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*Education of Journalists*

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**Educating Journalists**  
**Universal Ignoramuses or Highly-Educated Specialists?**

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*Summary*

Mass media today are an unavoidable part of life of contemporary civilization. Central to the information system of the mass media are journalists as the key “producers” of information. Their working methods have changed under pressure from state-of-the-art technological advances that have facilitated the functioning of the mass media. In the 1960s, journalists began their careers with a notepad and a pencil, and they are going to retire by using PCs, satellite communication, digital cameras, and electronic data bases. With time, journalists have become educated experts who continually broaden their knowledge and professional training. That is why permanent in-service training is a must for their future, since educated journalists are the most effective barrier to manipulations. A Croatian survey has shown that Croatian journalists are very interested in permanent education.

*1. Introduction*

Mass media have become the inescapable and prevalent segment of modern civilization. They have created a sturdy web of global satellite radio and TV stations, dailies with millions of readers simultaneously published on several continents, and the ever-increasing web pages. The global village has been completely globalised by the mass media which have been rapidly developing on the wings of contemporary computer technology. The end is nowhere in sight and the new solutions seem to pop out from the pages of sci-fi books.

Despite doomsday predictions, journalists are still the vital core of the information system. Mass media lean towards fun and entertainment, but they cannot do without information. And information is still produced by journalists and, it seems they will go on doing it. However, reporters could not stick to the old ways and the way of work, but had to adjust to the new needs and possibilities of the mass media. All professions change rapidly, but journalism probably belongs to those which are permanently affected by the swift changes brought about by the new technologies and the speed-of-light development of the media. The generation of reporters that started working in the early sixties using a notepad and a pencil, bad telephone links and complicated tele-

printers, is retiring by using PCs, satellite communications, digital cameras, electronic databases.

Journalists had to go a long way from “universal ignoramuses”, as they used to be dubbed, to highly-educated specialists who continually expand the scope of their knowledge and professional qualifications.

## 2. *Education of journalists*

Is journalism profession on a par with law or medicine? There are those who think that there are fundamental differences between journalism and other established professions. “In such professions, a student learns a great deal of knowledge and comparatively little technique, then sallies forth to practice. In a typical journalism school, the student learns a great deal of technique and very little about how things work – or how to find out how things work”, John Ullman argues.<sup>1</sup>

According to Ullman, reporters spend more time learning how to ask questions and how to write the answers in an intelligible form, applying the six Kipling’s principles of “six honest helpers” of journalists. According to this traditional understanding of journalism, all you need is to ask who, what, where, when, why and how, and accurately jot down what was said and faithfully describe what was seen. But even Ullman knows this is no longer enough so and in his advocacy of investigative journalism he says how “investigative reporters, of course, answer the same questions, but what distinguishes their reporting from that of most of their colleagues is that investigative reporters often know more about how things are supposed to work, and therefore know more about how to get the real answers.”<sup>2</sup> Contemporary journalists are no longer satisfied with asking questions, listening and looking, but are experts in their respective fields and have a thorough knowledge of the topics they report about. This is why journalists must be educated, not only at college-type institutions, but also by being provided regular vocational training.

Herbert J. Gans thinks that being a reporter has become a respectable profession primarily due to the fact that journalists promote progressive social ideas and fight for the truth, as they did in the Watergate scandal. “... these values also serve journalism as a profession, giving it a respected social role. Insofar as journalists are defenders of a set of values, they are more than technicians who transmit information from sources to audiences. Contemporary journalists do not, for the most part, see themselves as reformers; but ... are proud whenever a story results in official investigations and in legislative or administrative reform.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ullman John and Colbert Jan: “The Reporter’s Handbook”, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1991, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Gans, Herbert J.: “Deciding what’s news”, Vintage Books, New York, 1980, p. 205.

### 2.1. *How to educate journalists*

Journalists are acutely aware of the fact that a mere respect of professional standards cannot maintain their profession at a satisfactory level and that standards can be learned only in appropriate schools and colleges. That is why journalists are less and less uneducated youngsters who step into editors' offices from the street but more often highly educated people. Nevertheless, education of journalists is still a bone of contention.

“Basically, two major philosophies of journalistic education have prevailed”, Ray Hiebert, professor of journalism at the University of Maryland points out. “One is best represented by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism model, which is one year of professional, practical journalism study, at the master's level only, and only after four undergraduate years of liberal arts. ... Most other universities offer four-year undergraduate courses in journalism, mostly giving theoretical instruction and very little practical subjects.”<sup>4</sup>

American journalists of today have mostly graduated journalism from colleges and only a small fraction of the older guard is without a degree.

Most European journalist colleges last for four years, with predominantly theoretical subjects; journalists with degrees knock at the doors of editorial offices without enjoying special privileges in relation to other graduates.

### 2.2. *Two journalism studies*

In Croatia there are two journalism degree schools, both at the University of Zagreb. The Faculty of Political Science, department of journalism, is older, established, with numerous departments and a rich curriculum. The department of journalism at the Croatian Studies is only several years old and is still developing. The interest for both courses is huge among young people who want to go to college after high school. Most students work in journalism during their studies. Those who demonstrate talent and a knack for journalism begin to work part-time very early on, which frequently has a deleterious effect on their studies. There are no exact data how many students of journalism land a job in the profession of their choice, but as an illustration, we can look at the findings of a poll among the junior students of journalism at the Faculty of Political Science conducted in 1997. Out of 78 students, 53 worked part-time in journalism.

What is the educational profile of Croatian journalists? According to the poll conducted by the *Puls* Agency for the Croatian Journalistic Association, out of its 2,714 members (including associate members) 48.8% have college education, 43.8% have finished secondary school, 7.2% have two years of post-secondary education, .1% has an M. A. degree and .2% are Ph.D.s. It is clear that journalists are divided into two categories: those with high-school and those with a diploma degree. The reason that so many journalists do not finish their studies is that they begin to work early in journalism and

<sup>4</sup> Highlights of a Summit of Journalism Educators from Central and Eastern Europe and the United States, The Freedom Forum, Arlington, 1994, p. 7.

neglect their studies. Among the surveyed journalists, the biggest percent graduated from the Faculty of Arts (34.3%), 31.4% graduated from the Faculty of Political Science, followed by much lower percentages of the graduates from the Faculty of Law, Pedagogy and Economics. Among the special journalist courses or schools, most journalists attended those organised by major media houses, such as *Vjesnik* or *HTV*.<sup>5</sup>

### *2.3. The need for vocational and in-service training*

Looking at these data, it is not surprising that professional associations and trade unions in Croatia and the world have been paying a lot of attention to the education and vocational training of journalists. A rapid development of mass media should be accompanied by the corresponding professional skills and knowledge that are impossible to get at the traditional faculties. Even if college education were the best of all possible education, it cannot be foreseen in what direction journalism is to develop and which types of knowledge will be necessary for future journalists once they start working in their profession. That is why the International Federation of Journalists places education of journalists among its key strategic priorities for the future. The Croatian Journalist Association at its annual meeting in 1997 also emphasised education of journalists as one of its priorities. In line with this, they initiated the Journalistic Workshop which has taken place four times and was attended by about a hundred young journalists; in October 1998 the International Center for Educating Journalists of Central and Eastern Europe was launched in Opatija.

It is these specialised courses, workshops, seminars and centres for education that have become major venues for training journalists. They are no competition to the current faculties nor is their aim to replace them. Their purpose is to inform journalists about the latest developments in their profession, the latest technologies (particularly using computers, new technologies, the stylistic and linguistic novelties of the new media such as electronic newspapers, the Internet, and so on.)

### *3. What Croatian journalists think about education*

Due to the enormous significance of vocational training and education of journalists, and the lack of the research into the opinions of journalists, a poll was conducted among the participants of the annual assembly of the Croatian Journalist Association in October 1998 in Opatija. The questionnaire was filled by 40 journalists out of about a hundred representatives of all Croatian media, delegates of all branches of the Croatian Journalist Association. The number of the polled participants is small, but is made up of the experts who came to the assembly with the mandate to bring decisions about the strategic issues of journalism in Croatia. Thus, the results of the survey may be regarded as the relevant opinion of the representatives of Croatian journalists.

<sup>5</sup> Novinar, no. 6-7, 1997.

### 3.1. *Unanimously for vocational training*

The participants in the poll were unanimous in responding to the first question: “Do you think that Croatian journalists need vocational and in-service training?” There was no doubt: without vocational training there is no professional advancement. The need for vocational training was given the average mark of 4.7 on the scale of 1 to 5.

The surveyed journalists were unanimous regarding the response to the second question: “Are you satisfied with the existing possibilities of the vocational training of journalists?” The answer was: “Will do” (an equivalent to the numerical mark of 1.7). This obvious disproportion between the obvious need for vocational training and the dissatisfaction with the existing opportunities will probably be of use to the creators of educational schemes.

As we have already mentioned, there are two faculty departments of journalism in Croatia, so we wanted to learn what the polled journalists thought about them. The response to the question “Are the existing college departments of journalism the proper way of educating journalists?” was “Better something than nothing”, which corresponds to the numerical mark of 1.9 on a scale from 1 to 5. The department of journalism at the Faculty of Political Sciences fared better in comparison to the one at the Croatian Studies; the marks were 1.6 and 1.3 respectively. We wanted to see whether journalists think some other forms of tertiary education for journalists should be instituted. The options included: faculty for journalists, post-graduate courses, a higher school for journalism, or something else (write down what). The answer was a bit of a surprise: post-graduate courses! Due to the marked dissatisfaction with the existing departments of journalism, another solution was expected, not a mere higher level of the existing system of education. An analysis of the respondents showed that most of them had a college degree (28), more than twenty years of work experience, and that they would like to continue their education. In general, there is a great interest among journalists to obtain M. A. degrees, particularly since there is no adequate post-graduate study in Croatia. Apparently this is a void that ought to be filled; this is the backdrop against which the answer to the question which other forms of education are preferred must be judged. A faculty or a higher school of journalism did not prove interesting for the education of journalists.

### 3.2. *What kind of courses are necessary?*

In Croatia, there are several forms of additional in-service training of journalists. The tradition of journalism schools in principal media firms (like *Vjesnik* in the past and HTV today) has been long and good. The former “Vjesnikova novinarska škola”, led by Zlatko Munko, was a venerable institution and trained numerous, today very eminent, journalists. Editors have always wanted to ‘tailor’ journalists to fit the desired pattern in order to optimally meet their needs. Today, major media agencies organise courses for their new workers, and the Croatian Journalist Association has organised for the second time its Journalistic Workshop. In Sisak, the Embassy of Local Democracy has organised very successful courses for young journalists; AIM did the same in Vukovar for the journalists from Osijek and eastern Slavonia. That is why the following series of ques-

tions touched on this topic. The Journalistic Workshop of the Croatian Journalist Association got a C (good); the opinion was that it should become a permanent form of in-service training of young journalists (3.95). There is no doubt that other forms of vocational training should also be organised (3.9). Which forms? There was some confusion here, because the respondents accepted almost all the offered answers together, and not separately. So, the surveyed journalists think that courses for beginners are necessary, as well as various specialised courses, plus internal courses organised by individual firms, in-service training of journalists working in particular firms, and courses about the application of computer technologies.

### 3.3. *Who would teach and who would finance?*

Numerous debates raged about who should teach at the courses and seminars for the vocational training of journalists. We offered the following answers: only professors of journalism; Croatian journalists exclusively, only foreign journalists and experts or a combination of professors and journalists, local and foreign.

The latter mixture got the biggest number of votes and thus removed all the dilemmas about who should teach. This is probably also the answer to the proponents of 'pure' solutions, who are either against journalists as teachers or reject professors of journalism as persons who are out of sync with practice. This also speaks against the theories of conspiracy according to which foreign journalists and media experts are more into propaganda than teaching about the media.

Very often the problem are finances. These courses are not cheap and it is difficult to find sponsors. The biggest number of the existing courses, seminars, and workshops is sponsored, and there is almost no seminar for which the participants carry the burden of financial responsibility. That is why the answer came as a surprise: participants should pay themselves (4.02)!

Other solutions were offered: the courses should be financed from the national budget, by the media houses, by foreign donations and the combination of donations, media houses' financial aid and personal contribution. The answer to this question can also probably be explained by the composition of the respondents, eminent journalists with a relatively high social status who find it acceptable to pay for their training from their own purses. However, younger journalists are not financially settled. Most of them live on low salaries or on irregular fees so they find it hard to allocate a portion of their meagre funds for in-service training. Obviously, the solution is somewhere in between, in the said combination of donations, media houses' aid and personal contributions.

And finally, we were interested to learn how much the polled journalists were willing to contribute to the vocational training of journalists? The following answers were offered: Unwilling to help; Does not depend on me; Financial contribution; As a teacher; By lobbying for donations. A large majority would like to contribute as teachers (3.6)! A number of the respondents wrote on the questionnaires that they would like to take part in the courses as teachers! This is also understandable given the composition of the respondents, the most eminent Croatian journalists who would like to pass on their knowledge and experiences to their younger colleagues. The experience of the

Journalistic Workshop proves the point. About fifty distinguished Croatian journalists took part in it. Not one turned down the invitation, and almost nobody asked for a fee. Some of them donated their fees to the Solidarity Fund!

Nevertheless, this response should be taken with a grain of salt. Namely, most respondents had never (15) or only once (10) attended a course for journalists. Having this in mind, their participation in the capacity of lecturers takes on a new dimension.

### 3.4. *The respondents' profile*

The composition of the respondents can help us understand more easily some of the responses. Here is the profile of the average polled journalist: male, works for newspapers, has more than twenty years of work experience, holds a diploma degree, has never been at an in-service training course for journalists and in his environment there are no vocational training opportunities. The composition of the respondents is shown on Charts 1-5.

## 4. *Conclusion*

The journalist profession is becoming more respectable in the world and in Croatia. "By all the conventional indicators, national journalists are solidly upper-middle-class. All but a small handful of older men and women are college graduates, and many have postgraduate degrees. Newsmagazine journalists atill are educated primarily at the Ivy League schools or equivalent private universities in other parts of the country; even most television journalists, some of whom grew up in lower-middle-class homes, have attended "quality" schools." <sup>6</sup> In Croatia young people also want to get a solid college education. The number of applicants for the department of journalism at the Faculty of Political Science in 1998 is very telling: there were eleven applicants for each successful candidate!

The conclusion is obvious: young people are interested in journalism, want to get a diploma and in the process to acquire the skills and the knowledge necessary for today's journalists. Journalism is no longer a profession that evokes images of false attractions, or that lures young people with romantic delusions about travels, big money, easy life, jet-set frolics, and so on. Young people have lost their innocence regarding this, since every day they hear news about the prosecution of journalists, violation of their rights, pressures endured and restrictions of their freedoms. Isn't it frightening that nineteen journalists were killed in 1998 while doing their job, the information disclosed by the organisation *Reporters without frontiers*? Aren't more than five hundred legal actions against Croatian journalists a sufficiently clear portent for young people how thorny the path they have embarked upon is?

<sup>6</sup> Gans, Herbert J.: op. cit., p. 209.

However, the professional challenges are apparently bigger than the difficulties journalists are confronted with. The dignity of the profession stems from its constant fight for freedoms, universal and professional. Worldwide there are almost daily major meetings at which the significance of the freedoms of the media is emphasised as well as the importance of journalists in their struggle against negative events of all kinds. Such journalists can no longer be universal ignoramuses, mere conduit for someone else's attitudes, obedient spokespersons for other people's ideas, reporters who have elevated self-censorship to perfection. Such journalism still exists, deeply-rooted, difficult to eradicate, but young people – at least at the start of their careers – do not even think to take part in such journalism.

Investigative journalism, fighting for the truth, promotion of progressive ideas, revealing the weaknesses of the powerful and empowering the weak – these are the attributes of the kind of journalism that young people prefer. They belong to a new, globalised world, in which borders have dissolved into the ubiquitous network of a digital world in which everybody can communicate with everybody else, without intermediaries and ideological barriers. “Despite different national cultures, despite different patterns of professional education, despite different labour patterns of journalists, the stated professional values of the journalists surveyed do not differ greatly from nation to nation.” This is what Colin Sparks and Slavko Splichal wrote in their 1989 study of journalism in several states.<sup>7</sup> In his analysis of the sociological aspects of news creation, Michael Schudson claims that professionalism is a set of values and practices that protect the Polish journalist from manipulation by the Communist Party, government bureaucrats, and the sponsoring organization of each newspaper or journal.<sup>8</sup>

Professional standards are the best and – with a little help of ethics – the most efficient obstacle for manipulation. Professional standards are provided by good-quality education. Uneducated journalists are an easier prey to all those who want to have control over the media: powerbrokers, politicians, parties, ideologies, advertisers, corporations, managers, show-business stars, sport clubs, etc.

That is why the interest in the education of journalists is natural, understandable and above all professionally justifiable. We should provide it ample support and adequate attention.

<sup>7</sup> Curran James i Gurevitch Michael: *Mass Media and Society*, Edward Arnold, London, 1991, p. 150.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



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Chart 1. In which media the respondents work

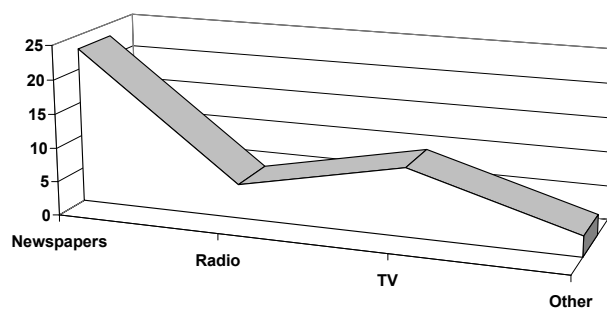


Chart 2. Gender composition

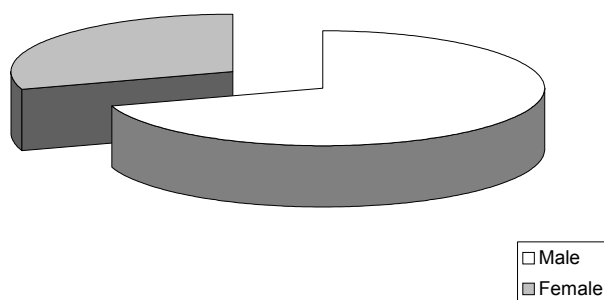


Chart 3. Respondents' qualifications

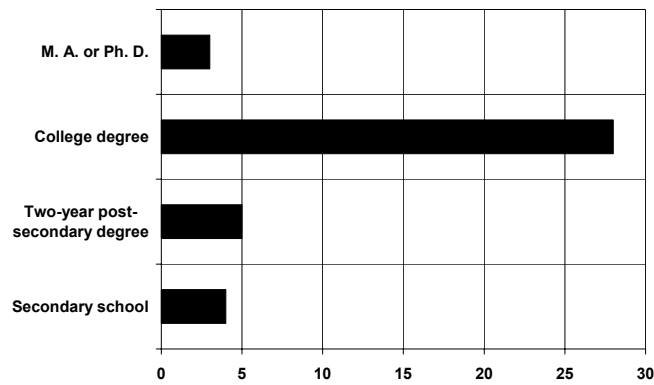


Chart 4. Respondents' work experience

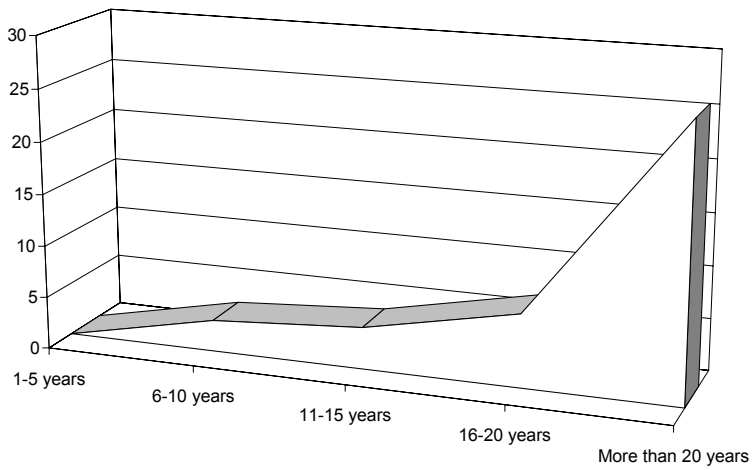


Chart 5. Number of courses for journalists taken

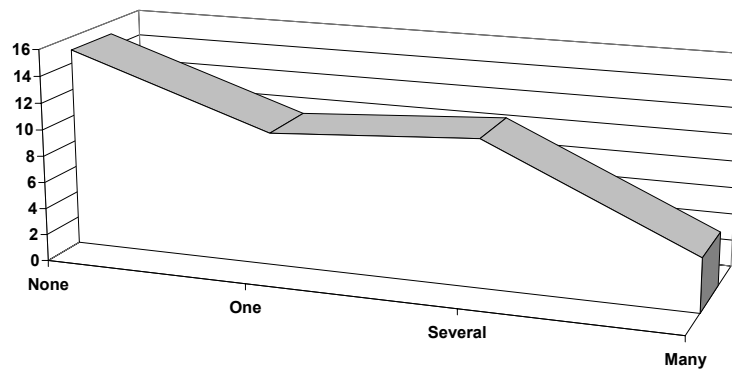


Chart 6. In-service training for journalists at workplace

