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# The Role of Student Editorial Practice in Journalism Degree Programs



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## Abstract

The article addresses the issue of the meaning of student editorial practice in teaching in journalism degree programs. It aims to discuss theoretical matters related to this kind of extra-formal activity and to present a specific example of how a student press editorial office functions at the University of Szczecin. The author's interest is focused around the benefits that accrue from this kind of student activity regarding the acquisition of knowledge, practical skills and soft competences, as well as shaping attitudes indispensable in their future work in the media.

In the initial theoretical part of the article, the assumptions of modern teaching in journalism programs were discussed with a reference to models of teaching that function in European countries, with the significant role of practical teaching of journalism skills also indicated. The latter part of the article is a specific case study that includes a closer look at the ways of implementing student editorial activities conducted simultaneously with the content of the study program. The analysis covers general assumptions, organization of work in an editorial office, a description of the publishing activity of an editorial office and the issue of student press in the space of the new media. Moreover, an attempt was made to assess the effectiveness of the conducted activities.

In conclusion, the author states that being active in student media may constitute a valuable complement to obligatory student apprenticeships and allow students to perfect their journalism skills on an ongoing basis throughout the course of studies.

**Keywords:** media, journalism, teaching journalists, the press, student press

*The aim of this article is to discuss the significance of student editorial practice in journalism degree programs and to present good practices in this regard based on the example of actions undertaken at the University of Szczecin. The initial part of the article refers to selected theoretical findings in the field of journalism teaching, addresses the issue of journalism theory and practice at a higher education institution and discusses the significance of acting in student media to develop the students' practical skills. The article then examines in detail a number of activities executed as part of the editorial work at the University of Szczecin student journal, Kwadrans Studencki.*

formed the third most populous group of students in Poland (11.5% of all students were students of social sciences, journalism and information studies). It thus seems fully justified to examine the issues related to the effective teaching of these courses, particularly methods for teaching practical skills among future media employees. There is an opportunity to pursue such an activity in student editorial practice, which may constitute a valuable means for complementing the degree program. Obviously, student media are not new phenomena, yet they may have specific significance in acquiring competencies among journalism students.

This article addresses the meaning of student editorial practice in journalism study programs and presents a detailed example of good practice in this regard. The article comprises two fundamental parts. The first forms a theoretical background for the issue of how teaching in journalism study programs should be presented. It is assumed here that, due to the

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## Introduction

During the 1990s, journalism degree programs became increasingly popular in Poland (Sobczak, 2016, p. 32). The number of students on these courses began to rise, and in the 2018/2019 academic year, according to the data of Statistics Poland (GUS, 2019), they

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specificity of work in the media, it is necessary that relevant teaching methods be implemented and, in particular, that possibilities are sought to enable students to have the conditions for the unassisted acquisition of necessary practical skills. There is potential in this regard in terms of student media. The significance of student media in teaching journalists shall be specified with references made primarily to the tradition of the student press. This shall serve as a background for presenting a specific example of this kind of activity, namely the University of Szczecin student journal, *Kwadrans Studencki*, founded in 2016. The starting point for the detailed description of the activities takes the form of a presentation of the general assumptions and motifs of the initiators of the student editorial team. This is followed by a discussion on the organization of work in the editorial office, including the specific sections and their tasks. In the part dedicated to editorial activity, the journal profile and its subject content is presented. It is important not to omit the coexistence of traditional student press and the activity of young people in the space of the new media. The latter, nonetheless, is not considered here to be a threat to the classic form but rather a door to many new possibilities for student journalism activities. In the conclusion, the usefulness of the described activities are evaluated in terms of acquiring knowledge and, most of all, practical skills by future journalists.

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### **Studies on journalism teaching: a review**

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The issue of teaching in journalism study programs has been already undertaken by researchers. Since the 1990s, a scientific dispute has continued on the subject of the profession of journalist in Poland. The key publications in this regard are listed below in chronological order. It is worth quoting at least the findings made by Jane Leftwich Curry, as presented in her work *Poland's Journalists: Professionalism and Politics* (Curry, 1990). A close look at the Polish journalists of the 1980s and the 1990s was also taken by Zbigniew Bajka (1991; 2000). Overview studies on this matter have been published, among others, in *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze*. The following years also resulted in publications by Walery Pisarek (1995), whose studies included journalist qualifications. A compiled work on selected issues in journalism teaching in Poland was published in 1997, with Tadeusz Wallas as the editor (1997). One year later, a review of the most important assumptions related to journalism teaching in Europe was published by Mogens Schmidt (1998). One should also list as significant the work by Teresa Sasińska-Klas (1998) on education in the field of journalism and knowledge about communications in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In turn, the issue of professionalism in this vocation was addressed by Jerzy Olędzki (1996). In 2005, a monograph dedicated to the teaching of journalists was published under the title *Teoria, praktyka, etyka. O kształceniu dziennikarzy w Polsce i na świecie*, edited by Anna Siewierska-Chmaj (2005). A view on teaching about the media and social communication

(disciplines of humanities that were new at the time) was also taken by Tomasz Goban-Klas (2008). It is worth mentioning two published papers on the opinions and expectations regarding journalism teaching in Poland, both in the view of students and scientific-teaching circles (Gawroński, Polak, Leonowicz-Bukała, & Kurek, 2009a, 2009b). The year 2010 saw an important publication by Sławomir Gawroński and Rafał Polak, *Dziennikarstwo i komunikacja społeczna – nowe wyzwania. Kierunki zmian w kształceniu w zakresie dziennikarstwa i komunikacji społecznej* (Gawroński & Polak, 2010). The former was also an editor of a volume dedicated to the employment prospects of journalism students on the job market (Gawroński, 2010a). In the following year, the paper *Dydaktyka dziennikarstwa. Opinie i postulaty* was published by the same author (Gawroński, 2011). Whether the profession of journalist constitutes a mission of some kind was discussed by Joanna Taczkowska (2012) in her work. A description of a specific case of teaching in a journalism study program at the Institute of Journalism, the Pedagogical University of Krakow, was published by Edward Chudziński (2012). Changes in journalism were tracked by Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska et al. in their research (including Dobek-Ostrowska, Barczyszyn, & Michel, 2013). Recent years have resulted in, among others, Barbara Sobczak's published work *Kształcenie dziennikarzy. Wyznawania, koncepcje, metody* (2016) and the paper *Zawód dziennikarza w obliczu zmian* by Jacek Sobczak and Ksenia Kakarenko (2017). This brief overview of selected subject literature shows that the issue of teaching in journalism study programs has been analyzed from various viewpoints. It is worth taking a closer look at them with due account of the benefits arising from student editorial practice, first with reference to recent research findings made in this regard.

Student journals have a long tradition, even though as many researchers in this subject have stressed that this phenomenon is omitted generally and its scale unknown (due to the frequent lack of documented source materials) (Zawada, 1977, p. 318). In their collaborative work, they underline the fragmentary nature of their studies due to the lack of complete collections, and the general lack of copies of a given title whose existence is nonetheless mentioned in other sources (Buck, 2018, p. 62). There are also problems with terminology, since student publishing activities are not properly covered by the existing definitions from the field of press studies and require a broader definition (Zawada, 1977, p. 319). In truth, although there should be agreement that student press is not a subject commonly addressed in research, review publications have been developed that consolidate knowledge on student journals issued at Polish universities (cf. Waśkiewicz, 1975; Waśkiewicz, 1977; Buck, 1980; Magowska, 1994; Chudziński, 2011; Gomoliszek, 2011; Zięty, 2015; Buck, 2018). Undoubtedly, student press constitutes one of the significant elements of the life of academic communities, one that co-creates student culture. At present, such student activities are largely being transferred to the virtual space.

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## **The specificity of teaching future journalists**

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The specificity of the profession of a journalist (to which one is being prepared by means of degree programs and specialties presently popular and abundant in the educational offers of higher education facilities) requires a comprehensive approach in terms of teaching.

However, it should be noted in the introduction that, as remarked by media expert, theoretician and journalism practitioner Edward Chudziński:

The profession of journalist in Poland, as in some other countries, is an open vocation. Performing it does not require the completion of a degree in Journalism and Social Communication, which is highly popular nowadays, listed in the offer of several dozen public and non-public higher education facilities, addressed to university candidates. (Chudziński, 2012, p. 334)

The concept of an open vocation is explained also by Joanna Taczkowska, who writes, “it is identified with an absence of substantive legal and formal legal criteria of access to the profession of journalist and the rules of performing this profession” (Taczkowska, 2012, p. 224). In the context of the profession of journalist, the author also recalls terms such as a “liberal profession” (ibid, p. 240) and a “profession of public trust” (ibid, p. 257).

Modern teaching in journalism degree programs in European countries is delivered essentially in accordance with one of two models, distinguished based on the dominant form of how knowledge/skills are transferred:

- Continental (academic) model – focused on transferring general knowledge in a cultural context, with practical skills obtained during professional work;
- Anglo-Saxon (practical) model – focused on the acquisition of practical skills, a teaching vocation in contact with the media (Chudziński, 2012, p. 334; also cf. Schmidt, 1998).

Obviously, these two approaches do not constitute options that are mutually exclusive. Barbara Sobczak wrote:

Therefore, the key importance in curricula is put on the ability to skillfully combine two concurrent paths, the theoretical and the practical. The theoretical path involves lectures with classes that form an apparatus that serves as the educational basis for subsequent levels of learning. [...] The practical path is the students' participation in classes in the editorial offices of journals as well as apprenticeships and internships. (Sobczak, 2016, p. 35)

The optimum solution for teaching in journalism programs is to find a suitable compromise between equipping students with reliable and current knowledge about journalism and transferring to them the practical skills that will allow them to find employment in a selected media editorial team in the future.

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## **Journalism theory and practice at a higher education facility**

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According to students, it is the mastered journalism skills and tools that serve as the basis for their future professional work. This fact is confirmed by, among others, the results of studies conducted among nearly 1500 students of Journalism and Social Communication at nine Polish universities in 2009. As many as 93.5% of the study participants concluded that the most significant element in their future work were the skills obtained as part of journalism workshops (Gawroński, 2010b, p. 14). Hence, students' expectations are often related to proposals that increase the number of classes delivered in the form of workshops. A study on students' expectations regarding journalism degree programs and their professional plans has been conducted, among others, by Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała (2010, pp. 271–288).

Therefore, in the discussion about the assumptions of teaching future media employees, a division of opinion between theory and practice arises; although according to the conclusions of Romana Bartoszcze (2005) “teaching at a higher education institution cannot boil down to merely passing on vocational skills” (p. 75). A professional journalist should have a solid theoretical background in various fields (economics, law, history, etc.) and be well-oriented in the current problems in the area of politics, the social situation, the economy, etc. (cf. e.g. Sobczak, 2016, p. 38). In the case of studying journalism, however, the knowledge acquired during the studies becomes relatively quickly outdated, which is an additional obstacle, as is the necessity for students to acquire new practical skills (e.g. related to the development of new media).

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## **Student media in teaching journalism**

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The common characteristic traits of student media, such as the press, radio, television and websites, include:

- promoting the values and concepts of a specific community,
- non-commercial nature (understood as running a non-profit business),
- autonomy from the state and university authorities,<sup>1</sup>
- engaged journalism (Zięty, 2015, p. 107).

By acting in student media, students have the opportunity to verify in practice on an ongoing basis the

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<sup>1</sup> The autonomous activity of student media is regulated by provisions of law in some countries, such as the USA (cf. Zięty, 2015, pp. 104–106).

knowledge obtained during classes, to acquire new skills and to perfect their journalism skills. Above all, it allows them to master the practical journalism skills of a given medium (i.e. the press, radio, television or the internet) under the supervision of lecturers and often also practicing journalists, media employees. Moreover, they acquire the skill to consciously use various sources of information and to verify their content. Another significant value is mastering the skill of communicating effectively in speaking and writing. Students can also develop the soft competences. Being a member of a student editorial team requires them to demonstrate motivation and commitment, to learn how to act independently and also to acquire team-working skills.

An added value of student participation in editorial practice is also a strengthened bond with the university. In their search for interesting subjects for articles, they diligently follow information about university-related events and eagerly participate in them. Hence, they participate in co-creating the life of the academic community and also undertake actions that affect the image of the university (more on this subject in: Kurek-Ochmańska, 2015).

Student participation in the work of an academic media editorial team is a manifestation of their awareness and willingness to self-improve under academic supervision.

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### Activities in the student journal editorial team

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In the traditional approach, student editorial activities give students the opportunity to learn about press journalism in practice, something that they consider least interesting according to Chudziński (2012, p. 335). During their time spent in a team that develops a student journal, they discover that this form is anything but an anachronism.

Three traditional functions played by student journals can be distinguished:

- a technical (training) function – allowing authors to develop in areas related to journalism,
- an integrative (culture-forming) function – bringing together a group of people who share interests or attitudes, forming a community,
- a representative function – the impact of a journal outside its own environment (after Waśkiewicz, 1975, p. 8).

Among the most significant difficulties related to the functioning of student press is that of the instability of the student environment, which over a period of several years has seen a complete pooling of the staff and its closed social circuit. The view of Andrzej Zawada, published in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, in 1977 still remains valid: “student culture is not focused on self-cognition and description, many of its activities are marked by immediacy, an ad hoc nature, evanescence; it is characterized by substantive dynamism and high volatility of interests” (Zawada, 1977, p. 318).

From a practical point of view, another significant issue is that of financing this kind of student activity. Assuming a professional level of print for the periodicals and the highest possible target print run, the cost is relatively high. Hence, in order to maintain the non-commercial nature of the journal, a plan for funding the activity should be implemented under the editorial team. The financial side of this endeavor requires additional skills from its providers, and thus allows the students to acquire experience in the marketing activities of an editorial team.

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### Student journal at the University of Szczecin: an example of good practice

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#### General assumptions

Students of the undergraduate program in Journalism and Social Communication at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Szczecin (general academic profile) undertake an apprenticeship amounting to 160 hours (4 weeks). In line with the regulations of the apprenticeship, the primary objective is:

to allow students to observe the work of journalists and editorial teams in various types of media and institutions, participants of public communication, to gradually include the students into their communication activity and thus to gain practical experience regarding the functioning of the Polish communication system within scope determined by the selected place of apprenticeship. (Regulamin praktyk, 2019)

The place of apprenticeship primarily includes editorial teams for the press, radio, television and websites, as well as press offices of various institutions. The apprenticeship may take place after the third study semester.

To a considerable degree, creating additional areas where the students' editorial work can be executed under the supervision of academic teachers is one answer to the demand. Participation in the work of a student media editorial team is a type of extra-formal activity that is important for young people, one having a positive effect on the development of the scientific, cultural or social life of members of the student community at a given university, also allowing it to become better socialized.

In October 2016, Journalism and Social Communication students at the University of Szczecin initiated the founding of the US Journalism Student Scientific Club (US JSSC). At the same time, they undertook actions intended to include students from other faculties of the university in the student club. Having obtained the relevant recommendations from the authorities of the University of Szczecin, the students commenced promotional actions to encourage as many people as possible to participate in the activities of the club. At present, members of the US JSSC include students of philological, humanity, social, economic, biologi-

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cal, legal and theological programs. The author of this paper has been appointed the supervisor of the scientific club.

One of the most important tasks of the US JSSC was to create a general US student journal. The objectives set by the editorial team were to promote the students' scientific and organizational oeuvre and to promote knowledge about initiatives undertaken. The journal was intended by its founders to become a forum where students could exchange views and also form a source of useful information.<sup>2</sup>

The students chose *Kwadrans Studencki* as the title for the journal, to refer in an obvious way to a term that is well known to all university community members, that is, the academic leeway period. This is because this small journal was intended to cover synthetically approached subjects important for this environment, while also allowing the reader to learn quickly about information most important to them.

with external institutions, obtaining sponsors, selling advertising space, accreditation and tickets for events, promoting the journal;

- website section – running the journal website, active management of social media profiles, maintaining contact with readers (e.g. organizing online contests);
- graphics / photography section – preparing photographic material, designing the layout of the journal (i.e. creating the logotype, designing the cover), creating designs for posters, leaflets and other promotional material;
- journal typesetting;
- proofreading of the articles;
- authoring of the articles (people who cooperate on an ongoing, occasional or one-time basis) – suggesting subjects, gathering information, creating texts; authors who cooperate with the journal on an ongoing basis are assigned

**Figure 1. Logotype of a student journal of the University of Szczecin**



Source: designed by Sara Kwiecień.

## Organization of the work of the editorial team

With support from the Sphere of Student Culture of the University of Szczecin, an institution that handles and associates all student organizations operating at the university, the students were able to create the editorial team of the journal from the ground up.

It comprises not only the club members but also other interested individuals from various faculties at the university. The editorial team attempts to divide all tasks related to the publishing of the journal among the students to maximize use of their skills and potential. Students cooperate with the journal editorial team in various areas, such as seeking information, writing texts, creating graphic materials, taking photographs, running websites to promote activities at different events, and marketing.

Various sections were distinguished in the editorial team of *Kwadrans Studencki*, with specific tasks attributed to them:

- management editorial board of the journal – coordinating the publishing process, controlling the timely execution of tasks, budget planning, representing the editorial team at official events;
- promotion and marketing section – cooperating

to relevant sections in line with the subject in which they specialize (e.g. IT section, science section, culture section, music section, sports section).

It should be stressed that one of the important areas in which students can gain experience by working in an editorial team of a student journal is marketing and promotion. This section prepares offers that cover the possibility of publishing advertisements, advertorials, invitations and promotional materials of other types in the journal. This allows the journal to become a self-funded endeavor, and by the effective choice of published advertising material it also promotes student-friendly companies and locations. In turn, for external institutions, it is an opportunity to reach a large number of young people who constitute one of the most active social groups in terms of consumerism.

The fundamental form of work of the editorial team is systematic editorial meetings under academic supervision, where decisions are taken regarding the journal. Their role is invaluable since they provide a substitute for the actual journalist work of an editorial office. Editorial meetings cover in particular:

<sup>2</sup> <http://wf.usz.edu.pl/instytut-polonistyki-kulturoznawstwa/studia-ii-stopnia/#praktyki-zawodowe> and [http://wf.usz.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/DiKS\\_REGULAMIN-PRAKTYK-ZAWODOWYCH-1.docx](http://wf.usz.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/DiKS_REGULAMIN-PRAKTYK-ZAWODOWYCH-1.docx)

- planning activities (both current and long-term),
- assigning roles and tasks planned for execution,
- verifying the timely execution of commitments.

At the meetings, the concept of the journal is developed, including its volume and subject-oriented arrangement. Students submit their proposals for subjects of articles, which are discussed in a forum and then a decision is taken jointly on their publication. In agreement with the supervisor of the editorial team, the proper journalistic genre of the text is also determined. The diversity of the proposed subjects and forms is naturally determined by the creativity and commitment of the beginner journalists. Discussions held at meetings of the editorial team regarding current problems of the academic environment allow them to acquire the skills to express their own opinions and interpret facts. Their participation in meetings also allows them to motivate one another.

After each meeting, the students commence the initial work to gather suitable material for publishing, followed by developing the material without assistance, and consulting the journal's editorial team supervisor about the prepared text.

#### **Description of the publishing activity of the editorial team**

In the *Kwadrans Studencki* journal students can share information on scientific interests, publish reports from important events at the university and in the city, or reports from trips that are part of scholarship programs, describe student life in Szczecin, write about their passions, be it art, music, theatre, sports, etc.<sup>3</sup> The following sections were distinguished in the journal: *Podróże kształcą*, *Studenckie życie*, *Na studencką kieszeń*, *W świecie nauki*, *Student z pasją*, *Wykładowca z pasją*, *Ciekawe wydarzenia*, *Krytycznym okiem studenta*, *Strefa rozwoju*, *Strefa kultury*, *Strefa muzyki*, *Strefa sportu*. The scope of the articles covers issues that are significant to the student community. All the created texts are verified by the editorial team supervisor. Before publishing the articles, their authors are required to make appropriate technical, substantive and linguistic corrections.

If they are willing to develop press material that is attractive and complete, the students often have to overcome communication barriers, establish numerous contacts and maintain good relations with representatives of various environments and institutions. It is worth mentioning that contacts with individuals and local institutions acquired in

this way will serve them as invaluable help in their future work as journalists.

As many as five issues of the *Kwadrans Studencki* journal have been published so far. The journal is distributed free of charge by students who belong to the editorial team, across all faculties of the university in places accessible to students (e.g. student houses, libraries and cultural institutions, cafes, places of entertainment).

#### **Student press in the space of the new media**

The content of student journals often migrates to the internet over time. In the case of the *Kwadrans Studencki* journal, the online option is used simultaneously with the traditional publishing activity, owing to which both the student editorial team (i.e. online publishers and social media experts) and the circle of recipients of the created content can be expanded to include new individuals.

Students run the journal website on the university domain [www.kwadrans.usz.edu.pl](http://www.kwadrans.usz.edu.pl) where both current information and the journal in an electronic form (pdf) are published. The journal has a fan page on Facebook and an Instagram profile. Social media serve as a means for the members of the student editorial team to reach students (not only of their alma mater) and also institutions interested in cooperation.

#### **Assessment of the efficiency of activities**

Among the individuals who currently work with the *Kwadrans Studencki* journal are representatives of most faculties of the university and many student organizations (over 30 people in total). It is worth also quoting an opinion of the students participating in the work undertaken by the editorial office:

Creating and publishing the only general university student journal at the University of Szczecin, *Kwadrans Studencki*, is a great challenge for us but also a marvelous adventure! We learn about the work of an editorial office, perfect our skills, gain experience and establish valuable contacts.<sup>4</sup>

We consider the existence of this US student journal highly important for integration and it will make it possible to express that which is in the hearts of us, the students.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to the popular view that today young people are accustomed to drawing information solely from the internet, the journal published in the traditional form has enjoyed much interest and has been received positively.

<sup>3</sup> The US student journal *Kwadrans Studencki*, issues no. 1–5 (2017–2019), Szczecin: ZAPOL Sobczyk Sp. j.

<sup>4</sup> The opinion was published by students who are members of the editorial team at the journal website: <http://kwadrans.usz.edu.pl/o-nas/> [retrieved on June 14, 2019].

<sup>5</sup> An application for a contest for the most active research club at the University of Szczecin titled *Koncept US* (the document is available in the archives of the journal editorial office).

## Conclusions

When addressing the issue of teaching journalism students, one should draw attention to the meaning of the practical classes that allow them to acquire experience vital in the media job market. The high significance of a student editorial apprenticeship in teaching in journalism programs stems primarily from the way that we learn through actions (Karwala, 2007, p. 8). Creating texts for university periodicals constitutes an introduction to the independent work of a journalist. Students also learn responsibility, since the success of the entire endeavor, i.e. the timely publication of a high-quality journal, is determined by the proper execution of tasks by the specific individuals who undertook the said tasks. Members of the editorial team will thus learn about the meaning of teamwork, as they often have to support each other actively and to motivate their colleagues.

Activity in student media creates the possibility to complement an obligatory student apprenticeship that allows students to improve their journalism skills on an ongoing basis throughout the study period. It should be also stressed that using the possibility of functioning within an editorial team in the course of a degree program is beneficial not only to journalism students. The ability to describe reality and express one's own views seems universal and significant in a range of academic teaching profiles.

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