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Press Freedom and Journalism Education

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Abstract: There is no democracy without press freedom, which enables the news media to provide citizens quality information and a forum for deliberative communication. Without freedom to express pro and con views, to argue for “heretic opinions” or “wrong views,” winners of political elections will be able to silence oppositional voices. Furthermore, press freedom is the main prerequisite for investigative journalism, which helps to hold those in power accountable. This stream focuses on how press freedom is interpreted in digital societies and dealt with internationally in journalism teaching, both theoretically and methodologically. Finally, it will discuss the challenges of teaching press freedom especially within contemporary digital media environments.

Educating journalists is important for building strong and free quality media needed to achieve the UN’s sustainable development goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2016). Free media and freedom of expression is core to contribute with relevant information about people’s rights, uncover illegal activities, act as a two-way channel between the elected and those who elect, and be part in the creation of social identities. Ultimately, a solid journalism education not only educates journalists but also the wider public. This reflects UNESCO’s position that journalism education is important “to support important democratic principles that are fundamental to the development of good societies”. Quality in education is contextual and multifaceted and increasingly more focus is given to how a free press plays a critical role in meeting humanity’s greatest challenges (Orgeret, 2019). The UN’s 17 SDGs (sustainable development goals) set out globally agreed aspirations for human development that will guide international development until 2030. SDG 16 is about “peace, justice, and strong institutions”, which give vital support to the struggle to meet the other SDGs, and the key to this aim is independent media (Whitehead, 2021). In the words of economist Joseph Stiglitz: “Free speech and a free press not only make abuses of governmental powers less likely, but they also enhance the likelihood that people’s basic social needs will be met.” Some examples of the wide-ranging impact independent media have on societies are promoting responsive and accountable government, reducing corruption, and educating the public. The

Nobel Peace Prize Committee's 2021 award to journalists Ressa and Muratov, emphasises how freedom of expression, quality journalism, and safety of journalists are preconditions for democracy and lasting peace. At a time when the media is increasingly a target for misinformation, manipulation or suppression by interests seeking to profit from conflict and polarisation, quality journalism and journalism education are more important than ever.

Important preconditions for a quality journalism education in a time of change, include, but are not limited to considerations of a global knowledge base and various epistemologies, increased collaboration, strengthened knowledge of safety and digital safety, as well as reflections on what kind of student involvement would be the best to reach these aims.

Globally anchored journalists

Journalism education on global issues such as climate change, war, conflict and peace, and illicit financial flows calls for global perspectives. There is a need for a new generation of globally anchored journalists. Methodologically, a teaching collaboration is not only the sum of a number of different forms of journalism and journalism teaching from different countries around the world, but rather a "global perspective" (Berglez) that journalists can choose to use to highlight complex power relations and structures which shapes news events and our everyday lives. While the global dynamics of 'big tech', 'big money' and 'big data' are accelerating, it is becoming increasingly important to see connections between the local and the global – at the same time as opening discussions problematizing the universality of Western knowledge, as developing global abilities must also include the willingness to be exposed to and learn from other perspectives.

More transnational collaboration

When in 2016, an anonymous whistle-blower handed a group of journalists 10 million documents from a law firm in Panama (Panama Papers 2016), it changed not only popular understanding of international finance but also signalled a transformation of journalism. Whereas the world of journalism has started to react to the urgent need for transnational cooperation to combat disinformation and face global challenges, these perspectives are still largely lacking in journalism education. To be able to cover some of our times largest challenges such as climate change, terrorism, conflict coverage, migration and financial flows collaboration is key.

Safety and digital safety of journalists should be integrated in the education

It is commonly found that war and foreign reporters are most exposed to violence, but the last few years and not least during the pandemic, reports show that it might be even more dangerous to cover conflict, abuse of power and corruption in one's home country. Hence the field of safety of journalists is not merely something that those who aim to travel need to consider. At the time of writing, the ongoing war in Ukraine also illustrates how we live in a time of change in terms of journalistic coverage of war and conflict. As our societies become increasingly digitized, cyber warfare becomes a scenario that must be taken as seriously as conventional threats. How to protect oneself and one's sources digitally against methods of attacks designed to compromise a journalist's online privacy (hacking, doxing, spoofing,

malware) must be a fully integrated part of any journalist educations. Discussions about the need for sensitivity towards gender differences in the field of safety, as female journalists may be in the “epicentre of risk” (Posetti, 2022), is also of interest here.

Promoting student engagement

Student engagement is indeed a buzz word in many camps, as student active learning has become a popular tenet in higher education. “Student-active forms of learning are an important factor for the quality of education, because they are particularly well suited to promoting engagement, reflection and in-depth learning” (DIKU, 2018–2019). The students must be active participants in the knowledge community, so that co-creation of knowledge strengthens the content of the education and promotes in-depth learning (DIKU 2018-2019).

Opdal (2021) presents a systematised overview of the literature pertaining to student active forms of learning and extrapolates a range of arguments from it: an empirical argument; an activity argument; an argument from conceptual schemes; an argument from purpose; and an argument from authority. To move forward in the discussions about what kind of learning that would be the best to install solid reflections on press freedom, that would also provide the students with the ability to continuously detect their own needs for news skills and knowledge throughout their professional lives as journalists, a further clarification of what is meant when using the concept ‘student engagement’ may be fruitful.

References

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