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**Abnegation, accommodation and affirmation: three discursive modes for the institutional construction of independence among national news agency executives in Europe**

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**Abnegation, accommodation, affirmation: Three discursive modes for the institutional construction of independence among national news agency executives in Europe**

**Abstract**

The relationship between the ownership form of news agencies and their independence has long figured centrally in debates about the quality of news agency operations. Drawing on a discursive institutional framework, this article explores how national news agency executives in Europe perform a narrated role in the discursive construction of their organizations' internal and external independence. We set out the concept of *independence discourse*, which we define as the variety of ways in which news agency executives use claims about the economic independence and the internal and external autonomy of their organizational operations. Based on a discourse analysis of elite semi-structured interviews with 20 European news agency executives, we identify three discursive modes for the institutional construction of independence: (1) abnegation; (2) accommodation; and (3) affirmation. These discursive modes represent an array of public and private approaches to discursively negotiating the power of both state/government and shareholders/owners. We conclude by arguing for an expanded concept of independence, one which offers an account of the complex array of forces shaping news agency operations today.

Keywords: news agencies, ownership, state, independence, autonomy, political economy, journalism studies, discursive institutionalism, executives, elite interviews, Europe

## Introduction

For a long time, news agencies were categorized as privately, cooperatively or state-owned (UNESCO, 1953). The debate about which form of ownership affords national news agencies the greatest degree of independence has been ongoing yet longer still – at least since 1866, when the private agency Tuwora was taken over by the Austrian state and transformed into the Imperial-Royal Correspondence Bureau (Pensold, 2002: 29). In the early 20th century, Kent Cooper, General Manager of Associated Press (AP), famously promoted cooperative ownership as the superior form in order to guarantee the free flow of news while he was fighting against the ‘overlordship of Reuters’ in the world market (Rantanen, 1994: 28). Decades later, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which supported a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), argued that national news media were in fact not independent but rather dependent on the big four ‘international’ (Western) agencies – AP, Reuters, United Press International (UPI) and Agence France-Presse (AFP) – and/or on the national news agencies of their own countries (Boyd-Barrett, 1980). All these concluded that that news coverage should be more independent (Boyd-Barrett, 2016: 88).

Whilst national news agencies have, since the 19th century, been debating the best form of ownership to facilitate their ultimate independence in the transmission of news, news agency researchers have recently hardly touched the topic. As a consequence, what we here term independence discourse may be more dominant among European news organizations than among academics. National news agencies have traditionally played a central role in what Nerone terms ‘the hegemonic model of western journalism’ (2013: 446), which became dominant in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, this role is now being challenged as a result of a series of crises taking place on various scales (Rantanen et al., 2019) – crises which challenge not only the status of news agencies within the hegemonic model, but also their journalistic authority more generally. In this context, news agency executives are under pressure to assure their

stakeholders of their independent capacity to produce trustworthy, reliable as well as, to a large extent, commercially viable news.

Drawing on a discursive institutional framework (Schmidt, 2008, 2010, 2015), this article explores how national news agency executives in Europe perform a narrated role (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017) in the discursive construction (Vos and Thomas, 2018) of their organizations' internal and external independence. This, we argue, is crucial to understanding how national news agencies in Europe seek to maintain both nationally and globally their dominant position as news intermediary organizations. We also problematize academic discourses that conceptualize internal and external autonomy as entirely separate concepts.

## **Previous research**

The independence and autonomy of news institutions have been the focus of research in several subfields of media and communication research – primarily political economy and journalism studies, respectively. However, less has been written about the role of news executives as institutional actors.

### *1. The concept of independence in political economy*

Political economists of the media have long argued that media biases are originated by corporate ownership and affect the collective consciousness of people around the world (Jin, 2018). As already noted in 1947, 'Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one' (Baker, 2007: 2). Or, as Herman and Chomsky (2002: xii) famously argue, 'the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them'. In this school of thought, when independence is missing, double *dependency* on politics and markets occurs (Champagne, 2005). While early political economists argue that news simply reflects the ownership and control of the organizations that produce it, nowadays it is widely acknowledged that 'the interests of shareholders, expert managers and editors are more diffuse, cross-cutting' (Winseck,

2016: 78). This change is reflected in Mosco's definition (2009: 24) of political economy as the 'study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources'.

In news agency studies, which are sometimes seen as part of political economy (Wasko, 2014: 268), it has been the nationality rather the ownership of agencies that has caused most concern. The so-called international agencies - AP, UPI, AFP and Reuters - which were once seen as the most powerful (Boyd-Barrett, 1980) fell into different types of ownership – co-operative, private and public/state – and thus it became difficult to make an argument about the influence of their particular ownership forms. The fact that they were all geographically western, i.e., US and European, in terms of their location, but operated transnationally, was seen to influence the content of news and make national media, especially in the global South, replicate their own news values (Meyer, 1989: 244). In order to correct this imbalance, it was considered important for an NWICO to build or strengthen national news agencies in the global South (Boyd-Barrett, 2011: 86).

However, since that time, significant changes have taken place even among the four so-called international news agencies. The number of Western 'international' agencies has declined: UPI is no longer an international news agency; Reuters has become Thomson Reuters and is in Canadian ownership (Rantanen, 2019); and according to Vyslozil and Surm (2019) and Surm (2019) Anadolu, EFE, TASS and Xinhua are now also among agencies that operate internationally. Most national news agencies in Europe can hardly be described as powerful media giants since many are struggling for financial viability after losing many of their traditional media customers. Some have been forced to cease operating or have been bought by agencies in neighboring countries (Lauk and Einmann, 2019).

As a recent study shows, the cooperative ownership form celebrated by Cooper has practically disappeared in Europe, where it has been replaced by a new form of corporate ownership in which media organizations themselves have become the main

shareholders (Rantanen et al., 2019). At the same time, 75 percent of the world's news agencies are state-owned or state-funded (Vyzlosil, 2014) and in Europe more than 75 percent of agencies identified themselves as either state- or publicly owned (Rantanen et al., 2019). Debate about the best ownership form has hardly disappeared, however, and still tends to dominate any discussion of independent news transmission.

## *2. The concept of autonomy in journalism studies*

In journalism studies, according to Schudson (2002: 249), political economy perspectives focus on patterns of media ownership and on the behaviour of news institutions in relatively liberal versus relatively repressive states. In contrast to political economists, journalism scholars define independence in conjunction with journalistic autonomy (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 309) and argue that the autonomy of news organizations from the state defines news, and even Western journalism as an institution (Nerone, 2013: 446). As Nerone (2013: 446) writes, 'this model assumes that news organizations are relatively autonomous from the state and that individual journalists are independent agents engaged in an agonistic relationship to power while representing the people by, among other things, giving expert accounts of affairs of public importance'. Journalism studies places much emphasis on journalists working for news organizations and on their perceived autonomy, although there are not many studies of news agencies.

Merrill (1974: 26) argues that press freedom is fundamentally 'freedom from outside control', i.e., press autonomy 'would apply most directly to the individual media units of the press, although it does (and should) apply to the individual journalist as well'. Autonomy can also be internal when journalists are able to do their job with a great amount of individual discretion and following agreed professional standards decided within the profession rather than outside it (Örnebring, 2010: 569). This in turn implies that journalists must also have autonomy to shape their own work without being controlled by either internal or external forces (Örnebring, 2010: 572). It is a widely shared view that 'journalistic independence provides objective or unbiased news,

allowing for effective democracy, constraining the power of the mass media and maintaining the trust of the public in mass media' (Watanabe, 2017: 224).

In this way, the concept of autonomy is closely related to that of economic independence: Both are presented as integral to allowing news organizations to maintain neutrality in their production of news (Hughes et al., 2017: 957). Hence, the concepts of independence and autonomy are seen as fundamentally important for news organizations and journalists. However, there is also deep disagreement about what matters most: i.e., autonomy *from whom* (Schudson, 2005) – from the state or the market, from the national or the global, or from external or internal forces.

### 3. *News executives as institutional actors*

The organizational and operational structures of national news agencies in Europe are fundamentally shaped by diverse forms of ownership and governance that vary significantly across contexts (Rantanen et al., 2019). In the production and transmission of news, these can be seen as constitutive of both the external relationships of independence and the internal relationships of autonomy that characterize contemporary journalistic roles and practices. As external representatives of their organizations (Conte, Siano and Vollero, 2017) and internal operatives with the capacity to determine organizational agendas (Prasad and Junni, 2016), news agency executives occupy a prominent institutional role, as both leaders and gatekeepers, at the intersection of economic and journalistic configurations of power and authority. Nevertheless, we still know little about the role they play in both challenging and reproducing constraints on journalistic independence and autonomy in the contemporary media environment.

While most of the research in political economy has concentrated on structures, markets and profits, using quantitative data (see, for example, Djankov et al., 2003), there is not much research on those who manage media organizations. As Wasko (2014: 265) writes, many critics have asserted that, overall, political economy is

primarily focused on the economic, or production, side of the communication process, neglecting texts, discourse, audiences and consumption. It has also been argued that political economy's macro-level focus overlooks micro-level data collection, particularly interviews and ethnography (Herzog and Ali, 2015: 41). Even in journalism studies, not much research has been done on media owners, often referred to as 'moguls' or 'barons' (Tunstall and Palmer 1991; Nemtsov, 1999; Stetka, 2012; Carlson and Berkowitz, 2013), or on senior news management or executives (with the recent exceptions of Grönvall (2015), Lahav and Reich (2018) and Russell (2019), for example). With the exception of Palmer's (Tunstall and Palmer, 1991), news agency executives have hardly been an object of separate studies except in (auto)biographies (Rantanen, 2019).

### **Conceptual framework: Discursive institutionalism and executive independence discourse**

Institutionalist perspectives originating in the work of Cook (1998) and Sparrow (1999) have sought to theorize journalistic roles in terms of the norms and rules that shape news media as an institution, including assumptions regarding what constitutes appropriate journalistic practice (Ryfe, 2006) and naturalized procedures for news gathering (Cook, 1998). Building on such institutional explanations, Hanitzsch and Vos draw on a discursive institutional framework to argue for a recognition of journalistic roles and identities as 'structures of meaning that are discursively created, perpetuated, and contested' (2017: 120). However, even within the discursive institutional framework, the focus remains squarely on journalists, with little attention paid to either the discursive strategies of news executives or the formative role that news executives play in articulating through discourse the institutional capacities and limits of contemporary journalism.

According to Hanitzsch and Vos (2017: 127), it makes a difference whether we look at the actual practices of journalists or focus on what journalists say they do or believe they do. This highlights the *narrated role* (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017: 127) they play in



the institutional construction of journalism. For Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), a narrated role refers to the ways in which subjective understandings and representations of journalistic roles and practices emerge through rationalizing processes of role reflection. These processes, they argue, are shaped both by dominant discourses about appropriate journalistic practice and by the material conditions of news production. In the case of narrated role performance, there is a tendency to rationalize elements of journalistic practice and to incorporate those elements into an integrated narrative, which may or may not satisfy public expectations of normative standards in journalism.

Drawing on the work of White (1987), Hanitzsch and Vos contend that these narrative strategies of 'integration and rationalization produce "moral meaning" by selectively prioritizing discourses that merit social legitimacy' (2017: 127), i.e., that they legitimize their own institution and its role in society. As argued by Carlson (2015: 2), however, 'discursive justification and legitimation of a profession involve both internal practitioners and external social actors'. Given that they benefit both symbolically and materially from positive public attitudes towards journalism, news agency executives also have a stake in legitimizing their own social role. We would therefore argue that news agency executives, particularly in their public orientation as organizational spokespersons, likewise perform a narrated role on behalf of their institutions. In this way, they can also be seen to figure centrally in the discursive contestation of appropriate roles and practices of journalism, as well as of the place of journalism in society.

As van Dijk (1993: 255) argues, power elites have a special role in planning and decision-making and in control over the relationships and processes of the enactment of power, as well as having special access to discourse: because of their symbolic power, they are the ones who have the most to say. One of the key issues in discursive institutionalism is thus the critique of power. Jäger and Maier (2016: 117) write that 'discourses exercise power because they institutionalize and regulate ways of talking, thinking and acting'. Institutions also draw on discourses in order to justify and promote their own existence and to reproduce their social domination (Wodak, 2001: 9). At a time when news organizations, such as news agencies, are in danger of losing their

privileged social position as national institutions, the production of moral meaning becomes even more important.

We thus propose a discursive institutional framework for exploring the organizational function of independence discourse among European news agency executives. Here we define independence discourse as the variety of ways in which news agency executives use claims about the economic independence and the internal and external autonomy of their organizational operations as a means of structuring knowledge about and ways of practicing journalism.

Inspired by Schmidt's contention that discursive institutionalism studies both 'the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in institutional context' (2010: 3) and that it 'can provide us insights into the dynamics of institutional change by explaining the actual preferences, strategies, and normative orientations of actors' (2010: 1), this study seeks inspiration from an approach that has only recently been used in media studies. Due in part to a variety of crises, including declining public trust and growing financial pressures, journalism has now lost 'some measure of legitimacy' at a time when 'the beliefs, norms, and rules that have constituted the institution have also been destabilized' (Vos, 2019: 2001). In this context, news agencies face similar challenges in maintaining their public role as authorities on matters of common concern (Rantanen et al., 2019). Because the legitimacy of national news agencies is partly created and maintained in the public and private speech of their executives, a discursive institutional approach to these processes must offer a rigorous account of the role played by executive talk in the maintenance and management of such institutional constructions of independence.

## **Materials and methods**

This article draws on data collected as part of the pan-European research project on The Future of National News Agencies in Europe, conducted in collaboration with the European Alliance of News Agencies (EANA) and based at the London School of

Economics and Political Science (LSE). EANA has 32 national news agencies as members, with – except for the Baltic states – one agency as an institutional member from each European country with one or more agencies.

A series of elite semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 CEOs or their deputies, mainly during the EANA Spring Conference in Bucharest in April 2018. Responses were drawn from news agencies across Europe, including Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, representing a diverse array of institutional structures and systems of governance. The interviews used a set of questions developed for the project (Rantanen et al., 2019) in response to an initial survey phase in which 25 of the 32 EANA member agencies participated.

Participants received an information sheet on data collection, outlining the survey and interview phases of the project. Informed consent was sought from all respondents. Due to the possibility of sensitive business information being raised, all participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. In order to ensure this, the research team and transcription service providers were also asked to sign non-disclosure agreements. All interview transcripts were anonymized.

Our research question was:

How does the executive talk of European news agency directors contribute to the discursive construction of their organizations' internal and external independence?

### *1. Elite interviews*

The news agency executives interviewed can be viewed as members of a professional elite in journalism. Their status depends, of course, on the size of their agencies and of their markets, and is by no means similar in every country. In this article, we define news agency executives as a category of business elite (Odendahl and Shaw, 2001)

working for commercial bureaucracies (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 190), although it should be noted that some state-owned agencies are not run as commercial businesses.

Members of an elite are used to being asked about their opinions and thoughts (Herzog and Ali, 2015: 45). This also applies to news agency executives who, as public figureheads and representatives of their respective organizations, are experienced in articulating their views. They are able to see their role as that of advocates, since they do not participate in actual news gathering (Donsbach, 2012). Also, elite interviews specifically try to understand the micro-politics of personal relationships and to relate them to a wider analysis of power (Kezar, 2003: 397).

## *2. Discourse analysis*

In this article, we are interested in exploring how news agency executives articulate their independence at a time when economic conditions mean that many news agencies have been forced to find alternative sources of revenue. We therefore elaborate on political economy and journalism studies with insights from discourse analysis. However, using discourse analysis in studying news executives as representatives of their respective organizations is still new. As Reardon (2017) has observed, discourse analysis has been extensively applied to the output of news, yet is underdeveloped in the area of production studies.

Given that we are primarily interested in the constitutive power of *how* news agency executives narrate their role through various modes of discourse (Van Dijk, 1993: 250), the question of whether their claims are *truthful* becomes secondary. Insofar as we are interested in their narrated role, our focus is therefore on what they *say they do*. At the same time, we assume that this cannot be fully separated from their normative, cognitive, practiced roles – what they *ought to do*, what they *want to do*, and what they *do in practice* (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017: 124).

Our analysis also draws on the argument set out by Schmidt (2015: 115) that discursive interactions generally fall into two categories: (1) a 'coordinative' discourse among policy actors engaged in creating, deliberating, arguing, bargaining and reaching agreement on policies; and (2) a 'communicative' discourse between political actors and the public engaged in presenting, deliberating, arguing over, contesting and legitimating those policy ideas.

## **Results**

We identified three discursive modes for the institutional construction of independence: (1) abnegation, (2) accommodation and (3) affirmation.

In our typology, abnegation is characterized by the disavowal or renunciation of any internal or external relationship of influence over news production activities.

Relationships of dependence are predominantly presented in negative terms.

Accommodation admits that some form of relationship between news agency staff and government or owners is essential due to various legislative and regulatory constraints.

Statements in this mode tend to present relationships of dependence in ambivalent terms. Affirmation confirms some form of relationship, even presenting such a ship in positive terms. However, statements in this mode frequently reframe the relationship in terms that reassert the value of independence.

Importantly, any or all of these modes can co-occur within a stretch of discourse. In fact, respondents were frequently found to draw on abnegation in order to mitigate statements that expressed accommodation and/or affirmation. In our study, we also see news agency executives primarily engaging in their coordinative role, where they are not engaged with the public. However, these two roles sometimes overlap, when the same ideological arguments are presented via both coordinative and communicative discourse. In what follows we outline these discursive modes in greater detail.

### *1. Abnegation*

Abnegation is characterized by the denial or repudiation of relationships of influence of various kinds. Statements in this mode included three ways of *renouncing*: (1) any influence of ownership on the agency's independence; (2) any influence of ownership on journalists' autonomy, and (3) any governmental influence on the agency's independence. In the first case, the influence of ownership was categorically denied. In the second case, news agency executives denied that their ownership model had any influence on how journalists who work for their organization collect and edit news. In the third case, the organization was presented as completely free from any influence from government or state.

We are completely independent, this is something that our own journalists are quite keen on and they are very strict with that. They write whatever they want. So that means that if they write, they don't give opinions, because they are very strict. So, they write the facts. And if the fact is not sometimes a very happy fact for the government, well, that's life. That's life.

In its most strident form, abnegation tends to assert ideological claims regarding the role of profit in producing institutional independence. Which is to say, that profit ensures economic independence, which in turn ensures journalistic autonomy:

The news agency is profitable, we don't need to ask the government for any money. We can make enough for us to run the news agency, which makes us independent because we are independent economically, so consequently we are then independent in many other areas... So, I think in our context this is good because economic independence in our context it means that the pressure cannot be that big because ultimately I don't really need their money.

Abnegation is integral to the ethos of being seen as externally independent and internally autonomous so that journalists are able to produce trustworthy and fact-based news. It is where the advocacy role is the easiest to recognize. This is where journalism as ideology is most visible as a dominant discourse through which 'the ideology is

perpetuated as a collection of values, strategies and formal codes characterizing professional journalism and shared most widely by its members' (Deuze, 2005: 446). It is so well-rehearsed and performative that it is difficult to penetrate.

Abnegation discourse supports the contention that private ownership is the form of ownership which will best protect an agency against government influence. It is the closest mode of discourse to the popular discourse often found in biographical accounts of news agency operations (for example, see Cooper, 1956). Voltmer and Wasserman (2014: 180) write about exogenous interpretations of press freedom, where journalists and policymakers turn to the established democracies of the West for role models. Abnegation as a mode of executive discourse shows how influential the US discourse on the power of private ownership against government interference continues to be, and how it has been transformed into dominant norms. This discursive mode serves a strategic function in the legitimization of the executives' organizations as being better than all other similar organizations (Chilton and Schäffner, 1997: 213).

## *2. Accommodation*

Accommodation concedes that some form of relationship with government or owners is essential or unavoidable because of existing legislative frameworks or ownership structures. In this mode, such relationships are presented in neither positive nor negative terms. Rather, accommodation entails adjusting to the limitations of either (1) the influence the government/state has politically and/or financially over the agency; or (2) the ownership form of the agency. In this mode, a relationship is acknowledged between the news agency and the state, through legislation, funding or as one of its clients, but also acknowledged between ownership and governance. It is about the space where autonomy is gained, maintained or lost. In our typology, accommodation consists of two key dimensions: (1) coming to terms with the relationship with the state or owners as an external force; and/or (2) admitting to the existence of internal institutional forces that potentially reduce journalistic autonomy within an agency.

In contrast to abnegation, accommodation is less ideological in tone. As one executive put it, 'You can be close or you can be far as long as you're free to do your job'. In this way, there is affirmation that a relationship exists, whether one wants it or not, and that one has to develop different strategies to manage it and mitigate its effects. It was described as either positive or neutral, not as a negative relationship:

First of all, I would say we have two types of relationships. We have a legal relationship, which is stated by the laws by which we function. And we have a business relationship in which ministries, agencies, whatever, buy stuff from us. They buy news-writers, they buy press monitoring. We don't sell them press releases or press release services, because by law we are compelled to publish their press releases. I think it's a neutral relationship.

In this mode, the relationship with state/government is acknowledged in its different roles and then assessed. It becomes a matter of fact rather than an ideological statement:

Regarding the relationship, I think we do have a very close and, to be honest, a happy relationship with the government.

Accommodation also includes a critical evaluation of the agency's own ownership form and the distribution of power within the company. In contrast to abnegation, which primarily functions as a publicly-oriented communicative discourse (Schmidt, 2015: 115), accommodation is a discursive mode that is more coordinative in nature:

It's because the biggest owners, they can do everything themselves if they like. So, some of our services they don't want them because they can do it themselves and they can do it in competition with the smaller owners. Sometimes they want us not to do a service because it will make it more difficult for the small owners, and then the biggest owners will compete with them for more power. That's one of the struggles that you can see the face of in the Board.



In this regard, accommodation does not fit well with the celebratory tone with regard to private ownership that we see in abnegation, because accommodation actually acknowledges power differentials both within organizations and in relation to government. This is the level where dependency on the biggest owners of the company, whether state or media, who operate with their own interests rather than the interests of a national news agency in mind, is critically discussed.

As a discursive mode, accommodation contradicts political economy theorists who see the media as dependent on national news agencies, because in this mode news agencies are framed as being in some form of essential or constitutive relationship with their owners and clients, and not the other way around. Nevertheless, strategies to mitigate the effects of this essential relationship are common.

### *3. Affirmation*

Affirmation confirms the existence of external relationships, even presenting these in positive terms, and of negotiations over independence and autonomy (Lewis, 2015: 219). Affirmation discourse shapes boundaries that define the limits of autonomy but also gives agency to actors. Like accommodation, affirmation is a coordinative discourse that mainly happens behind closed doors and is seldom publicly displayed.

Some agency executives, whatever the ownership form of their agency, emphasized that appropriate journalistic practice indicates a working relationship with the state/government. This is supported by broad-ranging academic literature that stresses the journalistic reliance on authoritative sources in order to legitimate news content (see for example Berkowitz, 2009), as well as analyses which problematise the tightening relations between PR practitioners, journalists, and news agencies (Johnston and Forde, 2009). In this situation, both parties – state/government and agency – are not only forced to adapt but also to reach a level of cooperation where power can be negotiated. One director described the relationship in these terms:

It's quite professional in the sense that, well, they expect soft power, they expect us to be credible and to produce quality journalism. They also expect us to adapt to the changing media world. We signed a [xx]-year agreement in which we basically say what kind of strategy we are going to implement, what revenues we're expecting, what expenditure we are going to make. The level of help is mentioned for each year. We are trying to follow this agreement.

Other news agency executives acknowledge that the relationship with government is a two-way street and that maintaining this relationship requires vision, long-term planning, networking and special skills:

Aside from that we do have a very close relationship. If we have a problem we can go to the Secretary of State for Finance and he will try to help us solve it, or I can personally call the cabinet or my Prime Minister just to help me solve something... But I think the relationship is not only about money, it's usually about the outcome of a lot of things that happen in the agency rather than only the financing. I would say that we do have a healthy relationship based on cooperation.

In this mode, we note, rather than being portrayed as detrimental to journalistic efficacy, relations with government in particular can be seen as a potential source of power and status. However, whilst relations with government may be affirmed, they are frequently reframed through an array of discursive strategies that either downplay their impact on institutional operations or recontextualize these in terms that foreground commercial client relations and market dynamics. Attention is here drawn to institutional arrangements whereby product pricing structures enable hidden government support. Such strategies allow an agency to continue to claim independence, thereby avoiding fears about government-subsidized media (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001). This is in spite of the fact that recent research demonstrates 'publicly owned media and government-subsidized private media are no less critical of government than non-subsidized privately-owned media' (Pickard, 2011: 88).

Finally, affirmation also reveals the ways in which the state is viewed as a complex assemblage of constituent elements. It is not viewed as a monolithic entity, but rather is seen to consist of different, sometimes competing, parts. Although some aspects of external relationships can thus be framed as beneficial, others can be seen as detrimental. Whilst we see in this mode the confirmation of relationships, we also note that executives are nevertheless keen to demonstrate the strategies that are put in place for the management of, and to mitigate the effects of, any relationships of influence that might challenge the appearance of independence.

## **Discussion/Conclusion**

In a rapidly changing media environment within which the dominant position of national news agencies is called into question, it is vital for national news agencies, no matter their ownership form, to argue that they are independent. News agencies sell (or sometimes distributed without a fee) their news to all kinds of clients: media and non-media, big and small, urban and provincial, party and non-party. They need to convince their clients that their news is worth the subscription paid. News agency directors, performing their role as the human faces of their organizations, need to make public statements in which they assure us that they have enough external independence to be able to provide news that they can sell to their clients. In so doing, they structure knowledge about ideal journalistic roles and practices by narrating what qualifies as independence in the operations of the news agencies they manage. Independence discourse is what we term this institutional construction of independence among national news agency executives. We identified a typology of three dominant and frequently co-occurring discursive modes through which claims to independence are achieved: abnegation, accommodation, and affirmation.

Abnegation is the most publicly oriented and well-rehearsed mode of independence discourse. It is very similar in tone to what news agency executives have repeated for many decades. As Fengler and Ruß-Mohl (2008: 673) observe, journalists may have a considerable self-interest in keeping alive a heroic notion of the journalist's role, and this

can also be applied to news agency executives. Abnegation is strikingly similar to academic discourses that also use symbolic resources to create, maintain or dissolve institutions (Carlson, 2015: 3). Like academic discourses around the issue of ideal ownership, abnegation has deeply ideological dimensions, setting out the boundaries in an ideal journalistic practice between 'us' (independent) and 'them' (dependent). Previous research has already shown that in interviews journalists draw on a more or less limited array of archetypes when discussing their own role or performance (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017: 127-128). This can also be seen in executive interviews.

Abnegation places not just particular emphasis but *all* its emphasis on the ownership form as the means of guaranteeing ultimate independence, as academic discourses have done for several decades. It draws on a collective memory that connects journalistic freedom with ownership and defend through reference to the past (Carlson, 2016: 352). Nevertheless, a number of interview responses also served to problematize the contention, central to abnegation, that market forces can ensure both economic independence and journalistic autonomy.

As the most recent research (Rantanen et al., 2019) shows, the great variety of organizational structures characterizing European national news agencies, as well the broad diversity of the markets in which they operate, imply an array of internal as well as external conflicts that must be taken into account when analysing the ways in which news agency executives characterize their independence – conflicts not merely between news agencies and their owners or the government, but also between different bases of executive, editorial and journalistic authority within any given news agency. In that regard, it is imperative that we bear in mind not only the diverse contexts within which independence discourse operates but also its key limitations when faced with the *varying frameworks* of governance, regulation, and commercial pressure that are typical of European news environments. Accommodation thus demonstrates a more equivocal attitude to independence, acknowledging that ownership alone cannot guarantee ultimate independence. It also problematizes academic discourses of internal and external autonomy, where the two are seen as entirely separate concepts. In this mode,

internal and external autonomy are intertwined, and many of the conflicts over autonomy emerge inside organizations, through their own shareholders and structures of governance, rather than in relation to external forces.

Affirmation, like accommodation, foregrounds the power of individual executives as actors narrating the independence of their organizations. This, following the work of Schmidt (2010), provides us with insights into the internal dynamics of organizations and into the dynamics of their institutional change. Particular to this mode is the reframing of all external relationships – including with government – as commercial client relationships, which are presented as a viable means of creating the appearance of independence. Nevertheless, the contention that purely commercial relations with government or owners constitute a viable means of ensuring journalistic autonomy is problematized by questions about the role played by news agencies in producing and disseminating public relations content (Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008). This was a key concern raised in our interviews.

Taking into account the various interests of shareholders, executives and editors, it is difficult to find empirical support for a concept of independence defined solely through private ownership. Similarly, the role of the state in relation to news agencies – as a news source, owner, shareholder, customer, financier, client and regulator – must also be problematized. Our study of how national news agency executives in Europe perform a narrated role in the discursive construction of their organizations' internal and external independence leads us to the conclusion that a new concept of independence is now needed: one which has relevance to both academic research and journalistic practice. Such an updated concept must take into account the variety of symbolic and material forces shaping contemporary journalistic roles and practices, including within national news agencies. This is a task for further research.

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