Experiential Learning in Reporting the European Union

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European Journalism—Perspectives and Limits in Reporting the European Union

THIS PAPER will explore how the spectacular revolution in communication in the digital era produces new opportunities in terms of journalism education and media practices. When it comes to the European Union, in recent years it has continuously updated its strategies and policies in order to implement the most adequate communication system that could contribute to strengthen the European public sphere and, consequently, the construction of the European Union (Nistor, Beuran 2015).

When analyzing *European journalism*, researchers mention that "journalism over Europe is emerging as a common transnational experience", whereas "the EU news appears restricted to the elites readerships of press" (Bee, Bozzini 2010).

The general structure and mode of operation of the EU institutions and the decision-making process are extremely slow and they lack the necessary drama that journalists need for developing news stories that could eventually engage the general European audience, according to the recent volume titled *Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions* (edited within the Reuters Challenges series of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, by authors John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi). When analyzing the level of interest that news media organizations and Europeans have or, more often, do not have regarding EU stories, Lloyd and Marconi have identified three major causes (Llyod, Marconi 2014):

1. The media coverage of the European Union is difficult for journalism, due to its lack of drama, confrontations and well-known characters, but instead is slow, complex, technical and detailed. "Even news which significantly impacts on everyday life—a decision which can affect a community in a positive or negative way, and there are many—is delivered in different steps over an extended period, and it can take years before the measures enter into force", consider the two mentioned authors.

2. Popular media (defined by the authors of the cited study as mass-circulation newspapers and television) could theoretically do more in covering EU. The authors

refer to the following reasons—the most powerful and influential newspapers (*Bild* in Germany and *The Daily Mail* and the Sun in the UK) "are strongly critical of the EU or of some aspects of it", while "television coverage is much less polemical, but is generally brief".

3. The decrease in the correspondents' corps based in Brussels, explained by Lloyd and Marconi as a result of the growing conviction among editors that news about the EU is unpopular with readers and viewers, during the 2000s.

How should journalists cover the European Union?

The Amsterdam School of Communications has conducted a research that identified five generic news frames for reporting the European Union (Vreese 2003):

1. The conflict frame emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, institutions or countries. Research has observed that political debate between elites is often reduced to conflict in the news.
2. The human interest frame brings a human face, an individual's story, or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem. This frame personalizes and "emotionalizes" news.
3. The responsibility frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving the issue to either the government or to an individual or group.
4. The morality frame interprets an event or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. For example, such stories may contain moral messages, judgments, and offer social prescriptions about majority behavior.
5. The economic consequences frame presents an event, problem or issue in terms of the economic consequences it will have on an individual, group, institution, region or country.

However, the principles of professional journalism should remain the same, in spite of the field that it covers. The Nieman Reports from The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University highlighted the importance of the "Essays about the Elements of Journalism" that present the essential principles of journalism as established by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (The Nieman Report 2001):

1. "Journalism's first obligation is to the truth—rather than adding context and interpretation, the press needs to concentrate on synthesis and verification;
2. Journalism' first loyalty is to citizens—a commitment to citizens is more than professional egoism; the allegiance to citizens is the meaning of the journalistic independence;
3. The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification—the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, art, fiction;
4. Journalists must maintain an independence from those they cover;
5. Journalists must serve as an independent monitor of power—in the next century, the press must watchdog not only government, but an expanding nonprofit world, a corporate world, and the expanding public debate that new technology is creating;

6. Journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and comment;
7. Journalists must make the significant interesting and relevant—storytelling and information are not contradictory;
8. Journalists should keep the news in proportion and make it comprehensive—journalism is our modern cartography; it creates a map for citizens to navigate society;
9. Journalists have an obligation to personal conscience" (as stated by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in their volume "The Elements of Journalism").

Developing Local European Journalism

THE RESULTS of a previous research, conducted by one of the authors of this study (Nistor 2013) among professional journalists in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, a European member state since 2007, indicate different opinions regarding the challenges related to developing local European stories—for some of the interviewed reporters reporting the European Union is still considered a niche, while others consider that the entire media content is European, ever since Romania entered the Union. Nevertheless, in recent years, local European journalism had the chance to develop also as a result of the complex communication services of the European institutions. Almost each interviewed local journalist mentioned the use of an official website, online platforms, social networks, audio-visual services, when covering EU matters. One obvious remark is that the recent strategy of public communication developed by the DG Communication is indeed necessary and useful for professional media. The EU Newsroom is gathering the latest news and press material from all the EU institutions, agencies and bodies in one place, therefore providing a single entry point to all EU news, according to the official platform. According to the interviewed local journalists, European journalism is still not approached "locally" enough—the most often mentioned sources, when it comes to covering European matters, are Brussels' official ones. However, journalists mention that there is an increasing interest in European matters, especially in topics like European funds or migration. Finally, as a general observation, according to all interviewed local journalists, the editorial decision of covering European matters is directly related to the idea of significance and impact upon targeted audiences.

Furthermore, the European Commission itself highlights the importance of media literacy. The Commission Recommendation, of August 2009, on *Media literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society* (The European Commission 2009), states that:
– Media literacy plays an important role in enhancing awareness in the European audiovisual heritage and cultural identities and increasing knowledge and interest in audiovisual heritage and recent European cultural works.
– Media literacy is a matter of inclusion and citizenship in today's information society.

– A media literate society would be at the same time a stimulus and a precondition for pluralism and independence in the media. The expression of diverse opinions and ideas, in different languages, representing different groups, in and across societies has a positive impact on the values of diversity, transparency, equity and dialogue.

Journalism Education—The Curriculum Dimension

BEFORE ANSWERING to the question "*what skills and knowledge should journalism students develop in order to produce relevant European news?*" it is necessary to first attempt to identify what a journalism graduate should know and be able to produce. In this regard, we will briefly mention the *UNESCO Model Curricula for Journalism Education*, 2007, a complex research conducted by a team of UNESCO experts and journalism educators from different countries. According to the mentioned study, *the basic goals of most journalists are: to serve society by informing the public; to scrutinize the way power is exercised; to stimulate democratic debate and in those ways aiding political, economic, social and cultural development.*

According to UNESCO Model Curricula (UNESCO 2007), journalism education should, among others, teach students:
– how to identify news and recognize the story in a complex field of fact and opinion and how to conduct journalistic research;
– how to write for, illustrate, edit and produce material for various media formats (newspapers and magazines, radio and television, and online and multimedia operations) and for their particular audiences;
– to adapt to technological developments and other changes in the news media;
– how to cover political and social issues of particular importance to their own society through courses developed in co-operation with other departments in the college or university. It should ensure that they develop both a broad general knowledge and the foundation of specialized knowledge in a field important to journalism.

The main skills of a journalism graduate are the following, as stated by the UNESCO Model Curricula for Journalism Education (UNESCO 2007):
– an ability to think critically, incorporating skill in comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of unfamiliar material, and a basic understanding of evidence and research methods;
– an ability to write clearly using narrative, descriptive, and analytical methods;
– a knowledge of national and international political, economic, cultural, religious, and social institutions;
– a knowledge of current affairs, and a general knowledge of history and geography.

In any case, researchers consider that educational needs are more diverse than ever: there is demand for elite and universal education, for qualifications as for solid education, for fundamental or applied research (Şandor, Tripon 2006).

The Experiential Learning Theory—Concepts and Framework

DAVID KOLB's *Experiential Learning Theory* defines learning "as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb 1984).

The Experiential Learning Theory is structured on the following six main propositions (Kolb 1984: 26-35):

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
2. All learning is relearning.
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.
5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

FIGURE 1. EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING THEORY
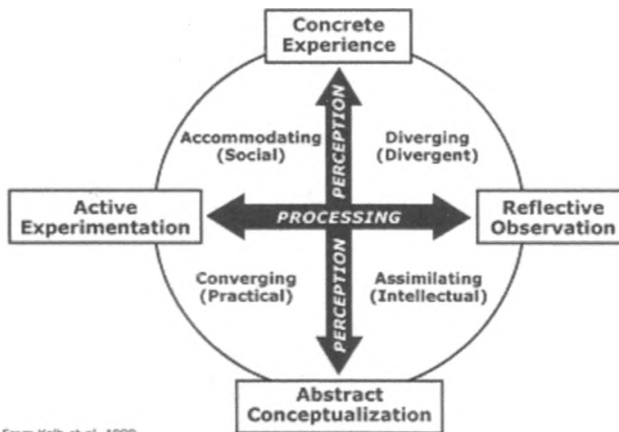
From Kolb et al. 1999

SOURCE: David T. Schaller (2005)

Teaching European Journalism
A Case Study on UBB RADIO ONLINE, an online radio where students practice EU Reporting

W HEN APPLYING the experiential theory on the journalism curricula, researchers consider that (Clair 2015):

– Educators must design learning around experiential activities in authentic settings to ensure students have experience in the unpredictable task of reporting.
– Students participate actively and make choices in the learning experience, collaborate and support other students, and reflect on and articulate what they learn with others.
– Anchoring experiential learning in authentic settings or around authentic activities, which further supports relevant and deep learning, helps journalism students develop skills and mindsets they can draw upon during internships and their first professional roles.

Journalism students' competences in reporting on European topics should include a strong knowledge of the European institutions, European Union history and structure, as well as a good knowledge of member states history, culture, and geography. Without a profound understanding of the phenomenon, students, and later on professional journalists, would not be able to produce analytical and in-depth news introducing different perspectives and comparisons when reporting the European Union, so that the message is clear and complete enough to be easily understood by a large audience.

In order to succeed in introducing a European dimension in the journalism curriculum, there is a strong need of a *cross-disciplinary learning* approach. When addressing a European audience, journalists must understand it as much as possible otherwise, it is impossible to provide any comprehensive news coverage of European topics. Therefore, students need at least basic knowledge in international and European administration, politics, geography, culture, economy. Consequently, journalism students need to develop their knowledge, competencies and practical skills in various fields. The main educational objectives could be at least the following: *achieving good journalistic technical skills and knowledge; computer and multimedia skills; knowledge in basic statistics; basic research and scientific methodology; professional internships in media institutions; knowledge in using the social media to promote and circulate the news-story, eventually to merchandise it; developing the ability to think critically; ethics and media law; basic knowledge of the institutions of civic life, e.g. county/city/state/national government; basic knowledge regarding the culture, history and geography of the European Union member states; basic marketing and management*

knowledge; good foreign languages knowledge and proficiency; efficient techniques to navigate the Internet and the online resources.

The case study of this paper explores an extra-curricular media project organized at the Journalism Department at Babeș-Bolyai University in Romania: UBB RADIO ONLINE, an online radio station that functions as a student laboratory, organized for journalism students and coordinated by teaching staff, which has been focusing on EU reporting ever since its launch. Using the facilities of this studio, students may practice radio news reporting alongside the written press, TV, photo and multimedia alternatives that they have access to in the corresponding studios that this Journalism Department has developed throughout the last years, so that practical media skills could be equally developed following the theoretical and practical media courses and seminars.

As previously demonstrated, through the Internet, journalists (in our case journalism students) take the opportunity to enhance their communicative performance and the interactive potentiality of the communication channel, while the main advantages relate to three themes: speed, breadth of diffusion, additional information, and interactivity with readers (Fortunati 2009).

Launched in 2007, UBB RADIO ONLINE functions as a simulated newsroom where students deal with various reporting assignments and play different editorial roles for achieving a better understanding of the specific responsibilities of each news desk position. It broadcasts student radio programs and it has also developed a multimedia platform for uploading texts, photos, interviews or features. As many scholars agree, well into the 21st century and with the third wave of online journalism, most traditional media organizations have a presence on the Internet, whether as full-fledged news services or, at least, basic websites (Zabaleta, Gutierrez, Ferre-Pavia, Itxaso, Urrutia, Xamardo 2013). Throughout the years, the online radio project has also developed an English service, alongside a German one, following the organization of the Journalism Department in keeping with the unique multicultural structure of the University (the academic institution has a multilingual profile providing complete bachelor, master and doctoral studies in the languages of the traditional ethnic communities of Transylvania—Romanian, Hungarian and German—and has lately developed educational programs in widely spoken languages such as English and French). Over these years, students from the UBB RADIO ONLINE newsroom have been participating in reporting assignments on a daily basis in line with their schedule of classes—press conferences, press interviews, news gathering, radio editing, radio programming, anchoring and other specific tasks related to an operating radio station with the goal of practicing radio reporting.

Due to its interest in EU reporting, the UBB RADIO ONLINE team has been collaborating with European journalism-related projects. One of them is EURA-NET PLUS—The European Radio Network, which is the leading radio network for

EU news (18 radio stations all across the European Union, providing news to 22 million listeners on a daily basis, according to http://euranetplus-inside.eu/, accessed 2016), where UBB RADIO ONLINE has been participating at the University Circle organized within the European Radio Network. Journalism students from this radio station have been participating starting with 2009 in numerous debates on European topics organized by EURANET PLUS at the European Parliament in Brussels, alongside with students from several other university radio stations from the EU. On these occasions, students had the opportunity to address questions to the Members of the European Parliament and to other EU officials, practices that contributed to a better understanding of the various European topics. Another related project is MICRO-EUROPA (2009-2012), initiated by l'Institut des Hautes Études des Communications Sociales (IHECS) of Brussels—a student radio stations network whose main goal was to train students in *reporting on the European Union*. Essentially, each month there was a certain chosen topic that students were producing local radio reports on, focusing on elements that could have been of interest for a European student audience, since in the end each radio station involved in the project was rebroadcasting the other stations' reports. Thus, UBB RADIO ONLINE has produced numerous radio reports on topics related to education, culture, travel and others. Occasionally, these journalism students were participating, together with their colleagues from the partner radio stations, in professional journalism workshops organized in Brussels, Nantes or London where, joined by media educators and professionals, they were trying to identify theoretical and practical approaches to *European Journalism*.

The students' activity in this laboratory radio station has been positively appreciated on various occasions—they have been awarded in all the editions of the national journalism competition titled *Europe from the Halls of Journalism Faculties* where they have competed against students coming from other university journalism programs (the competition has been organized by the Representation of the European Commission in Romania). In 2012, a student from UBB RADIO ONLINE team has won the *Young European Radio Journalist Award*, in a European contest focused on EU topics where more that seventy young radio journalists from all over Europe have participated, with the awarding ceremony being held in the European Parliament in Brussels, in the presence of the former EP President Martin Schulz. Consequently, the alumni of UBB RADIO ONLINE, who have also been also highly engaged in all the curricular and extra-curricular programs of the Journalism Department, have become professional journalists or communicators in various news media organizations or they even work in European institutions like the DG Communication of the European Commission in Brussels.

The reporting exercises, the news desk meetings, the process of news gathering, the production and the dissemination stage definitely contribute to the develop-

ment of technological and multimedia skills, alongside with developing the ability to think critically.

Therefore, we consider that David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* could be applied to UBB RADIO ONLINE, as described below:

1. *Concrete Experience*—students face a new experience, through exposure to specific reporting practices on a daily basis;

2. *Reflective Observation*—students, joined by the coordinating teaching staff, are discussing, debating, and analyzing the main journalistic activities during their weekly newsroom meeting or during their day-to-day meetings in the studio.

3. *Abstract Conceptualization*—students also reflect on issues related to EU media coverage in other courses from their curriculum (one example, among others, could be the European Journalism course); usually, new ideas were designed after these practical reporting experiences and theoretical approaches;

4. *Active Experimentation*—students put into practice all the knowledge and some of the alumni use these skills in the real professional activity, as earlier mentioned in this study.

Final considerations

In conclusion, we consider that journalism education moves forward with quick and secure steps, in spite of some voices that still link journalism education to a 'symphony of slowness', as Eric Newton, senior adviser to the president at Knight Foundation, states, referring to its reaction time to new things (Myers 2012). One example, in our opinion, could be the case of UBB RADIO ONLINE of the Journalism Program at Babeş-Bolyai University, where students are being trained in a simulated newsroom environment where they complete their strong theoretical background with the specific media production, technical, editorial and broadcasting skills.

Taking into consideration David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* and accepting that, naturally, up to a certain extent there is an artificial dimension of this simulated news laboratory, we consider that in general the structure of the UBB RADIO ONLINE student project contributes to facilitating the understanding of a real media newsroom and the training in reporting the European Union that can complete the journalistic competences of a journalism graduate of Babeş-Bolyai University.

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Abstract
Experiential Learning in Reporting the European Union

Reporting the European Union has become a challenge in recent years due both to recent fundamental changes in the media industry determined by the fascinating digital twist and also to the debate around the European project itself (as indicated by the last decade's referendums and by the highly debated *Brexit*) or by the immigrants' crisis that European Union has been facing since 2015. The professional media could play a key role in developing the European public sphere that is required for strengthening the public engagement of EU citizens, thus contributing to increasing democracy in the Union. After presenting theoretical considerations on the journalism curriculum, followed by the European Journalism concept, the authors verify *the experiential learning theory* analyzing an extra-curricular media project developed in a Romanian University where journalism students are stimulated to develop skills in reporting the EU.

Keywords
European journalism, journalism curriculum, experiential learning, UBB RADIO ONLINE