

**Dr. Edzard Schade**

University of Zurich

IPMZ – Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research

<mailto:e.schade@ipmz.unizh.ch>

## **Academia and journalism – a complex relationship**

### **Critical reflection as the principal contribution of mass communication studies in Zurich to the professionalisation of journalism in Switzerland**

One main result of my historical research is, that the relationship between the academic world and journalism in Switzerland has been frequently difficult and, above all, complex: from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century right through to the present day. That's not banal! My paper sets out to examine what roles mass communication studies and media research have played and what functions they have performed in relation to journalism and the mass media. The question is: What was the nature of the relationship that developed between academia and journalism in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

For the succeeding analysis I distinguish between two "relationship models":

1 By the first relationship model **research** builds the central basis for the relationship between the academic world and journalism: The academic world acts as a critical, analytical companion to journalism. Through research and the development of theories, it promotes reflection within society on the mass media and its journalistic output.

2 By the second relationship model **teaching** takes the centre stage: academic study can serve as the basis for a more or less practice-oriented journalistic training.

I think our international comparison will show that media and communication science departments within universities differ widely in the weight they attach to their reflective and educational function with regard to journalism. And they differ also widely in the way in which research and teaching are implemented. Nevertheless, the institutionalization of research and teaching in the field of media and communication science can essentially be viewed and employed as an **indicator of the professionalisation of journalism**, or of efforts in this direction. That's why I reformulate the question of the relationship between academia and journalism as follows: In what way has the academic world contributed to the professionalisation of journalism? This question forms the starting point for the following examination of the history and development of mass communication studies and media research at the University of Zurich. Before embarking on this analysis, however, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term "professionalisation".

The theory of professions describes numerous core issues which shape the processes of professionalisation. I concentrate my examination of the professionalisation of journalism in Switzerland on the following five dimensions which set the profession apart from the occupation (cf. Goode 1957; Krzeminski 2002; Lamnek 1999; Lamnek 2002; Tenschler 2003: 125-131):

1. **Organization:** By establishing their own professional organizations (professional groupings, associations, etc.), members of a profession secure for themselves the largest possible measure of **self-administration**. To this end, professional organizations must exercise their **own disciplinary powers** and play an important role in the **regulation of access to that profession**.

The establishment of own organisational structures, a core process of professionalisation, took place in Switzerland at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, the profession contained a high number of academically trained practitioners, but there were no specific academic training courses and research institutes. In this situation, organizations of professional journalists (not only in Switzerland) sought contact with the academic community in the hope of receiving assistance in the professionalisation process.

2 **Academic training: High-quality professional training** is one of the fundamental elements of a profession, as it is the only way to ensure that members of that profession operate on the basis of a **shared and systematic foundation of knowledge**. Linked to this is the capacity to systematize and further develop specialist knowledge related to that profession, for example by institutionalizing training courses and levels of qualification (examinations, certificates etc.) The incorporation of this academic dimension thus plays a clear role in regulating access to the labour market.

The initiative of the professional organisations for the institutionalisation of academic training provoked numerous controversial debates over training policy. The debates triggered around the question of how far universities could actually contribute to practically equipping media practitioners for their job. Or in other words: **What can and should journalists learn at university?**

The widespread myth that journalism was a matter of natural talent stood in the way of an easy relationship between academia and journalistic practice. It was only through the pragmatism of all involved that the press and universities were able to enter into a close cooperation a century ago, leading to the establishment of departments of journalism at Zurich and Bern universities in 1903. Oskar Wettstein (1866-1952), the founder of the Zurich department, proposed that by creating departments of journalism, the universities should give aspiring journalists specific opportunities to familiarize themselves with the technical, historical and legal aspects of the press and the journalistic profession. He proposed only limited efforts to supplement these rather theoretical foundations with practical exercises such as writing and style courses (cf. Wettstein 1902: 46). Wettstein described journalism as the "philosophy of daily history" (Wettstein 1903: 33), indispensable for the ongoing analysis of developments within society. For him, the prime role of the press in this respect was to promote social education and information; and for this reason he believed it to be appropriate for universities to become more heavily involved. Academic study, in his eyes, made for diligence, encouraging a more profound understanding – and this was exactly what the press needed to raise its quality. For this reason it was less important what a would-be journalist studied and more important that he learn to think scientifically. Today the examination of the historical development of mass communication studies and research at the University of Zurich shows us, that the training policy of Wettstein is still in effect. Ever since the department was founded in 1903, the fundamental focus of academic teaching has been on the acquisition of a capacity for theoretical and methodical reflection. As a result, the practice-oriented training of media practitioners has been left largely to the media organizations. Only recently has the state become more involved, by creating practice-oriented courses at specialist colleges – but not at Universities.

Now we are coming to those aspects of professionalisation of journalism, with which the department of journalism in Zurich was heavily involved.

1 **Ethics:** Adherence to **shared standards** promotes the creation of a specific identity within the "professional community", and thereby forms the **basis for the profession to present itself with confidence vis-à-vis society**. By formulating and ensuring adherence to their own codes of ethics (professional ethics, codes of honour and codes of conduct, for example), professional organizations are able to go on the offensive against demands for outside control.

2 **Public service:** Professions see themselves as **performing a service to society**. Accordingly, professional organizations require their members to place altruistic motives at the forefront when carrying on their activity, thereby serving the common good.

3 **Social recognition:** A profession needs broad social recognition to gain **influence within society**, privileges, high status and high degree of self-organization.

So far the theoretical approach. Let's look once again to the history.

**main objects of research for the media society**

- **Historical foundations for the ethical standards and social responsibilities of journalism (from the beginning until the 1930s)**
- **Opposition to state censorship and instrumentalisation of the press (1930s – 1940s)**
- **Opposition to structural maintenance policy and abandonment of autonomy in mass communication (1960s – 1970s)**
- **Towards controlled deregulation and commercialization of broadcasting (1970s – 1990s)**

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In Switzerland the young "Zeitungswissenschaft" – the mass media research – was principally engaged in **analysing the historical foundations for the ethical standards and social responsibilities of journalism**. Wettstein and Weber demonstrated in their studies of newspaper history, how the educative function of the press was deeply rooted in the revolutionary liberalism. Like the press – the object of its research – newspaper studies had been entrusted with a vital social responsibility in the form of its manifold educational and informative functions. In academic discourse, journalism was now seen as a "public service" – and this proved to be a strong argument for ongoing professionalisation. Academia also projected this "image" of professional journalism towards the outside world, for example in the various important advisory roles it exercised vis-à-vis the federal authorities. This inevitably meant, of course, that the failings and shortcomings of journalists were increasingly criticized by the academic world, and also by politicians and the public at large.

During the Second World War especially, the communication science was a resolute **opponent of state censorship and instrumentalisation of the press**. Karl Weber, who headed the Zurich department in this period, argued forcefully "for the *maintenance of press freedom, more decisive action against abuse*, and disciplined, *responsible behaviour* on the part of the Swiss press." (Weber 1939: 11). In doing so, he imposed upon journalism the duties of a mature profession. The press succeeded in achieving broad public acceptance amongst the democratically minded population by its insistence on the highest possible degree of press freedom. In some ways, the press emerged from the Second World War as a victor: It was clear to a large part of the Swiss population that in the majority of cases, the press had been a far more unambiguous advocate of democracy than many federal councillors and parliamentarians. In short, the press had proved its worth and was often called "protection forest of democracy" (cf. Frei 1987: 7). The academic world had made a vital contribution to this positive image.

After the Second World War, a range of media policy issues prompted a rethinking of the existing normative foundations of mass communication studies. Economically induced concentration processes in the media landscape were seen as posing a threat to established federalist structures, but also as an opportunity to strengthen and professionalize the press through the formation of powerful major publishing groups. The communication science was an **opponent of structural maintenance policy**, because economically weak and influenceable media organisations were considered as a danger to democracy. In broadcasting, the trend towards commercialization led in the 1970s to problems. The pluralisation of Switzerland's public service radio and television system, though entirely desirable in terms of democratic principles, had to be "bought" at the cost of commercialization. The communication science welcomed a **controlled deregulation and commercialization of broadcasting** as a productive compromise. The idea that the communication deficits arising out of the concentration of the press could be made up for by commercial local broadcasting, was at first glance attractive and even welcomed by neoliberal forces. But the academic world was soon forced to acknowledge that the new diversity of providers did not lead to the desired diversity of content.

Accelerated moves since the mid-1980s to grade up the disciplines of mass communication and media research in Zurich and Switzerland, with the resulting substantial expansion of the academic staff, can be seen as a reaction to the increasingly complex relationships between journalism, politics and economics – an attempt to adapt theoretical and methodological observation and analysis tools to the changes in the object of their research.

✎ Conclusion: With its theoretical work and research on the subject of mass communication, the Zurich department regularly carried out the task of critical reflection. And this is its main contribution to the professionalisation of journalism in Switzerland.

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