

# Media Work: Science and the Public

Report>  
Japan

**In an era of budget-cuts at universities and prolonged discussion about the usefulness of non-career-oriented studies, it has become increasingly important for scholars to inform the public about their work and thus legitimate their own existence. Thus, presenting understandable research results to the general public has become a matter of survival. However, up until the present day, young scholars (at least in the German-speaking world) have commonly run the risk of damaging their reputation by publishing in a simple, understandable way in popular media rather than in highly sophisticated academic journals with merely a handful of readers. At best, presentation and publication in popular media is considered a private matter, which should be done in one's free time. University education reflects that attitude. As a result, students hardly ever learn how to make their knowledge accessible to a broader audience.**

By Judith Brandner & Brigitte Steger

In this context, the Institute of East Asian Studies/Japanese Studies, University of Vienna began a summer course on 'Media Work for Students of Japanese Studies' as a pilot project. For practical reasons we only accepted advanced Japanese Studies students. During the course the students learned how to 'sell' their scientific results to the media without making major concessions in the scholarly content. One aspect of this involved learning how the media world functions and how to deal with it in a critical way. Moreover, the participants were expected to do their

own journalist work. This meant that they had to learn the basics of journalist research and acquire the technical know-how and new methods of presentation.

Our approach was a mixture of theoretical and practical work, focusing on the latter. Theory included an introduction to the media world in both Japan and Austria, analysing radio programmes on Japan and participating in a discussion with a historian and a radio programme- and filmmaker. This discussion clearly showed the ambiguous role of the interviewed scholar who later had no influence on the published result.

During exercises, the students had to present themselves either as scholars or as journalists, not only improving their presentation skills and experiencing how to respond to the demands of journalism, but also learning firsthand about the journalist's difficulty in evoking interesting stories from scholars.

For the symposium on daily life and free time in Tokyo and Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century, the students produced multi-media documentation, which has been published on [www.aaj.at](http://www.aaj.at). Their work included research on the topics, reading abstracts, choosing persons to be

interviewed, conducting the interviews, editing on the computer, and writing the story. The most challenging task was the creation of a radio programme on the topic of 'Vienna through Japanese Eyes', which were produced at a newly-established campus media centre with the generous technical support of the director and under the direction of the students and broadcast on Austrian public radio on 12 September 2002.

## Obstacles and rewards

Though we would have liked to go even deeper into the differences between scholarly and journalistic work, we purposely built up time pressure to simulate a real work situation. Most importantly, the group – eight very competent and motivated young people – seems to have enjoyed the course. They liked the idea of actually producing something to be shown to other people and enjoyed collaborating with each other. Several students 'discovered' radio as a fascinating medium and subsequently listen more carefully to feature stories and documentaries.

Some found special delight in cutting interviews with the editing software. 'Finally we learned something useable and developed new abilities', they remarked. Still others found it interesting and challenging to experience the cultural differences between academia and journalism, particularly in the ways that they approach their topics and their specific methodologies for investigation. ◀

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