

Which Education for Which Journalism under Which Circumstances?

Recent empirical data and historical backgrounds from Austria

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Abstract

What are the qualities of a successful journalist? According to two Austrian surveys – both quantitative as well as qualitative – carried out in Austria in 2010 and 2012 the essential profile-characteristics of a journalist are his or her ability to produce well-written texts, to work under pressure and be flexible, to be creative and versatile, to be critically-minded and react responsibly, and to be a team player.

On the other hand, less than one third of the respondents of both studies agreed that an academic journalism education would be a precondition for a successful career in journalism. This is despite a growing number of university graduates entering the field and the existence of a large array of educational venues, which are used by individuals to gain degrees and consolidate their social standing. But this does not in any way relate to their career in journalism, as the field does not value it in any kind of way the journalists can experience for themselves. Neither do they gain benefits, nor does it help them in their daily business in the office, nor does it bring financial advantages for them.

Introduction

What are the qualities of a successful journalist? The ability to produce well-written texts, to work under pressure and be flexible, to be creative and versatile, to be critically-minded and react responsibly, and to be a team player. These are the essential profile-characteristics of a journalist according to two surveys – both quantitative as well as qualitative – carried out in Austria in 2010 and 2012.

On the other hand, less than one third of the respondents of both studies agreed that an academic journalism education would be a precondition for a successful career. In Austria, it seems, the profession of journalism is understood as a craft which largely depends on skills and talents, and less on knowledge or education. Yet a large amount of evidence shows a growing number of university graduates within the ranks of Austrian journalists and a blooming scene of journalism schools (Dorer et al. 2009 and Hummel et al. 2012).

Following the approach of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology one should understand these data within both a broader context of societal developments and the history of the "journalistic field" – the working profiles, the value of higher education in journalism, the history of respective educational institutions etc. that are shaping the perceived and experienced relevance of different kinds of education. With this premise the article explores how education, both formal and informal, is evaluated by Austrian journalists.

Journalism education in Austria

Journalism in Austria had a new beginning after World War II, and this beginning was accompanied by some sporadic courses that aimed to train journalists. However, these first forays into journalism education had to be terminated in the mid-sixties due to a lack of participants (Hummel 2012: 6pp). It was not until the late seventies – as a consequence of the then newly established press-subsidies-law, which also provides money for journalism education – that some respective institutions were founded. The first director of the largest one ("Kuratorium für Journalistenausbildung"), jointly carried by the Newspaper Editors Association and the Union of Journalists, had to conclude, that young journalists were only interested in practical training, but not in theoretical backgrounds, which were at the centre of the curricula of Austrian Universities (Pürer 1980: 24). This

was in line with the results of a poll by 144 editors in chief and heads of departments within the Austrian press in 1981. Those stated that the ability to work under time pressure, to handle the formal display of reporting and to adapt quickly to new situations were the most important skills for a journalist, and could be learned best in everyday practice (Pürer 1981). The vast majority did not see university degrees as useful for a career in journalism at the time.

The establishment of Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Austria in 1993 led to the still on-going formation of further departments of journalism, like the most recently opened “Forum für Journalismus und Medien” which was founded in 2011– but those were more due to demand from the side of students than from the industry: In sum the number of graduates from respective programmes is by far higher than the labour market can absorb (Dorer et al. 2009). Furthermore, there is a “shock of practice” for trainees, both from UAS and university departments, as they feel that their training has not prepared them sufficiently in the skills needed to obtain information and work efficiently under pressure (Hummel 2008: 13pp).

Nevertheless the collective agreement for journalists working at dailies and weeklies – which is legally binding for the entire media sector – prescribes a training-phase on the job for two years at the beginning of each entry into the first appointment in journalism, which can be reduced to six months in case of a proven journalistic (freelance) practice or a corresponding university degree. As a consequence – following the seniority-based pay scheme of the collective agreement – people who join a newspaper at age 18 will earn higher wages when they are 35 as compared to their fellow journalists, who spent time completing an academic degree. Nevertheless despite the poor monetary reward of academic education the quota of graduated journalists is constantly rising. One may assume that this is due to a general change in Austrian society, since the general quota of people with university degrees has tripled over the last 30 years (Statistik Austria (1) 2013).

Therefore several relevant bullet points emerge: Firstly, there is no formal education that has to be completed to work as a journalist in the highly concentrated field, and university level education provides no advantage over people who enter the field without any formal training. Secondly the number of educational programmes related to the field

and thus the number of graduates in the field rises, while the number of journalists is not rising (Hummel & Kassel 2009), providing only limited chances for individuals to distinguish themselves by holding an academic title. Thirdly, the limited staff providing content for an expanding array of media create a setting, where the skills of creating an acceptable output in a short time frame is more essential than intellectual background-understanding and this is underlined by the media institutions, as they neither recognize academic education on an income level nor on a prestige level, as not even the trainee phase can be replaced by acquiring an academic degree. Combined, these factors constitute the institutional background for the journalists' opinions about journalism education.

The Journalists' Views'

As in most western countries journalism in Austria faces tremendous changes, and ongoing developments in society have influenced the socio-demographic make-up of the profession over the last decades. Thus, while journalism is still a predominantly male profession, it is estimated that well over a third of the individuals working as journalists are women (e.g. Kaltenbrunner et al. 2007: 115pp). Likewise, the number of journalists with a university degree has risen to approximately 30 per cent from around 20 per cent in the early 1980s (Hummel et al. 2012: 8).

However, while these developments may reflect a general social trend, other changes are more closely tied to the journalistic profession. For example, with the beginning of the new century, the advancement in technology gave rise to the new media and changed both the process of production and publication, at the same time as the concept of "for-free" newspapers gained popularity among Austrian publishers. As a consequence of this plurality of developments a new generation of journalists who work predominantly as freelancers emerged. This influences the journalistic profession insofar as the legal status of freelancer has a negative effect on income, and does not offer the same protection as the employed journalists enjoy.

This is the background for two large-scale research projects carried out at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Salzburg in 2010 and 2012. The survey of

2010 consisted of a combination of a paper-and pencil-questionnaire distributed via the Journalists' Union (n = 348), amended by 65 directed interviews, covering nearly all of the larger Austrian media companies. The aim was to map out different career-strategies, personal job-motivations and role models in today's journalism. The survey of 2012 was based on 210 computer assisted telephone interviews and 26 narrative, face-to-face interviews completed in the first half of 2012. This more recent study is focussed on the "free-media-sector" (online, private broadcasting, give-away-papers) and aims at possible differences between these journalists and the ones working in current-affairs news-gathering (in particular the daily newspapers and the powerful public broadcasting service ORF). Furthermore, the study of 2010 paid more attention to the paths into and within journalism, whereas the study of 2012 accented the social environment and background of the respondents.

A central theme, that was part of all steps of the projects, was to gain insight into the journalists' ideas about the essential prerequisites a successful career requires. Due to the nature of the surveys – one done by mail in 2010, the other by phone in 2012 – the scales used to gain information on the items were not a complete match, but the information provided by the data matches.

Interestingly enough, all education-related items were on the bottom of the list in both quantitative surveys, while the more talent- and skill-based items scored high. Even the question aiming at the importance of a specific training in regard to the journalistic practice did not score very high and was constantly rated as unimportant (cp. table 1).

Thus the idea of journalism as an occupation that demands creativity and talent seemingly dominates over education as a prerequisite for success – regardless of the type of media the person works for. Education is no more (or less) an asset in a newspaper than it is in private ownership radio.

In addition, the 2012 sample showed that it does not make any difference in a person's opinion about the importance of education, if they hold university degree themselves or not. A closer look at the data also reveals that women, who hold university level degrees at a significantly higher rate in both studies (Mann-Whitney U-Test, sig (2-tailed) < 0,05), did not think education to be any more (or less) important than their male

colleagues. And the same result is achieved when comparing freelancers and employees. Again both groups deem academic education as equally unimportant, in both the 2010 and 2012 sample. And last, younger journalists (< 35 years), who are part of a cohort with a higher quota of completed academic degrees than their older colleagues, did not judge education any more important than the older ones (>35 years) All those failed Mann-Whitney U-Tests mentioned in the last paragraph showed 2-tailed significances exceeding 0,20 when testing the sample and are thus clearly not statistically significant.

Prerequisite for success	Score 2010	Rank 2010	Score 2012	Rank 2012
creativity	246	1	939	1
to be able structure a text / writing skills	211	2	909	3
capacity to critically reflect society	170	3	898	4
capacity for teamwork	93	4	869	5
networking	61	5	569	12
organizational skills	48	6	729	6
flexibility and stamina	28	7	929	2
technical skills	-20	8	645	7
foreign language skills	-38	9	612	9
specific education relevant to a branch of journalism (i.e. economics, politics, sports)	-43	10	645	8
specific training and/or education in journalism	-71	11	584	11
good looks; agreeable personality	-168	12	608	10
holding a university degree (no matter which subject)	-198	13	409	13

Table 1 - Q: Evaluate these items in regards to their importance for having a successful career in journalism. The 2010 score was generated with information acquired by journalists identifying the three most important and unimportant prerequisites. 2012 score calculated based on a 5-part likert scale.

In conclusion, no difference in the evaluation of prerequisites for success could be found: Both the 2010 and 2012 samples showed that women and journalists under age 35, who more often hold an academic degree, do not deem education any more important than the groups, which are less likely to have completed a degree (male and journalists over age

35). And freelancers, who are often struggling to find permanent employment, do not consider education as a valuable asset that aids them in distinguishing themselves – at least not in comparison to so-called creative talent and soft skills.

The qualitative data from 2010 confirms the seemingly surprising fact that even those who have pursued higher education as a means of entry into the field of journalism and those at the beginning of their careers, who are competing with others in a tight market situation, do not emphasize the value of – in this case – academic education over talent:

“I cannot say that a university degree is a prerequisite, because my own experiences were a bit negative in this respect. ... To be clever, to be critical, to be committed - I believe those are the most important things ... and a broad general knowledge.” (journalist 1, news agency)

As we have seen in the previous chapter, universities of applied science, which are usually more practice-oriented than the universities, which have been part of the Austrian education landscape since the mid 1990ties. Therefore most of the individuals (age average is 48 years in the 2010 sample and 39 in the 2012 sample) that have completed a university-level education have done so on research-oriented universities and thus have had a scientific and not practical training. They find the skills they or others have achieved in this training wanting when it comes to the everyday working routines:

„A large part of journalism is simply craftsmanship, and that is not something you learn at the universities. We’ve had an intern recently, from Salzburg, who studied communication science. And for example her style of writing, she wrote ... the writing style [in journalism] is quite different from that at the universities. At a university your sentences should be as complicated as possible. Only those are clever who write the most unreadable. So when you come here, you must change that completely and the journalism schools are better in teaching you [how to write].” (journalist 2, quality newspaper)

And those who do think an academic education an asset often stress the value of soft

skills and background information, work in highly specialized fields and/or are employed by quality media:

„Of course you can study communication science, I believe that is good if you are oriented towards scientific work. Maybe social sciences. I studied economics, that was quite useful. Sociology, law, languages, statistics, mathematics, all quite useful. ... A broad spectrum, can even be history, physics, can be anything, and of course it is important to learn how to work methodically.” (journalist 3, public broadcasting service)

“I’ve studied communication, political science and philosophy, but I would not advice anybody to study [communication] if they wish to go into journalism. Something with more content would be an advantage ... history, geography, literature, political science, philosophy, whatever. ... The things I learned in communication studies in Vienna really didn’t pay off. Taking a scientific perspective was interesting enough, but in order to learn the profession it is negligible.” (journalist 4, news agency)

These journalists argued that it is necessary to educate oneself in e.g. economics, law, or languages if one wants to work in specific department. But even in those cases our interview partner often did not think that the completion of a university degree is necessary. In other words, it is the knowledge that counts, not a formal degree:

“For an all-rounder like me, a broad general knowledge is good. Knowledge in law is an advantage, as is knowledge in history, politics of course. But I don’t believe you need a complete university programme for any of these. But to have a broad knowledge, a bit of this, a bit of that – that’s ideal.” (journalist 5, news agency)

Disregard for the completion of academic degrees in general, and in journalism- and media-related studies in particular, is reinforced by the stereotype of the journalist as a university-dropout which is still widely accepted and was often agreed upon by our

interview partners, who described the “typical” journalist as “career changer with a different background [who] took up some university education, but never finished it and went into journalism instead.” (journalist 6, freelancer) But despite these statements 20 per cent of the 2012 sample (n=210) have a completed degree in the field of communication, although in comparison to other subjects, communication studies often gained a less favourable view, and it appears to have become a kind of folklore that some newspaper editors “always sort out applications from communication scientists.” (journalist 7, quality newspaper).

Two of our interview partners also addressed the need for different education in different parts of the journalistic field, distinguishing between national quality newspapers and free local newspapers. Underlying their statements is the assumption that journalists working for quality newspaper should have solid background knowledge, while in the everyday business of a free local newspaper neither the readers nor the topics of reporting demand it:

„On principle I think that a journalist should always start out from the perspective of someone who does not know. Or at least from the perspective of the reader’s knowledge. I work for a local print magazine, so it is easy for me to say this; of course there are other areas. [...] But of course it doesn’t work everywhere. In political journalism, for instance, education is extremely important, I have to understand what’s going on in the background.” (journalist 8, local news magazine)

„It depends on which media I want to work for. In the case of the very good quality media, the big ones like Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, you must have an extremely well-grounded education in the field you specialize in. If we are talking second league, I think it is more important to have a broad general knowledge, because you will not be able to work only in one specialized niche. And the further down you go, solid general knowledge becomes less and less important. For instance, I used to work for a free local newspaper, and much reporting was about who got married and who got baptized and such. And well, you don’t need to be an astrophysicist for that.” (journalist 9, news agency)

In sum, judging from the qualitative the argument can be made that an academic degree is not valued for itself and like a large array of other factors is judged by its' relevance to daily routines, its usefulness to complete tasks in the office, the type of media one works for, and the influence on the income. In addition, young journalists, upon entering the field, find themselves in an environment, where their colleagues and principals do not pay much attention to formal degrees and certificates and thus too, are not likely to consider them as important.

In a roundabout way, this attitude is reflected in the 2012 data, where we did not explicitly talk about the value of different career strategies, but asked our interview partners to describe the reasons and events which informed their decision to become a journalist. Whether the person "always" wanted to become a journalist or whether the final decision was made some time after the person left school, a surprisingly high number of journalists saw the reasons for their decision in childhood experiences. However, with one exception, in which vacation travels and a story-reading grandmother are said to have had an impact on the person's development, all interview partners explained their decision with personal talents and character traits instead of external factors:

„I am the creative type and I am not someone who likes to stand at the margins ... those are the two reasons why I said I want to do this as a profession.“ (journalist 10, regional private television)

„I used to read day and night, I have always been crazy about language. My parents often said, they did not give life to a child but a book-cover with ears and a body, because I read up to ten books a week. ... Working for a newspaper was never my wish at the time, but I have always liked to write stories.“ (journalist 11, online media)

Even in cases were e.g. a teacher in school suggested journalism as a possible profession to a student, this was allegedly due to the student's talent for writing. Retrospective questions such as "How did you (decide to) become a journalist?" may be considered problematic with regard to actual facts, in part depending on a person's ability to reflect

their own life stories. They do, however, tell us about the important bits and pieces from which individuals make up a coherent narration of their lives, in which one step logically leads to another. They also tell us about story-telling strategies and rules, which in turn may be considered as indicators for what is “normal” or socially acceptable. Therefore a person who makes a real effort to become a journalist by choosing a subject-related university programme and a completing a number of internships, may still describe their way into the profession as an instance of “mere chance”. And likewise, by playing the aspect of perceived childhood-talents to the front when asked to narrate how they became journalists, our interview partners emphasize the agreed-upon value of talent over education.

In sum, the quantitative data shows that education as a prerequisite for success ranks among the lowest in a list of 13 items – regardless of the responding journalists’ age, gender, or the type of media they work for. Thus even those who hold a higher education do not seem to value it. The qualitative interviews suggest that many journalists do not consider academic training to be important because of its lack of relevance for daily work routines. And differentiation between various university studies, subjects such as economics, history and law, are – with few exceptions – thought to provide a better background than media- and journalism-related studies. So if journalists do not see any particular need for journalistic training and/or an academic education, does the latter at least offer them monetary benefits? The 2012 sample suggests that this not the case: A multivariate regression model, which tried to explain how the income of journalists in Austria comes together, showed that to hold an academic degree does not have a significant impact (Mann-Whitney U-Test, sig.(2-tailed): $p > 0,28$) on the journalist’s earnings, when compared to his or her age (Kendal’s Tau-B, sig.(2-tailed) $p < 0,05$ / corr. Coefficient: 0,247) and working close to Austria’s societal centre of Vienna(Mann-Whitney U-Test, sig.(2-tailed): $p < 0,05$).

Reading the data according to theory

Thus far, this article asked questions about how journalists value education in general and journalism specific education in particular as a driving force for career advancement in a

highly competitive field which has no formal entry barriers, but a large number of profession-related trainings and courses that range from practical training to academic degrees. Our data suggest – among other things – that while journalists do not show much appreciation for any form of education and consider talents and soft skills far more important for professional success, at the same time university and non-university education programmes still hold great attraction for young people, and the number of journalists who hold an academic degree rises. Having ruled out the possibility of financial benefits of academic degrees as the reason for these seemingly contradictory phenomena, we will argue that individuals are acting with specific institutional and societal dependencies, which provide the more or less implicit or explicit rules individuals adhere to, and which are reflected in the answers we received in our empirical studies,

Therefore we will try to make sense of our findings by interpreting them with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields, as Bourdieu (1998: 19ff) argues that the social world is divided into relatively autonomous "fields", which are structured systems of social relations and harbour individuals that act within those fields. According to this theory, the accumulation of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital provides the actors with the means to gain a position in the field and to take part in the field's power struggles.

While academic degrees and certificates from journalism education institutions are part of an individual's institutionalized cultural capital, skills and knowledge may be considered as part of the incorporated cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983:187). Upon entering the journalistic field, however, young journalists often discover that the institutionalized cultural capital, which they have accumulated in their secondary education, does not pay off in the sense that it does not bring them any advantage in the competition over a position in the field. It can neither be transformed into economic capital nor into symbolic capital – or prestige – to any significant degree. While the qualitative data is not conclusive on this particular subject, answers received from quality newspapers suggest that an individual's cultural capital may best be valued and turned into symbolic and/or economic capital in those corners of the field where the media with accumulated cultural capital sit, e.g. quality newspapers, high-brow print magazines and

broadcasting programmes etc. In these cases, however, a subject-specific degree in music, arts, politics etc. may still be more valuable than journalism-related education.

The incorporated cultural capital on the other hand, may prove more useful than the institutionalized cultural capital as long as it includes the skills and talents that the doxa of the field – its' internal rules and accepted truths – demands. This doxa – which also contains ideas about journalism as a profession based more on talent than on education – is formed through a tradition of practice in the field: Through their practice, individuals who are “doing” journalism establish not only the field's structures and relations, but also its rules, values and beliefs. As we have shown with our brief summary of the history of journalism education in Austria, the field puts a stable emphasis on talent as the driving skill in journalism, whereas the concept of journalism education is relatively new to the field and is therefore not well engraved in its' doxa. And the aspiring journalists, struggling for a position, leads them to downplay their own education, and specified knowledge about the media in particular, in favour of creativity, flexibility, team-orientation and good general knowledge (Bourdieu 1998: 99p).

The idea that young journalists adopt into their habitus the field's existing beliefs about prerequisites for success in journalism, may be considered as deterministic, as indeed one popular critique of Bourdieu's concept of habitus states (Fröhlich et. al 2009: 402). However, the habitus should better be understood as flexible in two ways. First, it does not determine a person's practice so much as it sets boundaries within which various practices are possible. Therefore while one editor may not hire a communication studies graduate, another might. Second, the habitus reacts to changes in the structure of the field, so it may be that – with the rising number of academic graduates and graduates from journalism education programmes – this form of cultural capital may one day be considered a standard prerequisite, if not one with which to distinguish oneself.

Conclusion

There are more academics in Austrian journalism today than ever before, but a growing number of people with completed academic education are a general trend in society. At the same time, however, the number and variety of education programmes in journalism

is also rising, while the job market is getting more and more competitive and the economic situation in the field more strained.

The structures of the field, as well as its history do not provide incentives for the journalists to see the benefits of higher or academic education. As Austria is largely dominated by a strong print market, which is serving general interest news that are not tied to specific knowledge through tabloids and free newspapers, the few individuals that recognize the value of a higher education are to be found in the quality segment and even there, the market situation makes the individuals put more emphasis on the craft than formal education. And therefore even journalists in this situation do most likely argue that success is not tied to need formal higher education and that they are content with this.

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