

2011

Journalism Educations and Child Rights: Exploring a New Model of Collaboration in Rights-based Journalism Education

Brian O'Neill

Technological University Dublin, brian.oneill@tudublin.ie

Michael Foley

Technological University Dublin, michael.foley@tudublin.ie

Noirin Hayes

Technological University Dublin, noirin.hayes@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschmedcon>



Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Neill, B., M. Foley and N. Hayes (2011). Journalism education and child rights: exploring a new model of collaboration in rights-based journalism education. Presentation at Cities, Creativity, Connectivity. Annual IAMCR Congress, Kader Has University, Istanbul, 13-17 July, 2011.

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Media at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conference Papers by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.

**Journalism educations and child rights: exploring a new model of
collaboration in rights-based journalism education**

**Brian O'Neill
Michael Foley
Noirin Hayes**

Dublin Institute of Technology

**Paper presented at 'Cities, Creativity, Connectivity'
IAMCR Annual Conference 2011**

Journalism Research and Education Section

July 13-17, 2011

Keywords: children's rights; journalism education; child-friendly journalism

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview and discussion of a unique approach to journalism education in the Central, East European and CIS region. In 2008, a group of universities initially in Turkey, and later joined by Romania, Georgia, Macedonia, Serbia, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan joined with UNICEF to introduce a new child rights syllabus into their respective journalism programmes. For years, the approach to training journalists in children's rights in the CEE/CIS region had been quantitative – 30 journalists here, 30 there. This has produced limited results in terms of the representation of children or children's issues in the media. From point of view of media development, integrating a rights-based approach towards journalism practice has the objective of embedding the concept of children's rights at source with a view to enhancing overall standards in journalism.

In the paper, we discuss the challenges and opportunities such an approach presents. The media in the CEE/CIS region have a very different history to other parts of the world, and very little consideration has been given to a critically-informed approach or rights-based approach to representation of children or reporting children's issues in the media. Journalism ethics, central to the curriculum of journalism education in modern western societies, do not feature in the curriculum of most journalism schools in CEE/CIS and the tradition of an independent, responsible media as a fourth pillar of democracy is virtually non-existent. The paper examines case studies from the countries involved and evaluates how the theoretical orientation of rights-based communication has impacted on trainee journalism experience. We offer a theoretical discussion of the project's significance, locating it within approaches to media assistance more generally as well as within broader international attempts towards

fostering greater awareness of human and children's rights among professional media workers.

Journalism educations and child rights: exploring a new model of collaboration in rights-based journalism education

Introduction

In 2008, a team from Dublin Institute of Technology was commissioned by UNICEF to develop a syllabus for incorporation into curricula of journalism departments in universities across the Central and East European region and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) of the former Soviet Union. The objective of the initiative was to complement existing professional training programmes for journalists on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and to introduce at a much earlier stage in journalists' professional development an awareness of children's rights. Modules on human rights, ethics and civic journalism are not unusual in journalism programmes. What was different in this instance was the specific nature of the subject matter, focused on child rights, and the set of relationships posited by the project between a UN agency, academics, journalism educators and professional journalists in a process of media development and enhancement of journalism standards. The project has now been running for three years and universities in countries including Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and Montenegro have adopted the syllabus into their programmes.

This paper discusses the background to this relatively unique project: why children's rights? why the CEE/CIS region? why journalism education? What are the challenges and opportunities of such an approach and what is its significance more generally for media development and assistance? Does fostering greater awareness of children's rights lead to better journalism and what kind of impact might it have in the societies

in which it is promoted? These are some of the questions that led to the development of the project in the first instance and which have been raised at various points in its delivery. A full evaluation of these issues is some way off but offered here are preliminary observations based on the experiences of those involved.

Media development in Eastern Europe

Media assistance to the former communist countries of Eastern Europe from 1989 became an important part of the transformation of that part of Europe from a socialist command economy to a democratic, liberal market economy. The media was seen as an important ideological weapon of the previous regimes and so was to be transformed in order to change society.

The exact amount of media aid is unknown, so much of it was hidden under such headings as aid to civil society and democracy building, but it is known to account for hundreds of millions of euro. Most was spent on specific training of working journalists, some was used to establish codes of conduct, or help legislators frame media laws. Some funding was used as loans to help establish new media enterprises. Between 1985 and 2001, the US government and non-government agencies spent \$600 million in media assistance, the bulk going to former communist countries. In 2004, the US government donated \$40 million, with about \$25 million going to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and, through it, to two independent agencies, Internews and the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX/Promedia). The balance went to media development through the State Department (LaMay, 2007: xiii).

But after all this money, and the activity arising from it, the question remains: has it worked? One of the leading academic media commentators on the region, Peter Gross, comments:

... while some progress has been made in professionalizing the field, to date the region's journalism is not of a calibre consonant with that of its Western neighbours. Their partisanship and inclinations to propagandize and their lack of professional standards and ethics are leftover traits from the pre-communist era, refined and hardened by the communist experience, its exigencies and teachings. (Gross, 1996: 43)

In 2008 Gross was even more critical of elements of the media in south-Eastern Europe. Speaking about Romania, which, by then had become a member of the EU, he said the media had not established themselves as being a necessity in democracy:

It is hardly a surprise that despite showing promise more than once since 1998 that they might evolve as bona fide platforms for news, information, and varied opinions, most news media outlets persist being organs of disinformation, intimidation, trivialisation, rumour, advocacy and propaganda on all political and economic issues or those tinged by them. (Gross, 2008: 146)

Why has so much activity and money failed to put in place a responsible media that can contribute to the development and strengthening of democracy? According to Ognianova:

Most training sessions have been too short; they have been too theoretical and general; and they have insulted the participants by revealing the visitors' total

ignorance about their countries and by preaching the ABCs of journalism to experienced professionals. (Ognianova, 1995: 36)

Most training has been offered by development agencies, including those funded by USAID, the EU and others. Much of it has been vocational and skills-based and many of the trainers have been working journalists, consultants and trainers, rather than educators. However, the trainers employed by these agencies have never tried to find or develop a journalistic voice from within the countries they are working in, because they are charged with promoting Western journalistic practices. They rarely speak the local language, and have little understanding of local journalism or its history. They often have poor knowledge of the political situation within which the people they are training work. Problematically, some trainers have offered advice, which, if taken, could put journalists in danger, such as dealing with police, security forces or criminals, as if it was Western Europe or the US.

There are other problems associated with the training and vocational model that has been the major one in Eastern and South Eastern Europe since the collapse of communism. This model has encouraged some of the brightest and best to go abroad, since they believe they have been trained up to something called 'Western standards'. Sadly, however, many want to work elsewhere not so much to bring Western media skills to Uzbekistan, for example, but to work abroad. Other journalists, some having availed of scholarship schemes to do journalism Masters degrees in the US, believe they are too highly trained to work as journalists for low pay and seek donor money to offer yet more training, or work in Western-financed media centres, or media development centres, whose sole function is to access Western donor funding and offer Anglo-Saxon or Western journalism training. Vocational training can also give a

spurious authority to media output. Eastern and South Eastern Europe have many radio stations, television stations, magazines and newspapers with very high production values that disguise and even give authority to bad journalism.

Partnering with Universities

There is a long tradition of journalism education in the universities of the region, going back to the formation of the School of Journalism at Moscow State University in 1947. Such universities have been dismissed by Western media development agencies as being unreconstructed Stalinism at worst, or at best offering an out-of-date model that is incapable of reform. The tradition of centralization was a major feature in all curriculum matters in such universities and topics such as media coverage or contact with the media were normally forbidden.

In the early years, following the fall of communism, there were many offers of university partnerships, but most American universities preferred not to deal with existing universities in the region, establishing their own institutions. The University of Missouri, for example, launched the American University in Bulgaria. Rutgers University launched its Media Centre in Warsaw (until it became plagued with problems and lost its US funding). New York University founded the Russian-American Press and Information Centre (RAPIC), now the Press Development Institute, which focused on print journalism training, growing in time to 19 field offices, of uneven quality (Hume, 2004: 33).

There had been some contacts made with Eastern and South Eastern European universities, through US Fulbright programmes as well as EU-funded university exchange and links programmes, especially the EU's Tempus programme. Most of these were channelled through already existing university programmes, rather than media programmes. A number of these links were with Western-style private universities, such as the American University in Bulgaria, where teaching is done through English, with little regards to Bulgaria's own media or education traditions, and with prohibitively high fees by local standards. Here, the Professor of Journalism, for example, was a former correspondent for News Corp's London-based Sky News – he did not speak Bulgarian and taught through English.

One of the first projects to include the old journalism faculties in the state-run universities was a project aimed at professionalising the media in Bulgaria, which was established as part of Bulgaria's pre European Union entry programme. That project funded under the PHARE programme provided a model for the current initiative and highlighted how media development has worked and how it might develop. Based on a partnership model, it focused on longer term faculty and curriculum development rather than short term training. Partly a test case, the experience of working in the Bulgarian PHARE initiative set out to establish whether working with the faculties that had been central to the old system of journalism education, and ignored by the new training, was a valuable and workable alternative to the training model which was being questioned by many involved in journalism and media training. An outcome of research arising from this project concluded that working with the existing faculties allowed greater cultural mediation for Western aid and also helped universities themselves to modernize (Foley, 2011).

Why children's rights

A report from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 1997 highlighted the absence of children from the vocational training for most media professionals (International Federation of Journalists, 1997). The emphasis of journalism education has traditionally been on providing trainee journalists with adaptable skills to enable them to survive in a fast changing work environment. Children rarely feature other than as part of training in media law, in relation to coverage of children at risk, or as subjects of feature material.

Various efforts have been made to address this gap including the aforementioned short training schemes including those initiated by UNICEF and other NGOs and child rights agencies. The IFJ itself has been to the fore in raising awareness of the role that journalists can play in promoting human rights and calling attention to the plight of children worldwide. In its 1997 survey of codes of conduct, few mentioned children in the context of ethical issues or dilemmas for journalists. At the same time, there are notable exceptions and most professional media organisations have in the interim developed guidelines regarding coverage of children in the news, advocate child protection policies and promote a sense of ethical responsibility on the part of the journalist towards children as subjects. The IFJ's own guidelines seek to embed the principles of the children's rights in journalism practice through a sense of responsibility towards children and a respect for their independent rights as citizens. Acknowledging that awareness of the actual detail of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was almost entirely absent from all but specialists in the area, it also

advocated that media organizations might consider appointment of specialized Childhood Correspondents to keep in touch with policy and legislation in the area.

Unquestionably, the UNCRC is the foundation for this impetus towards greater media awareness of children as rights holders. The landmark convention of 1989 which provided a separate articulation of the rights of the child acts as the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights. All the countries of the world have ratified it except Somalia and the United States of America. Somalia has been unable to proceed to ratification as it has no recognised government. By signing the convention, the United States has signalled its intention to ratify — but has yet to do so.

The convention reflects a new vision of the child and childhood. Children are neither the property of their parents nor the helpless objects of charity. They are human beings and the subject of their own rights. The convention offers a vision of the child as a strong, competent individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development. By recognising children's rights in this way, the convention firmly sets the focus on the whole child.

The creation of a body of rights for children and the question of what children's rights really mean and how they can best be realised continues to be contested. Promotion of children's rights is based in part on a recognition that awareness of children's vulnerability and corresponding need of special protection has not prevented children from suffering as a consequence of decisions made in the adult world around them.

Compassion for the plight of children has often led to their being viewed collectively and treated as objects of charity rather than as individual human beings with their own strengths and abilities, their own needs and rights. As a consequence, the issues surrounding children have often been deemed non-political and have failed to be addressed. The basic principle of the rights of the child is that society has an obligation to satisfy the fundamental needs of children and to provide assistance for the development of children's personalities, talents and abilities.

The creation of a convention on the rights of the child reflects a generally accepted rule that the greater the awareness of rights, the more chance there is of securing them. It is in this context that the role of journalism is crucially important. The Convention itself pays particular attention to the role of the media in children's lives. Article 17 acknowledges the important function performed by the mass media and encourages media organisations to disseminate information of social and cultural benefit to the child and to develop appropriate guidelines for 'the protection of children from information and material injurious to his or her well-being' (UNICEF, 1989).

Notwithstanding the role that journalists can play in mobilizing support for the rights of children or acting as watchdogs for the public interest, media professionals are not advocates for any agency or specialists in children's rights. Their role is to report accurately. The objective of this project is that in so doing, they have an awareness of the fundamental rights of the child.

Children in the media of CEE/CIS

If journalism standards have fared so poorly overall in the transition countries of the former Soviet Union, what then of the situation for children in the media and child rights? Visibility of children's issues as well as barriers to participation were highlighted by the Young People's Media Network as particular areas of concern for countries in the region, as illustrated in the following quotes:

"The media in Macedonia are generally focused on political and economical issues in the country. The social and community issues are not covered enough or at all. The youth issues in Macedonia often are seen from educational or criminal perspectives. We need to make bridges of communication between youth of the region, help to overcome the prejudices and taboos, and to create close relations between young people, no matter of the state borders."

Antoaneta Ivanova, 23, Macedonia

"Young people's interests are not covered widely in Kyrgyzstan. There are only two or three youth TV programmes on Kyrgyz TV. TV channels are not interested in non-commercial programmes. It would be much better if we have more TV youth programmes, more youth media organizations; because there is no other one, besides our Children's Media Center in Bishkek. It would be very good if youth have more youth newspapers. Maybe YPMN will help us; the participants will share their experiences." Children's Media Center, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan¹

Research is currently being conducted by participants in the programme, but results to date indicate that media representation of children in the countries represented is rarely positive. Sensationalist media coverage of children in difficult circumstances

¹ Young People's Media Network in Europe and Central Asia (YPMN). Retrieved from: <http://www.unicef.org/magic/bank/case025.html>

with little respect for their rights or welfare is found to be commonplace. Typically, news coverage followed the pattern of stereotyping found internationally as, for example, by the Media Monitoring Project² in South Africa which showed that:

- *Children are under-represented in the news media*
- *Children are predominantly represented as victims*
- *Children are represented mostly in negative stories*
- *Male and female children are equitably represented, but are still stereotyped*

It is in this context that this project set out to provide an academic context for education in children's rights and journalism which would address both a theoretical understanding of human rights issues as they relate to children and a foundation for a journalism practice that is informed by an understanding of rights and their abuses.

There are a number of international models which have addressed this topic previously, including the aforementioned Media Monitoring Project in South Africa. The most important international example is ANDI, the news agency for children's rights, established in Brazil in 1993 and which through awareness-raising, development of news sources, and providing supports for journalists has endeavoured to heighten the profile children's rights in Brazilian and Latin American news coverage (ANDI, 2008)³. While ANDI has to a limited extent included university partnerships as part of its initiative to increase awareness of children's rights in the media, it is primarily concerned with professional media sources. Again, for this reason, the European DIT/UNICEF Child Rights Syllabus project is unique in

² <http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/>

³ See <http://www.andi.org.br/>

focusing primarily on journalism education in universities and on an educational platform for reforming journalism standards.

While the role and influence of journalism may be contested, one of the reasons why it is so important for children's rights is that traditional media still retains for the general public a position as a fourth estate, a fourth pillar of democracy, that combines power and influence on the most issues in society. In this context, children's issues may often appear to be less contentious, and consequently safer, than more overtly politicized topics. Yet, all the key elements of contemporary political life impact on children from finance and economics to social policies and legislation. In this way, reporting more difficult or politically sensitive topics from a child rights perspective may provide opportunities to touch on subjects or enter areas of political debate that might not otherwise be possible. There are opportunities in the area of children's rights also for civic journalism in which journalists abandon the notion that they are spectators in political or social processes and are active participants. This is a philosophical approach that has had a significant impact for instance in Brazil based on the work of ANDI. In either case, the underlying objective is that journalism armed with the information and awareness of children's rights are best positioned to monitor and call attention to abuses, as well as progress in areas where the integrity of the child is in question, regarding the participation of children in public life, where protection of children from all forms of abuse is an issue and to raise awareness on children's rights beyond children to all issues, policies and practices.

Devising the syllabus

The full title of the Child Rights Syllabus document, the centerpiece of the project's development, is called *Children's Rights And Journalism Practice - A Rights-Based Perspective*.⁴ Designed as a taught module for undergraduate students of journalism, it is organised into two distinct units: 'Introducing Children's Rights' and 'Children's Rights and Professional Journalism Practice'. Unit 1 introduces central guiding principles designed to give students a conceptual appreciation and understanding of children's rights. This is then applied to practical examples and professional contexts in Unit 2.

The overall aim of the module is to provide the trainee or student journalist with an understanding of children's rights as articulated in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, and to develop responsible news reporting skills that encompass and respect children's rights in all matters relating to children's participation and representation in the media. The underlying objective of the project is to embed at source the concept of children's rights among students of journalism, media and communications and what this means is that in addition to fundamental training in such areas as practical techniques of news writing and reporting, analytical skills of media criticism, as well as media theory and history, there is an equal consideration of a rights-based framework for understanding children and issues that affect them.

The syllabus sets out a number of distinct learning outcomes in which, it is envisaged, that students on completion of the module will be able to demonstrate competence.

These are:

⁴ An online version of the syllabus is available at: <http://elearning-events.dit.ie/unicef/index.htm>

1. Understand and be able to outline the principle features of children's rights as outlined in the UNCRC
2. Read, analyze and critically evaluate the reporting of issues affecting children from a rights-based perspective
3. Critically assess the relevance and importance of editorial guidelines and codes of practice in relation to news reporting affecting children
4. Make professional judgments regarding journalism practice from a perspective of children's rights
5. Report fairly, accurately and in keeping with the principles of children's rights

The learning outcomes, set out above, highlight analytical and critical skills, augmenting other aspects of the traditional media syllabus and supported by a study of the UNCRC itself. Students also examine the professional context in which editorial judgments are made, with specific reference to children. Finally, students engage in journalism practice, implementing principles that have been learned and skills acquired in covering news stories about children.

The module is informed by a student-centred pedagogy as well as by the principles of human rights education so that it is not just a matter of what is taught but also how it is taught. This has particular relevance for many of the journalism faculties in the countries of the region where traditional teaching based around the authority of the teacher/professor have dominated since Soviet times. Student-centred pedagogy emphasizes an active learning process with the teacher as facilitator, placing more responsibility on students to manage their own learning. As a human rights module, the pedagogical approach is one in which the method of teaching itself embodies the message of respect for human rights and dignity. In this way, the module as a whole is intended to have transformational and not just instrumental value for participants.

To date, the syllabus has been introduced in seven countries and approximately 15 different universities. In 2009, the twentieth anniversary of the CRC, it was launched in Turkey where seven universities signed a memorandum of agreement to implement the syllabus. In 2010, four further countries joined the network (Georgia, Macedonia, Romania and Azerbaijan), and 2011, universities in Serbia, Montenegro and Kyrgyzstan began preparations to include the syllabus in their programmes. Internationally also, there has been interest in joining the project and a meeting in 2010 of universities in Southern and Eastern Africa met to consider adopting the syllabus. Currently, one university in Mozambique is piloting the syllabus.

Conclusion and next steps

The project is still at a relatively early stage of development and it will be some years before a full assessment of its impact is possible. The different papers presented in this panel provide an insight into a work in progress and highlight the exciting opportunities as well as the difficulties in developing something new within the traditional journalism education curriculum. It is important though to focus on the long term aims of this new initiative which seek nothing short of a paradigm shift in the visibility of children and the awareness of children's rights in professional media. Ultimately, what this means is a normalization of children's rights in all aspects everyday life. News media—press, radio, television and online— are best positioned to reach the adult population to impart this message. Through a changed discourse in which children are considered in all aspects of public policy the opportunity exists to create conditions in which children are allowed to grow and develop as 'fully fledged citizens' in their own right and not as a future generation with rights to be assumed on

maturity. These are the issues and debates which student journalists will have as participants in this programme and which, it is hoped, will be formative influences on their own development as news reporters.

References

- ANDI. (2008). *Facing the Challenge. Children's rights and human development in Latin American news media*. Brasilia: Andi – News Agency for Children's Rights.
- Foley, M. (2011). *The Press and Democracy Building: Journalism Education and Training in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe During Transition*. Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin.
- Gross, P. (1996). *Mass media in revolution and national development : the Romanian laboratory*. Ames, Iowa ; [Great Britain]: Iowa State University Press.
- Gross, P. (2008). Forward to the Past: The Intractable Problems of Romanian's Media System *The Harvard Journal of Press/Politics*, 13(2), 141-152.
- Hume, E. (2004). *The Media Missionaries*. Florida: Knight Foundation.
- International Federation of Journalists. (1997). Information and Child Rights: The Challenge of Media Engagement. Retrieved from [http://www.mediawise.org.uk/www.mediawise.org.uk/files/uploaded/Information %26 Childs Rights - International Survey pdf.doc](http://www.mediawise.org.uk/www.mediawise.org.uk/files/uploaded/Information%26ChildsRights-InternationalSurvey.pdf.doc)
- LaMay, C. L. (2007). *Exporting press freedom : economic and editorial dilemmas in international media assistance*. New Brunswick, N.J. ; London: Transaction Publishers.
- Ognianova, E. (1995). Farewell to Parachute Professors in East-Central Europe. *Journal of Mass Communications Education*, 50(1), 35-47.
- UNICEF. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>