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Editorial control, the division of responsibilities, and journalistic autonomy

Historical newsrooms in Britain, Norway and Sweden

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical approach for exploring the role of individual journalists in media history by bringing research on early twentieth century British newsrooms into dialogue with Norwegian and Swedish journalism history. Traditional journalism histories usually took either a ‘great man’ approach focused on a small number of proprietors, editors, or famous columnists, or an institutional approach focused on the character of specific news organisations. The advent of the digital turn in recent years, meanwhile, has elicited a shift to a focus on media content, which can now be easily accessed, searched, and quantified. What has often remained missing is the role of individual journalists who were not famous nor at the top of the editorial hierarchy. Newspapers were hierarchical institutions, and while editorial control was paramount, the way newsrooms functioned also relied on a division of responsibilities, with specific departments and journalists overseeing the creation of specific types of content. Some journalists operated with a surprising amount of autonomy and agency and wielded a surprising amount of influence, including even on their superiors. The article showcases such dynamics via three case studies: financial editors, editors of the women’s page, and foreign correspondents. The article also argues that the theoretical approach provided can profitably guide future research in British and Scandinavian press history.

KEYWORDS
journalism, autonomy, editorial control, media history, transnational analysis

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Introduction

Journalistic outputs such as news reports and commentary are the product of journalists, and recognition and understanding of the role of the individual people involved is important. Yet journalism is also, in the majority of cases, produced within the institutional framework of a media organisation. Journalists may work together to produce content, while even seemingly very individual and solitary products such as opinion columns will be edited by sub-editors before being greenlighted for publication. News organisations also tend to be hierarchical organisations, with individual journalists answering to department heads, editors, and in some cases proprietors. The role of the individual journalist and the importance of their contributions within such larger structures can therefore be overlooked, or hard to discern – especially in historic newspapers where the practice of anonymity was used. While notions of journalistic agency and autonomy have been explored in prior research, this article focuses on the autonomy of individual journalists who worked within hierarchical media organisations, to stress the importance of assessing the specific contributions of individuals, the division of responsibilities within media organisations, and the importance of relationships.[1] It offers a theoretical case for why the agency of individual journalists should be centred as a focus of research, and specific insights from existing scholarship to offer supporting evidence.

The article combines theoretical and methodological discussion with explorations of specific historical examples, drawing on my own research and other relevant scholarship. In particular, historic newspapers from early twentieth-century Britain, Norway and Sweden provide material to work through and illustrate important concepts. While there are differences in the histories of the press in Britain and Norway and Sweden, there are also similarities. This includes: the expansion of the size of news organisations which made newspapers require ever larger workforces; the common practice of anonymity which gradually faded in the mid-to-late twentieth century; some of the basic formats and genres evident in the newspapers of each nation; that there was a pronounced shift from a party press to a more commercial press in each nation (though this occurred earlier in Britain); and that newspaper readership penetration was very deep in all three nations by the early-to-mid-twentieth century (Koss, 1984; Weibull, 2013; Dahl, 2016).[2] Moreover, by drawing on research into journalistic autonomy in the early twentieth century British press and resonant parallels in Norway and Sweden, I will suggest some areas which future research can profitably directed towards in all three nations, and more generally as regards historical scholarship on journalism.

The article begins by discussing relevant concepts such as journalistic agency and autonomy, news values, a newspaper's "voice" or "social personality", and editorial control. It then develops the notion of a "division of responsibilities" within newspapers, and illustrates how this works in practice and how it relates to editorial oversight by focusing on three specific case studies centred on specific journalistic roles and the sections of the newspaper which they produced: Financial Editors (often referred to as City Editors in early twentieth-century Britain) and the City page; Women's Editors, the Women's page and other forms of notionally "feminine" content; and Foreign Correspondents and foreign news and opinion articles. These three case studies have been selected because they informed the development of my theoretical approach, and because they provide instructive areas of both overlap and contrast as regards the dynamic between journalistic autonomy and editorial control, they were each distinctive parts of newspapers' output produced by specific journalists and departments, and each were tied up with notions of specific areas of professional expertise. The section on the City page and financial journalism draws on my own original research on British journalism as it offers some particularly clear examples to illustrate the dynamics I am exploring. The sections on the Women's page and "feminine" content and Foreign Correspondents and foreign news, meanwhile, identify relevant dynamics evident in other scholarship on the UK, Sweden and Norway as well as, in the case of foreign reporting, some supplementary examples from my own research, to showcase the general utility and feasibility of the approach.

It will be shown that despite the editorial hierarchy of news organisations, specific journalists and departments could sometimes wield a surprising amount of autonomy, though this could result from different dynamics. Furthermore, in some cases, their status and expertise meant that certain types of journalists could exert important influence over other figures at their newspapers – extending all the way up to the apex of the hierarchy – and leave an imprint on parts of the newspaper outside of their own direct jurisdiction. This status and expertise could be accrued through experience within journalism, or in some cases from experience and expertise amassed in other prior pursuits – as newspapers have always been melting pots, bringing together a diverse range of individuals from different fields (Ackerley, 2020a; Jarlbrink, 2009). In other cases, most notably in the realm of "feminine" content, it was a lack of attention from proprietors and editors combined with notions of expertise in their specific area, which enabled greater journalistic autonomy. Indeed, the issue of gender and how it impacted journalistic status and agency is a throughline across the three case studies.

Theoretical and methodological contribution

Before proceeding to the historical analysis, it is important to explain how "autonomy" and the associated term "agency" are being conceptualized. Such terms are complex and much debated (Colburn, 2022; Krylova et al, 2023) and have been applied to studies of journalism in a variety of ways. Hanitzsch et al (2010) outline a six-dimensional scale of influences, defined as political, economic, organizational, professional, procedural, and reference groups. Örnebring and Karlsson (2022), meanwhile, sketch out the genealogy of the concept of journalistic autonomy, and focus on seven possible factors, which may infringe upon it: the state, political interests, the market, sources, the workplace, the audience, and technology. Narrowing down into some of these areas, autonomy from the state has long been a fundamental concern of journalists and the news industry: and central to the narratives they tell about themselves, and how they justify their profession (Steel, 2012; Ackerley 2020b; Ackerley, 2023). Autonomy from the market as well as the state has also been stressed as a key concern (Örnebring, 2013a), and there is a large literature on the ways in which market pressures and business concerns shape journalism (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008).

Focusing on the dynamics within media organisations, there has also been an influential interpretation that individual journalists tend to lack much in the way autonomy, with control instead mainly residing in the hands of owners, editors and managers who may prioritize business imperatives (Sjøvaag, 2013). In a more nuanced riff on this theme, Glassner and Gunther (2005) argue that journalists may have some autonomy within the newsroom, but that the newsroom is likely to have little autonomy in relation to other parts of a news organization. Other scholars have stressed the important symbolic dividing line which is held to lie – or hoped to lie – between editorial and business sides of newspapers, a particularly prominent idea in the US (Mari, 2014). At the level of individual journalists' decision and activities, Flegel and Chaffee (1971) point towards various possible influences: editors, readers and audiences, and the personal opinions of journalists themselves. Carpentier (2005), meanwhile, stresses that journalistic autonomy can be conceptualised as having both positive and negative elements: the freedom for journalists to say and publish what they like, and freedom from interference in their work and output. Adding to this picture, there is also the issue of how journalists conceptualize and talk about their own autonomy. Such notions are reflected by some media scholars, where the concept has often been heavily linked to notions of objectivity and thus seen as a key part of the professional norms of (at least some forms of) journalism (Høyer, 1996; Waisbord, 2013).

This article will explore one specific part of this broader picture of autonomy and agency: the autonomy of journalists as contrasted with editorial (and proprietorial) control. There are specific historical and historiographical reasons why this particular dynamic is of interest, particularly as regards early-twentieth century newspapers. In Britain, this was the supposed era of the press barons, who are popularly viewed as having dominated their newspapers and shaped them solely to their own beliefs and interests, and it remained the era of the party press in Norway and Sweden. However, while this article will argue for the importance of recognising the scope for journalistic autonomy which did exist, there were outside influences on journalists as well. Whether this amounted to an infringement on their autonomy (as implied by some works which class "sources" as an influence over journalistic autonomy), or was part of the way in which the journalists wielded autonomy will be explored. Much of the traditional work on media history in Britain and Scandinavia, as well as in many other nations including the USA, took the form of either 'Great Man' or institutional histories (with many early histories being penned by journalists rather than academic scholars) (Carey, 1974; O'Malley, 2002; Eide, 2017, p. 125). Such approaches continue to be evident even in more recent scholarship (Addison, 2015; Freedman, 2021; Hendy, 2022; Potter, 2022; Roberts, 2022). And, aside from the fact that such approaches mirrored the evolution of historical research more generally with its major blindspots and omissions (and, for a longtime media history tended to lag behind developments in the broader field of history) (Curran, 2002), there are some understandable reasons why this has been the case. Individual figures atop the editorial hierarchy of newspapers could and did wield great influence, and institutional cultures and norms shaped journalistic production. But what has often remained missing from the older 'great man' and institutionalist approaches as well as the newer digital and content analysis approaches which have become ever more common is the role of individual journalists who were not at the top of the editorial hierarchy, or who were not famed columnists.[3]

There is a pressing need to examine the role of this large cohort of journalists, who produced much of the content of historical newspapers, and whose role – or even identity, given the practice of anonymity which endured at many titles well into the twentieth century – remains largely overlooked (Lonsdale, 2015). There is also a need to examine such figures holistically, focusing upon both their behind-the-scenes activities as well as the content they produced. As Bingham and Conboy (2013) have noted, historians of the media "have too often deployed news artefacts without properly considering their distinctive stylistic and institutional traits; scholars of the media, meanwhile, have frequently focused too tightly on the texts themselves without due regard for their social and cultural contexts." This article suggests how a focus on individual journalists as part of a broader analysis of media organisations can help avoid these traps.

One factor which lends credence to an institutionally-focused approach to journalism history is that media organisations tend to have distinctive characters, or "voices". Stuart Hall (1978, pp. 60-63; 2021) famously referred to newspapers' "social personalities". An influential study of the popular press remarked that the "daily newspaper is governed by the rhythm of day-to-day events", yet "the air of immediacy is deceptive" because newspapers are already in complex relationships with regular readers (Smith et al, 1975, p. 11). The readership knows to expect certain things: the basic layout of the paper, the types of articles present, and the general style, or "voice", of the writing held within. Journalists have certain working practices and follow procedures to ensure such continuity is maintained. New innovations are periodically introduced, but the basic nature of a newspaper generally persists for a long time. Having such systems in place also helps journalists deal with the deluge of possible news stories and topics worthy of comment and analysis, allowing them to more easily categorise the mass of material, assign it to dedicated journalists and departments, and institute structures and procedures to utilise it. A visible sign of the specific working practices at a newspaper are the style and content choices that come to define its image. We all know – or think we know – what a newspaper is like. Newspapers – and their readerships – such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Sun*, *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, *Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *Klassekampen*, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen* and so on are all known for their general political stances, but also their tones, aesthetics, and preoccupations. This is part of how newspapers function and attract and maintain an audience: potential customers know what to expect before picking up a newspaper and may even come to have an affinity with its personality. It can also influence recruitment as well, whether as regards journalists or other roles. Margaret Smith recalled that when she went to be vetted in 1951 by the Editor of the *Guardian*, A.P. Wadsworth, after applying for a position as an editorial secretary, as soon as she mentioned she was from a "*Manchester Guardian* reading family" she was in (Guardian Oral History Project/84, Margaret Smith).

Former editor of *The Times* Henry Wickham Steed (1928, p. 10) mused that newspapers aimed to provide content that would give a daily victory over dullness. But, as he explained, "readers' ideas of dullness vary… Each journal seeks to minister to the tastes of its specific public, tickling the palates that like to be tickled…" Indeed, newspapers can come to embody a certain distinct character which reflects the broad views and mores of particular demographics – such as the manner in which the *Daily Mail* for a time came to speak for a to a specific kind of middle-class attitude (Jeffrey and McClelland, 1987), or the way different news genres in Danish newspapers helped construct identities, such as those based on social class and national identity (Willig et al, 2024). Moreover, a predilection for certain topics can arise at different newspapers due to the composition of specialist correspondents and institutional contacts that it has amassed – and individual journalists and departments play a key role in acquiring them.

Of course, atop the structure of media organisations sit owners and editors – and such figures, by virtue of their position atop the organizational hierarchy, are extremely important in shaping the general character of their newspapers, via the issuing of specific editorial lines or by setting and policing broader parameters which shape what is permissible. Moreover, such editors and proprietors can leave an imprint on the character of a newspaper which endures long after they are no longer involved. Indeed, there is a wealth of scholarship which highlights the importance of editorial and proprietorial influence in both Britain and the Scandinavian nations (Eide, 2000). Örnebring (2013b), for example, has convincingly showcased how at some nineteenth century newspapers across Europe – with a focus on Britain, Sweden, Germany and Estonia – the small size of newspapers at the time and the lack of a division of labour means editors deserve to have the majority of our focus – though, even then, lower-ranking journalists could still be important. Looking to the twentieth century, many journalists tried to stay loyal to traditions which had been instilled under earlier owners and editors and tried to emulate the style of writing and analysis that they thought was befitting of the newspaper, or tried to maintain consistency with the newspaper's prior ideological and policy positions.

The practice of anonymity played an important role here. In her work on female journalists in Sweden who wrote under pseudonyms, Birgitta Ney posed the question of whether it is actually important to know who was writing specific articles, rather than just focusing on the articles themselves, and concluded that who they were and how their own experiences shaped their journalism should be uncovered (Nye, 2006, p. 32). In the case of her subject's, the choice of pseudonym was used to evoke specific ideas, leading readers to approach their columns in a certain manner. More generally in the history of the press, anonymity was often a means of creating an editorial voice for a newspaper, subsuming the individual writers into one entity.[4] It was standard procedure in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both in Britain and Scandinavia (Liddle, 1997; Salmon, 1997; Dahl, 2016, p. 56), but the use of anonymity and pseudonyms was still widely practised at the quality newspapers during the interwar period in Britain or in the Swedish case even until the 1970s (Ekecrantz, and Thomas Olsson, 1994). Even when full anonymity was not implemented, in the early-twentieth century the *Manchester Guardian* often only supplied opinion pieces and book reviews with initials, a common feature in its and *The Times*'s letters to the editor column as well, with a similar practice used at various Norwegian and Swedish newspapers. While a select group of readers would have been able to work out who the authors were, most readers would have been left in the dark. Full anonymity was maintained for the leading articles, now usually called editorials, at both quality and popular newspapers, a convention that usually persists until today.

Of course, this makes it harder to uncover who was producing journalism but also makes it all more the pressing to identify them, their contributions, and level of autonomy. Newspapers still had a coherent voice beyond the body of articles that lacked clear attribution, encompassing named individuals and even guest contributors and the letters page. While contributors internalised the style and news values of the newspaper and were actively taught how to reproduce it, editorial control was also at play. Sub-editors checked every article to ensure that they conformed to the correct style of the newspaper, both in matters such as grammar and prose style. They could even monitor pieces to ensure they complied with the paper's editorial line. R.D. Blumenfeld (1933, p.100), a veteran of the business and long-serving editor of the *Daily Express*, even went as far as to argue that although the sub-editor was the "unknown soldier" of journalism, they were "the maker of the newspaper in the real sense of the term – in the final form which it reaches the reader".

The personality of a newspaper is thus important and needs to be reassembled and understood, and editorial control plays an important role it. But conceptualising both as overly monolithic can obscure the amount of diversity that existed within a single newspaper. Different departments, working on different sections of a newspaper, had their own practices and conventions,[5] and it cannot be assumed that those at the top of the hierarchy paid an equal amount of attention to every part of the publication, whether this was due to their own perceived surfeit or deficit in the requisite skills and knowledge, their evaluation of the importance of different forms of content, or merely time constraints or their personal preferences. Sub-editors would often be engaged in more mundane aspects of copy editing, such as identifying spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, rather than enforcing editorial lines. A detailed study therefore needs to be undertaken to ascertain who was assigned the task of producing specific types of content, how they achieved this, and what level of editorial oversight they received. The notion of a division of responsibilities is important here, which needs to be appreciated in relation to how editorial oversight was applied, the two being in constant tension. While space is limited and so the theoretical approach cannot be undertaken in an extensive manner, the next section of the article will focus on three case studies to showcase its utility.[6] Financial Editors, Women's Editors and female journalists producing supposedly "feminine" material, and Foreign Correspondents will be expounded upon to explore how far journalistic autonomy could stretch, its limits, and the different forms that autonomy and influence could take. The first of these case studies will focus mainly on Britain, while the latter two will work through relevant examples from the UK as well as Sweden and Norway.

Financial journalism

By the late-nineteenth century, financial coverage within British newspapers had come to be included on a specific section of a newspaper called the City page, overseen by a City Editor (sometimes running a City office or department) – named this way due to their focus on the City of London, Britain's financial centre. A lot of the content on the City page was based on collection and reproduction of financial data, usually accompanied by short articles discussing news stories relevant to business dealings or the current state of other countries' economies, to guide the investments of readers. Most of the articles took the form of reports, but some element of analysis was also common, especially on topics such as inflation, or wage and price levels – which gave City editors licence to make political interventions, even if this was under the guise of the delivery of merely impartial technical knowledge. Indeed, there was also a pronounced political and ideological leaning evident across most – though not all – City Editors in early twentieth-century Britain: towards classical liberal orthodoxy, which consisted of a belief in the necessity of the Gold Standard, "sound money", fiscal restraint, free trade, and a deep antagonism towards anything deemed socialist (Ackerley, 2019, p. 200). Here we can see something akin to the way news values can be evident across the broader press, rather than merely confined to individual titles. This viewpoint was shaped by the tutelage of fellow City Editors, as well as due to the prevailing beliefs of the main focus of their reporting, the City financiers and banks, as well as in academic economics. Indeed, City editors were enmeshed in networks of information and intellectual exchange through and beyond journalism, connecting them to financiers and economists. Moreover, City editors also offered, or were sought out for, advice by others working for their newspapers who wished to draw on their technical expertise in a realm which was seen as opaque and confusing. At *The Times*, for instance, long-serving Editor Geoffrey Dawson would ask the City Editor, Courtenay Mill, for his opinion about financial topics, and was reliant on him for appraisals of the health of the economy, analysis of how finance functioned, and for the formulation of appropriate policy. This gave Mill a large amount of influence over the newspaper's general editorial stance on financial and economic issues for the best part of a decade (Ackerley, 2022). Similarly, at the *Manchester Guardian*, Editor Ted Scott held a great reverence for economic expertise, having studied economics himself at the London School of Economics, and would look to this City Editors for advice and guidance (Ackerley, 2019).

Despite City Editors often having a lot of leeway to write analyses within their own section of the newspaper as they saw fit and holding sway over others within their newsrooms, including even Editors, there were still pronounced limits to their autonomy. Mill at *The Times*, for example, increasingly began to clash with senior members of the editorial team such as Deputy Editor Robert Barrington-Ward, as the latter became increasingly focused on new modes of economic thinking and analysis, but also with Dawson as well. A major point of contention arose over Mill's continual resistance to and criticism of the newspaper making reference to the economist John Maynard Keynes, and ultimately Dawson took the side of Barrington-Ward and his close friend and Director of *The Times*, the financier Robert Brand (Ackerley, 2022, pp. 259-63). One source of financial expertise, Brand, came to take precedence over the other, Mill.

At the newspapers of the press barons, Lord Rothermere and Lord Beaverbrook, City editors had less room for manoeuvre in general, though their expertise on financial issues and their contacts in the City meant that they were consulted to inform business decisions. Their more restricted autonomy was because both proprietors took great interest in that part of the newspaper and saw themselves as experts in the topic given their backgrounds in accountancy and business respectively. At Rothermere's titles, City editors were generally left to shape their section of the newspaper as they wanted, but only because Rothermere shared their views on most issues of financial orthodoxy (Ackerley, 2019, ch. 5). At the newspapers of Beaverbrook, however, his City editors were often treated with disdain, and when the press baron's own views clashed with financial orthodoxy, such as on the issues of imperial preference versus free trade and whether policies should focus on raising or lowering wages, his City editors were beaten into submission and forced to support the newspaper's editorial line. In the case of Stanley Walter Alexander, who served as City editor for all three of Beaverbrook's title – the *Daily Express*, the *Sunday Express*, and the *Evening Standard* – this led him to anonymously publish works under the pseudonym Hannibal, where he championed orthodox policies and scathingly lambasted Beaverbrook, and to become involved in pressure groups which promoted classical liberalism (Ackerley, 2019, pp. 76-77, 172).

So, we see a clear distinction between newspapers where there was often a lack of proprietorial interference and where the Editors respected the expertise of their City Editors, and newspapers with powerful proprietors who were especially interested in monitoring financial and economic content because they deemed it centrally important, and because they thought of themselves as experts in these fields. Yet City Editors activities also mattered beyond journalism itself due to their wider activities and networks. Financial journalism was a feature of mainstream newspapers in the Scandinavian nations as well, and although research has been done on more contemporary financial reporting in these nations (Bjerke & Fonn, 2015), such works tend to take a more content analysis-based approach or focus on notions of professional ethics. An assessment of the role and level of autonomy of Financial Editors historically therefore provides a promising avenue for future research, to see if similar dynamics were evident, and if financial journalists were afforded the same status – at least at some titles. How notions of financial expertise interacted with the political affiliations of the press would also be an interesting avenue of inquiry.

Women's pages

As previously noted, the press barons are often held to be the archetypal exemplars of proprietorial dominance and control, and this held true for the coverage of financial and economic topics. Yet by the early-twentieth century, most newspapers in Britain were far too large, with too much information being gathered, and too much content being produced by too many journalists and departments, for any one individual, whether Editor or proprietor, to realistically oversee everything that was published on a daily basis.[7] This meant that some journalists and departments could undertake their work with a surprising degree of autonomy. This is a distinction that historians often fail to grasp: different sections of a newspaper, written by different journalists, could even promote divergent views. As

Bingham notes when discussing content in newspapers owned by Rothermere that had a focus on life-style issues rather than high politics, particularly articles aimed at a female audience: “Rothermere’s dictation of the main political line did not prevent radically different constructions of young women being included: Indeed, editorials were often discreetly subverted elsewhere” (Bingham, 2002, p. 29, 36). The case study from which this insight was drawn contrasted the deeply hostile coverage of ‘flappers’ – a name given to a certain type of young woman in the 1920s, identifiable by their clothing and behaviours, which were seen to signify a break with traditional gender roles – and the 1928 decision to grant all women over the age of twenty one the right to vote which was evident in editorial columns and political columns, with the much more sympathetic depiction of flappers in lifestyle features and the Women’s Page. In this case, it was actually Rothermere’s lack of interest in certain forms of content and lack of respect for the journalists who produced it which enable those working on the Women’s Page and other parts of the newspaper dedicated to lifestyle features to have greater journalistic autonomy, at least in some form. This was despite such content being seen as important to the financial success of the newspaper, by attracting a demographic which was particularly important for securing advertising revenue: women.

In later decades, supposedly feminine features such as problem pages, and agony aunt and advice columns could also subvert the overall editorial line and political and social views of a newspaper. Phillips (2008, p. 110) has argued that such content often provided an “internal challenge to the masculine discourses of the news page and to the male dominance of the news institution”. Though it is important to note that in the post-war decades, the female authors of such columns in Britain had become powerful celebrities in their own right and increasingly valued by editors as a draw for readers. Their autonomy came to be based more on their valued status rather than them being overlooked – and they were able to foreground notions of feminine sexuality and push back against male objectification of women. Yet, as newspapers came to prioritise more overtly sexualised content, exemplified by Rupert Murdoch’s *The Sun* and its use of topless models on page three, as well as generally embracing risqué imagery and a tabloidese full of innuendo, agony aunts and other female lifestyle features writers came under closer editorial scrutiny. The Editor of *The Sun*, for example, instructed staff to add a “dirty letter” into the newspaper’s “Dear Deirdre” column, while Claire Rayner resigned from the *Sunday Mirror* after an editorial mandate that she print “sexier letters” (Bingham, pp. 57-59).

Similar patterns concerning massively unbalanced gender representation were evident in the-early-to-mid twentieth century

Scandinavian press, with women being especially absent from senior editorial roles and often being assigned to specific forms of content. Alongside the eventual introduction of Women's Pages, this also included content such as sensational – often crime related – stories from abroad (Dahl, 2016, pp. 96-97). Early research into women journalists in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Scandinavia press was focused merely on identifying who they were, rather than exploring their actual contributions (Berger, 1977), although certain high profile female journalists such as Wendela Hebbe did receive more attention (Hebbe, 1997). But, as Birgitta Ney notes, while this is an important first step, it is also important to reconstruct their experiences as journalists; the common assumption has been to view the male journalist as the norm, while female journalists historically conformed and deviated from this archetype in interesting ways (Ney, 2006, p. 12).

Ney's (2001a) research explores the ways in which gender shaped the role of women journalists in the early-twentieth century, such as limiting which kinds of public space they could enter – a limit not placed on their male colleagues. Yet, by offering a woman's perspective on the spaces they surveyed, they had agency to shape their reporting in innovative ways. How far such content may have challenged the broader output of the newspapers in which they were published and the press as a whole during the early twentieth century, however, remains unclear, and is worth further research.[8] Nye does note that female journalists, such as Lotten Ekman, made contributions to newspapers which could challenge editorial agendas, but which can only be uncovered by looking behind-the-scenes at archival and personal records: such as by writing anonymous letters to the editor – sometimes, of a fictitious nature (Nye, 2001a, p. 43). Another important element of the impact of historic female journalists evident in the Swedish case which can only be fully appreciated by looking beyond published newspaper output was their role in networks promoting female enfranchisement. Such female journalists directly helped this issue gain coverage in the media, but they were also part of broader networks centred on the issue, helping with logistical efforts and engaging in social arenas such as salons. In the 1970s, female Swedish journalists were often involved in transnational networks aimed at aiding women in third world nations (Ney, 2001b). The work on female journalists in late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Scandinavia also has some interesting parallels with the British experience when it comes to the ways in which women could enter the profession due to networks and relationships, and especially family links. It was common in Norway for women to enter journalism due to familal links to editors and proprietors so as to contribute to the family business (Dahl, 2016, p. 97), and similar trajectories can be found in the UK press, such as how Mary Crozier came to work as Women's Editor at the *Manchester Guardian*; her father W.P. Crozier, worked his way up from News Editor to Editor-in-Chief.

Of course, gender imbalances within journalism persist, including in the UK and Scandinavia (Djerf-Pierre, 2007; Sjøvaag & Pedersen, 2018), especially as regard who gets to write about topics which are still viewed as being more important, such as political and economic news and foreign affairs. This suggests a focus on the interplay of the division of responsibilities and editorial oversight, and the ways in which lack of status can in some ways enable greater room for autonomy may be fruitful – especially because, as Sjøvaag (2015) has argued, "soft journalism genres" continues to be overlooked in much journalism research. This includes in Norway, where the lack of such a clear-cut dynamic between a "quality" and a "tabloid" press as is found in Britain means that notions of hard and soft journalism – notions of worthy and unworthy – play out more *within* newspapers, rather than both within and *across* different types of title, which no doubt means the way the division of responsibilities and its interplay with editorial control functioned historically, and functions today, will have a different complexion.

Foreign correspondents

With Foreign Correspondents, the autonomy of the journalist is perhaps most obvious and pronounced.[9] Indeed, in early-twentieth-century Norway, for example, foreign news was afforded high status, and newspapers such as *Norske Intelligenssedler* and *Morgenbladet* often boasted about how expansive their network of foreign correspondents were (Dahl, pp. 104-05). By virtue of being geographically removed from the newsroom (and hence their Editor and proprietor) and in lieu of the status and sense of expertise which arose from being the person 'on the spot' with supposed knowledge of the location where they were based,[10] early-twentieth-century Foreign Correspondents had a lot of leeway to choose which topics to cover and how to write about them. They would be sent requests – or commands – to cover specific topics as well, especially those which obviously had the greatest international significance, or which were of particular interest to their proprietor or Editor. But this still left lot of room for autonomy, which was reinforced by the fact that such correspondents would usually be charged not only with covering major political events, but also economic and cultural affairs. Foreign Correspondents would, for example, often attend cultural events, or choose books from their assigned nation to review.

The papers of Cecil Sprigge, who served as Rome and Berlin Correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, before – somewhat oddly – being transferred to serve as the newspaper's City Editor – are instructive here, richly detailing the multifaceted nature of his activities and his licence to select topics.[11] Of course, the material that he wired to Britain would still have to be accepted, and could be altered by the sub-editors – but the choice of topics was often his.[12] Sprigge was also able to spend his time in Italy writing books related to Italian history and other topics, which added to his perceived expertise. It is important to include journalists working for wire agencies when considering this theme, as by the mid-nineteenth century this was a major source of foreign news, and continued to be so throughout the twentieth century and up to the present. An account of how foreign news entered Sweden in the 1960s (Thorén, 1968), for example, showcases just how important the reporting of wire agencies was.

Interestingly, when looking at early-twentieth-century Foreign Correspondents, a similar gendered pattern is evident as was the case in lifestyle feature – although there were exceptions, such as with the pioneering early Swedish female foreign reporter Ida Bäckmann. Her gender was often stressed, because being a woman – and a woman undertaking such overseas reporting in potentially dangerous areas – was a novelty, and presumably a selling point (Ney, 2006, pp. 47-48). As Lonsdale (2021) has documented for Britain, the more usual situation by the early-twentieth century was that women produced content for a range of publications, such as magazines and niche journals, but also mainstream newspapers. They usually worked in a freelance role and were often treated with condescension and as outsiders by male dominated newsrooms, consigned to mainly collecting material for and penning lifestyle and cultural topics. Similar dynamics were evident in Sweden and Norway (Ney, 2006), where female journalists were often assigned the task of assessing and then reformatting foreign news stories for use in specific forms of journalistic genre, including stories involving crime and scandal. But, once again, while constrained in their autonomy in important ways, such female Foreign Correspondents had a lot of autonomy to choose topics and shape news coverage of issues perceived to be "feminine".

Other female Foreign Correspondents faced similar issues, but managed to attain greater leeway to write about supposedly more "important"' and high-status topics as well, at least by the late 1930s. This was the case with Sylvia Sprigge nee Saunders, wife of Cecil, who served as Berlin correspondent for *The Times* and briefly as Rome Correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* after Cecil left the role before they were married,[13] later served as *Guardian* Rome Correspondent again, and served as a war reporter mainly focused on Italy during World War II. Surveying her personal documents and correspondence, it is clear that Sylvia enjoyed a similar level of autonomy as Cecil while serving in Rome. When it comes to the history of Scandinavian foreign news reporting and Foreign Correspondents, important work has been undertaken to map out who the relevant journalists were and their backgrounds, but there is a lot of scope to explore just how much autonomy they had to shape foreign news reporting and what kinds of topics they were choosing to focus upon, and the gender dynamics at play (Hovden & Werenskjold, 2019). Due to the nature of news production for radio and television and the logistical concerns, it seems that there was very likely less scope for such journalists to wield the level of autonomy of Foreign Correspondents for the press – and so more work in this area to explore such a comparison would be welcome.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has made the case that in media and communications research, including journalism history, a useful way to explore journalistic autonomy is to focus on the notion of a division of responsibilities within news organisations, and assess the dynamic of how this interacted with editorial and proprietorial control. The notion of journalistic autonomy presented in this article has been implicit in prior research on the British, Swedish and Norwegian press, but has not previously been foregrounded and developed into a specific theoretical and methodological framework. While other aspects of journalistic autonomy are vitally important to consider, the contributions of individual journalists and the departments they worked within helps complicate notions of a newspaper's voice or social personality and news values – which are undoubtedly important, but which can occlude a nuanced understanding if applied uncritically. The article has showcased that editorial control was always an important feature, and it could in certain respects and for certain types of content, be very strong – but that by looking at specific contexts and dynamics it is evident that individual journalists can have – and have had – a surprising amount of autonomy, at least in specific areas.

The article has provided three short case studies to show the utility of this approach and why it is important to look at press content in a holistic manner beyond just newspapers' published news reporting,[14] and sketched out some areas of overlap between research on the British, Norwegian and Swedish press to suggest areas that could be fruitfully applied to future research in these nations and more in media history research more broadly. In particular, whether financial journalists held the same status in Scandinavia as in Britain and thus could wield influence more broadly across the publications they worked for, is worthy of exploration – especially given that the existence of a party press rather than an industry dominated by press lords would likely have led to different dynamics as regards how financial expertise was utilized. Some similarities are evident in the way female journalists were able to maintain autonomy in the early twentieth-century British and Scandinavian press, but the way the "hard" and "soft" news dichotomy tended to play out *within* newspapers in Scandinavia rather than *across* quality and tabloid titles as in Britain opens up avenues for future research on the three specific nations, and transnational comparisons of the dynamics at play. The special status accorded to Foreign Correspondents in the early-twentieth century press in Scandinavia and Britain is clearly showcased in prior research, but the extent and limits of their autonomy needs further exploration, especially as regards whether their autonomy remained stable over time. The gendered nature of the dynamics between the division of responsibilities, journalistic autonomy, and editorial control has also been demonstrated in Britain, Norway and Sweden, but such a lens could profitably be applied to other journalistic roles and forms of content production over a longer time period within these nations, and more generally.

Finally, a focus on the importance of individual journalists suggests the need to explore their relationships and networks as well, whether professional or personal, and this provides scope for research taking both a national and a transnational focus.

NOTES

[1] Örnebring (2013b) has explored how this division of labor within journalism expanded across Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, and the process only intensified with the emergence of a truly mass press at the end of the century.

[2] In Hall and Mancini's (2004) classic work on "media systems", Britain was placed under the "Liberal Model" while the Scandinavian nations were placed under the "Democratic Corporatist Model", and differences such as the higher level of explicit party affiliation throughout the twentieth century were documented for Scandinavia. It is worth noting that similarities between the British and Scandinavian press were also highlighted, such as high rates of newspaper readership and gender equality in newspaper readership, and that the dominance of a metropolitan press was not as pronounced in early twentieth-century Britain as it later became. Similarly, while Syvertsen et al (2014) document the characteristics of Nordic media systems which make them distinctive, their history of the Scandinavian press showcases a lot

of similarities to the evolution of the British press, especially as regards notions of freedom of the press and industry self-regulation.

[3] Bingham (2010) discusses issues which arise from a lack of context when relying solely on digital content analyses of newspapers.

[4] See the view of a leader-writer for the *Standard*, who pointed to the importance of the practice in Edwardian journalism, and at *The Times* under its feted editor John Delane (Escott, 1908).

[5] Franklin's (2008) volume provides an in-depth overview of different forms of newspaper content and why and how the diverse forms need to be critically engaged with in different ways.

[6] Ackerley (2019) provides a more extensive consideration of who produced economic and financial content and how and why it was shaped in specific ways.

[7] Long-serving *Manchester Guardian* editor C.P. Scott, who was seen to shape the paper in line with his own character and values, was far less comprehensive in his editorial oversight of all aspects of the paper than his reputation suggested (Ackerley, 2022, pp. 251-52).

[8] Indeed, Voss (2018) has explored the ways in which the Women's Page served to report on social change and intersected with and contributed to the women's liberation movement in the post-Second World War decades in a range of Anglophone nations. Kurvinen (2024, pp. 95-99) has also detailed a similar development as regards Women's Pages in Finnish newspapers from the 1970s.

[9] It is important to acknowledge that it has been showcased that during periods of crisis and war the coverage of international affairs – including by foreign correspondents – by the press of various nations has often been shaped by notions of national interest and political expediency, and thus by state agendas and the discourses of elite actors (Hallin, 1986; Bennett, 1990; Carruthers, 2011).

[10] Hannerz (2007) has foregrounded the cosmopolitanism of many Foreign Correspondents.

[11] He was deemed to have the required economic expertise to serve as City Editor after having covered such topics as Foreign Correspondent.

[12] See, for example, the wide range of topics that feature in his letters to editorial staff W.P. Crozier and A.P. Wadsworth, which he usually chose – but with regular requests for specific stories as well (Crozier/Wadsworth Correspondence). A similar dynamic could be seen with the *Express* newspaper's Berlin Correspondent Denis Sefton Delmer. While Beaverbrook often requested specific topics be researched, he respected Delmer's expertise and gave him license to cover the topics the Correspondent found most interesting (Beaverbrook Correspondence, BBK/H/80 and BBK/H/81).

[13] Sylvia was released from this role in November 1930. While receiving a later expressing commiserations for the *Guardian* Editor Ted Scott, this suggests her status as a woman journalist made her be deemed more expandable (Scott to Saunders, 1930).

[14] Willig et al (2024) note that research into Scandinavian media history was for a long time too narrow in this regard, but this article has discussed some of the work focusing on these lacunae.

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