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Journalistic Autonomy: The Genealogy of a Concept

By Henrik Örnebring and Michael Karlsson. The University of Missouri Press, 2022. 358 pp.

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At the 2024 ICA conference on the Gold Coast in Australia, the Journalism Studies division celebrated its 20 years anniversary. What better time, then, to take stock of, or write the "family history" (p. 10) of one of the field's central concepts, namely autonomy. It was therefore perhaps not entirely surprising that Örnebring and Karlsson's book *Journalistic Autonomy: The Genealogy of a Concept* won the division's Outstanding Book Award; and indeed, this is — despite an important omission that I will return to at the end — well deserved, also because the book reactivates the long-honoured practice of tracing the complex histories of key concepts. Regarding the concept in focus here, this is needed, the authors argue, because the autonomy of journalism is being reshaped by a range of simultaneous and overlapping processes that make established legitimizations of journalistic autonomy out of synch with key aspects of contemporary society. This point is developed in the concluding chapter, which draws together key insights from the preceding chapters each of which discusses autonomy in relation to institutions or processes often seen as having a complex or adversary relation to the autonomy of journalism; the chapters are consequently called autonomy and, respectively, the state, politics, the market, the workplace, audiences and technology.

The genealogy is therefore rather a series of parallel and interlinked genealogies. While this in some sense may stand in the way of a broader picture, it is a very well-functioning heuristic device that helps to analytically break apart complexly intertwined processes developing over relatively great time spans. This means that the genealogies clearly are historical and somewhat critical, but it is arguably more difficult to see the manifestation of the author's claim that (their) genealogies constitute a specific kind of writing — apart from the appearance of section titles like "Love me or leave

me" (p. 224). More broadly, the book is based on four propositions, which are that autonomy is "relational", "requires a boundary" (linked to the idea of independence from), "implies agency" (independence to) and "must have a purpose" (linked to anticipation). These aspects are touched upon throughout the chapters and so are levels of autonomy, from the episodic to the programmatic and from the individual to the institutional. In their thinking of how journalism is related to its environments, the authors employ the metaphor of a membrane, which allows for some interesting reformulations of the constraining elements of traditional demarcations of autonomy in liberal democracies. As such, the book is clearly and unapologetically about the development of journalism across the North Atlantic or, as the authors write, "journalism as we know it" (p. 57).

Each of the chapters skilfully weaves together historical texts and empirical observations into interesting analytical points. While this is illuminating in an eclectically amusing way, it would, in places, have helped with a bit more transparency as to why certain (con)texts are singled out and others not, especially since the claim is to unearth the broader trajectory of thinking undergirding how journalists — then and now — legitimise themselves. So, when a Swedish scholar is introduced in Chapter One with the words that that he is "not widely known internationally is probably an understatement" one wonders why he merits attention and how his thinking has informed journalistic cultures. While this is not to say that the discussion of him is uninteresting (it is not) but that his place in the broader genealogy is unclear. In general, however, the chapter does reveal many nuances about the processes through which journalism wrestled itself (relatively) free from the state.

And so do the rest of the chapters on journalism's relation to the market, sources, technology and more. As the book is based on secondary material there is as such nothing really new revealed. What is new and engaging is the way in which existing material is brought together, contextualised and analysed. A good example of this is the discussion of journalism's "relational nature ... to its audience", which positions a range of known texts (by, e.g., Gans) in relation to contemporary discussions of metrics. Yet, as hinted at above, such processes may be difficult to discuss fully within the applied structure as metrics concern both relations to the audience and/or the market. Yet, while the individual chapters (understandably) shy away from developing such interconnections, the concluding chapter is focused on an ambitious synthesis of issues raised in and in between the parallel genealogies.

In a smart and strategic move, Chapter Ten — "whither autonomy" — in fact turns against one of the key tenets of the book by

initially claiming "the impossibility of 'independence from'" (p. 275), which largely has been the structuring idea of the book. What is argued is not only that journalism can never be fully autonomous, which is hardly a new insight, but that we need to focus more on the exclusionary impacts of over-focusing on independence-from thinking. This is linked to exclusions "imprinted ... on journalism" from the inceptions of ideas of autonomy in times with a much more restrictive liberal democracy where everybody not at the dominant centre was seen as propagating special interests. But this move beyond independence from is also a call for paying more attention to aspects of agency and purpose, i.e. a "value system that is *for* something," (295; emphasis added), e.g. the "truth" that "human activity affects the speed and severity of climate change" (p. 296). What is or should be withering, is thus not autonomy but ingrained ways of thinking about it.

And, while I have been and remain very positive about this book, this brings me to my only, but major, concern, namely that despite talking about agency and purpose and invoking an example about climate change (almost the only time this is mentioned), the authors do not address fundamental relations between journalistic autonomy and climate change. While the authors draw on notions from biology (e.g., the membrane, agency, and anticipation) and throughout talk about "journalism and its environment" (p. 55), this only concerns social environments. What is neglected here is that journalism has been, and largely remains, deeply implicated in the development and maintenance of a system that is based on the exploitation of natural resources. Following the structure outlined above, the book thus really ought to have had a chapter entitled something like "autonomy and the natural environment." The concluding arguments about agency and purpose could then have included discussions of how journalism, one the one hand, may help break down rather than perpetuate distinctions between the human and the more than human and, on the other, how it may disentangle itself from the extractivism upon which much of the economy still relies. Indeed, as the authors argue, the notions of autonomy undergirding the legitimisation of journalism is somewhat out of synch with contemporary concerns; I fully agree but lament that this argument is made without giving any thought to journalistic autonomy, liberal democracy, and climate change. While this neglect does not in itself diminish the quality of what is written in the book, it does call attention to the insularity of journalism studies or, in line with arguments of the book, what we might call the field's exclusionary autonomy.

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