

A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone up to take a picture of a small, patterned object on a table. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The person's arms and hands are visible, and they are wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt. The background shows a wooden table and some other objects, but they are out of focus.

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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Navigating “Academia Incognita”: The European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School and ECREA’s Young Scholars Network

Anne Kaun, Benjamin De Cleen and Christian Schwarzenegger

1. Introduction

In ancient maps, unknown territory, the terra incognita, would often be signified by warnings of perils held by the unknown and that might lurk in the midst of an unclear future. Many of us, young scholars, walk into the unknown world of academia without much prior knowledge of the grammar of the field or of its implicit rules. What is clear is that on a journey into academia one needs more than merely excellent research skills. However, there seems to be no checklist of steps to accomplish on this route: every researcher’s path and context will be different. In line with that academic careers are often shrouded in legends of passion and coincidence when it comes to how success was actually achieved. The myth of the dedicated academic, sole genius makes it hard for newcomers to develop an understanding of what the essentials for a successful career are. This myth also potentially precludes the sense of collective experience and criticism of problematic conditions and therefore of collective organization. Consequently, on a more structural level individualism and dedication on a 24/7 basis fits well into the environment of the neoliberal university (Crary, 2013). The outlined myth needs, hence, to be critically examined and deconstructed. Young scholars need to acquire an understanding of the field within which they operate in order to be able to function as academics and to critically examine the academic world and position themselves within it.

Early career scholars face a number of common challenges, uncertainties, and experiences, and thus they can learn from each other, from other young scholars who are in similar situations, as well as from senior scholars. Furthermore, the ever more competitive academic environment demands broad solidarity among scholars to secure academia’s capacity to be critical about

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developments in society at large but also about academia and the conditions of those working in it. The summer school and the YECREA network aim to provide a space for this.

On our expedition into academia incognita, we need people who travel with us, show us the way, help us avoid the potential threats of the unknown, and remind us that we are not the only ones facing problems, doubts and insecurities as well as help to identify structural inequalities and constraints that are only resolvable through collective organisation. The myth of the successful scholar as the heroic survivor of perilous conditions – the passionate workaholic who sacrifices his or her private life for academia – stabilises the alleged normality of the sometimes structurally problematic conditions of academic work. Such a view hampers the critical interrogation or deconstruction of what it takes to make a career in academia today by focusing on the individual skills and personality traits needed to make it and by formulating handy survival guides that tell you how to effectively function as a 21st century scholar. We, writing as the management team of the Young Scholars Network of ECREA, believe that such stories of total dedication as well as magic formulas, cookbook recipes, and the pocket guides to academic success serve false aspirations and hopes as well as hinder a critical attitude towards academic work. Still, we can build on and learn from others who are experiencing or have experienced similar situations, issues, and insecurities. Young scholars can find people in their departments or in their personal network that might provide them with some of the support they need. However, we believe it is valuable for early career scholars to have access to structures and networks of support that go beyond their own university.

In times of decreasing membership in traditional unions that channel collective organisation, new community formations gain importance. This chapter looks at the strategies and experiences of two initiatives that are aimed at helping young scholars find their ways in academia as well as providing spaces of solidarity beyond individual career planning: the annual European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School and YECREA, the Young Scholars Network of ECREA. One being a summer school and the other a network, what they offer is different, but they have similar goals, share some basic premises, and have partly been driven and inspired by the same people.

While being two independent support infrastructures, the summer school and YECREA are interlinked, institutionally, through ECREA, especially in terms of the people involved. Furthermore, the summer school and YECREA share some history. It is common for summer school participants to become actively involved in YECREA; and the YECREA network helps summer school participants to maintain the international network of peers they establish during the summer school. Additionally, YECREA has regularly found inspiration in topics dealt with at, and formats used by, the summer school. This is not a

coincidence, as they share the aim to provide a supportive infrastructure where young scholars can meet and learn from each other and from senior scholars. Both initiatives focus on young scholars and their specific needs in the field of media and communication studies, without compartmentalising them, i.e. disconnecting them from their senior colleagues. Both initiatives also take the structural constraints and specific needs of young scholars seriously.

2. The European Media and Communication Summer School

The European Media and Communication Summer School has been running successfully since the early 1990s. It was originally organised by a consortium of ten universities that steadily grew to 22 universities by 2012. ECREA joined the consortium in 2001 (back then still as the ECCR, one of ECREA’s predecessors). The main aims of the summer school are to build a network for young scholars across Europe and to engage PhD students, as well as established lecturers, in a critical dialogue and intellectual exchange (Carpentier, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009; Carpentier/Trivundža, 2010; Parés i Maicas, 2008). The formats that constitute the summer school are centred on the PhD students and their work. They encompass workshops of a more general character focused on, for example, abstract writing, presenting, publishing and research ethics, lectures on contemporary issues in the field of media and communication studies, and excursions that link the summer school to the cultural and socio-political context of the hosting country. At the heart of the summer school, however, are the student workshops in which the PhD candidates present and discuss their individual projects. The feedback is always multi-voiced in the sense that several assigned respondents and a number of summer school participants engage with the work (Trivundža/Carpentier, 2012, 2013). The combination of comments by both young and established scholars is a conscious choice in order to provide multiple perspectives and diminish borders between the two groups, seeing them as equal members of the same community. As of 2006, the intellectual outcome of the summer school is documented in a summer school book including full chapters from a selection of PhD students and the lecturers as well as abstracts of all the PhD projects presented and discussed at the summer school.

Since the 1990s the summer school has developed into an important resource and platform for European PhD students in media and communication studies. A survey conducted in 2008 among summer school attendees of different generations shows that participants highly value the social network that the summer school provides. The survey revealed that over 90 per cent of former participants are still in touch with other summer school attendees. They were able to build a sustainable and lasting network beyond the summer school ex-

perience (De Cleen, Garcia-Blanco/Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2009). Providing the infrastructure for connectivity and peer support between its members, including former summer school participants, is also a primary aim of YECREA.

3. The Young Scholars Network of ECREA

The objective of the Young Scholars Network of the European Communication Research and Education Association (YECREA), is to give a voice to and provide a network for the young generation of European media and communication scholars. YECREA provides a forum for doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers to inform, assist, share ideas, get peer support, and reflect on life as an early-stage academic.

In order to do so, YECREA, established in 2006, has progressively built a successful infrastructure of country and section representatives. The former connect the network to national environments for media and communication studies. The latter give a voice to young scholars in ECREA's sections and temporary working groups and play an important role in bringing young scholars with similar research interests together. Both forms of representation are aimed at making visible the specific issues and concerns of young scholars within ECREA without disconnecting them from the general membership of ECREA. The YECREA management team provides the infrastructure and ensures continuity. The representatives and members play a crucial role in giving flesh to the bones of the formal structure of YECREA.

The section and country representatives are at the heart of YECREA's most important activities: information dissemination and the organisation of workshops as well as social events. Country and section representatives disseminate information to the YECREA membership via the YECREA website (yecrea.eu) and the YECREA Facebook group (more than 500 members in January 2014). The Facebook group, especially, allows for organic and community-based ways of sharing and discussing information, by YECREA representatives as well YECREA members.

Besides information dissemination, YECREA organises workshops and social gatherings at the biannual European Communication Conference (ECC), at the off-conference events organised by the ECREA sections and temporary working groups, and at a number of other study days and conferences in which ECREA was involved. As the network of YECREA representatives has grown, the number of workshops organised by YECREA representatives and members has increased throughout the years, with 2013-14 seeing a total of eleven young scholars' workshops. These workshops are fundamental in providing a space for critical discussion of the currents of the academic community facing severe challenges of tightened budgets and increasing workloads. Of course,

the workshops offer counsel on how to cope with the demands of our profession, but they also aim to analytically identify and challenge the structural conditions that make life and work in academia the way it is today.

The belief guiding YECREA policy is that young scholars have particular needs as a group with a particular position within the academic world, while being an integral part of the research community. Hence, YECREA aims to bridge the gaps between senior scholars and the young generation as much as possible by putting them in a cross-generational dialogue. YECREA therefore organises workshops that cater for issues that are specific to the career stages of young scholars, but it does not host paper panels specifically for young scholars. We believe that, when it comes to presenting and discussing their research, young scholars benefit most from being part and parcel of the research community of scholars of all ages and career stages and not a separate group.

PhD students are faced with numerous challenges that are not always directly related to their research efforts, but to the profession and the logic of the academic field. Across the sub-disciplines of media and communication studies, and across the wide variety of research conducted by young scholars, there are competences and skills that are crucial to all young scholars. YECREA has organised a range of workshops – of the type also found at the summer school – that foster an understanding of the implicit grammar of the field and that deal with essential academic skills and competences. Recurring topics have included the system of conferences and peer-reviewed journals, writing abstracts and publishing articles, methodology, establishing an academic network, and procuring funding for research at home and abroad. One thing that all YECREA workshops have shown is that young scholars are all in the same boat – whatever their subject, wherever their department. Sharing experiences of setbacks at a workshop can moderate frustration, for example, about rejection by a journal. These setbacks are an integral part of the academic game and should not result in major discouragement. The workshops also serve as resources to prevent typical mistakes by providing best-practice examples.

Despite significant differences in personality, institutional, and national context – for example in terms of employment conditions and teaching load – young scholars also share similar professional experiences. All of us have to juggle demands in terms of research, teaching and administrative tasks, deal with the requirement for international mobility, as well as to find a healthy balance between work and private life. YECREA has brought researchers in different stages of their career together, had them discuss how they have dealt with conflicting demands, time pressure, and work-life balance, and has provided young scholars with the opportunity to ask established and less established scholars what their strategies have been. One of the most important lessons learned is that the discomforts of academia are not exclusively faced by young scholars. The pressures are not a temporary stage of deprivation that

must be completed on the way to redemption in senior scholar haven. It is thus important to adopt work and life routines early, which are fit to last and not to set a pace that can only be briefly endured. Another recurring lesson has been that in order to succeed and feel good about one's academic career, it is crucial to work on a topic that one is genuinely interested in. At the same time, working on a topic and in a field that has personal significance should not imply a total identification of personal life with the academic career, nor lead to an acceptance or even romanticising of what are in fact sometimes unacceptable working conditions.

4. Concluding remarks

Throughout their endeavours, YECREA and the European Media and Communication Summer School aim to create an infrastructure for young scholars to develop a critical understanding of how academia works, to build and maintain a network of contacts as well as create an environment of support and solidarity. These have always been crucial elements of successful and satisfying careers, but this is ever more important in an increasingly competitive academic environment with institutions governed by neoliberal principles, resulting, in some European countries more than in others, in the growth of what Guy Standing (2011) has called the (academic) precariat. In the academic field, young scholars are among those most affected by insecure and low paid employment. This contributes to an overly competitive environment and the detriment of the quality of academic work as well as the quality of life of those working in it. The development towards ever more competition and insecurity makes support networks more important than ever. Both the summer school and YECREA are aimed at establishing supportive spaces for young scholars, and connect them with each other and the wider academic field in order to develop the solidarity and sense of community that is crucial to secure the quality of academia, and to secure reasonable working conditions.

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