

Education of Journalists in Albania

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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 Albania, 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. EDUCATION LEVEL OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

Albanian media have gone through many stages of development since the publication of the first opposition newspaper *Rilindja Demokratike* in 1991. By contrast to year 1991, when there was only one opposition paper and only one state-owned TV station, there are now over 15 daily national newspapers. Seventy percent of those are private-owned. There are also five national weekly magazines and dozens of other smaller local newspapers and magazines, some of which are NGO papers and bulletins. In addition, there are about 70 private TV and radio broadcasters throughout the country. While print media scene seems somewhat consolidated, given the fact that printing was the only full gear working industry in the last ten years, broadcast media have been around only in the last four years, and they are therefore facing much greater difficulties.

Alongside this boom of media outlets, a new generation of journalists emerged in the 1990s, rich in passion and ambitions but poor in professional skills. Proper education for journalists in Albania was nowhere in sight during the Communist period. The Journalism Department got closed down in 1973, but even this limited education was ideological rather than professional.

In early 2001 the research department of Albanian Media Institute did an extensive research project on broadcast and print media situation in Albania 2000. Among other data collected in the course of research, researches assessed the education level of journalists working in the print and broadcast media. According to this survey, carried out with assistance of directors of the broadcast media and publishers, there were 1,366 journalists working in Albania last year. Out of these, only 8.2% held the BA degree of the Department of Journalism.

At the same time, the percentage of journalists who had completed postgraduate education (usually not related to journalism) is as low as 0.07. The percentage of working journalists with only high school diplomas is 0.06. This percentage tends to be higher for local media outside Tirana, which in most of the cases have very small newsrooms and work with limited staff. According to the same survey, more than half of the interviewed journalists have gone through different training courses run by Albanian Media Institute (AMI) and Soros Media Center (SMC).

Around 100 students work in different newsrooms of Albanian media. Most of them are employed in Tirana, which boasts the greatest concentration of media outlets in the country. Most of the students employed by media come from the Department of Journalism. Students majoring in journalism often work with local media in their original places of residence over summer school holidays. These local media are keen to take on board young people, as professional as they can be, since the competition level on both local and national media market is getting harsher everyday. This early employment however interferes with the progress in studies of these students: while working experience is beneficial, their work without firm background that completed studies provide is usually of lower quality than it would have normally been upon their graduation.

The overwhelming portion of people currently working in the media who have not majored in journalism is a strong indication of how badly needed the training for journalists in the country is.

2. CLASSICAL UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Albania does not have a consolidated tradition in the field of journalism education. The first school was the one established within the Department of Political and Legal Sciences, fashioned after the Soviet model. This school lasted for ten years to be succeeded later on by different kinds of courses, taught by the very same teachers.

The new school, part of the Department of History and Philology, was opened in 1992. Its foundation was perceived as a necessity due to rapidly increasing number of newspapers of different orientations and profiles, and their desperate need for new journalists. As in other post-communist countries, the Albanian press during the transition period has experienced gradual transformation from propagandistic journalism to informative. Journalism now tends to be a business and, as such, it aspires for professionalism.

The school at the Department of History and Philology, the only journalism school in the university system for the time being, has so far produced six generations of journalists. Meanwhile, a great part of the current students are employed in various media outlets. More than 100 students from Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro are currently enrolled.

Over 30% of the students cover a significant share of work in Albanian newspapers, magazines, radio and TV broadcasters.

The Department employs 6 full-time teachers. The remainder of the departmental staff consists of visiting lecturers. In addition, a US instructor is affiliated with the Department, teaching the allocated courses. There is only one classroom, which can conditionally be termed a computer lab. That is where the writing classes are taught and the *Reporteri*, student newspaper, is done. There is also one teachers' office. The department-owned equipment includes: 15 computers, four printers, one scanner, one computer for layout practicing, one TV set, videos and cameras, few books in English and even fewer in Albanian. As humble as it is, even this lab had to come as a donation from AMI, IREX, IOM, and Press Now.

Considering that these facilities are insufficient for regular practice by students, other modalities have been sought, mainly through TVSH (Albanian Public TV), Radio Ime and Albanian Media Institute.

With regard to the relationship between practical and theoretical education, theory and practice are well interwoven in those more practical courses (News Writing; News Reporting; Media Analysis; Media Ethics; Radio Journalism; TV Journalism; Editing; Comment/Analysis; Professional Practice (working on *Reporteri* newspaper); Editorials; Photojournalism; Investigative Journalism). The course opens up with a theoretical introduction (a 2-hours class) whereupon the class splits up into smaller groups that then work on application of theoretical elements in practice. Practical education sometimes also includes joint broadcast productions, as is the case with the private radio station Radio Ime that airs live news prepared by the students.

However, insufficient technical capacities remain an obstacle to continuous practical exercises by students despite inventiveness of their teachers, who organise practical classes outside the Department.

Another fact worth mentioning is that a number of students work at different newsrooms of print and broadcast media, but this practice has its downside as well as advantages. The advantage of working in these media is that the students become familiar with the job and its various techniques, and in so doing they gain experience and professional skills. On the other hand, there is the risk of obtaining 'deformed' *ad hoc* knowledge, which is not based on sound theoretical foundations.

Problems and difficulties are many, but one to be noted is certainly the scarcity of practical experience. Class attendance is a real problem since many of journalism students already work for various print and broadcast media. This is accompanied by the lack of a specialized staff and technical resources, no postgraduate studies and last but not the least - a tremendous scarcity of relevant literature in foreign languages, but especially in Albanian.

Publications on mass media and related issues are extremely few. The fact that the situation in the newsrooms of various media outlets where a considerable number of students work differs significantly from the one depicted by lectures at school leads students to experience difficulty in applying the knowledge acquired. However, it can be said that students do possess basic journalism skills and clear professional orientation upon their graduation.

3. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF EDUCATION

Albania of the day is not abounding with organisations providing alternative forms of education in addition to training offered by the Department of Journalism at the University of Tirana. The only organization offering continuous training for journalists at the moment is the Albanian Media Institute (AMI.) This non-profit, non-governmental organization emerged from the merger of two mother-organizations, the previous Albanian Media Institute and the Soros Media Center (SMC) that decided to join forces in April 2001. These two organizations had been the main actors in the field of training for media professionals during the first decade of transition.

AMI and SMC used to implement various joint projects in order to avoid overlapping. In this way, AMI and SMC acted complementary prior to their merger: AMI had been more active in Radio Training while SMC focused in TV training. Their collaboration stretched to print media projects as well.

AMI was registered as an NGO in December 1995 upon an agreement between the Albanian League of Journalists and the Association of Professional Journalists. At the beginning AMI was funded by the Danish School of Journalism through a grant of the Danish Government (DANIDA). After that AMI received a grant from UNESCO, which aimed at setting up a digital radio studio to be used as a training facility for radio journalists.

The main objective of AMI is development of professional standards of journalism and support to free and independent media in Albania. AMI has organized numerous training courses, seminars, roundtables, conferences and research projects with these objectives in mind.

The Soros Foundation through its Media Center, established in 1993, strongly supported but also initiated training of journalists abroad and in the country, and publication of books on Albanian media. SMC organized hundreds of professional training courses for operators, sound technicians, cameramen, mostly held at the SMC premises where a fully-equipped TV studio was located. Extensive collaboration with BBC and Deutsche Welle allowed SMC to organize a training with Albanian trainers, especially those from broadcasting media. SMC has continuously facilitated improvement and preparation of media legislation in Albania, and it has also organized workshops focused on media legislation issues. All this experience of working

with and for Albanian media enabled SMC to produce a database on Albanian media between 1993 and 1998.

AMI nowadays possesses high-quality training facilities (complete radio & TV studios, Internet connection) as well as didactic materials available in the Institute's library. This enhances its possibility to implement various projects of practical nature rather than purely theoretical programmes.

It is important to note that there are no independent schools offering continuous training for journalists. Although there are sporadic courses or seminars run by different organizations, none of them offers consistent and continuous education.

AMI does organize frequent training and systematic courses aimed at further professionalisation of journalists but this form of education lacks the continuity and degree-awarding nature of the university system. However, it offers an alternative to university-sponsored education. The courses are taught mainly by renown and experienced foreign journalists, PR and IT experts, etc. Another advantage of these courses/seminars/workshops is discussion which they inspire among participants, something that Albanian education has always lacked.

In this regard, the Institute has always aspired to form teams of local trainers so that training becomes more convenient and accessible, and thus more frequent in the future. For instance, one of the most successful projects implemented by AMI and Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development is the Radio Training Project, which resulted in the creation of a team of local radio trainers. These trainers can now be considered fully qualified to tutor local radio journalists, and they are available all the time, without dependence upon foreign experts for satisfaction of media training needs in the country.

Funding-wise, Albanian Media Institute remains dependent on external sources. Since this organization is both non-government and non-profit, support from other organizations or governments is and will be crucial for the future of its training activities.

By contrast, the Soros Media Center has been a branch of the Open Society Foundation and as such has benefited from funding provided by its overarching foundation. However, now that the two main training institutions have merged, they will operate under the principles of Albanian Media Institute so far, namely – near to full dependence on external support.

It is important to point out that official state institutions have provided no support whatsoever to projects and training run by AMI and SMC. As a matter of fact, support runs the other way: the University of Tirana or, more specifically its Department of Journalism has been donated equipment by these two non-governmental organizations. However, the faculty staff has always readily taken part in various projects implemented by Albanian Media Institute and Soros Media Center.

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

As already pointed out, international donors have played a crucial role in the education of journalists done by training centres in the country. Nowadays, six years since the foundation of AMI and eight years of SMC's operation, these two organizations, now merged together as AMI, have relatively stable partners for different projects and training courses aimed at media development in general and education of journalists in particular.

This long-lasting cooperation is an indication that long-term strategy has been designed and implemented. This is especially true for the cases where training was devised to source a team of local trainers who could then pass on their knowledge and skills to local journalists. For example, trainers in different fields have emerged from the activities of the South East European Network for Professionalisation of the Media Network (SEENPM). In a broader sense, these particular activities constitute a test of validity and success of training projects organized by, and with the support of, international donors, and consequently probe their long-term strategy. On a finer note, a new trend seems to be taking over in the relationship between local training organizations and their international donors. While international donors used to be the ones to have the last say on the form of projects, methods and target, their requirements and recommendations now tend to be more relaxed, transferring more real power (and implicitly trust) to locally based training institutions. This new trend is a natural product of successful long-standing cooperation among international donors, implementing centres and local media organizations that have for years now enjoyed good and mutually beneficial relationship.

This tendency indicates the increasing confidence of international donors towards their local partners, as well as further strengthening and consolidation of the latter. These organizations are gradually assuming more responsibilities related to the designation of different projects. Already quoted example of the team of radio trainers illustrates this tendency rather well: their skills and knowledge will be tested during the second phase of the project. AMI has been given a considerably great freedom to determine the shape and target of the project. During the following phase they will do in-house training for several local radios. In this way, besides transferring their knowledge to the others, the team of trainers will hopefully start to establish a tradition of continuous training, independent of the presence of foreign experts.

5. HOW LOCAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS PERCEIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

For many understandable reasons, training activities tend to be primary located in Tirana. Consequently, primary beneficiaries are Tirana-based journalists. Local media outlets outside the capital are constantly plagued by severe economic conditions, lack of proper

equipment, and fierce competition by both national and Tirana-based media. Struggling with these problems, while lacking proper organization, contacts and funding for training activities, local media are constantly dependent on national training institutes based in Tirana. These institutes invite local media representatives to participate in different courses and workshops whenever possible. For example, during the electoral campaign for local elections last year IREX started encouraging and supporting local media to air open debates among election candidates. Press Now has also supported publishing of a newspaper in Gjirokastra and a printing house in Berat.

Moreover, there are courses and workshops designed specifically to the benefit of local media. Apart from the in-house training project, targeted only to local radios, another example of training aimed at local media only is training programme for young cameramen working for local TV broadcasters. Equipment of local broadcasters is lagging behind the capital-based broadcast media, and so is most of the staff using them. In the light of this situation, local media remain a top priority of all training efforts.

The small number of people employed by local media outlets and acute lack of coordination on their part has impeded opening of a regional training institute. There is only one other media-training institute in the country apart from AMI, the Regional Center for Media Studies and Training (RCMST). Founded in early 2001, this organization directs its activities to media in Southern Albania. Although RCMST sets an example for similar efforts in other parts of the country, this organization has a long way to go before surmounting all immediate difficulties and getting a good record of significant activities in assisting the local media. Aspiring for this, it will be hard for RCMST to grow self-sustainable and independent of bigger, national training institutes such as AMI.

6. WHAT NEXT

One of the key preconditions for development of efficient and modern system of education for journalists in Albania is rapid transformation and modernization of overall university education, including improvements both in curricula and in technical capacities.

It is also of crucial importance to advance projects and institutions that promote alternative forms of education and training of journalists and media professionals as a supplement to insufficient academic education of journalists. Hence future development of education in the field of journalism is inseparable from further strengthening of existing training institutes. These institutes have gained significant experience in training, and they already possess the know-how as well as the necessary facilities. They are therefore most qualified to offer alternative forms of education for journalists, complementing the study programmes run by the University of Tirana.

Another possibility for advancing education in this important field is to create highly professional teams of local trainers, equipped and qualified of continuous intervention in education of media professionals independently of international agencies and trainers. In other words, building local training capacity seems to be another strong possibility for advancing educational efforts in media sphere.

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