Survival story across system changes: journalism education in Estonia

**Today,** we view journalism education in a wider perspective than ever before. We have a number of theories, the wide scope of research uses modern interdisciplinary methods that are also used in teaching. Furthermore, in the contemporary globalising world, journalism education is international, even when taught in national languages. This has not always been the case everywhere.

The following is an insider’s view about journalism education in Estonia as I’ve been in the field at Tartu University for the last 28 years.

The story about journalism education in Estonia is also a story about journalism and the profession of journalism. All three are survival stories that reflect the historical realities of Estonia as a country and as a nation.

Journalism and journalism education are tinted by political systems where ever they exist. They carry different roles and functions in different regimes and are dependent on the degree of freedom at their disposal. Journalism in Estonia dates back for over 300 hundred years but for less than a total of 30 years has there been the freedom of press. This is because Estonia has been ruled by a succession of foreign powers throughout its history.
Estonia

- Territory 45 000 km²
- Population: 1.37 million (ca 930 000 Estonian speaking)

- Rulers throughout the history:
  - 1227-1558 German domination (Livonian Order)
  - 1583-1629 Poland, Sweden, Denmark
  - 1629-1710 Sweden
  - 1710-1918 Russia
  - 1940-1941 Soviet Union
  - 1941-1944 Nazi Germany
  - 1944-1991 Soviet Union
- Independent nation state: 1918-1940 and from 1991 onwards

From 1675 when the 1st newspaper in Estonia, published in German appeared, just eight publications in Estonian appeared for short periods over the next one and a half centuries. Only from the middle of the 19th century was there a regular appearance of Estonian newspapers and the first Estonian full-time journalist was employed at this time.

Beginning of Estonian journalism

- The first newspaper in Estonian territory: Ordinary Freytags Post-Zeitung 1675-1678 (in 1677-1678 Ordinary Donnerstags Post-Zeitung);
- The first periodical publication in Estonian: Lühhike Õppetus (Short Instruction) 1766-1767;
- The first weekly newspaper in Estonian: Tarto maa rahwa Näddali-Leht (Tartu Countrymen’s Weekly) 1806;

The first daily newspaper in Estonian: Postimees (The Postman) 1891.
The role of journalism and journalists in the 19th century Estonia, a province of the Russian Empire at the time, was to become the ‘voice for Estonians by Estonians’. The emerging national press, stressing and propagating cultural and national values and uniting Estonian people around these values rapidly became an important means of ‘nation-building’. Newspapers became the means of survival of the Estonian language in the context of the very severe Russification of the 1880-90s when Russian was the only official language. Since then, survival of their mother tongue is connected with national survival in the minds of Estonian people.

The second half of the 19th century was also a period of strictest censorship when the camouflage strategy ‘reading and writing between the lines’ began to develop.

**Footprints of censorship**

The censor has crossed out all the editorial, except for the headline and the nine last lines.

The text of the editorial is replaced by the advertisement of the weekly supplement of PM - Health/Tervis - that is put into a black frame.

Because national leaders of the late 19th century were also popular journalists and editors of national newspapers, the image of a journalist in the minds of people was associated with an image of public leader, patriot and public teacher. Journalists belonged to the limited Estonian intelligentsia.
The level of education of Estonian journalists in the 1890s is comparable to that of Norwegian journalists – 22% of them had completed academic studies, though not in journalism.

This image of journalists began changing along with the market and technological developments of the early 20th century, when journalism became increasingly an industry aimed at consumer production. This new journalism created another type of journalist – the hard working news reporters, who did not have such a commitment to society as their predecessors. They made mistakes, hunted sensations and did not care about the accuracy of their reporting.

A reporter as seen by a newspaper cartoonist in 1937
There was a lively discussion in the Estonian press during the inter-war years on the quality of journalistic production and journalist training. But no attempt was made to establish any form of formal journalism education.

By the late 1930s, journalism in Estonia had gained several characteristics of a profession: there was a professional organisation the Estonian Journalists Union to safeguard professional values, ethics and journalists’ integrity, and protect journalists’ interests in relation with their employers. The Union occasionally arranged courses for reporters and editors, and gave scholarships for studying abroad. The Union also established and maintained contacts with many journalist organisations in Europe, including Finland.

The Soviet take-over of Estonia in June 1940 oversaw the destruction of the Estonian profession of journalism and the imposition of Soviet model of journalism that was restored in 1944 together with the restoration of the Soviet regime.

The duty of Soviet journalism was to brainwash the population into believing Communist ideology. Consequently the media was strictly controlled and supervised by the Communist Party and security organs, and any educational institution involved in teaching journalism came under far greater scrutiny than any other discipline.

For ten years after the War, journalists for the Estonian Communist press were trained in the Journalism Schools and Faculties of the Communist Party Colleges, but most of them had no journalism training at all. More important than professional skills and knowledge was loyalty to the Communist authorities.

**The Soviet journalist doctrine**

“It is the party that guarantees the journalist the necessary freedom of action /---/. In using the freedom of activity, offered by the party, the journalist must see to it that this freedom is realized to the fullest extent in the interests of society. The party has the right to demand from the journalist ideological clarity, definite views and a principled manner”.


“In case when the activity of a journalist does not correspond to eht demands of the party, it is empowered to deprive him of the right to speak in its name or may choose other means of influence over him”.


The first journalism graduates in June 1957 with the ‘Founding Father’ of journalism education Prof. Juhan Peegel (in the middle)

It is hardly surprising that as a consequence the ‘wooden language’ style and propagandistic content, characteristic to the Soviet press, developed in the Estonian print media.

This is where the story of Estonian journalism education begins.

The birth of journalism education at Tartu University in Estonian in 1954 can be seen as the result of an oversight of the ideological supervisors of the time. They
underestimated the importance of mother tongue as a means of national survival and maintenance of opposition spirit to the ruling regime. The Ministry of Education permitted journalism to be included in the curriculum of Estonian language and literature. Consequently, journalism education was based on subjects that could not be faulted on ideological lines – linguistics, the history of Estonian culture and the traditions of national press. At the same time, a lasting research into Estonian journalism history began.

While the oversight of the ideological guardians ensured that the ‘birth’ of the journalism education was relatively painless, surviving through the adolescent years to maturity required several strategies.

Foremost among them was what became known as the ’radish phenomenon‘. Communist red on the outside – ambiguous white on the inside!
This strategy was widely used by journalists and understood by their readers. Indeed the continued existence of journalism education at Tartu University was at one point dependent upon this radish strategy. In the early 1970s, a concerted attempt by CP to bring all journalism education under the umbrella of the Communist Party Colleges was averted by the then Head of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee. He was a former journalism student at Tartu.

Running the radish phenomenon a close second was the development of ‘teaching between the lines’ that occurred as a response to the requirement in the late 70s to introduce a Moscow based All-Union curriculum for journalism education in Estonia.
‘Teaching between the lines’ was mainly achieved by declaring an ideologically correct course outline in the curriculum and syllabus, but delivering a totally different content in the course lectures. Thus, for example, under the title of ‘Criticism of the theory and practice of bourgeois journalism’ the Department taught ‘Mass Communication Theory’.

The radish phenomenon and the other strategies of camouflage were sufficiently successful for the independent Department of Journalism / to be established in 1976, and subsequently to outlast the Soviet period. By then the Department was sufficiently mature to take the challenges of democracy and the free market economy in its stride. – Not without a little help from friends and one in particular!
The first cooperation agreement between the Journalism Department of Tartu University and a foreign University was made in the summer of 1990. That foreign university was – Tampere, whose friendship is widely appreciated and whose generosity has permitted the establishment of the largest library of Media and Communication in Estonia. Since then the Department has exchange programmes for students and teachers with 11 Universities and Journalism Schools in Europe.

Deliverance from ideological supervision also enabled the Department to enlarge and diversify both the scope and the methods of research and to join international academic research community. A young, well-educated and qualified generation of researchers is now developing.

Fifteen years of press freedom and construction of civil society on the one hand, and the growing pressures of the capitalist market on the other hand, have made it obvious that free market journalism is not the same as free journalism. The job market for Estonian journalists has remarkably shrunk within the past ten years, especially for television journalists (by 40%). Journalists’ professional choices and decisions depend increasingly on the interests of their employers, and this is reflected in the growing degree of self-censorship. Journalism has become more of a production than a creation, and as a consequence, journalists often treat their sources not as individuals but simply as material for a story. Educators cannot change the environment, but they can provide young journalists with necessary knowledge and skills to be able to meet the challenges of their profession at any time and place, and most important of all under any circumstances.