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Introduction to special section on news agencies in Europe

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There was a time when it was a matter of national pride for countries to have a sovereign news agency. The need for its existence, at least until the late 20th century, was seldom questioned and it was seen as part of the national armory in the same way as banks, armies, post offices and other national institutions symbolizing independence and self-sufficiency. Europe has many of the oldest national news agencies in the world: these were founded in the 19th century and many are still operating. Some of their names still invoke their home countries or capital cities, and either the technology they have used (the telegraph) or their clients (the press). As wholesalers of news to most of the media in their home countries, they have played a key role in any media system by setting a national news agenda (Rantanen, 2019).

Today, however, the viability and the very concept of a national news agency is under severe threat. As a result of new technology, people have access to news and information not only through the media but also directly. Moreover, the value to the major clients of a wholesale general news service has declined dramatically because the information this traditionally contained is now already distributed – and generally available in seconds – to both media and general public. Thus, the media are no longer dependent on agencies to provide them with up-to-date news or information, the old core component of value of the service (Rantanen et al., 2019). As a result, national news agencies in Europe are not among the most profitable media companies (see, for example, Ofcom, 2017), but there is of course huge variety when it comes to their size, profitability and turnover. While the smallest agencies are making no profit (see, for example, Lauk and Einmann, 2019) or even making a loss, the turnover of one of the most successful national agencies, Agence France-Presse (AFP), which also operates internationally and which receives public funding worth 111m€ , is 296m€ (Surm, 2019)

European news agencies have not recently received much academic attention. We still rely heavily on the work of such pioneers in this field as Palmer and Boyd-Barrett (Palmer, 1976a and b; Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Boyd-Barrett and Palmer, 1981), who began their research into news agencies in the 1970s and focused much of their work on the most powerful international agencies of the time, the 'Big Four': AFP in France, Reuters in the UK, Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) in the USA. Boyd-Barrett and Palmer are both still active scholars and we have admired and drawn upon their work for several decades now. The members of a new generation of news-agency researchers who are introduced in this special section, together with more conventional academics with longer publication records, share many of the interests of the pioneers mentioned, including historical research, political economy, and the study of relationships between international and national news agencies. So this special section in many ways pays homage to these predecessors, showing the continuing importance of the work they started. Equally, new and challenging times call for new researchers with fresh approaches and interests.

in this special section, we seek to go beyond Anglo-(Franco)-US research interests, and include research from outside what is conventionally defined as Europe. Four of the articles are based on survey data and interviews conducted in 2018 in conjunction with the European Alliance of News Agencies (EANA), which has 32 national news agencies as its members. It has one agency as an institutional member in each European country (for example, from the UK, Reuters is not a member, but the Press Association (PA) is), except in the cases of the Baltic countries, and also in Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine (Rantanen et al., 2019). This 'enlarged' view of Europe has also relied on our authors extensive knowledge of languages, enabling research that is inevitably comparative. The new generation of researchers also come from diverse backgrounds as journalists and news-business managers in several countries and often having deep knowledge of how news agencies operate in practice. Many news-agency directors and journalists have been active in writing about their own organizations and sometimes conducting historical research (Rantanen and Kelly, 2019).

Our writers draw on the work not only of other news-agency researchers, but of those who, while not news-agency experts themselves, share an interest in how the concept of news and the organizations that produce it have changed both in the last few years and indeed since the 19th century, when new and at that time exciting telegram bureaus were founded. We therefore begin this special section with a historical section, to remind our readers that historical research is still important and helps us to understand why, for example, 75 percent of the world's news agencies are state-owned or state-controlled (Vyslozil with Wippersberg, 2014).

History and Concepts

Much of the recent academic research on news agencies has been historical (see, for example, Akami, 2012, 2014; Silberstein-Loeb, 2014; Vyslozil with Wittenberg, 2014; Tworek, 2019) and, unlike in many other fields of study, historical research has always been one of the definers of news-agency studies, which. Such studies have been carried out not only by academics but often by news agencies themselves, which have celebrated their anniversaries by publishing a company history, written either by a news-agency director themselves or by hired academics (Rantanen, 2019). Recently, there has been a turn to expanding historical research on one company through comparative research using concepts developed in other fields of study.

Heidi Tworek's article is a good example of this new kind of historical research, using the work of contemporary theorists such as Habermas and Bourdieu. She analyses the development as a member of the historical international news cartel of the Wolff news agency in Germany, which has often been neglected by academics concentrating on the more powerful cartel members, Havas in France and Reuter (a notable exception being the work of another pioneer, Wilke; see, for example, Wilke and Rosenberger, 1991; Wilke, 2011). She shows how politicians played a vital role in using technology, sustaining, to their own advantage, Wolff's monopoly through its privileged access to the telegraph. But Tworek's piece is not only important historically. She quotes Doctorow (2019), who has argued that current debates about regulating speech on the

Internet may resurrect the power of news agencies because only they will have the resources and protections of press freedom to conduct worldwide reporting. Tworek argues that today, as in the past, news agencies may tend to be 'invisible', but they shape the news and are shaped by a range of political, economic, cultural and technological forces.

News agencies today and their new business strategies

The authors of our second section continue the tradition of a political-economy approach to news-agency studies, but with an academic twist, moving towards business, management and innovation studies. They draw on interviews with CEOs and top managers of news agencies, which, combined with documentary research, provide a rare opportunity to investigate the agencies from inside through the testimony of their own representatives.

We start with the Russian agency TASS, again notably under-researched except in articles using content analysis (Watanabe, 2017). The last book on TASS to be published in English came out in 1962 (Kruglak, 1962). Since TASS has not received much scholarly attention outside Russia, most Western academics probably share the view that nothing has changed, that it is still 'the same old TASS'. Apart from the changes in name, very little is known about the extent, if any, to which TASS has been able to renew itself. Elena Vartanova and Andrei Vyrkovsky, in their article on the fall and rise of TASS, show that even a state agency has to renew itself in order to compete with other state-owned and privately-owned agencies. Their article makes an important contribution to discussion of the role of the state, how the state has many faces and there is competition within the state for available resources. Vartanova and Vyrkosky also show how TASS, which survived a period of financial crisis and decline in its operations, has managed to regain its position domestically and is now seeking to do the same as an international news agency.

Jasmin Surm, in her article, shows how AFP, the EFE agency in Spain, and Deutsche Presse Agentur (dpa) in Germany all fulfil the criteria for an international agency. However, to continue

doing so, they all need not only a large domestic market but also linguistic and cultural markets outside their home countries. While international and national news agencies have in the past often been studied separately, this article emphasizes that our understanding of international agencies has to be contextualized in a national setting, especially when considering ownership. All three of these agencies currently fall into different ownership categories, AFP being publicly owned, EFE state-owned and dpa in private (media) ownership. Surm also shows in her article that for these agencies AP and Reuters have traditionally been defined as international competitors, while Anadolu, TASS, and Xinhua in China have now also become significant competitors. She emphasizes the need for further diversification of markets and products to safeguard the agencies' economic futures and sustain their general news service.

Atte Jääskeläinen and Servet Yanatma, in their article, focus on media-owned agencies, the Press Association (PA) Group, Austria Presse Agentur (APA) in Austria, and Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå (TT) in Sweden, in order to investigate why the management of these agencies decided to transform them from traditional newswires into diversified media businesses. They argue that the ability to negotiate a new mandate with their own owner-clients was crucial, especially because news agencies' owners – be these state bodies or private media companies – had an interest in limiting the agencies' freedom to compete with them in the market. Investing in diversification was an alternative means of delivering surpluses back to owner-clients by lowering prices, and this choice had to be supported by the owners. As Vartanova and Vyrkovsky argue in their article, Jääskeläinen and Yanatma also emphasize the key role played by management in the diversification process.

Towards new concepts: Ownership, nationality and governance of news agencies

If there is one major weakness in news-agency studies it is the lack of theories and concepts. The final section of this special section tries to do three things: first, to revisit some of the concepts that have been widely used in the past; secondly, to suggest new alternative approaches, and finally to invite academics who never thought they were interested in news

agencies to join the discussion from the perspectives of their own fields and through their own conceptual thinking.

Rantanen and Kelly in their article explore how news agency executives in Europe perform a narrated role in the discursive construction of their organizations' internal and external independence. They identify three discursive modes for the institutional construction of independence: (1) abnegation; (2) accommodation; and (3) affirmation. These discursive modes represent public and private approaches to discursively negotiating the power of both state/government and shareholders/owners. The article also problematizes academic discourses of internal and external autonomy, where the two are seen as entirely separate concepts. They argue for an expanded concept of independence, one which offers an account of the complex array of forces shaping news agency operations today.

Almost all our authors conclude by suggesting paths for more research. At a juncture where we do not know whether there is a future for news agencies, or, if so, what sort of future, we have two options. We can leave news agencies behind as objects of research no longer relevant and concentrate on non-institutional news providers. Or we can argue that new research on news agencies is needed in order to understand the present crisis. If we choose the second option and decide that new research is needed, what kinds of concepts, methodologies and empirical data do we need in order to study them? We have suggested a couple in this special section, but we also need to start searching for alternative approaches to their study. We hope you will join us.

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