

Book Review

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Journalistic Autonomy: The Genealogy of a Concept (Journalism in Perspective). Henrik Örnebring and Michael Karlsson. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2022. 370 pp. \$40 hbk. \$38 ebk.

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Tasking oneself with a genealogy of one of journalism’s most closely held values isn’t for the faint of heart. Yet, that’s what *Journalistic Autonomy: The Genealogy of a Concept* accomplished. The authors weave a well-developed, exceptionally researched, and thoughtfully articulated narrative of autonomy’s entrenchment in journalism history and journalistic practice. Henrik Örnebring and Michael Karlsson, both professors of media and communication at Karlstad University in Sweden, add to the growing body of recent journalism studies literature that seeks to respond to journalism’s crisis of relevance (Carlson et al., 2021; Reese, 2021; Zelizer et al., 2022).

The structure of the book is an homage to genealogies, like those of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, written as a family history meant to “balance between constraint and empowerment within the institutional framework” (p. 11). The family tree the authors sew from seed to fruit centers on the belief that “autonomy is a key part of journalism as an institution” (p. 12). The authors spend two chapters developing and framing the history of journalistic autonomy to provide a baseline understanding of the concept that serves as the trunk of the family tree. The authors use each chapter to understand how the definitional work done in Chapters 1 and 2 can be applied within systems of the institution of journalism.

The use of the genealogy, and to extend the metaphor of the family tree, allows for scholars and students to pick different fruits of Örnebring and Karlsson’s labor. If one is more interested in the bright line between journalism and public relations, then “Chapter 6: ‘When Powerful People Say Things’: Autonomy and Sources” would be the branch to attend to. If one finds the political vein of journalism important, then understanding journalism’s relationship between autonomy and the state (Chapter 3) or autonomy and political interests (Chapter 4) would be appropriate places to begin. The genealogy can be read from cover to cover, but it is written in a way that discussion and future scholarship can build from a singular chapter—as if to contribute a new bud that may eventually flower. The family tree of journalistic autonomy is not yet done growing.

The book's applicability for scholarship and classroom use reflects a growing trend in recent scholarship contending that as a field, journalism studies, oftentimes, is far too optimistic of journalism's role (Zelizer et al., 2022). Örnebring and Karlsson seek optimism in journalism's future, even as they reach that conclusion through an examination of the sometimes cruel and antithetical genealogy of journalistic autonomy. This can be seen in the authors' discussion of the workplace—an example of what they call bodily autonomy. While much of journalism studies has attended to the intersections of autonomy with outside forces, it has fallen to feminist and race scholars to address the inner-workings of newsrooms and the pressures associated with being a woman, LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, and allies) member, or a person of color within newsrooms. The authors poignantly share how this emerges in newsrooms, often unconsciously:

In the mainstream view, the workplace itself—the newsroom—becomes a guarantee of independence. Journalists are the underdogs, and the newsroom—with the protection afforded by the newspaper organization that built it, and a considerable societal legitimacy—is their nest, a safe space. This view tends to obscure the fact that some journalists are in a position of power, particularly in relation to groups seeking entry to the profession who do not conform to prevailing norms (male, white, able, etc.). (p. 171)

Bodily autonomy is often afforded to those in power, and in the case of newsroom demographics that happens to predominantly be heterosexual White men. Örnebring and Karlsson trace the disregard for bodily autonomy to workplace harassment, which may reflect why journalism is questioned by marginalized communities. The representation isn't in the newsrooms, hence, stories for those marginalized are not told. And when representation exists in this newsroom, harassment is sadly often utilized to remove one's bodily autonomy as a journalist. It is a cruel, repressive cycle. Yet, the authors wish to be optimistic about breaking the cycle.

At its core, *Journalistic Autonomy* is a thoughtful and necessary contribution to journalism studies scholarship, and it is an exemplar of analysis and critical discourse. Themes of ethical practice, democracy-building, and commitment to equality and truth ground Örnebring and Karlsson's argument. The definitional work builds a more robust and more nuanced definition of journalistic autonomy, which can then be utilized in future scholarship or engaged in classroom discussion. The systems analysis that emerges from the definitional labor provides context and examines opportunities for journalism to refine, reform, and transform. And the cruel optimism of the text, which situates an optimistic future for journalism by illuminating journalism's troublesome past, gives solace that journalism has the power to still be relevant. This understanding and reckoning of journalism's dark history build upon the notion that journalism desperately needs a revolution (Zelizer et al., 2022). But despite the pain, there is still optimism for a renewed and revitalized future. Journalism is still relevant. It just is a matter of how we choose to see it, use it, and defend it moving forward.

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