Training and Education of Journalists in Bulgaria: 
Current Situation and Basic Trends of Future Development

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This text was written as part of research started in September 2001 by Media Plan Institute from Sarajevo. Purpose of the research was to collect basic information on education of journalists and media professionals in countries of Southeast Europe (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FR Yugoslavia, Macedonia, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova). The research has shown that levels and types of education of journalists and media professionals throughout the region differ. However systematic analysis or database on education in this field is lacking. This report on Bulgaria, as well as reports on other countries that will follow, is therefore intended as an overview of education projects and forms. The report provides basic information on different levels and modalities of education of journalists and media staff while describing activities and attitudes of key actors in the field. The report finally considers how education of journalists can and should develop in the future.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bulgarian print and broadcast media function in a strongly competitive environment and under accelerated liberalization of regulation mechanisms over the last several years. This has produced an increased flow of information and hence the demand for advanced professional skills on the part of all media professionals. The overall dynamics of political, social and cultural changes in the country has set new, higher professional standards and is pushing for radical improvement in training and education of journalists.

This survey provides a descriptive analysis of how Bulgarian media people are trained these days, and the main trends that frame Bulgarian education in this field with the view of confronting challenges of the future.

2. LEVEL OF EDUCATION OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA STAFF

Statistics shows that although journalism in Bulgaria is regarded as highly prestigious profession many a professional is not quite comfortable with technological innovations and state-of-the-art media kit. Nor can media professionals meet the up-growing demands and requirements of their audience. An overall view of the existing print and broadcast media outlets would suggest that forms of journalistic writing often get mixed up contrary to the elementary conventions of journalism while violations of editing standards and values are not lacking either.

Journalism, especially local journalism in the country, also exemplifies past models and experience rather than tendencies and practices of contemporary journalism and society in general. The reason for this dire discrepancy lays in several...
facts of journalism: education lacks sufficient funding, quite a small number of media apply scientific methods in management and production, and last but not least – those best trained in the field, would prefer other course of personal professional development to building-up and promoting the fourth estate in the country.

3. CLASSIC EDUCATION IN JOURNALISM

Classic education in journalism in Bulgaria is concentrated in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications at Sofia University, the oldest academic institution in the country founded in 1881. More than 5,000 students have got their degree in journalism from the foundation of the Department in 1952 until the present day. It has been two years now that the education is structured to mirror the Western three-level model: BA, MA, PhD. The Department offers both full-time and part-time courses, and there have been attempts to carry out training, based on distant and continuous professional education, since 1999 as part of a joint program within the framework of the TEMPUS project.

The BA track lasts for 4 years and includes courses such as theory in mass communications, languages, stylistics, ethics in journalism, history of journalism, social theory, creative writing and text-writing, advanced humanities - sociology, cultural anthropology, economics etc.

After the first year of general education students are profiled according to their wishes: radio-journalism, TV or print media. Their further study is shaped along the respective choice. Courses include specialized disciplines like press-journalism, broadcasting techniques, TV and radio technologies, graphics design, talking in front of the microphone, media language and communication. Once they embark upon the third year of their studies, students are required to choose a field of their future expertise among domestic politics, economic reporting, culture and international affairs. The course of their studies is thereof tailored to their chosen expertise. The completion of the BA degree depends on successful defense of their final paper, which students present before the Academic Committee of the Department.

MA degree in journalism involves another year of studies in the course of which students are obliged to pursue special research, finalized by MA thesis. Students from other departments are eligible to apply to this MA programme as well. The entry requirement is a BA degree in any other academic field, but in their case MA programme in journalism lasts two years. It is also completed by an MA dissertation.

PhD programs require additional three years of study following the MA course. From this academic year, however, BA's also can apply for PhD. The logic is that only a few of the graduates perceive academic carrier and chances to find job if one has
only a BA are considered weaker than with an MA degree. By 2001 the average number of BAs and MAs that graduate per year amount to approximately 70. It is not unlikely, however, than the number of MAs will decrease due to the relaxation of PhD entry requirements. The number of PhD graduates hardly exceeds half a dozen per year.

Teaching at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication of Sofia University is done by nearly 50 academics, half of whom are either associated or full-time professors.

Students have access to a TV studio for training, but the studio is hardly of any use for their professional development for the equipment available is outdated. There are two radio studios for training but they also fail to meet the standards of modern training. At the same time, there is a Students’ Radio at the Department, and this radio station facilitates to some extent professional development of those who wish to go into radio broadcasting.

Print media journalists can advance their professional skills at the Departmental Publishing Center, but this is hardly sufficient.

Education in journalism at Sofia University includes several internship programs for students in different Sofia-based broadcast and print media. This allows students to get some training in real conditions. Regrettfully, however, the lack of any official agreement between the Sofia University and the media often turns students into ‘errant schoolboys’ rather than trainees or interns. This considerably diminishes professional motivation of these students and more or less directly affects their professional development.

The Department of Journalism and Mass Communications at Sofia University maintains good contacts with various foreign universities and academic centers. Traditionally strong links are those with schools and universities in Munich, Lille, Strasbourg, Liverpool, Krakow, St. Petersburg, New York and Oklahoma. The Department also takes part in implementation of joint projects under the TEMPUS Program. Low academic wages, inability of the state to allocate sufficient funds for training and education, along with the declining prestige of Bulgarian education in general, acts however, as a major obstacle to future development. Another major problem concerns the certain old-fashioned style of training and insufficient practical orientation.

What is encouraging, however, is the reputation of the University as the most prestigious academic institution in Bulgaria. In addition, although university education is no longer free of charge as it used to be up until recently, tuition fees at the Department of Journalism remain stimulatingly low: students enrolling for BA in Journalism have to
pay annual fee of 185 DEM whereas MAs and PhDs are bound to contribute 201 DEM and 310 DEM of annual fee respectively. Foreign students are required to pay much more substantial sums ranging from $2,500 to $3,200.

Another Bulgarian institution of classical education in journalism is American University in Blagoevgrad (AUBg). It was opened in 1991, and its communications studies program attracts considerable number of students both from the country and abroad.

Basically, the four-year teaching program at AUBg offers professional education in print and broadcasting journalism, PR and advertising industry. Students, enrolled to pursue studies in one of those fields, have to take 12 courses in literature, social studies, culture, humanities and arts. They are also obliged to take courses in mass communications, information technologies, editing, graphics design, history of mass communications, media laws and regulation, and rhetoric. Refreshing innovation is summer practical training that all students are required to undergo in various Bulgarian print and broadcast media. Teaching is invariably done in English. Students pass entry exams in TOEFL, SAT and essay writing. The minimum number of credits required for enrollment is 900, but admission is hardly possible with less than 1,300.

Each year some 15 - 25 students graduate in journalism. Two full-time professors teach communications studies, complemented by three associate professors and some other 10 - 15 part-time employed PhD lecturers. The University also runs the University Radio Aura, where students embark upon practical training. There are also several academic newspapers published by the students and academic staff. The major advantage that this University boasts over other schools of journalism in the country is its up-to-date approach to education and a considerable number of foreign lecturers. All this significantly contributes to good reputation of the University in the region of South East Europe.

All this however does not come free of charge. The downside of this school of journalism is certainly to do with extremely high costs of study. Annual tuition fees amount to $10,000. Low interest 15-year loans (6% per year) of $1,000 - 1,200 are offered to students.

High education in journalism and communications can alternatively be obtained at several other private Bulgarian universities.

The New Bulgarian University (1991) also hosts a Department of Mass Communications, offering BA degrees in Public Relations, Broadcasting and Production, and Editing in all media. The course of education lasts from 4 to 5.5 years. BA courses are four years long while MA degree requires additional 1.5 year of studies. Admission to MA programme is however offered only to the best among the graduates...
by a decision of the academic staff. PhD program was recently introduced, with so far only one person enrolled. The assessment is credit-based where each credit equals 15 classes. The course includes 2 years of general studies. Students can not take more than 18 hours per week. To complete the general study phase undergraduates have to acquire 80 credits. Additional 170 credits are required for BA degree and another 45 for the MA. PhD degree requires of students to obtain another 120 credits following the completion of their MA course. Both MA and PhD degrees involve both specialized research and dissertation.

Three full-time professors teach communications studies at this department. The rest of the academic staff are part-time PhD lecturers, coming from other Bulgarian academic institutions. Each course at the Department, comprised of 30 classes, equals 2 credits and costs 60 DEM.

The major advantage of this University is its liberal enrolment procedure and qualified academic staff. Main shortcomings include rather crudely structured training courses and the lack of academic reputation.

The Free University in Varna offers 2 programmes in communications since 1994: in Journalism and in Public Relations, both at BA level. So far some 200 people have graduated at these two departments. Specialized courses are offered in sport journalism, economic journalism, political journalism, film journalism, photojournalism and PR. The University has a training radio studio, a training publishing center, and a training TV studio. Students also undergo internships at Varna-based broadcast and print media outlets.

The main advantage of this university is free access to education. What is problematic is the lack of qualified journalism teachers as well as rather low academic reputation.

There are two other Bulgarian universities that offer specialized education in communications. Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv runs a two-year course in journalism. It is open to students regardless of their academic background once they have completed successfully 3 years of study in their respective field of studies. They are then offered to minor in journalism. It is usually students of languages, social sciences and humanities, and economics that pursue this course of study. So far, the minor is offered only at BA level.

Practical training is carried out at Radio Plovdiv, Plovdiv TV Regional Station and at local newspapers. The good thing about this training model is that it provides young graduates with a good professional start. Graduates, however, need lots of additional training and practice.
The Free University of Burgas also offers journalism as a minor to its students. The two-year course is done at the BA level. The programme was launched back in 1997 and some 30-40 students graduate every year since 1999. The specialization is paid for, but fees do not exceed 500 DEM for the whole course of studies. So far, however, the State Academic Committee has not officially certified and accredited this programme in journalism.

Training in journalism and mass media is offered also at the University for National and World Economy in Sofia. The course consists of 120 classes, and it is taught as a minor to students from different academic disciplines. Classes are taught in the evening or during weekends, and the course stretches over some 5 semesters. The course focuses on introduction to journalism and communications, economic journalism, legal aspects of journalism, media management, rhetoric and PR. Education is paid for, and amounts to 600 - 650 DEM.

The main advantage of this programme is that it provides basic journalism training to students of economics. It can however hardly serve as a good enough base to embark upon a career in journalism.

Since 1997 there is a specialized MA course in British and American Mass Media, taught at the English and American Studies Department of Sofia University. It is free of charge and is accessible by choice to students in their 5th year of education. The training lasts for 60 academic hours and is focussed on contemporary mass communication theory, British and American press and broadcasting, media regulation/deregulation in Britain and USA, and civil society as projected by the media in these two countries. Students finish their studies with a research project, which they defend at the end of the course. Due to their advanced knowledge of English, many a graduate who has done this course ends up with a job at international news rooms of Bulgarian print and broadcast media. They do however require further training in basic journalistic skills and information technologies.

4. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF EDUCATION

Alternative forms of professional training for mid-career journalists and media professionals are offered by the Media Development Center, Sofia and ProMedia-funded Broadcast Training Center – both registered as NGOs (the latter is still in the process of registration).

The Media Development Center, Sofia is the only facility in the country equipped to provide professional hands-on training to practicing journalists and media managers from all media, as well as students of journalism. It is mainly foreign experts provided by Deutsche Welle Radio Training Centre, Deutsche Welle Television
Training Centre, the Guardian Foundation, Fulbright Commission and Knight Foundation who run courses, usually in the form of workshops. Training includes participation of eminent Bulgarian experts, who assist foreign trainers by contextualising the course in specifically Bulgarian environment.

The Media Development Center has a modern digital radio studio equipped with the DALET, CuBase, Raduga and other up-to-date software for radio production as well as SONY DV camcorders with portable video-editing suites. There is also a computer room with high-speed Internet connection available to 10 working stations. These facilities allow training for radio, TV and print journalists. Courses are offered to both journalists and managers. Course programmes cover development of professional skills in areas such as political and economic reporting, elections coverage, news and current affairs production, investigative journalism, and print and broadcasting management. The courses are structured and offered on the basis of extensive sociological research on Basic Needs for Additional Training in Journalism, carried out by one of the major Bulgarian sociological research and survey agencies. Training courses also build on the expertise and consulting by international media organisations such as the BBC and Deutsche Welle.

Other specialised courses offered by the Media Development Center include online journalism and English language training for journalists. Tuition is covered through donations by various governmental and private funds. Trainees have of recently started to contribute to the running costs of the respective course. A course is normally run for 12-14 trainees at the time and lasts for about 5-6 days.

The Media Development Center Sofia is implementing a three-year Support for the Media in South East Europe since 2000. The project is funded by the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany within the framework of the Stability Pact for South East Europe. This project aims at improving professional skills of journalists and media managers from the region while building bridges and cooperation among them. The Media Development Center from Sofia is a member of the South East European Network for Professionalisation of the Media, comprising 19 media training centres throughout the region. The Network inter alia facilitates the recruitment of participants for regional training courses as well as flow and exchange of information among journalists from SEE countries. The Media Development Center intends to run 33 courses, training some 450 journalists and media managers from Bulgaria and South East Europe in 2001 and 2002.

The second alternative form of training for journalists in Bulgaria is the ProMedia-funded Broadcast Training Center. It specializes in TV broadcast training. Foreign and Bulgarian trainers carry out the training and teaching, usually as a part of
bigger international projects aimed at the promotion of highly professional TV journalism. Courses last between 1 and 3 weeks during which period trainees are required to take leave of absence. The Center has a state of the art TV studio and newsgathering equipment. Trainers from the US, the BBC, and Bulgaria teach courses in all facets of TV news, from camera work to production. The Center was established in conjunction with the Bulgarian Media Coalition, an NGO that will take over operation when the ProMedia programme ends.

5. INTERNATIONAL DONORS, NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS AND EDUCATION OF JOURNALISTS

The first few years after 1989, when the overall political changes in the country commenced, witnessed the increased interest of various foreign media organizations and institutions in education of local journalists. Short and mid-term internships were offered to a limited number of Bulgarian journalists in countries such as USA, UK, France and Germany. The main idea was to acquaint Bulgarian media professionals with the way in which media and state coexist in the context of developed democracy and civil society. All these training activities proved most useful as there was a clear need for better understanding of media in the condition of democracy. They were nevertheless very formal and generally informative while failing to provide the participants with real practical skills. BBC, Deutsche Welle, RFI and VoA were especially active at this stage.

The next stage brought prominent Western academics to Bulgaria in the capacity of visiting lecturers. These scholars would lecture for a day or two Bulgarian journalists – the trouble with their lectures was however that they were much more West-oriented with little or no relevance for the local reality. They were also pretty ineffective in terms of proactive approach to teaching and made the education process too academic. All this led to the conclusion that a new approach to training of journalists was needed. What was essential was a design of long-term training strategy with focus on practice-oriented Bulgarian-based courses. It was believed that only such approach would make possible a smoother transformation of local media landscape along Western lines.

6. HOW LOCAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS PERCEIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

When asked about education in their field, all media professionals in Bulgaria - reporters, editors and management – invariably agree that current academic education in journalism should be supplemented by regular vocational training, run outside the
media organisations themselves. The reason for it is that most media channels apply a certain editorial policy, which sometimes does not allow ‘fresh blood to’ penetrate into the routine daily activity. In general, both print and broadcast media function on the basis of rules and principles that change slowly and often lag behind the requirements of the day.

Stereotypes, pseudo-authorities and general approaches thus hamper promotion of modern journalism. In many cases, one and the same reporter covers different social areas and issues. This does not allow him/her any more focused specialization and ranking with latest developments. Areas such as environmental reporting, reporting diversity, scientific journalism, financial and business reporting etc. are covered by people who lack professional understanding of these issues. Needless to say that foreign language proficiency and adequate computer literacy are desperately needed in all newsrooms. In this respect, short-term workshops organized by media training NGO’s are most welcome. In all the surveys carried out during the last 3-4 years, media people insist on the necessity to run practical seminars and workshops. It is encouraging that this requirement is to some extent met by existing media centres with the assistance of foreign funds and expertise over the last two years. This is filling some gaps in the education system for the moment.

7. WHAT NEXT

It will not be an exaggeration to conclude that journalism continues to be regarded as a highly prestigious profession in Bulgaria. Students enrolling in journalism courses are more often than not among those with highest entry exam scores. The best among them do not find it too hard to find employment in the major Bulgarian media. However, due to the lack of fully qualified teachers, same faces seem to appear as trainers of journalism at almost all of the institutions. This harmfully effects their teaching and assessment criteria as well as creative potential and directly results in inadequate qualification of graduates, who end up training themselves in the course of their daily work or taking additional training courses. In this respect journalists consider professional training offered by NGOs as ‘priceless’ since they combine leading Western expertise with the experience of very qualified local experts.

This indicates that extensive training programs provided by NGOs and aimed at undergraduate students of journalism boast very good prospects for future development. These programmes can combine theory with practice and from the very beginning will coach future journalists along the paved way of Western experience in this field. Regretfully, however, journalism departments in Bulgaria do not have funding to facilitate any such programmes for their students at the moment. Nor do donors
prove willing to give money towards education of undergraduates. A joint project in this respect could therefore prove most useful and produce incredibly quick results.

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