

Journalistic Autonomy

Between Structure, Agency and Institution

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Abstract

This article investigates the concept of autonomy within the journalistic institution. A review of the literature reveals that journalist autonomy is restricted at the political, economic and organisational levels of news production, negotiated at the editorial level, and exercised at the level of practice. The article addresses the limits of professional autonomy, aiming for a wider contextualisation of the question to analyse the factors that restrict and enable journalistic autonomy. By investigating journalistic autonomy within the duality of structure, the analysis finds that autonomy is attained when journalists engage in the recursive reproduction of the institution. The level of autonomy enjoyed by journalists therefore remains a fluid concept that is continually adjusted to manage the daily task of reporting the news.

Keywords: autonomy, institution, journalism, professionalism, structuration

Introduction

In the sociology of journalism, news is seen as the product of an institution (e.g. Cook 1998). Journalists, on the other hand, tend to explain news as the product of professional judgement (Gitlin 1980: 249). In one version, news is the outcome of structure, in the other, the result of agency. This discrepancy invites interrogations into the nature of autonomy as a professional trait. This article analyses the boundaries, limits and expressions of journalistic autonomy within a contemporary media context, arguing that autonomy exists within a duality of structure that ultimately serves the legitimacy of the institution.

Foundations

The concept of autonomy is commonly associated with the political realm. Definitions tend to emphasise autonomy as the right to self-government, where the self-governing state is characterised by independence, sovereignty and jurisdictional reach (Merriam-Webster 2013). The concept is also defined in relation to the individual – here anchored in the individual's freedom from the state, freedom from the control of others, and immunity from the arbitrary exercise of authority. Autonomy is therefore sometimes referred to as 'the absence of conditions' (c.f. Glasser & Gunther 2005: 385). As a prerequisite, however, freedom from conditions creates some difficulty in rendering individuals autonomous within a socio-political setting. As members of society we are

subject to a social contract binding us to the organisation of the state and to our fellow citizens in a reciprocal exchange of rights and obligations. Hence, autonomy cannot be defined by a lack of conditions.

Individual autonomy does, nevertheless, signify some form of self-directing freedom and moral independence – a status that separates us from others. What connects us to society and to our fellow autonomous individuals is the moral dimension, commonly tied to Kant's ([1785] 2012) categorical imperative, where moral laws are held as true if they can be universalised. Kant suggests that autonomy is the product of rationality that enables man to impose moral laws on himself, and it is this ability to legislate ourselves that binds us to these laws. Hence, autonomous individuals are bound together in a social setting by morals, and drawn into a political unity by a social contract that connects individuals to the state and to the democratic order. Any discussion of individual autonomy should, therefore, account for the social arrangements under which we operate on a daily basis – conditions we commonly refer to as institutions.

As journalism is practiced within the boundaries of the institution, professional autonomy is negotiated within an institutional context. In the research literature, journalistic autonomy is conceptualised both as a positive and negative right – it is based on the freedom to speak and publish, and freedom from interference in that activity (c.f. Carpentier 2005). At the level of practice, autonomy refers to the “latitude that a practitioner has in carrying out his or her occupational duties” (Reich & Hanitzsch 2013: 135). In an institutional context, autonomy entails independence from other socio-political institutions, primarily the state and the market (Örnebring 2013: 39). This article addresses the limits of this autonomy, aiming for a wider contextualisation of the question to analyse the factors that restrict and enable journalistic autonomy.

Factors Restricting Journalistic Autonomy

The question of journalist autonomy is closely linked with issues concerning how news becomes news. Warren Breed (1955) argues, in his study of social control in the newsroom, that news selection is not only determined by journalistic standards, it is also shaped by social factors, such as editorial hierarchy, conflict avoidance and normative behaviour. Institutional practices, socialisation processes and professionalization efforts are all factors that contribute to limiting the autonomy of the reporter and shaping the news. In the research literature we find a number of ways to classify these restrictions. Based on a survey of the autonomy perceptions of journalists in 18 countries, Zvi Reich and Thomas Hanitzsch (2013: 135) find autonomy to be restricted on two levels – one external and one internal. The external dimension is related to coercive forces restricting the political autonomy of the news organisation, including policy, state censorship, legislation and regulation. Internal restrictions relate to journalists' freedom to make decisions free from management pressures, commercial factors and forces inside the news environment (ibid.). As individual and organisational autonomy are interrelated concepts, separating the two levels is no easy task.

Because professional autonomy is largely conditioned by organisational factors, political-economic analyses of journalistic autonomy tend to emphasise the conditional nature of this relationship. The American scholar J. Herbert Altschull (1997) outlines four conditions whose combinations determine news content in his book *Agents of*

Power: official structures; commercial interests; informal influences; and interest group pressures. Among the factors that contribute to restrict journalistic autonomy he lists a range of interested actors spanning from individuals to institutions, such as government regulations and licences; the interests of publishers, public relations and advertisers; the informal influence of friends, relatives and lobby groups; and political parties, trade unions, and religious groups pursuing specific ends. Altschull (1997: 260) does not distinguish between individual and organisational restrictions, but claims that, “[n]o newspaper, magazine, or broadcasting outlet exceeds the boundaries of autonomy acceptable to those who meet the costs that enable them to survive”. Indeed, Altschull argues that, “...the content of the press is directly correlated with the interest of those who finance the press” (ibid.: 261). Analyses of the effects of economic interests on news media content therefore tend to find little support for the presence of journalistic autonomy in newsrooms (see also McChesney 2003; McManus 1997).

Studies focusing on the limits to journalistic autonomy frequently refer to this dual relationship between the organisation and the individual, demonstrating further the difficulties in creating clear demarcations between the two levels. Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) find that levels of journalistic autonomy are possible to predict based on journalists’ perceptions of the types of influences affecting their work, and the objective limits on autonomy beyond this perception. The authors list six domains that are perceived to influence journalists’ levels of autonomy: in addition to the political dimension, economic aspects limit autonomy through market pressures, profit expectations, advertising influence, and audience research. Organisational aspects limit professional autonomy through ownership influences, management structures, and editorial decisions. On a practical level, procedural factors limit autonomy in the form of news routines, deadlines, and the allocation of editorial resources. Professional norms and conventions, newsroom policies, and media laws also restrict autonomous practice. In addition, reference groups such as competitors and colleagues, audiences, friends and family all contribute to affecting journalists’ perceived levels of autonomy.

However, external and internal pressures restricting individual or organisational autonomy are not always clearly distinguished in the literature. Often, structural factors are thought to affect individual autonomy just as much as organisational demands. John Soloski (1989: 207) claims that professionalism, as a journalistic goal, “is an efficient and economical method by which news organizations control the behaviour of reporters and editors”. The unpredictable nature of news work requires a great deal of autonomy in reporters in selecting and processing news. However, the rules, norms and policies of professionalism condition news judgement. Journalists have more freedom than organisations can permit. Therefore, says Soloski, organisations have news policies that serve to limit journalists’ discretionary behaviour. The boundaries created by trans-organisational and intra-organisational control mechanisms ensure that journalists have some creativity in reporting, editing and presenting news stories, but are narrow enough “so that journalists can be trusted to act in the interest of the news organization” (ibid.: 226).

Factors that condition organisational autonomy also influence journalistic autonomy. Stephen D. Reese (2001) looks at the larger structure of the news operation to establish a hierarchy of influences that shape journalists, their organisations, routines, ideologies and news content. His model classifies influences from micro to macro structure,

and ranges from the level of the individual to work routines, organisational factors, the media environment at large and ideology. The forces shaping news content operate simultaneously and at different strengths. The individual level includes journalists' attitudes, training and background. Routines include rules, norms and procedures, technology, time and space. The organisational level refers to editorial policy, economy and power relations. At the extra-media level, influences that shape journalists include the government, advertisers, public relations, sources, interest groups and other media. At the ideological level, larger social interests, power assumptions and culture are factors that affect news work (ibid.: 179-183). Hence, the factors that shape the news include the entire institutional apparatus from macro-level social and political structures to the micro-level personal backgrounds of the journalists themselves. News is the product of work done in an institutional context, and it is at this level that we find efforts to establish where and how journalistic autonomy is actually exercised.

Factors Enabling Journalistic Autonomy

Whereas restrictions on journalistic autonomy are often portrayed as an intermeshing combination of structural and organisational restraints, signs of autonomy are regularly recognised at the level of practice. As a general rule, higher positions in the professional hierarchy render more autonomy than lower positions. Age and experience can play a factor in this hierarchy, as do assignments to news beats, foreign postings and editorial positions (Cook 1998: 75; Mellado & Humanes 2012; Ryfe 2009a; Willnat & Weaver 2003: 418). Soloski (1989: 217) suggests that there are two occupational ladders in news organisations – one managerial and one professional. The managerial ladder rewards success in the business part of the enterprise with greater authority, while the professional ladder rewards journalistic success with greater autonomy.

The type of media outlet, genre and media system can also affect levels of autonomy. Studies have found that journalists practicing detached watchdog journalism have more control over their work and thus experience a higher degree of autonomy; these are most often journalists working in media free from commercial and corporate pressures. This includes public service broadcasting, publically owned media (Hanitzsch 2011), smaller or weekly publications, and radio (Nygren 2012). Journalists working in Western countries or 'full democracies' perceived more autonomy than colleagues in flawed, authoritarian or hybrid regimes (Reich & Hanitzsch 2013: 149). Overall, Reich and Hanitzsch find that, "High professional autonomy among journalists correspond with higher levels of press freedom and lower levels of state intervention in the media" (2013: 150). There are, however, strategies for autonomy within all state systems where media operate. In more autocratic settings, Noha Mellor (2009) finds that Arab journalists encourage strong role denominations, such as expert, witness and social reformer to attain higher levels of autonomy.

At the level of daily news work, autonomy is understood as the extent to which journalists are free to decide story angles, what sources to use, and what narrative frames to employ (Ryfe 2009a: 202-203). Practically speaking, then, the strongest influence over media content is exercised by editors (Nygren 2012), primarily in the form of news policies. Recently, advances in technology have been seen to enable autonomy (Dickinson & Bigi 2009; Lund 2012). It has been suggested that technology could particularly

facilitate more freedom in war reporting – a practice historically burdened with heavy propaganda efforts – allowing reporters to break free from the official narrative (Bennett & Livingston 2003). However, when it comes to “the extent to which journalists can take part [in] and influence decisions that affect their work beyond operational procedures” (Reich & Hanitzsch 2013: 136), Soloski (1989: 217) remarks that hierarchical autonomy in fact keeps reporters out of decision-making positions in management. Hence, there is a limit in the degree to which autonomy in the daily practice of journalism can be attained, and this is primarily attributed to the individual reporter’s news discretion, access to sources and position in the professional hierarchy.

Structural Contexts of Journalistic Autonomy

There is widespread agreement in the literature that journalistic autonomy is restricted by commercialisation and corporate control, causing increasing deterioration of the news profession. Timothy E. Cook (1998: 173) suggests that the history of the American news institution is characterised by decreasing levels of autonomy and increasing profit-orientation. Lower autonomy levels are explained as a structural problem – they are primarily a result of cutbacks in resources affected by increased demands to generate reporting that is favourable to owners’ commercial interests (McChesney 2003: 309-310). As resources are reduced, less space is devoted to hard news (Bennett & Livingston 2003). This in turn increases public officials’ and strategic communications workers’ control over political messages. There is, therefore, concern among some researchers that the commercial landscape in which the news media operate is creating a crisis in journalism, where deteriorating levels of journalistic autonomy are potentially damaging to democracy (see also McChesney 2003).

There are some differences in the perception of the effects of macro-level forces on journalistic autonomy between researchers and professionals. While a survey of Swedish journalists found that perceived influence over news content had diminished in favour of advertisers, audiences and politicians (Nygren 2012), other surveys have found that political and economic factors have had a low impact on perceptions of autonomy (Hanitzsch & Mellado 2011: 416-417; Mellado & Humanes 2012; Reich & Hanitzsch 2013: 150). In a survey of journalists in 18 countries, procedural and professional aspects were found to be the most important influences on news work, followed by organisational factors and reference groups, with economic and political influence scoring low (Hanitzsch & Mellado 2011: 419; Reich & Hanitzsch 2013: 151). Yet, even though perceived political and economic influence is seen as low in most of the countries in this survey, Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011: 416-417) conclude that political and economic contexts are the primary forces shaping variations in journalism cultures and media systems. The authors explain this discrepancy by interpreting low degrees of influence perception as evidence of internalised socialisation processes. Hence, political and economic factors no longer appear as external forces to journalists but rather as natural aspects of news work. This is also the conclusion drawn by McChesney (2003: 311) who claims that, “The corporate/commercial pressure on news often takes place indirectly, and is therefore less likely to be recognized as such by journalists or the public”.

The indirect effect of macro-level influences on autonomy in daily news production thus seems well established. McChesney (2003: 302-306) and Soloski (1989: 225) agree

that the professional norms and practices of journalism result in news that maintain and legitimise the existing political order. Similarly, a study of the Danish coverage of the Iraq invasion in 2003 found that despite efforts to remain independent, Danish media were “unable to stay autonomous of either the national or international political agendas or of the central coalition players, becoming instead voices for them and their version of the reality of war” (Kristensen & Ørsten 2007:340). Cook (1998: 72-75) therefore asks whether the feeling of autonomy may simply be a process of internalising the demands from superiors, sources, and audiences – channelled into what journalists can actually control (see also Soloski 1989: 218).

Following from this, autonomy can be seen as an integral part of the normative model of Western journalism. John Nerone (2013) suggests that this model grew out of the relatively monopolistic U.S. newspaper markets at the end of the 19th century, and then spread to the rest of the world. Monopolistic markets created an environment where the news media could determine what facts and ideas would be presented to audiences. The high barriers to entry established by advertising-based media limited the number of alternative models for news production. Professionalism then emerged from publishers’ understanding that they needed to appear neutral and unbiased to maintain their economic foundations (McChesney 2003). It “made sense for media owners to grant some autonomy to journalists because it gave their product more credibility and worked to enhance their commercial prospect” (ibid.: 307). The normative model, argues Nerone (2013: 446), “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”. The model in turn “assumes that journalists’ capacity for independence is provided by the media organizations that employ them” (ibid.). As such, organisational and personal autonomy are made inseparable and seen as mutually beneficial within daily news work.

Internalised or not, journalistic autonomy should be interpreted within an institutional framework, where the boundary work of the professionalization project is an on-going process. Internalisation could be seen as the result of unconscious socialisation processes, but it could also be explained as a reflexive demand put on journalism by the institutional structure. If corporate media rely on a public impression of their journalists as autonomous professionals, reporters working for corporate media organisations also need that autonomy to perform their work. Autonomy therefore works reciprocally as an exchange between the practical and organisational levels of news work. Whether autonomy exists in fuller or lesser forms, professional culture should also be seen as more or less autonomous from the business organisation. As the research of David Ryfe (2009a: 208) demonstrates, in practical terms autonomy is something that is locally negotiated through the interaction between executives, editors and reporters. In the context of the changing realities in which journalism finds itself today, autonomy is not a stable entity, but something that is continually negotiated within the daily practice of news reporting.

Current Challenges to Journalistic Autonomy

In recent years, news institutions have undergone great changes as a result of technological innovation and increased economic pressures. Studies of how these changes have affected journalism often report resistance in the newsroom to the introduction of new

technology (c.f. Boczkowski 2004), new work routines (Ryfe 2009a), and increased engagement with audiences and amateur news work (Harrison 2009; Hermida & Thurman 2008). In an ethnographic study of altered beat practices in a U.S. newspaper, Ryfe (2009a: 212) found that journalists struggled to implement new newsgathering routines, and even resisted or ignored new editorial policy. Because many of the changes that the editor tried to implement were driven by market research rather than journalistically motivated, reporters saw this as an encroachment of their autonomy. Ryfe shows that resistance to change was not only an issue of identity or morality, but that the degree of perceived autonomy was closely tied to the practicality of news work. Changes failed because the familiar routine of the news beat was embedded in reporters' sense of autonomy. These managerially imposed alterations to news beat practices were unsuccessful because journalistic practice is closely linked with or even equal to professional identity.

There are many questions regarding journalistic identity within the contemporary setting. Professional autonomy has recently come under pressure from bloggers and amateurs (see Compton & Benedetti 2010: 489). Jane Singer (2007: 82) observes that the online environment entails a reconfiguring of "notions of professional autonomy over defining and enacting normative behaviour". Henrik Örnebring (2013) finds, in an interview study with journalists across Europe, that professionals distinguish themselves from citizen journalists in areas of expertise, duty and autonomy. He argues that there is a shift in legitimacy claims away from individual autonomy towards the collective nature of journalism. By emphasising the link between professionalism and the institution, non-institutionally affiliated news workers can more easily be excluded:

This emphasis on the collective nature of newswork is in remarkable contrast to the long-established image of the lone, persistent and often idiosyncratic individual journalist as a professional ideal and model (Örnebring 2013: 48).

Hence the problem with citizen journalists is not that they have too little autonomy, but that they have too much – "they are not subjected to the same editorial quality control that professional journalists are" (Ibid. 49).

Such boundary disputes are part of maintaining the professional status. This is particularly seen in efforts to uphold the distinction between journalism proper and citizen journalism, often centred on practices, ideals, standards and ideas regarding professionalism (Blaagaard 2013). As demonstrated by the research reviewed here, questions of journalistic autonomy are often challenged and resolved at the level of practice. Nevertheless, many scholars are concerned with the negotiations over autonomy that are taking place within extra-institutional settings. To understand how autonomy functions as a dual entity in this manner, we can turn to the theoretical direction of new institutionalism and the theory of structuration.

Autonomy – Between Agency and Structure

If we take as a starting point that action is possible within the duality of structure (Giddens 1984), we should consider how journalistic autonomy is formed as a result of this exchange. Giddens (1984) explains that our ability to act as agents within a larger social structure is dependent on the rules and resources we can access within that structure. As agents we are to some extent restricted by the structures that surround us, but what we

do can also affect their compositions. Giddens' vantage point for the theory of structuration is to balance the constraining influence of structure over human action embedded in the established sociological framework. By abandoning "the equation of structure with constraint" (ibid.: 220), Giddens instead bases his theory "on the proposition that structure is always both enabling and constraining, in virtue of the inherent relation between structure and agency" (ibid.: 169). Our levels of autonomy are shaped by the rules of the structure, but we also contribute to maintaining or changing those rules through our applications of the resources available to us. How we use the available resources can lead to changes, depending on the amount of confirmation or challenge in our behaviour.

The issue in social theory of the relative power in the relationship between agents and their structural surroundings is ultimately one of autonomy. Giddens attributes a fair amount of power to the agent in sustaining or changing our social and political circumstances. The theory of structuration is a useful foundation for a discussion of autonomy not only due to the explanatory power of the duality of structure, but also because social practices are thought to be recursive (ibid.:3). This concept explains how journalists, by doing what they do, continue to reproduce the institution that conditions their activities. In this recursive position, however, Giddens' arguments have been amply criticised for attributing too little power to the restraining force of structural properties, rendering individuals with an exaggerated amount of autonomy (e.g. Thompson 1989: 72-73). This tendency towards structural restraints is evident also in journalism research.

Throughout much of the research history of journalism, structure has generally held primacy over agency, most notably in organisational studies of journalistic production (e.g. Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1972). Equally prevalent is the attention on the constraining force of professional ideology and its support function for hegemonic structures – an often-applied approach among critical Marxists and within the political economy of news (e.g. Gitlin 1980; Golding & Elliott 1979). The academic study of journalism has always been based on the assumption that journalists help maintain the news system through their practices. The fluctuating issue has been to what extent journalists follow professional norms and rules blindly, or if they indeed have any effect upon the rules that constitute practice. The research on journalistic autonomy reveals that negotiations over autonomy take place in the intersection between practice and the editorial function. The resources that journalists can use in gaining more autonomy depend on their position in the professional or organisational hierarchy. Achieving higher positions and higher autonomy is therefore dependent on journalists enforcing the rules of the profession. Hence, the rules and resources at journalists' disposal, as Giddens argues, can be seen to work recursively. In the end, it is the institution that is primarily rewarded by this recursive exchange, but the autonomy of the institution also serves to secure the autonomy of individual journalists.

In viewing journalism as an institution we assume that the news media are durable social entities with norm and rule-structured natures that are effective in controlling human behaviour (e.g. Scott 1995: 33). Hence, institutions "comprise the formal and informal constraints that shape the choice-set of actors" (Nee 1998: 8). Within the theoretical direction of new institutionalism, systems are seen as multiple and flexible in terms of composition and goal orientation. Institutions comprise collectives that operate in a reciprocal relationship with their socio-economic environment¹. A central issue here is whether or not collective behaviour can be reduced to an aggregate of

individual behaviours (Peters 2005: 16-21). The questions raised within this framework often relate to how journalists can be said to exercise agency within the framework of the journalistic institution, and the kind of resources news organisations have to control their environment. Research has also focused on how practices and routines contribute to reproduce the news structure and on how professional and organisational behaviours modify when forced to adapt to a changing news environment (e.g. Altmeppen 2010; Ryfe 2009b). Journalism as a profession has therefore always been portrayed as a more or less constructive tug-of-war between the restrictions that curb the vocational performance within the editorial, financial, managerial and regulatory structures, and the autonomy inherent in practicing journalism.

The On-going Maintenance of Journalistic Autonomy

As we have seen, journalistic autonomy is primarily addressed in the research literature in terms of the values and priorities imposed on reporters by the organisational setting (c.f. Elliott 1972; Schlesinger 1978). Ultimately, however, the autonomy of journalism is primarily tied to the separation of press and state. This implies that journalistic autonomy is connected with the emergence of formal organisations and the development of journalism as a profession (c.f. Johnstone et al 1976; Wilensky 1964). Eliot Friedson (1994) describes professional autonomy as the antithesis to ‘proletarianisation’ – conceptualised as the standardisation of production. Professionals need the appropriate levels of freedom required to facilitate discretionary action and to render employers sufficient authority over their own work. As an ideal type, professional autonomy implies collegiate control – a type of control that is sustained by occupational monopoly in an economic and political sense – essentially controlling who enters the field; and legislates and administers areas of expertise, practical affairs, work standards, and evaluations (Friedson 1994: 163-166). The journalistic profession, thus, develops as a result of occupational and institutional autonomy in relation to other social fields and institutions.

Autonomy not only means occupational control over who enters the field and the grounds for expertise, but also signals to the general public that the field is capable of self-regulation. The internal discipline implied by the tenets of professionalism warrants public trust. A profession guarantees that its practitioners abide by a universal code of ethics and a canon of knowledge acquired at trade schools whose violations will lead to sanctions – primarily by expulsion. Consequently, professionalism is the concept which renders autonomy (Abbot 1988). As journalism is only a semi-profession, in the sense that its organisations are weak, it has low entry barriers, and its possibilities for sanctions are few, the autonomy of the individual journalist represents a precarious thing – the potential power of which warrants some levels of control.

This control is organisational to the extent that editorial and procedural practices form news policies. But because autonomy involves some form of self-government, reporters also do have some room for originality. Herbert Gans argues in his study *Deciding What's News* from 1979 that autonomy does exist in news organisations, but is unevenly distributed. Levels of autonomy reflect ranking in the newsroom, as Soloski's (1989) occupational ladder demonstrates. Autonomy is the prize that all journalists seek (Schudson 2005: 218), and the highest level of autonomy rests with star reporters and senior writers. However, even senior autonomy is bound by the demands of efficiency. Gans (1979[2004]) finds in the newsrooms he investigates that there is little autonomy

in the story selection process – this was the prerogative of the editors – but that there is more so in the actual production of news. Gans concludes that the process of socialisation – and the desire to be published – creates conformity. Journalists adjust their news judgements to align with the tastes of editors, but because they have a high degree of operational control in who they interview and how they write the stories, journalists retain a perception of autonomy by incorporating organisational demands into news judgement.

Such internalisation processes notwithstanding, Michael Schudson reminds us that journalism is also dependent on something happening. News is inherently preoccupied with events. Thus, the autonomy of the journalistic institution is also conditioned by events in a world beyond institutional control. When something happens, journalists have to report it, and fast. Journalists handle this ‘anarchy of events’, as Schudson (2007) describes the journalistic reality, “by depending on the available cultural resources, the treasurehouse of tropes, narrative forms, resonant mythic forms and frames of their culture” (ibid.: 254), to write those stories *quickly*. The constant time pressure in journalism requires certain coping measures to deal with the anarchy of events. Editorial processes, access to sources, publication technology, genre demands and professional formats, ethical standards, peer pressure, and a tight time frame in fact suggest that routine is more important to journalism than originality. This is the type of standardisation of work practices that Friedson (1994) calls an antithesis to professionalism.

Hence, the uncontrollable environment of events that journalists have to relate to creates the need for a standardised methodology. Because autonomy can only be exercised within this tight operationalized framework, journalists’ self-perceived autonomy primarily concerns the level of editorial control. As with many of the self-imposed restrictions on journalism, measures that compel autonomy serve a legitimating function for the field as a whole – legitimacy that can return some of the autonomy lost in the daily routine back to the individual journalist. Journalistic autonomy is therefore a collective construct of the journalistic community – and something that inspires conformity (Schudson 2005: 218).

Conclusions

Journalistic autonomy may be restrained by the structuring properties of its modes of production, but socialisation through affirmation of vocational values comes with a reward. The recursive practices that protect the boundaries of the field contribute to reproduce the institution of journalism. Affirmative behaviour initiates the occupational ladder, ensuring that successful processes of socialisation mobilise professional rewards. Since the hierarchical system is based on an ideology designed to protect the field, a journalist who strives for increased autonomy is also beneficial to the institution, as the advancement towards autonomous status requires the reproduction of the system. As journalism continues to face the challenges of the digital age, the rules and resources of the news media structure remain open and negotiable. It is within the permeability of this profession that the agency inherent in journalistic autonomy can assume its influence in the duality of structure. The level of autonomy enjoyed by journalists is therefore a fluid and moving concept – continuously adjusted according to what is needed to perform the task of reporting the news.

Note

1. As opposed to 'old institutionalism', where research was primarily preoccupied with formal-legal analyses of the impact of institutions on society and the significance of structure in determining behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:738; March & Olsen 1984: 138).

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