

Journalistic ethics: how do universities in the Czech Republic shape students' moral perception?

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Abstract

This study reports the results of pilot research examining the aspects of journalism ethics courses influencing students' values and moral perceptions at the two largest universities in the Czech Republic. Through a questionnaire distributed among 84 students, followed up by syllabi analysis, the research helped to gather data to explore the factors involved in the establishment of the ethical standards of young journalists. The results suggest that more than a newsroom experience (often considered to be the biggest milestone on students' path of ethical education) it is the teaching style and course design what sculpts the point of view of the emerging generation of journalists at Charles University in Prague and Masaryk University in Brno.

Introduction

How the emerging journalistic generation makes ethical decisions today will have an impact on the form of media contents in upcoming years.

It has been argued that journalism ethics teachers should be aware of the fact, that although they themselves might not be active journalists or media employees of any sort anymore, their actions, teaching style and the ability to engage students in a discussion about morally controversial topics could influence the shape of the future of media outlets (Zhong, 2008, p.110).

For centuries, ethics have been among the academic disciplines. However, the ethics of journalism shaped much later, along with the profession itself, building up a reputation and the attribute of a “watchdog of democracy”. Siebert (1956) described this trend in *Four Theories of Press*, writing about libertarian theory, which ‘...[is] held to be the ideal in which the prime function of society is to advance the interests of its individual members.’ (Ostini and Fung, 2002, p.42)

In the U.S., teaching journalism ethics was quite rare in the 80’s. But already between 1994 and 2004, the number of media programmes requiring students to take an ethical course increased by more than a third (Pleasant, 2007, p.378).

Nowadays, most of the recognized schools of journalism offer ethical courses of some sort, including universities in the Czech Republic. Out of 87 local colleges accredited by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (Vejska.cz, 2018), the two largest ones (regarding enrolled students) are Charles University in Prague (Charles University, 2017) and Masaryk University in Brno (Masaryk University, 2018). Located approximately 200 kilometres apart, both of these institutions are a typical example of the most reputable universities in the country, offering a vast choice of programmes including medicine, law, mathematics, pedagogy, history, philosophy and of course, media studies and journalism.

Based on last accessible data from 2017, Charles University accepted 93 students to its undergraduate programme of journalism and 121 students to its graduate programme, which is available to students who previously obtained a bachelor’s degree from any programme, including journalism (Faculty of Social Sciences, 2017). In comparison, Masaryk University accepted 401 students to its undergraduate programme and only 44 students to the graduate programme, requiring previous bachelor’s degree exclusively from media studies and journalism (Faculty of Social Studies, 2017). There are three main reasons for the massive difference in the number of accepted undergraduate students in Prague and Brno. First, until the academic year of 2017/2018, Masaryk University offered two types of undergraduate programmes - full-time education and so-called “combined education”, when classes take place only several times during each semester. Second, Masaryk University does not offer a separate option for journalism - it is taught within a media studies and journalism programme. Finally, in Brno students are obliged to choose a double major, therefore for some of them, journalism can be the second, supplementing choice.

Although both universities show slight differences in the setting of their journalism programmes, they are reputable representatives of Czech public educational institutions with similar values and structure of their faculties. Therefore, the outcome of the comparison will provide valid information on the state of journalism ethics education within the country.

Literary review

Teaching journalism ethics

An essential issue students must understand while taking journalism courses is the complicated relationship between law and ethics. Compared to law, which dictates the same standards for each journalist, moral values differ in terms of individual beliefs. However, similarly to legal aspects of media production, ethical approaches can differ even on national levels. As an example, the results of the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (Hanitzsch et al, 2012-2016) can be used. In this comparative project, researchers from 67 countries (including the Czech Republic) interviewed local journalists. One of the questions framed around ethics asked respondents to express a level of (dis)agreement with the following statement: *What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment*. While, Czech journalists seem to be rather undecided, their American peers, for instance, somewhat disagree.

Regardless, the difference between media law and ethics is just a tip of the iceberg of each journalism course. Teachers must dive much deeper and try to unfold many other burning issues, as well as decide what is the best possible way to lead their ethical classes. In general, they believe that courses dedicated to media and journalism ethics are considered essential within journalism and mass communication programmes. While teaching their classes, they find the main goals to be fostering moral reasoning skills, contributing to the moral development of students, prepare students for professional work or, e.g., advance the liberal education of future journalists (Lambeth et al, 2004).

However, one of the main issues connected to teaching media ethics seems to be insufficient research in teaching effectiveness. While the number of affordable textbooks laying the theoretical grounds is not a problem, the amount of aids in different formats seems to be a deal-breaker. Christians and Lambeth (1996,

p.236) mention its interconnection with the fact "...[that] over 50% of those currently teaching free-standing courses do not regard ethics as a major strength intellectually or a primary research interest." Therefore, Coleman and Wilkins believe, that ethics professors at colleges, as well as instructors of ethics seminars for professionals, should reconsider the content of their lectures. They should make sure that "...individual ethical decisions are more firmly linked to larger ethical principles." (2002, p.221)

Several decades ago, the dominant question was whether media education would develop and be a regular part of syllabi not only created for journalism programmes, but also for those dealing with other levels of education, such as elementary schools or high schools. Today, the main issue is no longer if it will happen, but what type of media education will dominate (Hoechsmann and Poyntz, 2012, p.12).

In his study called *Problem solving in a mass media course*, Christians (1979, p.139) expresses a frustration caused by an inability of students to apply their course material effectively. For that reason, he decided to concentrate the syllabus around the decision-making process, rather than blindly follow the textbook chapters.

Journalistic ethics in the classroom

Students realize that later in their lives they might have to start compromising in terms of their ethical thinking. At the beginning of their studies, they often state that a desire to contribute to social change is what triggered their decision to study journalism. However, after discovering the newsroom aspects of the profession, the longer they have been enrolled in their degree, the less likely they want to work in media as journalists. This conclusion is only one of the outcomes of a study titled *Journalism Students' Motivations and Expectations of Their Work in Comparative Perspective* (Hanusch, 2015). The researchers worked with students from eight countries, however, the Czech Republic was not one of them. In spite of a possibility of geographical and cultural differences, it is an important piece of knowledge for local teachers and academic workers who are in charge of the programmes' syllabi. It is necessary to keep students motivated and lead the courses in an attractive way. Regardless of some opinions about the importance of laying the philosophical grounds first, many instructors choose to lead their classes in a more active and discussion-based way.

An example can be a study by Peterlin and Peters (2018), who decided to create a media ethics syllabus wrapped around a popular TV show *The Newsroom*. In their research, they categorized nine problems regularly discussed in the classroom, e.g., truth and honesty, privacy, conflict of interest or stereotypes. Later, they selected particular scenes of the above-mentioned programme and classified which topic could be discussed after watching each part. However, some researchers still argue, that media ethics education should also build upon philosophical, or even psychological approaches (Goree, 2000, pp.101-114).

Along with case studies, current media affairs, numerous amounts of textbooks created to help teachers to properly structure their courses and other approaches mentioned above, the most common aids are ethical guidelines of the most reputable media. This practical list of do's and don'ts with multiple recommendations on how to approach sensitive matters is often analysed by students and used to support their reasoning in essays or group discussions.

Apart from foreign ethical codes such as the BBC Programme Guidelines, at Czech universities the most widely used sets of rules are those established by national media, such as the Code of Czech Television (first published in 1995). Also, The Ethical Code of a Journalist by The Syndicate of Czech Journalists from 1998 is among those frequently used in ethical courses. However, their structure and content have been customized since the original versions were introduced (Moravec, 2005, pp. 53-54).

Ethical courses in digital age

Previous studies suggested that a well-designed course on journalism ethics can affect students' values (Plaisance, 2006, p.391). Thus, it is crucial to design up-to-date syllabi not only reflecting on the standard topics connected to moral issues young journalists might have to deal with, but also focusing on new technologies. In the world of social networks, smartphones and easy Internet access, it is easy to capture an event (or even stream it live) and share it on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or one of many other platforms. It might seem that the classical aspect of the journalism profession is slowly disappearing. However, as Neal Augenstein points out in a book by Antony Adornato (2018, p.147), those are just the new tools, which cannot (and should not) erase the traditional approach, including ethical understanding and the ability to set the information into context. Speed versus accuracy is one of the crucial questions connected to fast online journalism that students often discuss in their ethical classes. Media convergence brings plenty of other topics, which should be a regular part of 21st-century ethical courses (Jakubowicz, 2013). Adornato (2018, p.148)

writes about the blurry line between professional and private social media lives, contacting source via social media, interacting with the audience, verification of user-generated content and its copyright issues.

While it may seem that young generation developed quite remarkable skills in terms of dealing with the unlimited possibilities provided by the Internet and IT technologies, journalism schools have a role to play in helping students to navigate through these media channels filled with privacy and fake news traps. After all, the young generation "...[is] often not as creative with new media as we sometimes think." (Hochs-mann and Poyntz, 2012, p.146)

However, the main pillars of journalism ethics remain. We are talking about the undeniable importance of accurate reporting and a high level of punctuality, providing the audience with reliable information. With this knowledge, McBride and Rosenstiel suggest three section of journalism ethics' interest: "Seek truth and report it as fully as possible, be transparent and engage community as an end, rather than as a means." (2014, pp.1-3)

Nevertheless, the Internet brought into journalists lives a brand-new set of ethically grey areas. The undeniable movement towards personalization and growing dominance of a one-on-one relationship is launching new topics students should discuss during their classes. It is no longer just about the proper way of crafting the story (in whichever form); ethical dilemmas of the 21st century include communication with the audience on social sites, sharing contents, commenting and other similar expressions of a personal matter (Marshall, 2004, p.103). Knowing that, instructors of courses dedicated to journalism ethics should carefully tailor the content of their lectures and seminars and keep on updating the courses based on the development of modern trends in journalism, as well as on ethically challenging current affairs.

Student's ethical perception

Previous research indicates that younger students tend to have stronger ethical values than students in the later phase of their studies, who (during their internships) often had to deal with practical questions and decision-making processes connected to ethical dilemmas (Hanson, 2002, p.238). In general, introductory students seem to have the perception of higher ethical standards than the graduating students.

Leaving the classrooms and starting a full-time career of a journalist does not necessarily mean that students forget their previous moral standards. However, as Reinardy and Moore (2007, pp.161-171) stress, in the light of deadlines or requests from senior editors (and possibly the media owners), they usually start compromising, since unlike the academic environment, in the real newsroom there might be no benefit from raising their voice and expressing their ethical opinion.

Regardless, not all scholars agree that newsroom experience must inevitably distort student's value system set during classes. As an example, Conway and Groshek conducted a research, which suggests that the closer to the graduation students are, the harsher they judge an unethical journalistic behaviour, for example, plagiarism. The same can be said about students with journalistic internships or with experience from student media. As the authors conclude "Results from the study... demonstrate that applied media experiences and coursework are crucial in developing future journalists' perceptions of fundamental ethical behaviour." (2009, pp.461-479)

Without doubt many variables participate in the results of this type of studies; therefore, the outcomes sometimes differ, depending, e.g., on the geographical location or educational approach.

For instance, according to Marína Urbániková from Masaryk University (Volek and Urbániková, 2017, pp.238-249), in terms of the Czech Republic, local students consider journalism ethics to be something, which is impossible to learn. She also describes students' perception of ethics as strongly individualistic and self-developed. Additionally, the author points out, that a formation of ethical values is a very complex process, and therefore it must be explained multidimensionally, with a contribution of proper education as well as an influence of national differences. Hence, this study will (besides other aspects) take into consideration different educational approaches at Charles and Masaryk University, as well as discrepancies in structures of both journalism programmes.

Constructed upon the previous concepts, the research focused on examining the level of influence of the educational mode of delivery on students' perception of journalistic ethics. Also, the importance of never-ending customizing of the classroom content according to the trends of digital age was in the centre of attention. As a basis for the study, the following research question was proposed:

RQ: Which educational factors influence Czech journalism students' perception of ethical cases?

Method

The spine bone of the analysis is data extracted from a questionnaire. It consists of 46 questions, designed to gather information about students' perception of journalism ethics and their opinions on ethically chal-

lenging current affairs as well as collecting data about participants’ demographics, values or newsroom experience. This part of survey was partially inspired by previous research described in the book *Czech Journalists in Comparative Perspective* by Volek and Urbániková (2017).

The questionnaire was distributed among journalism students within the two largest universities in the Czech Republic - Charles University in Prague and Masaryk University in Brno. Both schools are dominant educational institutions for two different parts of the country. However, as the results of the questionnaire showed, both schools educate a wide spectrum of students in terms of gender, origin (from small towns to big metropolises), financial background, etc. In this particular study, only several segments of the whole questionnaire will be discussed, whereas in the future larger comparative research conducted in the U.S. will built upon the remaining dataset.

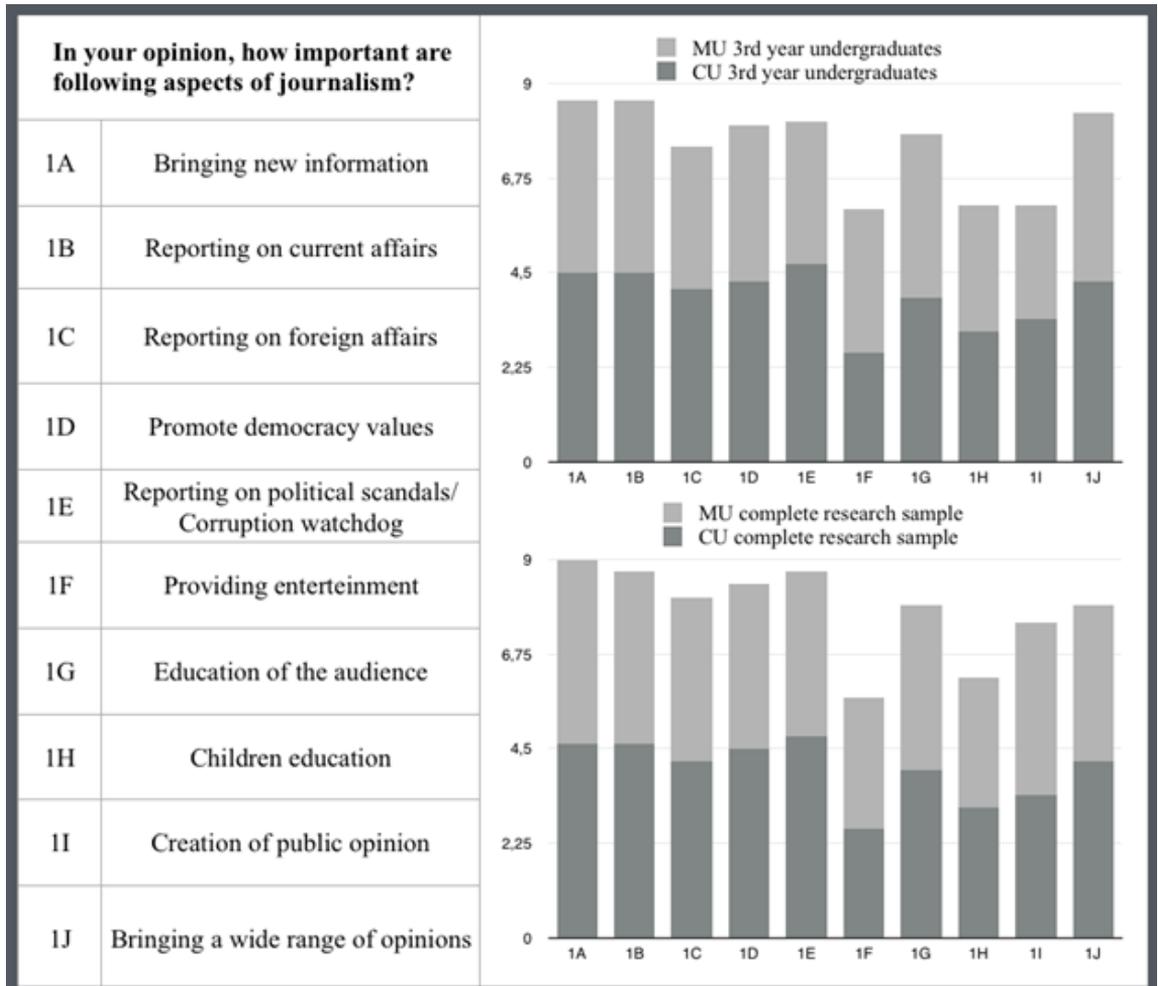


Fig 1: Important aspects of journalism

The questionnaire was distributed in person, so as to explain the purpose of the research to every student and reach the highest possible return rate. Students were also instructed to answer according to their own beliefs, not based on what they think the most correct answer would be. First two groups from Charles University filled in a paper version of the questionnaire (33 students), the third group of students from Masaryk University was asked to complete an electronic form on their personal electronic devices (51 students). Both versions were identical. The level of education among participating students differed from second-year bachelor students up to second-year masters students. The youngest students were 20 years old; the oldest participant was 27 years old. The gender ratio was 63 % females, 35 % males and 1 % chose an option “Other”.¹

¹ Which represents the real-life gender ratio in journalism/mass media courses quite reliably.

Because the sample of 84 students who participated in the questionnaire survey wasn't strictly homogeneous (it consisted of students of different age, level of study as well as work experience), before drawing any conclusions, a test run was conducted. The results of the first question were first evaluated based on data from a homogeneous group of third-year bachelor's degree-seeking students from both universities. Subsequently, this dataset was compared to results from the complete research sample. The results² show, that the answers are so similar, that the validity of the study won't be threatened if using the data from all participating students to evaluate the results.

Additionally, this survey was enriched by information about different syllabus structure at both universities.

Combining all the data provided enough material to create an introductory study about teaching journalism ethics in the Czech Republic, essential for improvement and potential future customization of ethical education within media-oriented fields.

Analysis

Two universities, one country

The research question was asked in order to evaluate which factors influence Czech journalism students' perception of ethical cases. To solve this issue, it is necessary to examine the structure of journalism studies designed by both universities. Although all programmes build on the same values, their structure slightly differs. Considering Charles University (CU), its students can choose between an undergraduate and graduate journalism programmes. Students seeking a bachelor's degree participate in three years long programme, which later divide its students into two study groups - one focusing on written and photographic journalism, the second dedicated to audio-visual courses, teaching future journalists about radio and TV. A course titled an Introduction to the Ethics of Journalistic Profession is compulsory for all students of both specializations.

Charles University's graduate programme combines students with the previous degree from different fields, including journalism. Again, those students can choose a specialization (sport, culture, politics, visual), in contrast to students with no media experience, who are obligated to sign up for general courses. Regardless of the chosen module, all students are again required to enrol in a class called Journalism Ethics in Practice.

In addition to two journalism programmes, the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism offers a Media Studies programme. However, it is more theoretical with focus directed towards media studies theory, not an actual training of future journalists.

The system at Masaryk University (MU) is slightly different. Until the academic year of 2017/18, students were able to choose a distance journalism programme. Starting with the academic year of 2018/19, only two possibilities are offered, both of them being a part of a programme called Media Studies and Journalism. In addition to that, an undergraduate programme is designed as one half of mandatory course load, meaning students are obliged to choose one extra field and study a double-major programme. Based on the questionnaire results, the highest number of respondents decided for a combination with Security and Strategic Studies or Sociology. All students must take a course titled an Introduction to Journalism Ethics. Comparing to that, a master's degree seeking students can select a course called Ethics and Media, which is classified as an optional class. However, unlike at Charles University, in Brno, the graduate programme is designed only for students who got awarded a bachelor's degree in Media Studies and Journalism. Therefore, the lack of a mandatory ethical course can be justified.

Internship: A life-changing experience?

The most significant observation based on the above-mentioned programmes' structures is connected to students' internship habits. Based on previous research³, young students come to journalism schools with stronger moral values. However, after getting to know the media world reality a little closer, their standards usually drop. One of the factors influencing this phenomenon is newsroom experience, which students usually gain in later years while fulfilling the compulsory media internships.

During their undergraduate studies, they are obliged to undergo an internship in a media organization of their choice. Both universities have this requirement, although there is a difference in its length. Students in Brno must spend 12 weeks in a newsroom; meanwhile, for their Prague peers, four weeks are sufficient.

2 See figure 1.

3 Discussed in the previous sections.

However, in reality, many of them spend much more time in the media than the obligatory amount. It is connected to the fact, that in contrast to MU’s students, they study only one field, which gives them more time to work part-time as interns in various organizations.

Additionally, Masaryk University schedules this practical experience for the fifth semester, comparing to Charles University, which offers the option starting with the fourth semester. This scheduling partially explains the questionnaire’s results showing that Prague journalism students have richer newsroom experience.⁴

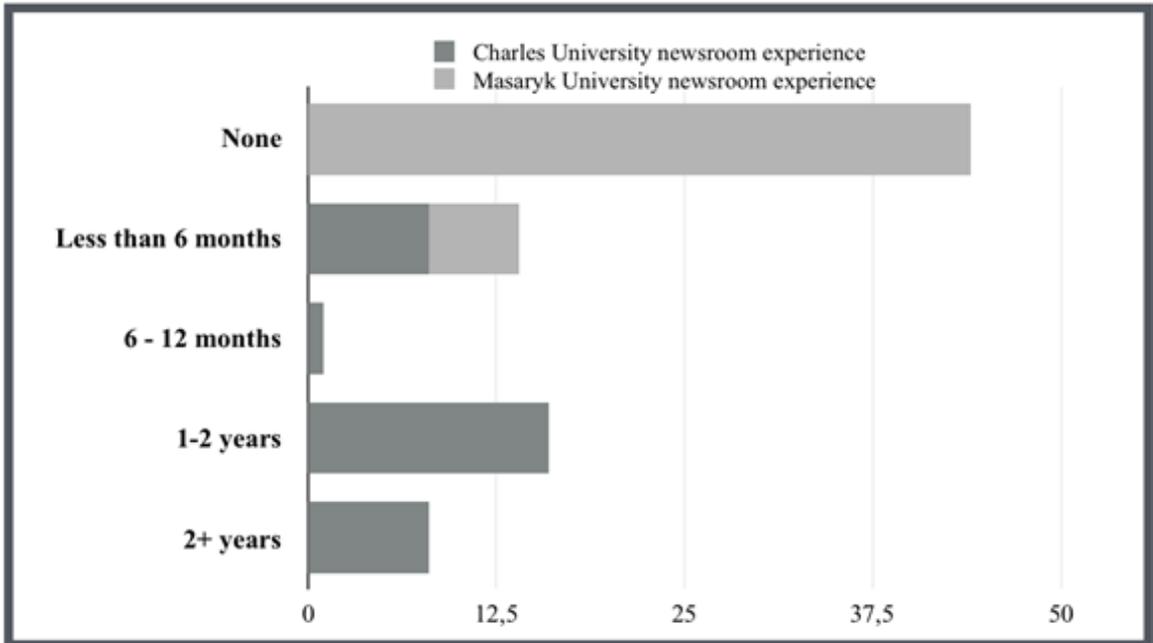


Fig 2: Newsroom experience within the research sample

However, more factors have to be taken into consideration. As suggested above, the situation is also caused by the structure of journalism study programmes in both cities. While CU students study only journalism, MU department titles its programme Media Studies and Journalism. On top of that, the majority of students are enrolled in above-mentioned “double major” programme. That results in heavier study load and less free time to dedicate to an internship. Additionally, although Brno is the second largest city in the Czech Republic, apart from the judiciary bureaus, the most important political institutions are located in the capital. That is why the majority of media organizations have their headquarters in Prague as well, providing CU students with more vacancies to fill and in general with higher chances to find an internship opportunity.

For those reasons, according to previous findings, unexperienced MU students were expected to have higher moral standards, as well as stronger values. However, the research proved that the reality is slightly different.

CU students on average consider the following aspects more important than their peers from MU: to bring new information, to inform about Czech politics, to inform about foreign politics, to promote democratic values, to report on political scandals and corruption, to educate the audience and to bring a wide range of opinions. On the other hand, to entertain the audience and to create a public opinion were the only two aspects, MU students think of higher than students from Prague.⁵

This question in particular shows, that even though Prague students are slightly older and have larger work experience, they still consider the role of media as a watchdog of democracy to be indisputable. Since both universities educate students from all around the Czech Republic⁶ (and therefore the origin of students is not a part of the equation), there must be other factors as important as newsroom training. In particular - teaching style and syllabus structure.

⁴ See figure 2.

⁵ See complete data in figure 1 above.

⁶ The questionnaire collected answers from students who grew up in small villages, bigger cities and the largest metropolises in the country.

Course design matters

For that reason, several questions about the journalism programmes were proposed. In general, the questionnaire recipients were rather satisfied with the amount of space dedicated to journalism ethics during their study. However, the results were fluctuating slightly above the average three-point answer, suggesting that Czech journalism programmes might benefit from some improvements. For example, one of the categories was focused on practical exercises used to teach students the importance of ethical reasoning during classes. And while students from MU think that the time dedicated to theory and practice is more or less divided equally, CU students expressed rather a disagreement with the fact, that their university uses mostly real-life examples to teach them about moral aspects of the journalism profession.⁷ Nevertheless, this section was aimed at all journalism courses, and therefore the number of practical exercises exclusively during ethical classes might be a little higher.

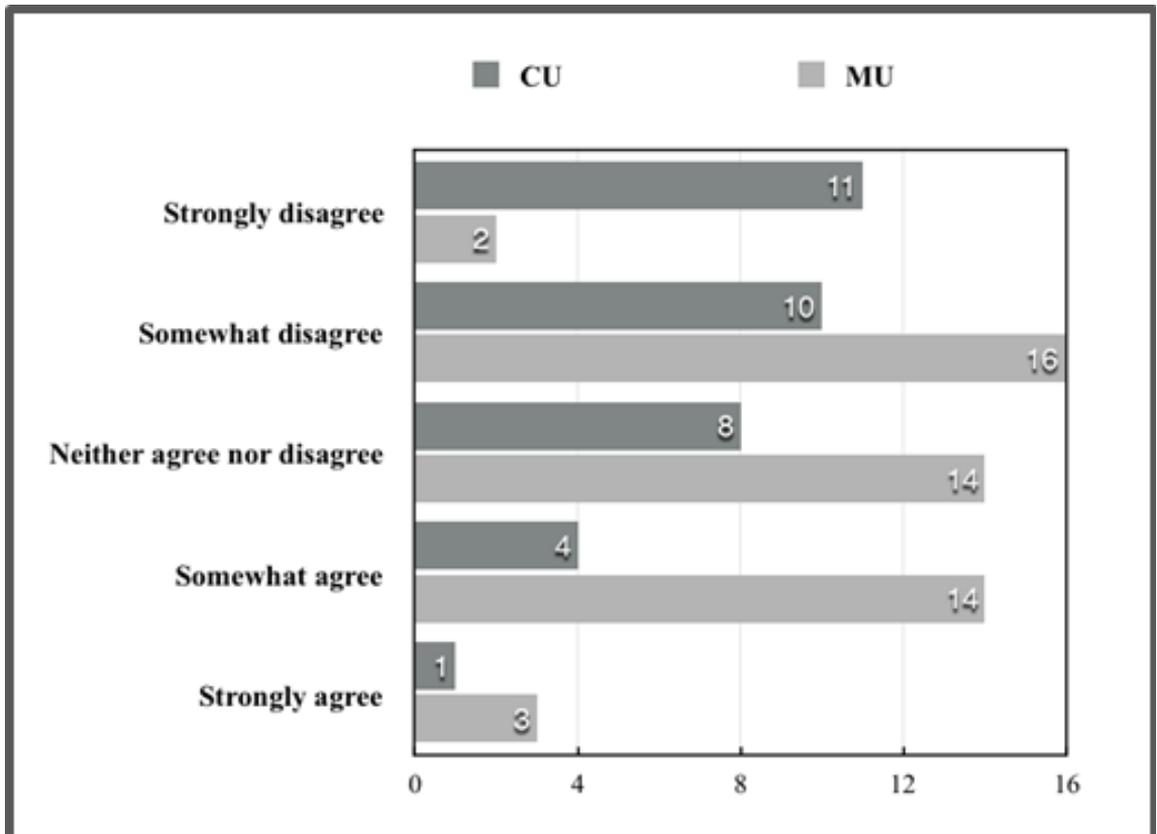


Fig 3: Journalism ethics is taught mainly on the basis of practical exercise as a part of my programme

Case studies are often the most exciting part of a lecture, however, their implementation to the syllabus is not easy. Unlike in other countries, where classes take place several times within a week, Czech universities often dedicate to each subject an hour and twenty minutes per week (in a duration of one semester). Considering there is no joined seminar to this lecture, sometimes it is hard to fit into the lecture both philosophical theory and practical cases. In spite of that, teachers in the Czech Republic often combine both approaches within ethical courses, including, for instance, the obligation of graduate students in Prague to complete an essay on a chosen current ethical affair several times during semester.

On a more positive note, students indicated that it is rather true, that their study programme finds journalism ethics to be a vital topic and on average they agreed that the space dedicated to it and the education style is quite adequate.⁸ Still, even though the answers are leaning towards the “agreeing” end of the Lickert scale

⁷ See figure 3.

⁸ See figure 4.

(Berger, 2016, p.301), most of them are placed around the “undecided” section. That suggests a positive outcome, but also a lot of space for future improvement.

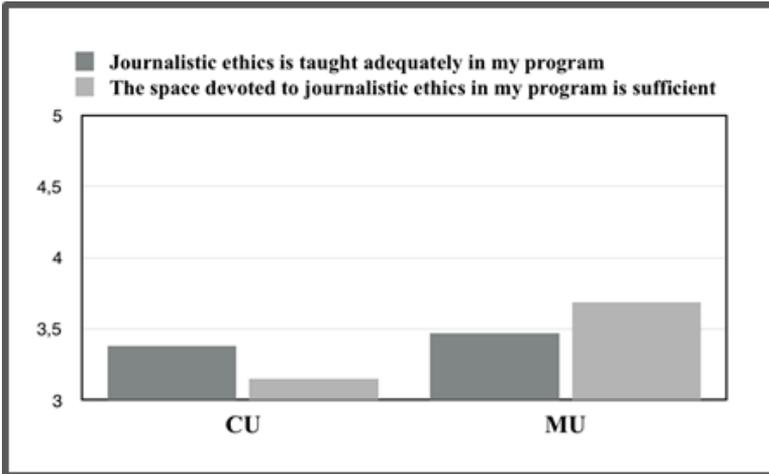


Fig 4: Journalistic ethics’ implementation in the curriculum

Additionally, CU students rather disagree with a statement that ethics is a common topic in courses not directly dedicated to the moral aspects of their future profession. In contrast to that, students in Brno rather agree with that, which shows higher connectivity in MU’s syllabus.⁹

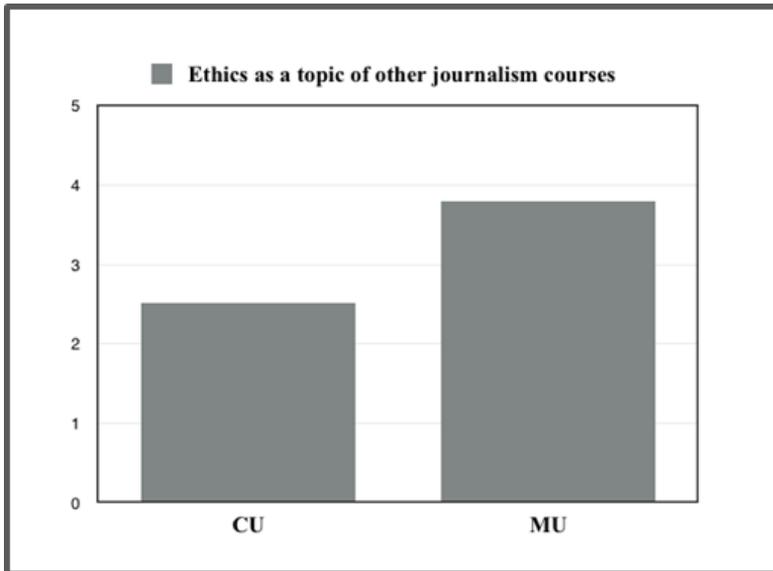


Fig 5: Journalistic ethics is a frequent topic even in courses that are not exclusively devoted to it

Following the previous set of questions, the topic of a media law education was examined in order to see, how incorporated this field is into the ethical courses. Based on syllabus research, none of the two universities teaches these two courses officially within the same class. The issue of a legal and moral difference sometimes appears during ethics classes. However, more than half of the responders disagreed with the statement, that media law education is a regular part of their media ethics course.¹⁰

9 See figure 5.

10 See figure 6.

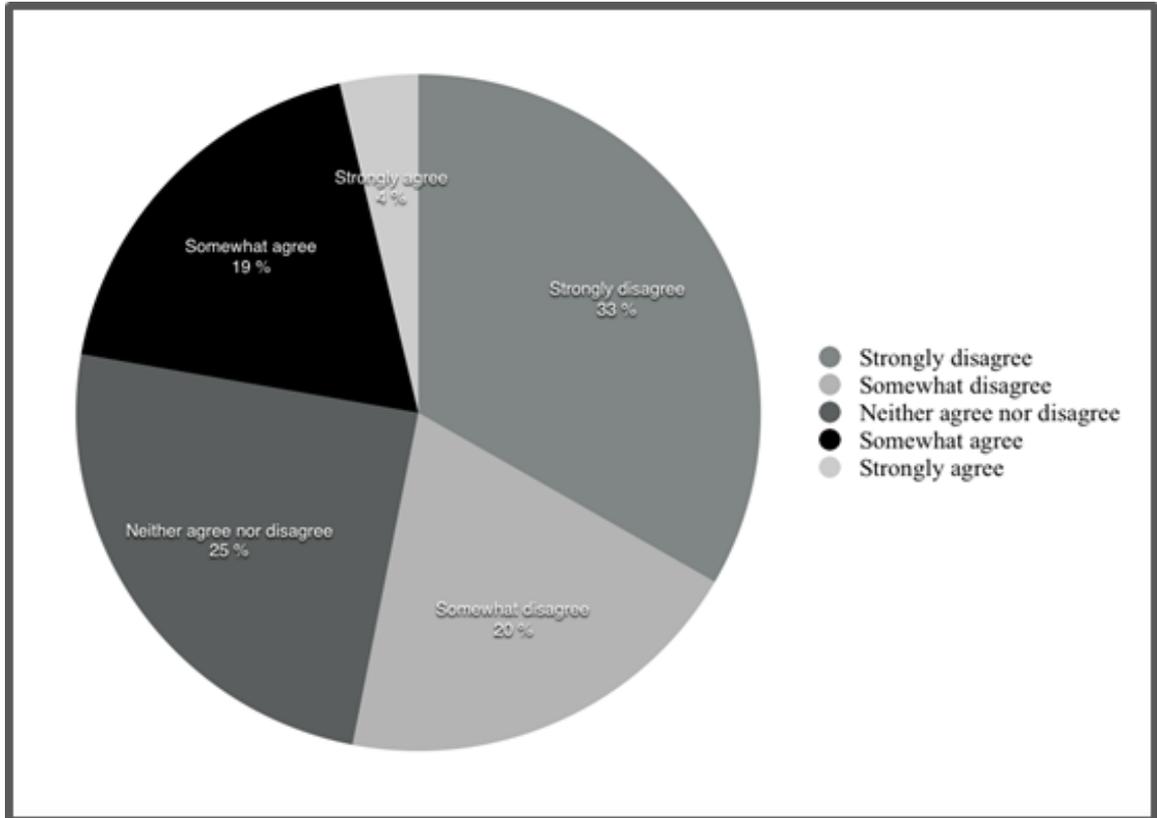


Fig 6: Media law is taught in one class, along with journalistic ethics

The questionnaire also examined, which additional factors not directly connected to university education might be influencing students’ perception of ethical cases. One of the questions was dedicated to media consumption and respondents’ preferences and habits.¹¹ As the least popular category students chose Fake News Media.¹² Nevertheless, because the society is overwhelmed with information, one of the jobs journalists should master is to fact check and correct misleading information. Students’ lack of interest in disinformation websites can be evaluated as a result of strong moral standards, however, since the majority of students do not seek this kind of platform on their own, ethical courses should dedicate a sufficient time to discuss its characteristics and teach students how to navigate around the traps disinformation “journalists” try to set up. See Table 1.

Additionally, it is clear to see, that the young generation’s attention moved towards online media. In the questionnaire, 65 students stated, they read online news on a daily basis and 72 respondents answered that they check their social networks every day. Therefore, students are almost permanently exposed to the effect of social media, without undergoing any specific journalistic training on how to deal with ethical challenges these new technologies propose.

Self-learning through social media

Based on the questionnaire answers, the emerging generation of journalists is aware of many difficulties connected to the work with social networks, although during ethical courses only a limited time is dedicated to this topic. Hence, one of the factors influencing their perception of ethical cases is an unconscious self-learning process during their everyday social network routine.

¹¹ See table 1.

¹² Also referred to as disinformation media.

Medium	Daily	3-4 times a week	Twice a week	Once a week	Rarely	Never
Newspaper	3	7	8	23	38	5
TV	20	16	17	9	21	1
Radio	13	8	19	15	27	2
Online news websites	65	10	5	1	3	0
Commentary magazines	4	4	14	22	33	7
Social media	72	5	2	1	2	2
Foreign media	21	19	8	16	19	1
Fake news websites	1	1	2	6	48	26

Table 1: Media consumption among participating students

In today’s world, which is strongly influenced by the growing trend of media convergence, social networks are becoming one of the key sources for journalistic work. On one side, students have to learn how to produce news stories for such a vast, global and interlinked platform. Anthony Adornato in his book titled *Mobile and Social Media Journalism* writes: “Mobile and social media skills are required of both new graduates and more seasoned journalists, in addition to reporting skills for traditional platforms.” (2018, p.13)

But a proper writing technique is not the only aspect journalism students have to deal with concerning social networks. For that reason, this research examines this topic from the other side of the barrier, because verifying all information (especially coming from sources like Facebook or Twitter) is one of the key aspects connected not only to ethical decision-making but journalism profession as well.

Therefore, students were asked to evaluate the relevance of five social networks for their work as journalists on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 meaning an essential importance, 5 meaning no importance at all).¹³

The results clearly divide the social media into three categories. The most respected platform based on students’ opinion is Twitter. Ten out of 84 students consider it to be a completely relevant source of information and 37 students answered it is a rather important source.

The second group of social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, scored between 3,1 to 3,7 importance on the Lickert scale, meaning students might find its importance to differ based on the circumstances and individual cases.

Finally, Snapchat scored the lowest, when a majority of respondents consider it from rather unimportant to not important at all.

Social Medium	Degree of importance
Facebook	3,2
Instagram	3,7
Twitter	2,4
Snapchat	4,4
LinkedIn	3,1

Table 2: The relevance of five social networks for journalistic work

¹³ See table 2.

However, as mentioned in the methodological section, the same research is intended to be conducted in the USA as well, where Snapchat is way more popular than in the Czech Republic (Chaffey, 2016).

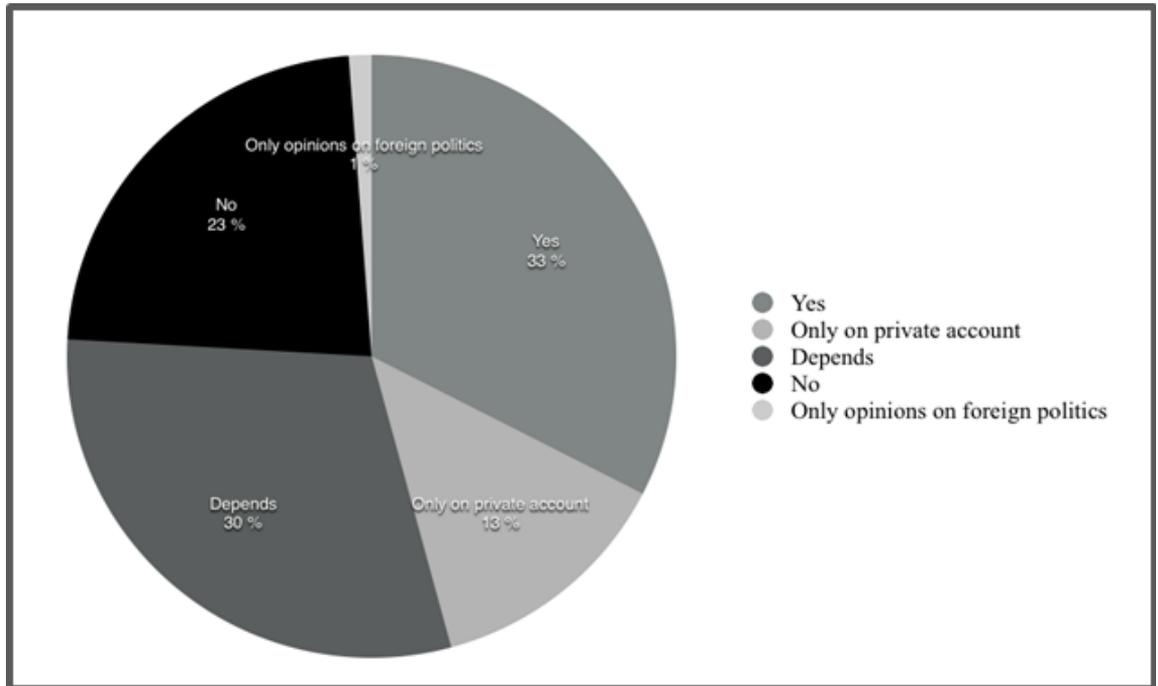


Fig 7: Should journalists share political views on social media?

A question concerning sharing personal political opinions on social networks was also part of the distributed questionnaire, but the answers were quite diverse.¹⁴ In comparison, responds to a multiple-choice question concerning hoax and fake news¹⁵ prevention while using social media as the first point of reference were more balanced.¹⁶ Among other things, these results suggest that however students realize it is essential to make sure about the correctness of certain affairs, they are ready to do the research on their own or within their newsroom, rather than depending on other media publishing the information first and potentially getting all the credit.

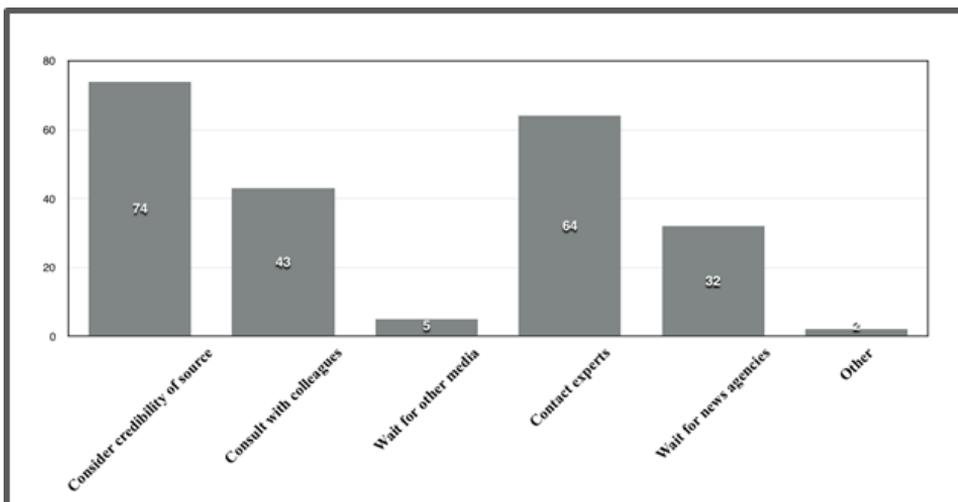


Fig 8: Fact-checking on social media

14 See figure 7.

15 Untrue news published on disinformation websites.

16 See figure 8.

Conclusion

The author is aware of the limits of the study connected mainly to a smaller research sample consisted of quite a diverse group of respondents, therefore, for now, the results should not be applied in a global scale. However, a more substantial comparative research is planned in the Czech Republic and the USA in following years, promising larger dataset and more profound results on the topic.

Regardless, it was discovered, that values of journalism students from Charles University slightly differ from those of Masaryk University's students. To sum it up, students in Prague seem to feel more strongly about questions linked to democracy, their individual code of ethics or the accuracy. Compared to that, respondents in Brno feel more strongly about topics of lower prestige within the society, such as the audience's entertainment. In comparative perspective, these results are extremely interesting, since the majority of previous studies from other countries argue, that the older (and more professionally experienced) the students get, the more rapidly their values tend to drop. However, in this scenario, on average, students of Masaryk University were slightly younger, and because of the double-major programme setting (leaving less time for journalistic dedication, respectively for media internship), they were expected to have higher moral standards. Nevertheless, the research revealed the opposite outcome.

Also, it is necessary to realize, that since students of Masaryk University were slightly younger, not all of them had yet finished the required ethical course.¹⁷ This observation is in line with the proposed explanation that specialized education in the area of morality strengthens students values and gives them a shield, they can use later in their career to stay at least partially immune against the questionable practice some newsrooms might be forcing on them.

It is important to stress, that although students from both institutions often disagreed on the level of importance of presented topics, the hierarchy of their answers is almost identical. To be more specific, respondents usually agreed in terms of which issue is the most important and which is not.

Based on current journalism trends, the topic of social networks was widely discussed, since students spend most of their time getting information from these platforms and therefore this self-learning experience is an inherent supplement to college education. Surprisingly, the results show that while using Facebook or Twitter, the emerging generation of journalists is aware of its limits and uses the data and information with caution. Most of them would always evaluate the reliability of the original source, get a second opinion from a specialist or discuss the matter with other colleagues. On the other hand, regarding the usage of their social network accounts as a platform for sharing opinions (while being an employee of a media organization) the research had quite fragmented outcome among the students. For that reason, ethical approach towards online journalism, in general, should be one of the main topics of ethical courses, since the current trends of journalism are undoubtedly shifting towards that direction and self-education consisted almost exclusively of personal hands-on experience cannot fully cover the issue.

Despite the fact, that one third of the respondents work (or have previously worked) in a newsroom, the above-mentioned results show that it is primarily a proper education in the field of journalism ethics, which serves as a milestone in students' professional development. The successful completion of an ethical course helps them to put facts into context and make educated decisions about sensitive matters. That being said, it is obvious that a proper syllabi design, as well as a regularly updated content of lectures, are crucial for reaching that goal.

“This study was conducted with the financial support of a grant provided by Grant Agency of Charles University no. 1734218, titled *Attitude of Journalism Students to Journalistic Ethics: A Comparison of the Czech Republic with the USA*, conducted at Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University. The author first presented the topic at Media Education Summit 2018 in Hongkong. The conference attendance was co-financed from Specific Research provided from the budget of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Czech Republic.”

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