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MAINTAINING THE FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

A MANIFESTO-LIKE INTERVENTION FOR PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN ACADEMIC TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR MULTIMEDIA JOURNALISM

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Abstract: With a changing media landscape in mind, this article takes a closer look at academic training standards for journalists. Focusing on multimedia production and innovative science, it analyses the impact on business models, resources and working conditions. As an interventionist appeal, it argues in favour of practice-based research and new training methods. Key demands include a greater awareness of the democratic role of journalism, ethical sensitivity and sustainable funding. By interweaving theory, practice and politics, this Manifesto-like paper aims to strengthen the profession of journalism and build a bridge between academia and practical training.

Keywords: Journalism, Academic Training, Hybrid Media System, Media and Information Literacy (MIL), Democracy, Critical Thinking, Newsrooms, Practice Based Research, AI.

1 Introduction

Well-trained journalists and media professionals report critically and independently on politics, business, and society. Political debates are reflected or initiated through political communication. We are therefore talking about a highly socially relevant public stabilizing system, which requires a fundamental level of **Media and Information Literacy (MIL)**. There is no doubt that the journalistic profession is changing rapidly. Search engines, social media platforms, and other online services have taken over large parts of the distribution of news and information. Video-based content, distributed via networks such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are becoming more important for news, especially in parts of the Global South, while legacy platforms such as Facebook are losing influence (**Reuters Digital News Report 2023**). John Hartley calls journalism "the primary sense-making practice of modernity"[1], referring to both news and the discipline of reporting news. In other words: the quality of a democracy depends on the quality of its media. Journalism is on the one hand the set-up produced by the news system and the press and is rooted within a new media ecology with overlapping and not always clearly definable agencies. On the other hand, journalism is part of a particular set of norms, standards, and procedures that govern the production of news. This paper is based on a normative

understanding that (objective) media play a crucial societal role in any functioning democracy and is intended as a call to strengthen practice-based research and new methods in academic training programmes for multimedia journalism.

According to the Zurich-based **Research Center for the Public Sphere and Society** the functions of public communication give rise to four dimensions of quality that are broadly rooted in academic research and journalistic practice shared in the **Yearbook Quality of the Media 2022**. Firstly, the dimension of relevance aims to shine a light on the ratio of hard news to soft news and the weight of content about institutional processes compared to coverage of individuals. The dimension of diversity assesses whether events are covered from a wide range of geographic and content perspectives. Contextualization is high when current affairs are embedded in long-term developments and thematic relationships. Finally, the dimension of professionalism assesses whether reporting is objective, whether it comes directly from the editorial office, and to what extent sources are made transparent. The four dimensions therefore can only emerge as interplay of academic research and journalistic practice. But how does academia and academic training systematically develop the foundations of journalistic research culture?

For some time now, activities to evaluate journalistic performance and developing standards of quality assurance have been increasingly apparent both in academia and in media companies. The digital change is here having a reinforcing effect, which constantly requires new competences. As recommended in a systematic review for **Digital Competencies for New Journalistic Work in Media Outlets** (2022), the attention paid to academic training programmes "may serve to reflect on the need to look at the curricula of journalism and communication degrees and reflect about whether we want to train professionals following the model demanded by the media outlets, or whether we would like to train professionals with a deep level of digital competences."[2] If scholarship is to move forward in a productive manner, the binary dualities that have long governed the theoretical and empirical work in the field of journalism studies and academic training for journalists should be overcome, since they are ultimately limiting.

The academic study of journalism struggles with the volatility of its subject not only because concepts that were thought to be secure no longer apply, but also because key notions (news, source, audience, agencies, etc.) are subject to dynamic change. This is an extreme challenge for academic training programmes and research in general. As Tamara Witschge et al. state:

> "The rise of hybridity can be seen as a response to rising complexity in both journalism practice and scholarship. Focusing on the *hybridity* of news professionals, institutions, technologies, and practices, scholars have aimed to address and make sense of the rapid changes buffeting journalism from all sides, and to inoculate scholarship against the danger that comes with focusing on stability, and with suggesting homogeneity. Theoretical frameworks that stress stability or suggest homogeneity prevent us from doing justice to the empirical developments and the dynamic and diverse nature of practices in the journalistic field."[3]

The notion of the hybrid turn in journalism studies refers to Andrew Chadwick's book *The Hybrid Media System* in which he tackles how the decomposition of actors in the political sphere and the blurring organisational boundaries have reshaped the mechanisms through which communicative power is distributed in modern democracies. Chadwick traces the evolution of contemporary political media systems based on a number of cases and avoids simple distinctions between old and new media, politicians and journalists, professional writers and amateur bloggers, voluntary sites and corporate big businesses. In his opinion, power is wielded by those who create, tap, and steer information flows to suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, and disable the power of others, across and between a range of older and newer media:

> "While actors associated with newer media have come to see that they can exert power by adapting their norms and practices as a route to embedding themselves in positions of fruitful and negotiated engagement with actors associated with older media, this process also works in the other direction: older media have found important resources in newer media and will continue to do so. Hybridity also empowers those associated with older media logics, provided they are willing to restate their significance – and adapt."[4]

This approach recognises that media systems exist in a dynamic state of hybridity. Chadwick challenges traditional binary distinctions and emphasises the complex interactions between different media actors and technologies. I will use this notion of hybridity to analyse how communication is distributed across different media platforms and how actors are adapting to this changing landscape, especially in the professional field of journalism.

As we adjust to hybrid media environments, the roles of participants become more fluid. Journalists, for example, can collaborate in new ways with (social) media, citizen journalists and other stakeholders. These blurred boundaries have an impact on journalistic norms, editorial decisions, and the entire media ecosystem. Based on this theoretical framework, the article is intended to serve as an appeal to interlink academic research and practical training to foster interdisciplinary dialogue in the professional field of journalism.

2 Adaption and Transformation

Within this media system, a new media ecology is emerging which is defined to a large degree by its capability of adapting and remaking itself. Society is experiencing a profound transformation of the media environment. This in turn has an impact on journalists' working conditions, rendering them more vulnerable. A look at the current job market shows that digital skills are now more in demand than ever in newsrooms – whether data journalism, audience engagement, multimedia storytelling, or in innovation management. Education and training must pick up on these trends and ensure that journalists at all levels keep pace with the digital requirements, since journalism has always had a symbiotic relationship with technology:

> "Any technologies that will provide greater spread or speed in communication have either been adopted by existing news organizations or have provided a platform for new competing market entrants. Usually the existing technologies are retained in some form and continue to be used alongside the newer ones."[5]

The increasing spread and use of smartphones, image-based instant messaging services such as Snapchat, and photo or video sharing platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Imgur, or Instagram increases the intensity and scope of visual communication as a mode of everyday interpersonal communication. At the same time, images, videos, and other visual media are playing an increasingly important role in various areas of society and are appearing in ever greater numbers and ever more diverse forms as the digitalization of everyday social life in general and visual communication in particular progresses. Live video streaming, accelerated mobile pages, wearables, instant articles, social bots, virtual or augmented reality, gamification of news, 360-degree storytelling, drones – these are the current buzzwords that are evoking a sense of optimism and uncertainty in journalistic training programs. Each of these digital tools, each individual trend, harbours risks, but also an enormous potential for journalism: for its distribution, forms of presentation, research, production, and participation possibilities.

Furthermore, working with information today requires a distinct competency and experience. The array of information available on the Web has created the need for additional employees — SMM specialists, fact-checkers, mining specialists, and journalists whose job is limited to just monitoring Internet communities or detecting clusters within the overwhelming amount of open data. Open data is information on the activities of government bodies, economic entities, and local authorities put on the Internet in a machine-readable format for the purpose of its repeated use. Thus, open data is the information that anyone can freely find, use, and distribute. Access to and evaluation of **Open Source Intelligence** (**OSINT**) is of enormous importance, especially for investigative research like the international citizen investigative journalism network **Bellingcat** or the think tank *Center for Investigative Journalism* **CIJ** and other collectives are famous for.

Therefore, it is no longer sufficient to teach the 'classical standards' of journalism as objectively given and which refer to the concept of public sphere as formulated by Jürgen Habermas.[6] Due to the challenges and opportunities posed

by technological convergence, academic researchers try to figure out where journalism's standards are evolving to.[7] In order to determine related teaching content, one should be conscious of different journalistic roles:

> "The discourse of journalistic roles [.] extends well beyond the boundaries of journalism as a field of practice and field of studies. In this sense, journalistic roles perform a double duty – they act as a source of institutional legitimacy relative to the broader society and, through a process of socialization, they inform the cognitive toolkit that journalists use to think about their work."[8]

The balancing act between theory and practice is a great challenge for academic training, especially because the fields of competence have become so widely differentiated.

Journalism thrives on fast action and precise communication in the quality of image, language, and writing. For some time now, the journalistic interaction of hybrid media use has become a much more dynamic component. Ideally, a media professional can master the interplay of all components and has skills in all the mentioned diverse forms of digitalization of visual communication and everyday social life in general. Their training will provide the person with the necessary tools. Therefore, the goal of academic education cannot be that everyone can do everything in the end, but rather that many things can be tried out in order to have basic knowledge and to develop core competences at one's own discretion.

Here, too, a dynamic within the media industry can be seen: the collective is becoming a robust form of existence and journalistic lone warriors are becoming more and more the exception. Team skills are key to being able to function in a collective. Subject and content penetration, complementary competences in the field of multimedia and discourse within an editorial collective to decode and decipher complex media worlds with all their data, images, and texts as well as systematic critical thinking is the "basic recipe" of successful academic journalism training. These are superordinate skills that prove their value especially in times of AI. Academic studies cannot be understood as a purely theoretical pursuit. It always has an impact on daily life and is effective as a transformative force. The successful transfer from academia to society is central, and this applies in a special way to education in the field of multimedia journalism. Journalism requires the recognition of how media work and the understanding of complex communication processes. Both cannot be had without a certain scientific foundation.

In the academic field, however, training is not only about teaching theory as a detached fact, but also about the transfer described above: the implementation of findings from theory in practice. Conveying and classifying knowledge, facts, and political discourses are more in demand than ever in view of the many crises that overlap and reinforce each other: from war to the danger of geopolitical bloc formation, migration, inflation, energy and climate crises with all their consequences challenge the world community. The classification of these processes is fundamental for stable conditions; the creation and preservation of access to balanced information are not self-evident. Education in the field of journalism and communication stands as a hinge for such processes in order to shape them proactively and responsibly. Academic training should afford all standards of journalism and personal experience in research and development of (evidence-based) journalistic practice and entrepreneurial journalism with its implication of creating a sustainable future for quality journalism.

Scientific theories and methods can be both systematic and reflective aids. Research on journalism and as a critical thinking skill within academic training is not to be understood just as a helpmate of any journalistic practice but is twofold: it is a critical counterpart of journalism, describes deficits and undesirable developments, but should not stop at criticism. It must point out facts and arguments for new ways and innovative research to improve journalistic quality like critical thinking and media and information literacy. There is no question that system logics still must be brought into a productive relationship, which is neither theoretically nor methodologically sufficiently elaborated. This understanding of journalism as an integrative field of teaching and research can therefore be expanded in training. It is not just about integrating theory and practice, but theory, transfer research, and practice. Students should get to know, work on, and reflect on the transfer problem during their studies. This enables them to develop proficiencies with which they can connect to applied research. Previous research teaching projects in journalism have already taken this

path through “research-based learning”. Theses, for example, can be deliberately designed as multimedia projects, based on the theoretical and methodological preliminary work on transfer. The importance of thinking in a networked and critical way is the prerequisite for successful interdisciplinary work. A career in journalism or communication requires an increased degree of adaptability.

Another specificity of the profession is that it is often regionally or nationally anchored. Based on specific national languages and the high specificity of national media landscapes, this is still the case, although the basic subjects of the discipline are international and intercultural. This is also evident in the empirical data, which often refers to a narrow radius, remains limited to North America or is Eurocentric, and simply does not even allow for large parts of the world to take place.

As stated in a research report on global journalism from the *Tow Center for Digital Journalism* at **Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism**, technology is changing journalism, its practice, and its consumption:

> “A public interest framework has the potential to unite the different sectors that are seeking to positively influence the global information space – groups engaged in free expression advocacy, the media development community, democratic governments, and the tech platforms. Creating a global information system that serves the public interest is the best available articulation of their shared goals. Public interest represents a powerful social norm within journalism and is also a recognized regulatory framework often applied to media.”[9]

In this context, there are methodological approaches that have long been discussed and demanded by academic research in the context of more civil engagement and which seem appropriate for academically oriented training of journalists and students of political communication. For example, the approach of **participatory action research** (PAR) or research in action, which is a form of participatory action research. PAR is one of many terms used when referring to research that involves participants in the process of inquiry and has a social justice orientation. Other terms include action research, community-based research, emancipatory research, and community-based participatory research.[10] Or within **communities of practice (COP)**, which create platforms for knowledge exchange and joint learning, overcoming the boundaries of hierarchy and organizational units. Like Christopher Johnson states in his **survey of current research on online communities of practice**, the following components are defining: (1) different levels of expertise that are simultaneously present in the community of practice; (2) fluid peripheral to centre movement that symbolizes the progression from being a novice to an expert; and (3) completely authentic tasks and communication.[11]

The fundamental changes affecting journalism are challenging the canonical repertoire of theories, methods, and epistemologies that have developed since the early 20th century. Journalism scholarship is often rooted in the social sciences and humanities and with the digital turn embraces the natural sciences, empirical sciences, and formal sciences (mathematics and statistics), as well. As the news sector struggles, so do the humanities departments at universities and art schools in times when relevant journalism scholarship is more strongly needed, but at the same time is more complicated than ever. Some even question the term “journalism” due to the blurring boundaries of journalism, since new hybrid forms of news-related content production have appeared and new ways to be informed about current events have multiplied.[12]

Journalism scholars are often split between the conflicting social responsibilities of this public dialogue. They are expected to guard key principles of quality journalism and promote the fourth estate. At the same time, they are in close contact with the industry, which is seeking guidance in the face of adversity and solutions to its problems of profitability.[13] New approaches and practices as described can contribute to a broader discussion about role responsibility, agency, and civic participation related to public discourse in an age of digital transformation and social change. What these varying aspects of academic training programs share is a recognition that information has a social value. Within the pluralistic information ecosphere of the digital realm joint efforts are binding academia, journalism, and new structures of newsrooms together with a significantly stronger emphasis on dialogue and multichannel communication instead of unidirectional dissemination of news.

3 Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

But before we can talk about ensuring the quality and methodological renewal of journalistic training in tertiary education, the heterogeneous social perception of journalistic work and the problem of journalism's decreasing reach and impact must be addressed. As already emphasised, journalism is essential for the stability of the democratic system. Exposure to journalistic news determines whether citizens regularly participate in the democratic process, develop an interest in politics, and trust democratic institutions. In contrast to this, there is an increasingly large group of so-called "News-Deprived", meaning people who consume little to no journalistic news. It is no coincidence that many states and education programs are starting precisely here and have been paying increased attention to Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in recent years. **Media and Information Literacy (MIL)** is defined as the ability to access, analyse, create, and reflect on media. Article 19 of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** states that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to freely adhere to their convictions and the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas by any means and regardless of state borders."[14] It is a prerequisite for citizens to claim their rights to freedom of information and expression. UNESCO has launched their resource ***Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think critically, Click Wisely***. On the 11th anniversary of Global Media and Information Literacy Week, stakeholders from all over the world reaffirmed the urgency of advancing global financing for media and information literacy development to strengthen people's access to media and information literacy competencies, thereby to fight against disinformation and build trust. The ***Abuja Declaration*** claims to develop an "ambitious training plan"[15] that will include, for example, formal agreements with universities around the world to provide certifications in Media and Information Literacy skills as well as specific MOOC, NOOC, and SPOC with different topics related to Media and Information Literacy like fake news, digital ads vs content, AI and algorithms, echo chambers, digital print.

This is also the key concern of the **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)**, a project that has set up national and multinational hubs in Europe to tackle disinformation. One of the core tasks of these hubs is to organise media literacy activities at a national or multinational level. Media and information literacy skills can be divided into five main areas: access, analysis and comprehension, critical evaluation, use, creation and engagement. These five main areas are related to the fundamental journalistic 5Ws and 1H: What, who, when, where, why, and how. The ***Abuja Declaration*** is rooted in the commitment by UNESCO to improve the training content for the journalistic profession.

An example of this is the ***Handbook for Journalists and Journalism Educators***.[16] The manual aims to equip journalism educators and journalist practitioners with guidelines and resources. For example, media and information literacy for critical civic empowerment and engagement as well as how to integrate MIL in journalism education and news reporting. Formats of fact-checking and the possibilities of using open data for comparison and verification of facts are also discussed to enhance understanding and assist in the reporting of misinformation and disinformation:

> "Journalists themselves have much to contribute to the public dialogue precisely because public interests represent such a strong normative value within the profession. The best-suited institutions to represent the interests of journalists and ensure their perspective informs the policy discussion are journalism schools at leading universities, which should expand research and education related to the concept of public interest."[17]

We live in a world in which we must deal with this complexity, uncertainty, volatility, and ambiguity on a daily basis. Communication and collaboration skills as well as creativity and critical thinking will become increasingly important. The role of journalism to combat disinformation is crucial. Every step in the work process of a journalist begins with checking truths, verifying the reliability of sources and fighting deep fakes. It is precisely this knowledge and experience that makes journalists experts in the development of tailor-made media literacy programs. Journalists should be engaged as trainers together with other media professionals to teach these programs.

In addition, journalists address all age groups by nature of their profession, which is why their expertise as trainers could also be an approach to bridging the generation gap in media literacy programs due to their access to different

peer groups. While there are extensive studies on the susceptibility of young people to misinformation and fake news, there is little empirical research on older people, for example, which is why studies are increasingly demanding the strengthening of media skills training for all age groups.[18] David Buckingham emphasises in his *Media Education Manifesto* the importance of media literacy and advocate for systematic media education to empower all citizens in navigating the complexities of our media-saturated world:

> "Media literacy is not something that will develop spontaneously of its own accord, simply through using media; nor is it best left to the vague good intentions of policymakers, or indeed to the media industries themselves. If we actually want media literate citizens, what we need is media *education*: that is, systematic, well-supported programmes of teaching and learning for all."[19]

Instead of 'quick fix' solutions that are superficial, fragmented and instrumental, media education should be more coherent, more challenging and ultimately more empowering. In times characterised by rapidly changing political and social contexts resulting from the digital transformation, communication is the capability that represents an elementary prerequisite for innovation, development, and our coexistence. In the political sphere, in the economy, as well as in art and culture, its importance is constantly increasing, and every form of design is no longer conceivable without communicative elements and critical thinking.

4 Media and Audio-visual Action Plan

In a nutshell, the call for an educational campaign to raise awareness of the importance of journalism applies to society as a whole and should also be implemented more intensively in universities and schools – even or especially in those with specific degrees in journalism. The relevance for the democratic system must be communicated more intensively and effectively. Educational institutions must regularly reflect on journalistic contents and their qualitative differences. This will not only raise awareness for quality reporting, but also a profound sensitivity towards the profession of journalism. Through this appreciation, journalistic education at universities will also find new ways, especially through the provision of sufficient resources that allow new didactic methods.

What is needed, then, globally and locally, is a new media policy that facilitates direct and indirect financial support for journalism and its related institutions, as is suggested by the **Media and Audiovisual Action Plan of the European Union** to support the recovery and transformation of the media and audio-visual sector. Finally, journalistic decision makers need to be aware of the types of content and channels that effectively reach audiences in the digital age. This can only be achieved through increased cooperation between media professionals and academia and is therefore another cornerstone of a new methodological orientation for university-based journalistic education. As stated at the beginning, to strengthen the professional field of journalism and as an appeal for the interlocking of academic research and practical training these thought-provoking ideas should play a role to be aware of the values *and* practices that constitute journalism.

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14. United Nations Human Rights Declaration, Article 19 (1948), **http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml**
15. **https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384461**. This declaration is in the tradition of previous ones that have addressed the issue of MIL for several decades, such as the Grunwald Declaration (1982), the Prague Declaration Towards an Information Literate Society (2003), the Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning (2005), the Fez Declaration on Media and Information Literacy (2011), the Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy (2012), the Paris Declaration on Media and Information Literacy in the Digital Age (2014), and the Riga Recommendations on Media and Information Literacy in a Shifting Media and Information Landscape (2016), Youth Declaration on Media and Information Literacy (2016), Khanty-Mansiysk Declaration "Media and Information Literacy for Building a Culture of Open Government" (2016), the UNESCO Global Framework for MIL Cities (2018); and Seoul Declaration on Media and Information Literacy for Everyone and by Everyone: A Defence against Disinfodemics (2020).
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Biography

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