

Independent News Agencies

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SUMMARY

Independence is frequently considered to be a prerequisite and guarantor of reliable, balanced and credible reporting, as basis of "truthful unbiased news". The "Group 39" agencies, the association of state-independent news agencies in Europe, point out the close connection between freedom of the press and independence of news agencies in their mission statement, as stated above. In the long run news agencies which are or want to be fully independent of the state or of the government can meet their public service function only through private-ownership and profitable business models. In addition to the ownership structure the economic situation is considered decisive for the degree of a news agency's independence. A profitable news agency is not susceptible to possible influences by financial backers. It seems significant, that all privately owned news agencies which are members of the EANA generate profits (all figures from 2001) whereas almost all publicly owned European news agencies report losses. The big differences in terms of profitability of their activities are best shown in the per capita turnover figures: The average per capita turnover of privately owned news agencies is € 112,000 and almost four times the average per capita turnover of € 31,000 of publicly owned agencies. The covetousness of politics and politicians towards news agencies is to be explained by the key role news agencies play in the media system. Usually an average of at least 50% of all articles published in daily newspapers is directly based on news agency content. The same applies even to a higher degree to news on the radio and on television. Moreover, news agencies decisively determine the global image of a country due to the existing global network between the agencies, in spite of the Internet. Unfortunately, it must be observed that many political institutions all over the world show strong ambitions to control news agencies and use them as an instrument to influence the media.

Key words: Independence, profitable news agency, public service function

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Ladies and gentlemen. Again from my side as well, thank you so much for having me invited to this celebration. I am honoured, and I am happy to be here, to be here with my friends from Hina, an Agency which we from Vienna, from APA, their development we followed very closely during these last 15 years and if I may say so, I am really proud on what you have reached so far. And congratulation from my side.

I think the last consequence that you have reached is independence and tremendous step forward towards independence, towards the truthful and unbiased news reporting, but I am quite sure it is still a process which is going on towards a final vision of so called “total independence”, if things like that exists.

So, what I want to do now is to explain a little bit how we see independence in news agency business. When I listened to Mirko Bolfeks’ statement earlier I decided that I should say something else of what I have prepared. So, please allow me to speak more free than what you have in your documents, in your papers.

First of all, in my understanding in my conviction, there is a clear connection between independence news journalism and independence on economics. Without being economically independent according to my experience, at least, and I am in this business as a news agency manager already 23 years, I may say that it is almost impossible to finally reach total editorial independence. So, in my understanding the very first precondition in the development of the news agency at a very long run is to reach economic independence.

Try to follow my argument: if you are not economically independent, that means – in other words – if you produce losses with your company, somebody at the very end of the day has to pay these losses. And if you yourself are not the one who can afford to run such a company you have to go to somebody else to ask him for subsidies. And believe me, at least according to my experience so far, nobody in the world will give you the money for free, just for nothing if you go to someone and say: “OK, please pay my losses”, on the other day he will come and say: “OK, I gave you the money but now I want to get something back”, and in principle – this is my experience – in principle what they want back for that is to want influence on editorial reporting.

This is a specially true when it comes to news agencies. It might be interesting that out of the 140 news agencies which exist worldwide, 140 national and international news agencies, the large majority of 85 percent are state-owned agencies and only 15 percent are state-independent, government-independent agencies. So you could say: “What do you bother, the huge majority is state-owned. No problem.” But if you look on this structure from a different angle, you will realise that this 15 percent of the independence agencies are dominating the worldwide flow of the information. These are the agencies like Reuters, like AP, like Canadian Press, Australian Associated Press, Kyodo of Japan, Press Association in London, all the Nordic agencies, the agencies from Holland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy – these are agencies who are strictly independent from any state influence due to the fact they have the different ownership structure. They all are owned by the media of their countries beside Reuters which is a stock-listed company. So there is a clear connection between ownership structure and independent news report.

May I come back to my statement earlier when I said: “Economic independence is the precondition for the editorial independence”. If you look more carefully and more in detailed on these independent agencies you will realise that all of them are profitable companies. But we have then on the basis of EANA and survey in 2001, and what we have realised is that almost all state-owned agencies in Europe are producing losses. So, in a one hand you have situation where you say: OK, independent, state independent agencies are profitable, and state-owned agencies are producing losses. Again I think it gives something to think about. And I think about ambition of Hina, all I could do is to insist that strategy which Mirko Bolfek and his colleagues are developed is the right answer in a right direction. This is in my opinion.

But at the end on the low-run we have the whole company as a hole has to be profitable. So therefore you have to diversify these agencies and probably you have to do what Mirko has talk about. You also have to diversify Hina and to try to earn the money what you need to finance this General News Service and the losses of the GNS to the wired income which you get from all the other services, the specialised services. In my understanding this is the only chance to get rid of these problems of this main infrastructural problem all agencies are focused and they say OK, the General News Service on the one side, this public service character can not be run profitable but to avoid to get subsidies from other parties – could be states, could be governments, things like that – you have to try to find other sources of income and these other sources of income are to be gained from the specialised services like data-base businesses, media-monitoring, OTS, IT-services, and so on. So, all I can say congratulations to what Hina has develop as a strategy and I think this is the only way on the long-run to gain this independence.

If you ask me according to my vision, where would I see Hina in a long-run – let's say 10 years from now – in my understanding Hina will be, I am absolutely sure, Hina will be one of these only 15 percent of independent news agencies in the World. But you strictly have to follow the way as I was described earlier. Thank you.

Wolfgang Vyslozil

Neovisne novinske agencije

SAŽETAK

Neovisnost se često spominje kao jamstvo za zdano, izbalansirano i vjerodostojno izvještavanje. “Grupa 39” – agencije, udruženje neovisnih novinskih agencija iz Europe, ističu blisku vezu između slobodnog novinarstva i neovisnosti novinskih agencija. Dugoročno gledano, novinske agencije koje žele biti potpuno neovisne o državi ili Vladi, mogu ispuniti svoju funkciju javnog servisa samo kroz privatno vlasništvo i profitabilne poslovne modele. Osim vlasničke, ekonomska

situacija smatra se odlučujućom za stupanj neovisnosti novinske agencije. Profitabilna novinska agencija nije podložna mogućim financijskim utjecajima.

Čini se važnim i to što sve privatne novinske agencije kao članice EANA-e ostvaruju dobit, dok gotovo sve javne europske novinske agencije posluju s gubitcima.

Velike razlike u profitabilnosti najbolje pokazuju brojke: prosječna zarada privatnih agencija je 112.000 eura, dok je u javnim agencijama taj protok kapitala *per capita* četiri puta manji i iznosi 31.000 eura.

Gramzivost politike i političara kad je riječ o novinskim agencijama može se objasniti ključnom ulogom koju one imaju u medijskom sustavu. Obično je i do 50 posto članaka objavljenih u dnevnim novinama zasnovano na sadržajima preuzetima od novinskih agencija. To vrijedi još više za radio i televiziju. Novinske agencije determiniraju globalnu sliku zemlje prema postojećoj globalnoj mreži agencija, unatoč internetu. Nažalost, mora se uočiti i to da mnoge političke institucije diljem svijeta pokazuju velike ambicije da nadziru novinske agencije i koriste se njima kako bi utjecali na medije.

Ključne riječi: neovisnost, profitabilne novinske agencije, funkcija javnog servisa