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## Laboratory Section

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STEPHAN RUSS-MOHL\*

### Communication Science for the Media Industry *The European Journalism Observatory as a Service Provider and Educational Project*<sup>1</sup>

Research funding institutions like the Deutsche Forschungs-Gemeinschaft (DFG – German Research Foundation), the Schweizer Nationalfonds (SNF – Swiss National Foundation) or the Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung in Austria (FWF – Austrian Science Fund) spend millions each year to support communications and media research – without ensuring that research results gained with taxpayer money arrive in newsrooms or society at large. The European Journalism Observatory aims to address this problem in the new convergent and web-based media world. By analyzing developments in international media systems and journalism cultures in addition to training young journalists and media researchers to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, the European Journalism Observatory aims to improve the quality of journalism utilizing a broad, multifaceted approach.

The suspicion of many practitioners towards the “Ivory Tower” of scientists continues to be notorious<sup>2</sup>; therefore, “practical” journalism schools

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<sup>1</sup> A German version of this article will be published in: B. Dernbach & W. Loosen (eds.) (2011). *Didaktik der Journalistik. Best-Practice-Beispiele aus der Journalistenausbildung*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

<sup>2</sup> Although more than 80 percent of young journalists, at least in the U.S. are recruited there from the university-bound journalism education. This has been occurring over a long period.

and apprenticeships tend to neglect the need to impart basic scientific knowledge of journalism and media operations to future professionals. Just as in many newsrooms and media enterprises, the administrators of such training courses lack receptiveness to relevant scientific knowledge.

Conversely, many media and journalism researchers do not have a journalistic education or field experience, and therefore lack an insider's view of newsroom related work. Hence, they often neglect and undervalue the hands-on side of journalism education. Many of them are hardly accustomed to using a keyboard for anything that might not wind up in a scientific publication. Consequently, they're often unsuccessful in making media practitioners aware of the relevance of their findings. Even the readiness of researchers to transfer their findings to practice is oddly under-developed, leading to scarce attention for communications research in the media industry (see Russ-Mohl 2009: 42 ff.; see also Groebel 2010: 160).

The following realities make research transfer even more difficult:

- Currently, the world and its large media conglomerates are part of the globalization process; journalism, meanwhile, has remained a remarkably “local” phenomenon. In general, it's conducted within one language area. In journalism education, “outside the box” thinking spanning beyond the “home” journalism culture is quickly derailed by language barriers, and within most curricula such thinking is often considered a chore or duty (see as an exception in Germany: the Dortmund model, see: Bettels & Fengler 2011). Although visiting a host country through some form of international exchange may facilitate insights into different journalism cultures (and perhaps research cultures, too), it cannot replace attempts to make relevant knowledge and experience from other countries more systematically accessible.
- Though media and journalism are very important in our everyday lives, media journalism – that is, the coverage of media and journalism by the media – has not been established broadly, with the exception of a few observant print media outlets like the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. After a brief heyday, many of these media journalism-focused projects shrank

to single-fighter status or, as in the case of German weekly *Die Zeit* and the Swiss *Tages-Anzeiger*, were abolished entirely. Due to an already tight market, it seems to make little sense to institutionalize “media journalism” as a specialized educational offer (as was done for classical departments of politics, economics and business, culture, sports, and local coverage).

- Journalism research is rarely oriented toward practical relevance. Results from the field are increasingly published in English, thus creating an additional hurdle for media practitioners when it comes to perception. Currently, neither research funding institutions nor media journalists are actively taking up the effort to make knowledge emerging from communication sciences accessible and applicable to the industry or the public.

It is increasingly important that lecturers and students of the myriad course offerings leading to journalism and related media occupations continually strive to provide information on trends in journalism and the media branch. Even if journalism stays local, or at least develops further into a “glocal” phenomenon, a view into other journalistic cultures remains essential for the following reasons:

- First, this approach allows for comparison, granting opportunities to recognize one’s own strengths and weaknesses, to learn and understand that there is often more than one way of doing things – more paths to travel than the beaten.

With an extended view, *best practices* can be identified. Only those who open up can learn from industry leaders elsewhere (“*benchmarking*”). For example, it took a long time before media businesses in German-speaking regions took note of how media companies were earning revenue through collateral products such as books, CDs and videos. In Italy and Spain, meanwhile, this practice was already largely established. Regarding format changes, German and Swiss publishers could have learned from their British and Scandinavian colleagues, ultimately saving a significant amount of money (Haller 2009). As for error corrections and correction policies, we are still waiting for the findings of American researchers and their European colleagues (Maier 2005; Porlezza,

Russ-Mohl & Zanichelli 2010) to help media practitioners counteract the descent of media credibility.

- Further, search engines prove insufficient for investigative journalistic work. To realistically assess the reliability or unreliability of journalistic sources in other countries, one must be at least somewhat familiar with differing journalism cultures.

Therefore, even without any related job opportunities, it would make sense to establish media journalism as an integral component of practice-oriented journalism curricula. This would facilitate a “double learning” experience in the reporting field, combining the acquisition of hands-on work and reporting know-how while deepening academic knowledge *about* journalism and media. Perhaps subsequent generations of journalists may even dedicate some attention to media journalism, learning how it contributes to transparency and raises the bar for quality assurance in the field.

### Challenges of Location

How can the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) – Lugano’s small, recently established university located at the crux of an Italian-German language border – offer an innovative, international and interdisciplinary journalistic education?

After careful analysis, there seems to be no room for a journalism curriculum at USI. In the Italian-speaking region of Southern Switzerland there is little demand for journalism graduates. Italy, meanwhile, has required its future journalists to pass a state exam since the times of Mussolini. It would be hard to imagine preparing graduates for an anachronistic relic of an authoritarian state for which there is no equivalent in Switzerland or the Western world (and for good reason).

In German-speaking regions, including areas of Switzerland, there are simply too many journalism training programs. Just over in nearby Lucerne lies one of the most successful schools ever established: MAZ – the Swiss School of Journalism. Due to competition not only with MAZ, but also with private journalism schools in Germany (schools that generously support their students financially rather than charging tuition fees to capitalize on the talent pool) another German-language journalism program

would have no chance to flourish in a location outside the German language border.

Still, we intend to build on extensive experience in order to provide a meaningful contribution to the professionalization of journalism in Lugano. The multicultural, multilingual environment of Switzerland provides suitable grounds for the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) – a journalistic training project functioning as a service provider for journalists, media research and journalism educators.

### The EJO as a Service Provider

The European Journalism Observatory (EJO) was established in the spring of 2004 as a non-profit center of the Università della Svizzera italiana. At present, the EJO is a network of several partners, among them the Erich Brost Institut of the TU Dortmund, the University of Wrocław, the Medienhaus Wien in Vienna, the Turība Business School in Riga, Latvia and the Università degli Studi in Milan, Italy. Support for the EJO primarily arrives from the Fondazione per il Corriere del Ticino, Lugano, and the Stiftung Pressehaus NRZ, Essen.

The EJO was designed to observe trends in journalism, branches of media and – in particular – media research. It is our goal to build bridges among journalism cultures, particularly in Europe and the U.S., and to contribute to quality assurance in journalism while reducing the gap between communication sciences and media practice. The EJO is oriented towards the needs of journalists, chief editors and media managers, who in most cases do not find the time to read long scientific texts. Articles and analyses conducted by EJO staff and collaborating partners are published not only in scientific journals, but also in newspapers, professional publications and on the EJO website ([www.ejo.ch](http://www.ejo.ch); [www.ejo-online.eu](http://www.ejo-online.eu)), allowing authors to attain greater exposure. Our multilingual EJO site (accessible in English, German, Italian, Polish and Latvian) ensures that information is made available to journalism educators and students who want to keep up to date.

Most EJO publications are readily available online, many in more than one language. Texts are translated if editors assume they will be of interest in the respective language area. The EJO is currently seeking partners in

the U.K. or in Ireland to further improve the English edition, and seeks partners in Switzerland, France, Belgium and Spain to produce French and Spanish versions of the website. Further Eastern and Southeastern European language versions are also in preparation and will be realized as soon as sponsors are located.

### Fields of Activity

EJO partners conduct independent research on journalistic trends and developments in different European countries as well as in the U.S. with a particular focus on innovation and “best practices.” In the future, EJO partners will cooperate more closely, thus transforming into a decentralized European think tank. The MediaACT project of the EU (<http://www.mediaact.eu>), which compares the accountability and transparency of media and journalism in 13 European countries, has already taken an important first step.

All researchers in the EJO network actively strive to *transfer* their knowledge to the media industry as well as interested publics outside the scientific community. The website will increasingly expand as a platform to enable online availability of at least a portion of many publications in several languages.

International conferences, public events and annual workshops provide opportunity for a rich international exchange of ideas and experiences. A cycle of such workshops carried out by the Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, MAZ and Medienhaus Vienna provides opportunities for researchers, media practitioners, and both young and experienced participants from a variety of countries to meet and interact (see Egli von Matt et al. 2006; Merkel et al. 2007; Fioretti & Foa 2008; Fioretti & Russ-Mohl 2009).

EJO's work is characterized by:

- *Professionalism in journalism*: Knowledge of the industry as well as experience in journalism enable its researchers to identify topics relevant to professionals working in newsrooms and the media industry.
- *Transnational perspective*: By focusing on the comparative analysis of developments in different European countries and in the U.S., trends in the industry are identified at an early stage.

- *Research transfer*: Studies of the EJO as well as research results of other institutes are presented in a clear and intelligible way.
- *Academic credibility*: Studies are conducted by an international group of journalists and researchers from Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Poland and the U.S. Their independence is guaranteed by the participating research institutions.
- *Multilingual service*: Articles and brief research analysis are frequently provided in several languages. Scientific research papers are published in the original language – with an in-depth summary translated in the other languages.

### EJO as a Training/Educational Project

The EJO is an international, multi-lingual educational project making waves in the small and neglected field of media journalism. Due to a lack of demand in the job market for media journalists, EJO in Lugano serves talented students, providing a springboard into the industry outside the framework of a regular journalism curriculum.

In all our language versions, paid student employees have the possibility to work collaboratively in our teams, gaining journalistic experiences. Editors are mostly PhD students and, moreover, already savvy journalists who collect further scientific and practical experience. Graduates trying to enter an increasingly tight job market also stand to benefit, as the EJO alleviates pressure to accept the very first job offered by providing freelance work opportunities for a period of time. All involved parties are guided by professionals who are comfortably “at home” in both communication sciences as well as in journalism.

Many of the postings published on the website deal with material that can be used in journalism courses and may even open discourse online. To date, discussion functions on the websites have been utilized infrequently, which is, of course, not terribly surprising. Experience with other online discussion platforms shows that participation accelerates with highly polarized and provocative content, with strong opinions voiced in forums. Our platform, with its rather sobering requirements and focus on research transfer, is considerably less animated than that which is found on web-



pages like <http://mediamatters.org> or <http://www.bildblog.de> when it comes to soliciting opinions.

Clearly, we hope that EJO partners, in particular those who operate their own journalism curricula, will encourage advanced students to contribute texts to the EJO platform. As most of the involved parties summarize research work or link to websites with interesting research results, short texts are requested.

Established standards of journalistic quality are, however, high, and the coverage of media and media research proves to be a perilous and difficult terrain. For one, “translation” is required from scientific statements into everyday language, requiring highly developed skills to reduce complexity, as one must ensure that statements from researchers are neither distorted nor trivialized (see Russ-Mohl 1985; Göpfert & Russ-Mohl 2000, 4. ed.). On the other hand, there exists a perpetual string of issues where the self-interest of journalists and media companies are involved in the game (Russ-Mohl 2000; Beuthner & Weichert 2005; Weinacht 2009). EJO authors must be aware of this without falling victim. Maintaining a critical distance proves difficult, but remains essential. After all, journalists are known for their overly-sensitive reactions to criticism.

In a first attempt, as part of the Media Management Master program at the Università della Svizzera italiana, students were asked to contribute a series of blogger profiles to the Italian EJO site. Unfortunately, this initiative failed. Ultimately, none of the entries submitted by students were in line with our quality criteria. As the students themselves want to become media managers rather than journalists, there was little sense in tormenting them with required re-writes, demanding the texts be perfected.

We optimistically hope that further attempts to allow students to contribute texts will be met with greater success. Yet it remains the case that we cannot compromise on professional journalistic standards. On the other hand, engaged colleagues have repeatedly demonstrated that journalistic excellence can be achieved throughout the course of journalism education given the appropriate commitment of lecturers and students. Book projects (Pörksen 2004; Pörksen 2007; Pörksen & Krischke 2010) as well as magazine publications linked to journalism schools or programs provide additional supportive evidence (for example, Deutsche Journalistenschule, München: *Klartext*; University of Eichstätt: *Einsteins*; University of Dortmund: *Journalistik-Journal*).

In any case, EJO can contribute something meaningful to journalism education on several levels. For media practitioners and researchers, as well as for students, EJO provides useful information and access to research results. The commentary function enables discussion, and is even an option for new students to practice argumentation and write texts while simultaneously gaining exposure on the Web. Advanced students, meanwhile, may contribute their own work, while PhD candidates can further their scientific qualifications without losing their journalistic skills. Additionally, PhD students may establish themselves as long-term cooperation partners or editors, taking advantage of diverse possibilities for engagement. Moreover, they get to know neighboring countries thoroughly through continuous contact with other project participants, experiencing the different realities of media and journalism first-hand.

### Translation Issues

Significant and – at least initially for us – unexpected difficulties arise when it comes to adequately translating texts. As a low budget project, the EJO cannot afford to engage professional translators, which would cost much more than the honoraria the media pays freelancers for original articles. If the project is to function further on a greater scale, we must convince authors to contribute their texts not only in the original language, but also in English.

Even then, processing remains expensive. The most important service of the EJO for its authors lies in the editing of their texts by native English speakers prior to publication on the EJO website. This helps authors to create visibility in the Anglo-Saxon sphere. Thereafter, the other Web editors may access articles and provide translations from English into their own languages. There is no denying that twofold translation is tricky, both from a linguistic perspective regarding quality of the pieces, as well as regarding mistakes or unforeseen nuances in meaning, which often creep into translations.

### Participation of Scientists

Regarding visibility, in the long run the EJO can make a significant contribution to research transfer and the improvement of media journalism

only if it develops into a true platform, connecting with more researchers and institutions in each of its language areas.

One challenge can be found in encouraging the participation of fellow researchers. Most journalism and media researchers are social scientists first and foremost, and often either not journalists at all or have little practical experience. Additionally, they are conditioned to make careers within the framework of the scientific peer review process, where what counts are publications in scientific journals and the attention of an often incredibly small scientific audience. Of course, most researchers know that their work is funded with public money, however incentives are lacking to share the achieved research findings with the media industry and the wider public.

In order to help researchers get started, we have developed several levels of participation:

- *Basic-Participation*: Occasional delivery of texts, links, and research work that is relevant to the industry and to journalists (also for secondary publication, as long as this does not cause copyright problems).
- *Medium/Moderate Engagement*: To be entrusted with an EJO work field – delivery of one's own contributions, as well as those of others, for example on the topic of political journalism or media economics.
- *Intensive Cooperation*: Tight institutional cooperation with the EJO partners in research, research transfer and at international conferences. Active participation in further expansion of the EJO, including new language versions and fundraising.

Ultimately, there is some hope that the research funding institutions will change course, creating more incentive for research transfer and thus, for contributing work to EJO. Whoever accesses public funds for his or her project should also assume the responsibility of sharing research findings with the public. Thus we might prevent some research projects from acquiring dust on lonely library shelves or vanishing in Web archives rather than bearing fruit in media practice.

Beate Josephi (2010), a German communications researcher living in Australia, may be correct in stating that journalism education has become a worldwide "success story." Throughout this professionalization, the curricula have not only differentiated, but also converged with one another.

To date, however, it has remained a challenge to find the right balance between the three spheres of trade, academic knowledge and topical expertise. Weischenberg (1990: 21 ff.) is not alone in considering this balance essential for successful journalism education (see most recently Zelizer 2010).

We hope that EJO can expand to a multilingual platform, making research results accessible to media practitioners in a *glocal* manner – which means globally, but also refers to each language area's local research and journalism culture. In a cost benefit perspective, this would likely serve as an affordable way to enlarge the base of knowledge and know-how for journalists and to further encourage reflection and insights related to the profession – be it as active contributors or as passive users. In the long run, such an online information offer “up to date” with Web 2.0 technology may complement and perhaps even replace the production of more expensive print trade journals dealing with journalism and the media.

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