Journalism History | Book Reviews
journalism-history.org/books

2023-4 | April 2023

Örnebring, Henry and Karlsson, Michael. *Journalistic Autonomy: The Genealogy of a Concept*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2022, 370 pp., $40.00 (hardcover).
ISBN: 9780826222541. Reviewed by John-Erik Koslosky, Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania-Bloomsburg**,** Bloomsburg, PA USA, jkoslosk@commonwealthu.edu.

A wave of scrutiny has washed over journalism's longstanding objectivity principle in recent years. Calls abound for abandoning or radically rethinking the concept.

Yet, another enduring–but-problematic journalistic concept, autonomy, has gone largely unexamined in our public discussion and research, even though the idea that journalists must be independent of outside influences is among the most fundamental principles upon which the practice is built.

Henrik **Ö**rnebring and Michael Karlsson set out to start that conversation in their book *Journalistic Autonomy: The Genealogy of a Concept*. In the authors' opinion, autonomy belongs among the "god-terms" (p. 55) of journalism, and it's just as ripe as its kissing cousin, objectivity, for a radical re-envisioning.

The authors present a compelling case for a new view of this old concept. They recognize the importance of autonomy in a journalist's job, but they argue that autonomy, as it took shape during key moments in journalism's evolution, is not autonomy that forwards the profession's espoused goals. **Ö**rnebring and Karlsson argue that autonomy, as it is historically construed, may work against goals such as seeking truth and promoting democratic values.

The authors build their argument by first wrestling with what autonomy is and what forms it takes in (primarily U.S.) journalism practice. The framework applies institutional theory as the authors aim to challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in journalism about autonomy and the purposes it has served in practice. They examine views on autonomy expressed in modern ethical codes, such as the Society of Professional Journalists, and the principles laid out in Kovach and Rosenstiel's *Elements of Journalism*. The authors call this the mainstream view of journalism practice before looking back at the past.

Much of the book's 358 pages, as the title suggests, is a genealogy–less a history built upon primary sources than an exploration through mostly secondary sources of how that concept in its various interpretations came to be. The book's organization is smart. The authors use their chapters to examine, one at a time, the various elements that journalism has historically declared its need to be independent from. They organize these into seven distinct themes: the state, political parties and other political interests, the market and financial interests, sources, the workplace, the audience, and technology.

Each chapter employs a similar organization, with the authors drawing from historical anecdotes to set the stage, explaining their goals for the chapter, and examining how that element of autonomy took shape. By and large, the chapters point back to the same critical periods in journalism history: the rise of advertising-funded mass-distributed daily newspapers in the 19th century and the professionalization of journalism in the first half of the 20th century.

The book lays bare an underlying problem with autonomy: Journalists are not actually free from any of the influences they profess to be free from. Journalists cannot be autonomous from their sources

if they rely entirely on those sources for their information — as fact-based journalism does. Journalists cannot be autonomous from their ownership and the business office if they rely on that ownership to provide them with the resources necessary to do their jobs. Journalists cannot be autonomous from political interests when so many of their news stories are rooted in political disputes.

The crux of the author's argument for a reconceptualization of autonomy lies in the fact that journalism's professed goals — at least in the U.S. and other democratic societies — are to serve the public and to serve democracy. In all its various adaptations, journalistic autonomy has historically been conceived as an "independence from" that frees journalists from the influence of various forces so they can do their jobs and serve the public as they see fit. The book argues that journalism should recast its autonomy as an "independence to" pursue its civic goals rather than an "independence from" all manner of influences over journalists' work. This "positive" rather than "negative" (p. 9) definition of journalistic autonomy would declare for journalism an independence to pursue truth and an independence to promote and defend democratic values. It would provide independence to exclude viewpoints that mislead the public or promote anti-democratic values—certainly an intriguing proposition.

Readers will no doubt see parallels between autonomy and the news media's adherence to an objectivity principle. But there are significant differences between the two concepts, and the authors draw necessary distinctions where they need to be made. All the conceptualizations of autonomy — episodic vs. programmatic autonomy, negative vs. positive autonomy, autonomy from the state, political interests, market, etc. — admittedly are a lot to process, making the arguments sometimes seem a bit abstruse. But the fundamental problems the authors draw attention to and their suggestions to begin addressing those problems are clear and well-articulated. This book can be a valuable entry point for researchers looking to explore autonomy and a thought-provoking read for practitioners who are called upon to maintain their "independence from" outside influences every day, even as they rely on those influences to do their jobs. The principle of autonomy deserves our attention as much as any journalistic concept today. The authors provide an interesting genealogical exploration and an intriguing proposition for a new view of an old principle.