences, and non-university facilities.

This is clearly demonstrated by the competencies taught, which were defined in the study as professional knowledge, professional skills, media technology skills, professional expertise, entrepreneurial knowledge, basic skills, and societal orientation based on Gossel (2015) and Nowak (2007)¹¹. Courses at universities (n=489) teach professional knowledge in particular (67.3% of the courses), followed by professional skills (16.0%), and media technology skills (9.2%). The same order applies to the universities of applied sciences (n=947), albeit with a greater balance (specialist skills: 31.2%, ability to act: 20.9%, media technology skills: 17.5%). Within the programs of the non-academic training facilities (n=382), the professional skills make up the largest part (50.3%), followed by media technology skills (18.8%), and professional knowledge (9.4%). There are also differences in the further competencies recorded here, which include skills and knowledge from IT, economics and management, and »others« from political and social science, law, foreign languages etc. However, they play a less important role than the »big three,« with none being taught in more than 5% of the courses except for the comparatively large share of IT-skills and knowledge, which is owed to the interdisciplinary orientation of according studies at the universities of applied science (cf. Fig. 1).

Figure 1:

Skills taught in the various types of institution (n=1818, %)

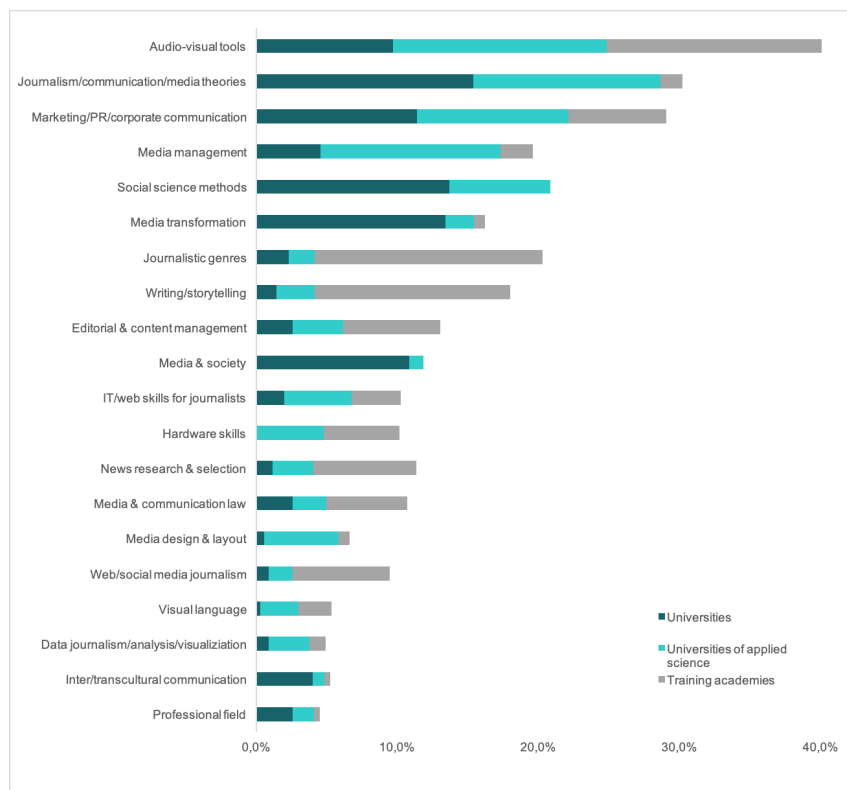


11 While Gossel (2015) and Nowak (2015) follow the German research tradition and summarily speak of »competencies,« the English translation in this article distinguishes between »knowledge« and »skills«, following the European Qualifications Framework, where knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual and skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments), cp. <https://europa.eu/europass/en>.

Regarding the specific course topics, it can be noted that the universities generally value scientific theories and methods. At universities, the way media are embedded in society and the changes instigated by the media transformation are more likely to form the central content of the courses. Universities of applied sciences, on the other hand, prefer to focus their content on the direct practical application. There is therefore a slight difference in the »top five« topics (cf. Fig. 2):

Figure 2

Most common course topics linked to media/communications/journalism (n=1199, %)



The most common course topics at universities (n=465) are theories of journalism, media, and communication (11.6%); social science methods, statistics, and scientific working methods (10.3%); the media transformation (10.1%); media and society (8.6%); and marketing/PR/corporate communication (8.2%). At the uni-

versities of applied sciences (n=663), on the other hand, the most common topics are audio-visual tools (13.4%), ahead of theories of journalism, media, and communication sciences (11.8%); media management (11.3%); marketing/PR/corporate communication (9.5%); and social science methods (6.3%).

It can come as little surprise that non-academic training facilities orientate their courses on the practical needs of potential participants. Their focus is on teaching the »craftsmanship« that forms the core of journalistic work (research, selection, reporting). There is much less focus on IT and data skills. The course content most commonly offered here (n=317) relates to audio-visual tools (14.5%), journalistic genres and forms of presentation (13.3%); text work/writing /storytelling (11.6%); research and news selection (6.0%); and marketing/PR/corporate communication; IT and web skills for journalists; and editorial and content management (5.7% each).

The *digitalization of journalism* has found its way into every aspect of the Austrian landscape of journalism education. Courses whose title or description includes the terms »online« and/or »social media« make up 73% of courses at traditional universities, 59% at universities of applied sciences, and 74% at non-academic facilities.

When it comes to the question of whether the programs also reflects *current trends and developments* in journalism, the result is mixed. Media management, editorial and content management, media design/layout, online and social media journalism, IT and web skills, and data journalism are all among the twenty most common course topics – but other topics that are considered relevant in the international discussion on contemporary education (e.g. Betels-Schwabbauer et al. 2018; Drok 2019) are only offered in a few cases. For example, a maximum of just 1.5% of the courses – regardless of the type of institution – offer a focus on mobile reporting, multimedia storytelling, entrepreneurial skills for journalists, media ethics, the function of journalism in society, interaction with users, or media effects.

The term *application-oriented* refers to courses that meet at least one of the following three criteria: explicit mention of application/practice in the course description, taught by practitioners, or concluded with a practical thesis. Two things are important to note here: Firstly, as expected, the practical application regardless of content is highest in the non-academic training facilities (83%), followed by universities of applied sciences (68%) and universities (39%). On the other hand, specifically the journalism courses at all three types of institution are dominated by practical application (university: 67%, university of applied sciences: 90%; training academies: 88%). The requirements for practical journalist education (e.g. Dernbach/Loosen 2012) are thus largely met.

The role of basic journalism principles

One of the aspects looked at in the interviews conducted with those responsible in the facilities investigated was the question of what should form the core of the journalism education programs. The answer was unanimous: Given the constantly growing number of potentially relevant skills, journalism education needs to concentrate on fundamental knowledge (such as in the fields of media law and media economics) and fundamental skills (such as research, interviews, and presentation). The respondents also emphasized the importance of teaching ethics, responsibility, critical faculties, independence, and the ability to reflect – aspects that they often combined under the heading of ›attitude‹:

»I am convinced that we need to refocus on two things in the future. One is to say: it's certain fundamental knowledge, we will definitely teach that. What are stories? How do I tell a story? ... I think it is becoming ever more important to say what my democratic and political role as a journalist is... Otherwise, we have got to a point where we get completely bogged down and training could take years given the enormous number of things there are to cover.« (Interview with initial and advanced training academy)

Most of those surveyed also agreed that this primary focus on teaching the basics should also apply to media technology – regardless of the growing importance of data, visualizations etc. Because technology is changing so quickly, the respondents felt that it is too difficult and not at all necessary to include the latest developments in basic journalism training. Instead, they believe that in targeted advanced training courses. On the other hand, many were critical of the view that journalists should be able to do everything, ideally equally well. One interviewee, for example, noted that teams of experts with different competencies are best suited to ensure quality in journalism – although this would demand an entirely different skill set:

»The most important skill is the ability to work in a team on the one hand, and a certain level of overall knowledge on the other. ... Not everyone necessarily needs to be able to create an interactive map. There are others who can do it better, faster, and more attractively. But you do at least need to understand a.) why we need a map, b.) where one is needed and c.) how I can tell the colleague who is able to create the map what I want. It is essentially about an understanding – not that ›I'll do it myself‹, but that ›I understand the important points and can talk to my colleagues in the team about how it can be done.« (Interview with training academy)

The didactics of journalism education

Yet, as the results of the content analysis show, it would be wrong to assume that journalism training on both basic and advanced levels neglects media technology knowledge and skill. The interviews with the heads and planning officers of the affected institutions also clearly showed that these institutions see keeping up with technological developments as both an obligation and a challenge. However, many make the point that this needs to be done in a reflective and considered way:

»One needs to have an understanding of the transformation of journalism and know what is important. That is the obvious part, of course – to say ›One needs to know what is important!‹ I think what I mean is that one needs to know which developments one is following and when, but not follow them simply for the sake of it.« (Interview with university)

Curricula and courses are thus planned in a way that builds on basic journalism training such as research and storytelling, while new topics and skills alike data visualization are placed in modules that allow them to be flexibly integrated and re-moved again if necessary should a trend turn out to be short-lived. When asked how important up-to-date developments in journalism can be spotted so that education programs can react to them, the interviewees usually recommend remaining in constant discussion with practicing professional journalists. However obvious and logical this approach may be, it presents some questions: Could over-emphasizing the experiences and perceptions of persons established in the sector not tempt people into simply perpetuating well-established practices? Can developments in the near future – developments that are already emerging in other countries – be recognized if one focusses solely on short term needs? That would take thinking outside the box of the immediate media environment and labor market. It is thus even more surprising that competition analyses, scientific research findings, observation of international trends, and holding discussions at specialist conferences are named much less frequently as means of spotting developments and integrating them into the journalism curricula.

Didactics, too, tends to focus on tried-and-tested methods. Most interview partners recommend that teaching journalistic skills should be associated with a large practical section, in which teaching staff provide feedback on the work of participants. Didactic methods such as design thinking, inverted classroom, peer group learning, and community-oriented learning are known and/or applied in only a few cases. This could be because didactic training for teachers is offered in only a few isolated cases and predominantly for academic staff at the universities and universities of applied science. Practical learning on concrete

projects is seen by most as the gold standard. That students and program participants may use their own creativity in class in order to, for example, develop and test journalistic products, was rarely mentioned (the preceding study by Medienhaus Wien also indicated this situation; cf. Kaltenbrunner et al. 2015: 24). Although “future labs” and other forms of experimenting with journalistic formats and work processes are occasionally described as best practice examples of courses, the Austrian journalism education landscape is in a »follower mode« rather than an »innovator mode« (Deuze 2006: 25). Few have yet latched on to the idea that journalism training and education can do more than just meet the needs of media companies: It can also act as an initiator, able to shape the journalism sector and the professional profile in a way that goes beyond quality assurance and teaching ethics and responsibility.

Journalism training in Austria in the context of the international discussion

Finally, the project was also interested to find out whether and to what extent topics that are currently considered particularly important in the international education discourse are integrated in Austrian journalism programs (e.g. Drok 2019, Bettels-Schwabbauer et al. 2018, Goodman/Steyn 2017, Zelizer 2017, Mensing 2010, Deuze 2006). To put it briefly: Digitalization has arrived in the Austrian education landscape, but some phenomena more than others. Courses on the media transformation, web and social media skills, data journalism, visualization, and media management are among the twenty most common topics of course content in 2018/19 (albeit particularly in the university sector). However, there is still some way to go when it comes to the role of journalism in democratic policy, the need to position oneself in an increasingly precarious labor market, the latest trends in reporting, and, last but not least, shaping the relationship with the audience.

The interviews conducted with the heads and planning officers of the programs did, however, clearly show that some of these topics are important to them. One key trend that was repeatedly mentioned in the conversations is the growing importance of entrepreneurial thinking and self-marketing. Several of the interview partners either made positive reference to corresponding courses in their institutions or were critical of the lack of such teaching subjects.

Another, more fundamental position that reflects the European trend, as shown for example in the survey of EJTA members (cf. Drok 2019), is the repeated emphasis on the relevance of »attitude« (ethical consciousness, the ability to reflect, responsibility) in journalism. The Austrian journalism education dis-

course is thus picking up on the unease expressed in societal discourse on targeted disinformation and fake news on social media, filter bubbles, echo chambers, and the loss of trust in established media, and reacting positively in attempting to (further) raise awareness of journalistic responsibility and quality.

There is also potential to build internationally on the emphasis on teaching the fundamentals of journalistic work over technical skills (cf. Bettels-Schwabauer 2018: 90). The interview partners believe that, given the constantly growing number of skills that could be of professional relevance and the changing technological skills, a selection needs to be made – an opinion that reflects the general trend. This selection must be made by (re?)focusing on what forms the core of good journalistic work: research, handling information responsibly, and good storytelling. Yet despite this, a dual challenge remains for the stakeholders in this study. On the one hand, journalistic work – and the way it is taught in initial and advanced training – must adapt to the changed communication processes in digital environments in such a way that journalism can uphold its standards and remain relevant to society; on the other, it is vital to keep up with the technological developments, meet the expectations of media companies and participants regarding appropriate journalism training, and even anticipate the requirements of the near future.

Conclusion

The range of initial and advanced programs for journalists has become more diverse in terms of both content and regions over the last two decades, although the vast majority of the programs are still based in Vienna. This diversification of the education landscape has occurred at the same time as the wide range of changes triggered by digitalization in terms of the media's business models, working processes in the editorial offices, journalistic products, media usage behavior, and, last but not least, the skills journalists need to have. Although these changes have been less disruptive in Austria than in many other countries, they still present journalism training and education in Austria with various challenges, for example regarding the question of how to deal with the growing number of potentially relevant skills and make a useful selection.

Regardless of how this and other challenges are tackled, in contrast to the idea posited by Gerhard Kocher, journalism should not be one of the professions »for which no training is required.« Teaching fundamental skills and providing orientation to both current and the next generation of journalists remains important in ensuring the quality of journalism.

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