Press Freedom and Pluralism on the Micro Level: Journalistic Qualifications and Professionalization

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Professionalization as a supportive factor for press freedom and pluralism

To meet the standards of the journalistic role in a democratic society, professional socialization is a decisive factor on the micro level of prerequisites. Regarding structural prerequisites, press freedom and pluralism depend on law and constitution, politics, cultural and economic influences on a macro level (see McQuail 1992: 99ff. and Czepek 2005: 19ff.). On a medium level, it also depends on media ownership, the medium and its concept, including target group, thematic choice, the role of interest groups – be it political, religious, economic or other – and the organisation and decision-making processes within the media companies. These structural prerequisites have an influence on press freedom and pluralism. They are, however, not a guarantee. A journalist's every-day decisions about whether to choose a certain topic and how to cover it – one-sided, critical, with in-depth research or superficially – do not exclusively depend on these structural questions. In countries with a good structural basis for press freedom and pluralism, journalists, nevertheless, might not always use the possibilities they have. This might result from economic pressure of, or on, the media company and the concept of the medium itself (medium level). On a micro level, press freedom and pluralism, however, also depend on how a journalist defines his or her professional role and on the quality of journalistic skills which are vital to fulfil this role.[1]

The journalistic role in a democratic society is often defined as (see Hallin and Mancini 2004 and Czepek 2005):

■ A watchdog who has a control function within a society
■ A neutral reporter on events and developments to enable a fact-funded formation of opinions, and as
■ A commentator to contribute to different views in a concept of external pluralism.

A precondition for the development of a journalistic role, decision making criteria, and journalistic routines, is the professionalization of journalists. This article discusses which qualification aims support the journalistic role in the democratic sense and thus support press freedom and pluralism. Which competences are needed to achieve these qualification aims? And potentially, how do different types of journalistic professionalization processes, like journalism schools, university studies or training on the job, support the relevant competences and qualification aims?

Professionalization, competences and qualification

Journalistic qualifications describe the functional requirements for working successfully as a journalist (see Kron 2004: 238). Regarding the training process, these functional requirements can be transferred into qualification aims, which are found at the end of a successful professionalization process. The definition of these aims depends on the definition of the journalistic role, here the role in a democratic society as described above.

To fulfil these qualifications, a journalist needs certain competences.[2] These competences describe a disposition for journalistic action. The expression 'key competences' hints at the fact that competences are a precondition in meeting qualification. Competence in this sense includes knowledge, values and behavioural standards (see Weischenberg 1995: 492). Apart from a range of competences, journalistic action requires ability, willingness and the possibility to act.

Figure 1: Analytic matrix on journalistic competences. *Source:* Nowak 2007: 93.

Thus competences are not a guarantee but a prerequisite to fulfilling journalistic qualifications (see Schobel 2005: 106).

The advantage of distinguishing qualification aims and competences lies in the possibility of structuring journalistic training more adequately. Gaining competences is a dynamic process; for example competences lead to additional competences because they form a network (see Erpenbeck and Heyse 1999: 26). Qualification aims are less flexible because they are defined at a specific moment for a certain situation. Qualification aims of the 1980s are only partly the same as qualification aims today, because society as well as media has changed. Nevertheless, journalists may have gained competences in the 1980s that enable them to fulfil the qualification aims of today's media world.

So after defining qualification aims, competences have to be identified and trained in, which then leads to journalistic qualifications.

Defining journalistic qualification aims

The definition of the journalistic role as a watchdog, neutral reporter and commentator is a value-based decision for a democratic society. This decision includes a responsibility not only for the journalistic product but also for the effect of journalistic production on society. This understanding of the journalistic role comprises basic journalistic skills, for example being able to apply journalistic routines and programmes like organizing, presenting, gathering, selecting and checking information (see Rühl 1980). Mastering these routines and programmes will enable a journalist to fulfil everyday tasks like the production of a medium. This is the basis for journalistic work.

However, it takes more to be a good journalist:

- Detailed knowledge about one or more fields of reporting in order to be able to check experts' arguments and recognize contexts and problems
- Systematic reflection in order to be able to gain a certain independence of opinions and manipulations by politicians, companies, lobby associations, apparent victims and so on
- An analytical and distanced approach to topics of reporting as well as the medium, the journalistic working process and the media system. This supports the journalistic freedom and responsibility.

These qualifications are fundamental for the journalistic role in a democratic society. Reflection and an analytical and autonomous approach enable journalists to adapt to changes in the media and to react adequately to new situations. Journalistic routines, like gathering, selecting, checking and presenting information in combination with systematic reflection, support pluralistic reporting and gives motivation for well-grounded research and to *actively* choose and consider topics, views and problems outside the mainstream, instead of only reacting to PR- or event-driven impulses.[3]

This leads to three sections of journalistic qualifications:

1. Production – being able to produce a medium
2. Development and reflection – being able to develop a medium
3. Autonomy and responsibility – being able to integrate democratic values.

The following paragraphs analyse which qualifications belong to these sections and how they can support press freedom and pluralism:

Production involves

- Being able to produce journalistic quality.
- Being able to fulfil journalistic programmes and role requirements.
- Being able to deal with journalistic organizations.
- Gaining specialized knowledge in a certain field of reporting.

This list of qualifications enables a journalist to do his or her everyday work, independent of the state of press freedom and pluralism in the country he or she is working in. This depends, of course, in some points, on the definition of journalistic roles, programmes and journalistic quality (see Weischenberg 1998). If the journalistic role is defined as a must-be-critical role, then this is already an important qualification for the support of press freedom and pluralism.

Apart from these definitions, with these qualifications, a journalist can produce a good article or TV item on the professional level but possibly avoid certain topics or situations to avoid problems with advertising clients, the editor in chief, politicians or the biggest employer in the region. This would touch on the question of press freedom or pluralism. The level of reflection needed for this first section of qualification aims is relatively low.

The second section, *development and reflection*, involves

- Analysing and reflecting regularly on one's own journalistic work and the media system.
- Being able to transform this reflection into journalistic action and thus react adequately to unknown situations.
- Being able to develop journalism according to changes in society, technology, media use and so on.

These qualifications enable a journalist to adapt to future qualifications in a transforming world. It is the view beyond the end of one's own nose. However, the way journalism is developed and the quality of the reaction to a new situation depend on values. An editor-in-chief, for example, could react to a decrease in copies sold by avoiding critical or complicated topics, or he/she could decide to write more positively about, for instance, big local industries. This is a reflection-based reaction to a new situation, but the value behind the decision is merely economic and does not include the values of press freedom and pluralism. This second section, therefore, is also not decisive for press freedom and pluralism. However, the third one is:

Autonomy and responsibility involves

- Taking responsibility for one's own work, its consequences for people and society.
- Being able to act according to journalistic ethics.
- Keeping internal autonomy independent of media companies, political parties, religious groups, economic pressure and so on.

Autonomy is a counterproductive journalistic qualification in a society that suppresses pluralism and press freedom. Autonomy and responsibility support the freedom of speech, the pluralism of topics and a critical approach as part of the journalistic role. Thus, to support press freedom and pluralism, journalistic professionalization must involve the training of autonomy on a basis of journalistic ethical standards.
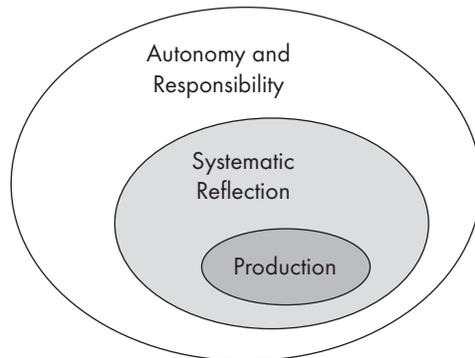

Figure 2: Three sections of qualification aims.

Training of relevant competences

To achieve qualification aims, an organized professionalization process[4] trains certain competences which have first to be identified (see Figure 1). The analytical basis for identifying the relevant competences is a matrix developed by the author (Figure 3) (see Nowak 2007: 91–8).

   This matrix shows that to achieve operational competence, for example to actually work successfully as a journalist, a combination of professional competences, expert and orientation knowledge and key competences are needed. The three sections of qualification aims refer to all elements of this matrix. It is easy to see that from 'production' over 'reflection' to 'autonomy and responsibility' the key competences gain importance:

- ■ 'Production', as a sector of qualification aims, includes the training of competences such as methodological and technical skills, knowledge of media and specialized and general knowledge. Among the key competences, the first row plays the important role: learning competence, personal, social and communicative competences and creativity as well as the ability to organize from the second row.
- ■ 'Reflection' as a sector of qualification aims includes – apart from the competences mentioned under 'production' – all professional competences and, among key competences, the ability to reflect and to analyse.
- ■ 'Autonomy and responsibility' as a sector of qualification aims moreover needs the key competences value orientation and readiness to take responsibility.

From a didactic point of view, this means that qualification aims that support press freedom and pluralism cannot only be trained through traditional lectures where a professor or instructor
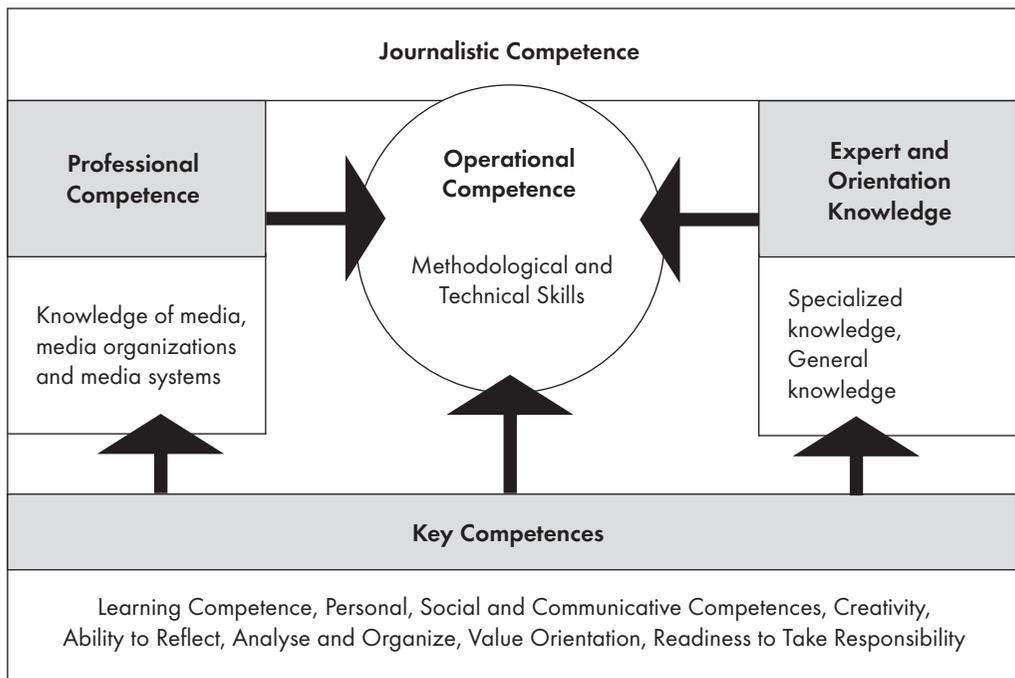
Figure 3: Analytic matrix on journalistic competences. *Source:* Nowak 2007: 93.

passes on his/her knowledge by reading or disclaiming a script. This might work with knowledge transfer, although even here integrating new information into previous knowledge, and thus into the mid- and long-term memory, will be difficult without applying other didactical methods (see Edelmann 2000: 280). With the training of journalistic skills and key competences it is nearly impossible to limit teaching methods to traditional lectures: operational competence requires the operational processes of acquiring these competences.

Based on the concepts of Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia (1967), learning target taxonomies, which limit teaching methods to lectures, would mean to only train cognitive learning targets. On this basis, the author has developed an advanced model of learning targets (see Nowak 2007: 155–61) including:

- Cognitive learning targets: thinking, knowledge, problem-solving, intellectual abilities.
- Operational learning targets: observable skills.
- Affective learning targets: emotions, values, opinions, attitudes, motivation.

This indicates that, in traditional lectures, operational and affective targets cannot be tackled. However, all types of targets are vital for training journalistic competences as described above. Writing articles or interviewing people needs operational learning targets, as they are operational competences. Training value-orientation and readiness for responsibility is only possible by also applying affective learning targets. Cognitive, operational and affective

learning targets do not coexist independently, but have to be trained in a combination of theory and practice. This illustrates the analytical matrix of competences in this article (see Figure 3). The integration of theory and practice demands interactive and open didactical methods such as discussions, working groups, projects and problem-oriented learning instead of mere top-down methods like lectures (see Terhart 2005: 89–90).

Adequate forms of journalistic training

Competences supporting press freedom and pluralism can only be trained in an interactive and project-based learning environment, integrating theory and practices, as operational and affective learning targets take centre stage. But which forms of journalism training support this approach?

Fröhlich and Holtz-Bacha (2003) identify four categories of countries that represent their *dominant* system of journalism education:

- Journalism training mainly on a university level (Finland, Sweden, Spain, United States, Canada).
- Journalism training in stand-alone journalism schools which are sometimes linked with university level (Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Italy).
- Journalism training on a university level as well as in stand-alone journalism schools (France, Germany,[5] Ireland, Portugal).
- Journalism training primarily as training on the job (Great Britain, Austria).

The problem with these categories is that they are not sharply defined and that they are based on the analysis of a limited range of countries in Western Europe and North America. Hiebert and Gross (2003: 257ff.) describe journalism education in Eastern Europe as still being in transformation, as the journalistic role in the society as well as educational structures are still being discussed.

In the following, I will give an analysis of potential concerning the support of press freedom and pluralism in different types of journalistic training.

Training on the job is, in many countries, a common access to professional journalism (see Fröhlich and Holtz-Bacha 2003). It means that journalists-to-be have little or no theoretical training but learn to be a journalist while they are already working as one. They learn by example with, as role models, their colleagues, who give information and comment on the beginners' work. Qualification aims are not explicitly set but the aim is usually to be accepted as a journalist – to get a contract – or, from the other point of view, to integrate a beginner as a useful colleague into the team. Concerning qualification aims, training on the job emphasizes the production section and neglects development/reflection and autonomy/responsibility. Although the competences that belong to the production section will be imparted, profound knowledge and experience is a matter of coincidence and thus not a reliable part of this form of journalistic training. Training on the job is, therefore, not an adequate form of journalistic training for the support of press freedom and pluralism.

Traineeships are the organized form of training on the job. Qualification aims are usually set; a minimum amount of theoretical training is often included. Although traineeships do not depend on fortunate coincidences as much as training on the job, they are still not an adequate

form of journalism training for the support of press freedom and pluralism. The negative points mentioned under 'training on the job' also apply, to a considerable degree, to traineeships. Reflection, responsibility and, to a certain degree, autonomy, however, might better be trained in traineeships rather than in unorganized training on the job, as long as seminars are included covering these topics. The question is to what depth they are covered. The training of journalistic autonomy, however, depends highly on the employer and his/her ethical and democratic values. If profit maximization is the highest value, the trainee will not be encouraged to develop an autonomous and responsible journalistic role.

Non academic journalism schools are often owned by media companies; some are owned by non-profit organizations or churches, or are private and commercial. Journalism schools offer an ambiguous picture, not only in terms of ownership but also in terms of their focus on media, topics and teaching methods. In Germany, journalism schools often emphasize practical training and neglect the theoretical background. Nevertheless, they enjoy a good reputation because of their emphasis on the practical training of methodological and technical skills, including reflection on journalistic products and ethical standards. Journalism school alumni can often easily start working as journalists, as they have had a good training in production-based competences. Professional competences are often limited to the journalistic product. The qualification aim of 'responsibility' is often important in journalism schools. The role of 'autonomy' as a qualification aim depends on ownership, as described above under 'traineeship'.

Universities vary as much as non-academic journalism schools. As a tendency, however, many universities offer a purely academic education, which enables alumni to pursue a career at a university or research institute. A good academic education in mass communication theory, however, does not necessarily train a student to work as a journalist. Older journalists often recommend studying any subject at a university and then entering journalism by training on the job. This obviously disregards the integration of theory and practice and especially of professional competence. Universities, however, have the potential to fulfil all relevant qualification aims and standards of training competences mentioned above, as long as they integrate theory and practice and agree to train journalists and not academic researchers, as the competences needed differ.

Vocational training cannot be a unique source of journalistic training as argued under 'traineeship' and 'training on the job'. It is, however, important for the adaptation of competences to changes in media and society in the sense of life-long learning. This is especially important for the sections on 'production' and 'reflection/development'.

This comparison of forms of journalistic training shows that different types of training have differing potential to support press freedom and pluralism. Journalism schools, and especially universities, have a high potential to support press freedom and pluralism, although many might not use their potential.

Conclusions

The contribution of journalistic professionalization to press freedom and pluralism lies in a clear connection between production skills, reflection and responsibility, with an emphasis on responsibility. An organized training process such as universities and journalism schools offer can, however, only support press freedom and pluralism when the training processes fulfil

certain requirements. Traditional lectures in front of large groups support, above all, cognitive learning. Competences like reflection, value orientation and responsibility require open learning methods which support affective involvement of students, like discussion, working groups, projects and problem-oriented learning (POL). Nevertheless, the central prerequisite for a training process which supports press freedom and journalism is the definition of the journalistic role as autonomous and critical.

Notes

1. For professionalization, socialization and role development see Saxer and Kull 1981: 29; Weischenberg 1995: 494ff.; Gruber 1975: 71–2 and Heinz 2002: 397–8.
2. 'Competence' can also be defined as a natural, inborn ability, in contrast to 'performance' as a learnt ability. This distinction, however, is not flexible enough to describe a training process as qualification aims change with changes in the media and in society. Gaining competences is neither inborn nor static but a dynamic process.
3. This shows that prerequisites on the macro- and the medium level as defined in the beginning of this article are vital for journalistic action on the micro level.
4. Concerning the concept of professionalization see Ronneberger and Rühl 1992 and Weischenberg 1995.
5. In Germany, however, the most common way to enter journalism is via a traineeship called 'Volontariat' with a duration of between one and a half and two years. They are supposed to include some weeks of theoretical training. Although the word 'Volontariat' implies a non-paid internship, it is usually a job with a fixed salary. However, academic training has been gaining relevance since the mid 1970s.

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