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BUREAUCRACY AND AUTHORITATIVE CONTROL IN CONTEMPORARY LEGACY NEWS MEDIA COMPANIES: A WEBERIAN ANALYSIS OF A FLEMISH CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Autonomy is considered a prerequisite for the press to function in service of the public. Over the past few decades both news organizations and society at large have been subjected to significant change and instability, potentially affecting journalists' independent modes of production. We argue that a re-evaluation of journalism's institutional strength to perform the societal functions bestowed upon it by the public is imperative. In this paper we contribute to this re-evaluation by examining to what extent the organizational structure of contemporary legacy news media organizations has a constraining effect on the autonomous modes of production of the newsroom. We draw on the theoretical framework of Max Weber and his concepts of the bureaucratic ideal type, Herrschaft and Lebensordnung to engage in an examination of the organizational properties that characterize two Flemish-based international media conglomerates (DPG Media and Mediahuis) and discuss how these properties might interfere with newsrooms. Our analysis is based on the rarely considered perspective of chief editors, who (as the most powerful representatives of the newsroom within the context of the news company) provide unique insights into the organizational limits to journalistic autonomy.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Autonomy from external influences is an integral part of the journalistic professional ideology (Deuze, 2005) and a "conditio sine qua non" for journalists to act in the interest of the general public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Nonetheless, the attainability of autonomy for journalists is frequently debated in both professional and academic circles. Specifically, the impact of news companies' business

considerations on independent journalistic production has been a recurring topic of inquiry (Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021; Coddington, 2015; McManus, 2009; Bagdikian, 1989). Champagne (2005) claims that "newspapers are economic enterprises directly subjected to economic laws which often come into conflict with the imperatives of intellectual production", referring to the crucial influence the organizational context wherein journalists operate has on their professional behaviors.

Over the past two decades, the news media landscape has changed significantly. Western news media companies had to adapt to professional and economic crises of journalism (Nielsen, 2016), declining public trust (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021), and the impact of technological innovations (Steensen, 2019; Whittaker, 2019). Additionally, Western societies became increasingly unstable due to financial crises, political polarization and social unrest. Against this backdrop of instability and change, we argue that a re-evaluation of journalists' institutional strength to perform the societal functions bestowed upon them by the public is imperative (Waisboard, 2019; Beam, 2009). This paper aims to address this issue by examining the constraining impact of contemporary legacy news media companies' organizational structures on autonomous journalistic production.

Our decision to focus on organizational constraints is inspired by recent research on the discrepancies between journalists' self-reported role perceptions and the overall media performance of the news organizations they work for (Mellado, 2020). The findings of this research suggest that the influence news companies have on journalistic production is not adequately recognized or interpreted by journalists themselves. This has methodological implications: studies on the topic of journalistic autonomy that rely on self-reported survey data provided by journalists arguably do not reflect the actual impact of organizational circumstances on journalistic production.

If we wish to make the organizational factors that interfere with the autonomy of legacy media newsrooms explicit, we consider it necessary to adopt a qualitative methodological approach that is embedded in a theoretical framework that incorporates both organizational and sociological perspectives. We argue that the often-overlooked Max Weber can provide this theoretical depth: his ideal type of bureaucracy offers reference points for the examination of the organizational structure wherein journalists operate. Additionally, his concepts of authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) and organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) provide sociological foundations for an in-depth examination of the relationship between organizational attributes/mechanics and autonomous modes of production pursued by newsrooms and individual journalists. In this research paper, we will apply the Weberian perspective to the case of two Flemish media conglomerates: *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis*. Our analysis will primarily be based on data obtained via semi-structured interviews with high-agency individuals belonging to the newsroom (e.g. chief editors). The perspective of newsroom executives has largely been overlooked by journalism scholars, though we argue that the boundary-spanning nature of their organizational role can offer unique insights into journalists' working environment. The goal of this paper

is twofold: a) to extrapolate theoretical dimensions that can be utilized to evaluate news companies' organizational structure and its impact on journalistic autonomy; b) to demonstrate the theoretical value of the Weberian perspective for the examination of authority in contemporary news media companies.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

This research paper focuses on journalistic autonomy and the organizational structures and attributes that shape its boundaries. In the following paragraphs, we will briefly define the notion of journalistic autonomy before engaging in a discussion of scholarship concerning organizational impact factors. Afterward, we will move on to a more general discussion of the sociology of Max Weber and its relevance to the field of journalism studies.

Journalistic autonomy concerns the freedom of journalists to shape or create their own workflows and practices independently from outside interference (Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2016; Deuze, 2005; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). It refers to the capacity of journalists to act according to their own professional logic. As a result, the concept is regularly discussed in terms of journalism's relation to external logics (primarily of a political or economic nature) and the boundaries imposed by the structures and environments wherein journalists operate (Shoemaker & Reese,1996; McQuail, 2010; Örnebring, 2013; Scholl & Weischenberg, 1999; Blassnig & Esser, 2022; Champagne, 2005).

In the social sciences, there is a long tradition of research that is preoccupied with understanding news work within the boundaries imposed by the news organization (Schudson, 2002). This research has focused on the impact of organizational rationalization and synergy (Williams, 2002; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), the emphasis on markets and profitability (McManus, 2009; Underwood, 1988), and corporate consolidation (Lebrun et al., 2022; Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021; Bagdikian, 1989). A recurring observation in these analyses of journalists' professional environment is the emergence of increasingly bureaucratic control structures. Especially the consolidation process strongly contributes to this development: with every merger or acquisition, the size and complexity of news companies grow, leading to increasingly hierarchical organizational structures. Consequently, the distance between journalists and corporate management increases, making the latter less sensitive to the concerns of the former (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Additionally, the pressure put on newsrooms to conform to organizational interests is exacerbated within these large company structures. As a result, chief editors and newsroom executives increasingly start behaving like managers of any other corporate entity (Underwood, 1988). As Fancher (1987) describes it: "Keeping newsroom operating expenses within budget isn't enough. Editors must understand where their budgets fit within the larger financial picture of their company, and where news priorities fit in the overall strategic plan".

Other authors have discussed how bureaucratic control collides with the newsroom's capacity to produce autonomously according to journalistic professional orientations (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991). Hallin (1992) argues that journalists themselves have come to accept this bureaucratic organizational structure and the professional routines it propagates. Similarly, Merril (1989) claims that journalists are not "professionals who deal with their clients directly and independently, but [functionaries] who fashion their work in accordance to the supervision and direction by their editors, publishers and news directors". In line with Breed's landmark study on social control in the newsroom (1955), these findings seem to suggest that the subjection of journalism to organizational goals has gradually been socialized.

Over the past two decades, the concentration of media ownership has increased significantly ("Media Action Plan" research report, commissioned by the CULT committee of the European Parliament, 2021). Furthermore, the market environment of news organizations has transformed under the impulse of increased competition for advertising revenues (Björkroth & Grönlund, 2018) and technological innovations (Steensen, 2019; Whittaker, 2019). These developments arguably had a considerable impact on the organizational structure of contemporary legacy news media companies and their level of bureaucratic control over newsrooms. However, there appears to be a lack of academic interest in the examination of news companies' organizational structures. Consequently, attempts to analyze the bureaucratic properties of media companies and their effect on journalistic practice remain largely absent from the contemporary scholarly debate.

Nevertheless, recent research redirects the focus towards the organizational perspective. Mellado (2020) contributes to this development by providing evidence for a normative-performance gap, which measures the distance between journalists' normative discourse and companies' actual media performance. Furthermore, Ferrucci & Kuhn (2022) have made a compelling argument for the recalibration of Shoemaker & Reese's classic "hierarchy of influences"-model towards a more central role for the organizational context.

Considering a) contemporary developments affecting media organizations, b) the lack of research on the organizational attributes of news companies, and c) recent efforts to re-introduce the organizational perspective in journalism studies, we argue that an examination of the bureaucratic properties of contemporary legacy news media organizations and their constraining effects on newsroom autonomy is long overdue and can help to illuminate blind spots in contemporary journalism scholarship. To adequately examine this issue we invoke the sociological framework of Max Weber, who wrote extensively on the subject of bureaucratic control and its relation to individual or professional autonomy.

3.   THE WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVE

Autonomy is a central concept in the sociology of Max Weber, who was preoccupied

with the authoritative control exercised by organizations ("*Herrschaft*") and its effect on individual freedom (Davis, 2013; De Jong, 2007; Bartels, 2009). Weber argued that organizations are guided by "institutionalized authority systems" (Dash & Padhi, 2019) and distinguished three basic types of authoritative control: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority. He considered bureaucracy to be the pinnacle of rational-legal authority, which is characterized by "laws, rules and the power stemming from a legitimate position or office" (Houghton, 2010). Weber thought that bureaucracies had the "potential to enhance as well as imprison individual freedom" (Bartels, 2009) and, as a result, paid considerable attention to the way rational-legal authority mechanisms interact with the individuals that populate bureaucratic organizational structures. He argued that bureaucracies promote certain patterns of action and behavior via formalized rules, procedures and structures. By adhering to these formal expressions of organized coordination, individuals are conditioned to internalize a particular organizational rationale ("*Lebensordnung*") (De Jong, 2007, Bartels, 2009). This rationale requires the individual to act "in obedience to social organizational structures" and might conflict with the individual's personal or professional values. The tension between this organizational rationale and individual/professional logics is fundamental to understanding how Weber's *Herrschaft* manifests itself in the organizational context.

Weber introduced an *ideal type of bureaucracy* that can be utilized to adequately examine this tension between structure and agency. The purpose of this ideal type was the conceptualization of bureaucracy in its purest form, in an attempt to capture the essence of the phenomenon (Van Hoof & Ruysseveldt, 1999). To this end, Weber defined specific reference points that may serve as analytical tools to examine how real-life organizational structures resemble the bureaucratic ideal type (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; Bartels, 2009).

One of the main reference points in Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy is the development and application of *standardized rules*. Weber considered bureaucracy to be the most efficient organizational form to achieve organizational goals. He argued that this efficiency was the result of the bureaucratic emphasis on procedures, standardized rules and formal structures, and its tendency toward the division of labor and specialization. In Weber's view, all these mechanics contribute to the predictability of organizational action and, as a result, control over the environment. In other words, bureaucracy improves efficiency by "reducing business decisions to calculable rules" (Dash & Padhi, 2019). Individuals operating within the context of a bureaucratic structure are expected to subscribe to these expressions of "formal rationality" (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; De Jong, 2007; Van Hoof & Ruysseveldt, 1999; Weiss, 1983). A second major dimension of Weber's ideal type is the presence of a *hierarchical command structure*. This refers to the organization of roles and functions in terms of managerial positions and subordinated services (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; De Jong, 2007; Van Hoof & Ruysseveldt, 1999; Weiss, 1983). Hierarchical command emphasizes discipline, which is enforced in a top-down fashion. As a result,

the hierarchical structure generally displays a "tendency towards maximum centralization" of power and command (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019). It is via this combination of centralized hierarchical command and an emphasis on formal rules and procedures that bureaucracies are able to exercise authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) over employees and propagate certain modes of behavior (*Lebensordnung*).

Despite its potential to add theoretical depth to discussions concerning the impact of news companies' organizational structure on journalistic practice, the sociology of Max Weber is characterized by its absence from journalism scholarship. Dominant theoretical paradigms such as the liberal-professional view (which focuses on the individual journalist and their professional ideology) and the Marxist and political-economy views (which focus on the impact of macro-societal political and economic factors) leave little room to spare for the meso-level of analysis, i.e. the news organization and its specific properties (Davis, 2013). Additionally, landmark studies specifically aimed at investigating news workers' organizational environment, such as Gans' (1979) description of the news organization, seem to have ignored the Weberian framework of analysis. However, the absence of the Weberian perspective is not limited to journalism studies alone. Studies have shown a general decline in the number of articles citing Weber (Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005), despite the fact that empirical research suggests that bureaucracy is on the rise in increasingly consolidated market spaces dominated by a few large multinational corporations (Dash & Padhi, 2019). An explanation for the absence of the Weberian sociological approach may be found in neo-liberal misinterpretations of the ideal type of bureaucracy. Rather than an analytical concept that can be employed to examine empirically existing organizational phenomena, neo-liberal critics treated the ideal type as "an empirically existing phenomenon that embodies, or a normative theory that prescribes, the exercise of formal rationality" (Bartels, 2008). As a result, discussions drifted towards arguments "against" or "in favor of" the ideal type in normative terms rather than in a theoretical sense. Exemplary of this flawed argumentation is the neo-liberal opposition to government by characterizing it as bureaucratic and inefficient, without considering the possibility of market-oriented companies that are structured according to the same bureaucratic principles. A second explanation for the absence of the Weberian perspective is the idea that the bureaucratic ideal type is no longer a useful framework to examine modern organizational forms that emphasize employee empowerment, decentralization and self-managing teams (Houghton, 2010). We argue that this criticism is also based on a misinterpretation of Weber's framework: not only would the reference points of the ideal type provide an adequate framework to examine this evolution, but when considered within the larger context of Weber's sociology, each of these organizational characteristics constitutes an expression of Herrschaft. Moreover, the idea of self-managing teams might even be considered a step toward greater bureaucratic control, as they reflect how coercive authority becomes obsolete once the organizational rationale (Lebensorndung) is internalized by employees.

Despite the lack of direct references to his work, we argue that the spirit of Weber lingers in journalism scholarship that discusses the discrepancies between organizational demands and (journalistic) professionalism (Andersson & Wiik, 2013; Champagne, 2005; Evetts, 2003), company mitigation of journalistic output (Mellado, 2020; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and the effect of the organizational rationale on journalists' labor conditions (Petre, 2018). Additionally, we observe that some scholars explicitly call for the re-introduction of Weberian sociological concepts (Bastin, 2013), for example as a means to examine the tension between formal rationality embedded in organizational structure and individual agency (Bartels, 2009). Davis (2013) explores this tension in the UK news media landscape and argues that bureaucratic formal rationality might discard "the very ideals that sit at the center of the journalist profession".

In light of our own research goals, we argue that the Weberian concepts of *Herrschaft*, *Lebensordnung*, and the bureaucratic ideal type will provide theoretical depth to our examination of the newsroom's level of autonomy in the increasingly complex organizational context of contemporary news media companies. We re-define our research goals in the form of three specific research questions: RQ 1) to what extent are the main traits of Weber's bureaucratic ideal type present in contemporary legacy news media companies; RQ 2) to what extent do these traits express mechanisms of organizational control (*Herrschaft*) over journalistic practice; RQ 3) to what extent is the organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) that is expressed via these modes of control accepted by the newsroom.

4.   METHODOLOGY

In order to adequately address these research questions, we propose a qualitative approach that leans on three main methodological perspectives: the case study, the semi-structured interview, and thematic analysis. We steer clear of the pitfalls of survey-based quantitative methods that are grounded in self-reported perceptions of autonomy, as these fail to address how interpretations of journalistic autonomy might differ across journalistic communities, newsrooms, or individual agents. Furthermore, this paper is not preoccupied with perceptions of authority among the journalistic populace, but rather with the reality of institutionalized modes of organizational authority over the journalistic production process.

The case study is a useful method to examine organizational reality under specific circumstances. Additionally, it enables in-depth analysis of root causes for case-specific phenomena. Specifically, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are vague, the case study can provide detail and nuance that would arguably be overlooked if other research strategies were deployed (Yin, 1981). Gans (1979) and, more recently, Usher (2021) provide precedents for a case study approach toward analyzing the organizational reality of journalists.

We have selected the case of the Flemish-based mid-sized international media

conglomerates *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis*. We selected these companies based on their size, market share, and the expected complexity of their organizational structure. Both *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis* are the product of a series of mergers and acquisitions that took place over the past three decades. In 1990 the predecessors of both companies owned only one or two Flemish newspaper brands. Consolidation from that point onwards eventually resulted in a news media oligopoly in Flanders dominated by the national public broadcasting company on the one hand and commercial providers *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis* on the other (De Bens & Raeymaekers, 2010). We argue that the organizational structure of both companies has become increasingly complex as a result of this rapid expansion. This potentially has significant implications for the autonomy of newsrooms that operate within these media conglomerates.

Today, *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis* control the lion's share of the legacy newspaper market in both Flanders and the Netherlands. Additionally, they are expanding beyond the borders of the Dutch-speaking world into countries such as Ireland, Germany and Denmark. Both companies are of considerable size in terms of personnel, variety of news brands and media products, and revenue. *DPG Media* boasts a portfolio of over 20 international newspaper brands complemented by a wide array of audio and visual news media and entertainment. In Flanders, they own the most popular newspaper (*Het Laatste Nieuws*), a prominent quality newspaper (*De Morgen*) and the most-viewed commercial television news broadcast (*VTM Nieuws*). In 2021 *DPG Media* reported a total revenue of €1,9 billion and a net operational result of €414 million. In that same year, the company employed 5.836 people, 2.034 of whom are classified as journalists (annual report *DPG Media*, 2021). *Mediahuis* is a smaller media group with a more pronounced emphasis on international news brands (over 30 news brands in 4 countries). Their portfolio includes the most-read quality newspaper in the Flanders region (*De Standaard*) and popular (regional) newspapers *Het Nieuwsblad*, *De Gazet van Antwerpen* and *Het Belang van Limburg*. In 2021, the company reported a total revenue of €1,1 billion and a net operational result of €166 million. In that same year, they employed 4.601 people, 1.922 of whom are classified as journalists (annual report *Mediahuis*, 2021). Neither company trades stocks publicly; both are owned by a select group of investors represented by one dominant shareholding family (*DPG Media*: the Van Thillo family; *Mediahuis*: the Leysen family) (Flemish Media Regulator (VRM) report "Mediaconcentratie in Vlaanderen 2020", 2021). Analysis of both companies will be primarily based on their activities in the Flanders region.

Data for the analysis of our case study are primarily collected via semi-structured interviews with high-agency individuals (primarily chief editors and journalistic directors) that have worked/are working at one of these companies. The interview form allows us to both a) map organizational realities based on testimonies of people who have experienced them (RQ 1) and b) examine how these realities have affected journalistic practice (RQ 2, RQ 3). The perspective of high-agency individuals belonging to the newsroom is particularly valuable due to their privileged position within

the organizational structure. They are boundary-spanning figures involved with both managerial and editorial matters (Coddington, 2015; Gans, 1979). As they arguably contribute to the establishment and enforcement of organizational authority (White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Gieber, 1960; Crouse, 1962), their perspective is a valuable resource for examining to what extent bureaucratic control structures are deployed and normalized within the confines of the newsroom.

Seventeen interviews with a total of fifteen interviewees (approx. 2hrs per interview) were considered during the analysis. Each of the interviewees is or has been employed as chief editor, journalistic director, or equivalent by one of the Flemish news brands owned by either *Mediahuis* or *DPG Media* between 1989 and 2022 (for an overview of interviewees, we refer to appendix A). We incorporate a historical dimension in our data sample for contextualization purposes. The accounts of ex-chief editors can help us to understand current organizational realities as part of a longer historical development, rather than structures that exist in a vacuum. Nevertheless, the majority of our analysis is based on testimonies provided by chief editors that are currently in office. All interviews were conducted in a sphere of confidentiality and permission has been granted to publish quotes included in this paper (Koetsenruijter & Van Hout, 2018). Caution is required when considering the data as our approach leans heavily on interviewee interpretations of organizational reality. We mitigate the risk of untruthful or incomplete testimony by engaging in rigorous triangulation, comparing and reconciling interviewee testimonies amongst each other and with other available source material, such as public company data (annual reports, financial statements, company data published on the company website), reports prepared by independent third parties (report on media concentration published by the Flemish Media Regulator ("*VRM*")), autobiographies of persons of interest (De Ridder, 2001; Ruys, 1999) and secondary literature on both media companies (Hendrickx et al., 2021; Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2020; De Bens & Raeymaekers, 2010).

We deconstructed our data via thematic analysis making use of NVIVO coding software. Over 400 A4 pages of interview transcripts were broken down into thematic excerpts which were allocated to one of five thematic categories. These categories were primarily defined based on the reference points that constitute Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy: "hierarchical command structure", "formal procedures", "standardized services, roles and competencies", "disciplinary mechanisms" and "meta comments on the bureaucratic nature of the organizational structure". Further sub-categorization was implemented based on criteria such as news company (*DPG Media*; *Mediahuis*), news brand (*De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad*, etc.), and referenced period (the 2010s, 2000s, etc.). A total of 175 individual interview excerpts on the topic of the organizational structure were classified in one (or more) of the five abovementioned main categories. After initial coding, we applied other theoretical concepts of Weber's sociological framework to the data (*Herrschaft, Lebensordnung*) to make sense of the tension between bureaucratic structure and journalistic autonomy. During this sense-making process, the interrelatedness of the five thematic

categories became apparent, requiring us to look beyond our initial categorization and pursue an interpretative analytical approach (Ritchie et al., 2013).

5.   ANALYSIS

In the following sections, we discuss the bureaucratic features of the Flemish media conglomerates *Mediahuis* and *DPG Media* by deploying the Weberian reference points of "formal rationality", "centralization" and "hierarchy". Afterward, we examine how these features contribute to the exercise of authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) over the newsroom and ultimately limit journalistic autonomy. Throughout these discussions, we will reflect on the organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) that underpins these control structures.

6.   FORMAL EXPRESSIONS OF A CENTRALIZED
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Simultaneous with the rapid growth of *Mediahuis* and *DPG Media* from the 1990s onwards, an increasingly centralized and formal organizational structure has been implemented by company executives to cope with the increased organizational complexity. Our data suggest that this centralized structure is expressed via the mechanisms of "functional synergy", "cross-functional harmony" and "internal budgetary competition". We argue that these three mechanisms have been formally embedded in the organizational DNA of examined companies. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss each of these mechanisms in more detail.

"Functional synergy" is a concept we introduce to refer to organizational mechanisms that aim to maximize efficiency within a specific functional department (e.g. the newsroom, marketing, IT,...) by centralizing expertise and subsequently allocating it (to projects, brands,...) in a cost-effective manner. Applied to the "journalistic" functional department (i.e. the newsroom), this means the centralization of news gathering processes across news brands to save on personnel costs. Analysis of our data shows that "functional synergy" has been introduced in the form of centralized news flows that stimulate shared use of news resources (articles, interviews, photographs,...) among journalists working for brands belonging to the same company. At one company an IT platform for content-sharing was introduced, which enables journalists to access each other's work. At the other, a physical centralized news desk responsible for the supply of content to its main news brands was established.

> [Interview excerpt 1:] *"We moved our most popular news brands to the same floor, and implemented a centralized news desk.* [...] *The general idea behind the implementation of this structure is that all the news resources that are gathered by our journalists are openly shared. How each brand uses these resources to create a finished product is still up to them."*

The presence of a digital content management system or a centralized news desk are formal expressions of an organizational rationale that aims to promote journalistic routines that embrace the sharing of editorial production. This rationale or *Lebensordnung* is embedded in the principle of increasing shareholder value via cost-efficiency. As more news brands are gathered under the same company roof, the total amount of reporters covering the same beats can be reduced. The result is that newsrooms dedicated to one specific news brand have become smaller, more specialized, and more reliant on support from centralized content creation teams that supply to multiple brands simultaneously. One example from our case study concerns the centralization of sports coverage, with one dedicated team of journalists producing sports content for multiple brands. Another shows how brand differentiation is realized on the basis of region/location: national news is produced by the "national brand" and subsequently shared with local brands that create added value by producing regional stories. The result of this evolution is the general decline of news diversity in the Flanders media landscape (Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021).

A second mechanism that we have observed is "cross-functional harmonization". This original concept refers to the centrally managed alignment of commercial and journalistic goals across different functional departments belonging to the same news organization. The main instrument to achieve this "harmony" is formal evaluation targets and procedures. These take the form of Key Performance Indicators ("KPI"), which are used to evaluate the performance of news brands, departments, executives and projects. Because KPIs primarily measure business performance (e.g. revenue, circulation, reach, etc.), newsroom executives are encouraged to seek alliances with other departments to achieve their targets.

> [Interview excerpt 2:] *"If I launch an idea for a new journalistic product [ed. such as a podcast, a magazine, etc.] then I am mindful of the targets of our sales director. I want him to think: "Yes! Our brand revenue needs to grow another 3% this year, and the launch of this new product can help me achieve that. I will support your idea."*

The example above illustrates how cross-functional harmony between the newsroom and the sales department contributes to the accomplishment of overarching organizational goals. The catalyst for cultivating this business-minded harmony is the system of formal evaluation procedures. Another formal organizational instrument that promotes cross-functional harmony is a structure of recurring meetings between newsroom executives and business executives aimed at aligning editorial and marketing initiatives and working together towards shared organizational goals.

The final mechanism that we will discuss in this section we have named "internal budgetary competition". It refers to the fierce competition between news brands belonging to the same media conglomerate for scarce financial means that are centrally managed. Our case study provides evidence that this internal competition

is formally embedded in the organizational structure via budget allocation procedures. These procedures are grafted onto a "shareholder value rationale": the better a brand's financial and business performance, the likelier it is rewarded for its performance with additional resources. Illustrative of the intensity of this competition is the fact that interviewees refer to the budget allocation process as a *"battle"*. We argue that this internal competition contributes to the gradual adoption of a business-minded *Lebensordnung* by newsrooms: because business and journalism are structurally intertwined in the organizational context, the idea that this interconnection is a natural or "common sense" phenomenon is propagated.

Notice that the competitive nature of the budget allocation process stands in stark contrast with the concepts of "functional synergy" and "cross-functional harmony". Generally, it appears that there is a pronounced aversion to competition where editorial matters are involved as this would contradict organizational goals:

> [Interview excerpt 3:] *"Online journalism is where our news brands have the biggest margin to grow." with "The biggest growth margin for our news brands lies with online journalism."*

Therefore, the apparent contrast is only superficial, as the underlying *Lebensordnung* that is propagated by all three mechanisms is the same: the maximization of shareholder value. Synergy and harmony express this rationale by promoting the efficient deployment of available means of production and economies of scale. Institutionalized competition, on the other hand, expresses it in the form of structural financial austerity. As such, each mechanism contributes to the promotion of the same organizational goals.

7.   HIERARCHICAL COMMAND STRUCTURE

In this section, we will discuss to what extent the examined media companies are managed by way of a formal hierarchical chain of command. We will examine hierarchy both within and beyond the confines of the newsroom.

7.1.   Hierarchy in the newsroom

Our data confirm the presence of a clear hierarchical chain of command governing the newsroom. We distinguish four hierarchical levels, the "strategic level" (typically represented by a journalistic director or chief editor), the "general management level" (typically represented by a single chief editor, a group of chief editors, and/or their deputies), the "operational management level" (typically represented by news managers and beat managers) and, finally, the "operational level" (typically represented by journalists and editors). Mind that each level can be occupied by multiple

individuals, and that multiple levels can be occupied by one individual, depending on organizational needs.

> [Interview excerpt 4:] *"The organization has become gigantic. As a result, we often need two or even three people on the editorial board. Or at least one general manager and beneath him/her a team of chief editors and beat managers."*

The highest level of command in the newsroom (the "strategic level") is the domain of the journalistic director. He/she is mainly preoccupied with strategic and creative management of brands belonging to a single organizational business unit and is part of the executive committee that governs this unit. Our data show that the scope and responsibilities of the individual operating at this hierarchical level may differ according to organizational demands. For example, one of our interviewees is tasked with the strategic management of two brands that share similar editorial properties. Another interviewee testifies to having been in charge of the strategic management of two news brands during a time that business performance was below management expectations. Once business performance stabilized, this specific strategic function became obsolete and disappeared from the organizational chart.

The second hierarchical tier concerns the general management of editorial matters and daily operations in the newsroom. In general, this tier is at least partly occupied by the chief editor. Data suggest that the extent of their involvement in day-to-day management depends on their strategic responsibilities ("strategic level") and the size of the newsroom. It is not uncommon for the chief editor to delegate some managerial tasks to deputies. These deputies are in charge of specific fields of responsibility, such as human resources, online content, etc. This is illustrative of specialization and division of labor at the managerial level. Another way this hierarchical tier is organized is via co-editorship, which involves two or more chief editors splitting managerial responsibilities amongst each other.

> [Interview excerpt 5:] *"If you seek the establishment of authority in the newsroom, then first and foremost you have to consider some of your most influential beat managers."*

The third hierarchical level is that of "operational management". This level is populated by news managers and beat managers who are usually in charge of specific editorial domains and answer directly to the chief editor. They too illustrate how hierarchy contributes to specialization, one of the traits of Weber's bureaucratic ideal type. Operational managers are crucial for the top-down implementation of executive decisions at the fourth hierarchical level (the "operational level") and enjoy some freedom regarding their method for implementation. Depending on the size of the newsroom, the body of operational managers can be quite extensive, which

suggests that further hierarchical differentiation further down the organizational ladder is possible.

7.2.   Hierarchy beyond the newsroom

To comprehend the full extent of the hierarchical command structure wherein legacy media journalists operate, we look beyond the newsroom and consider its position within the organizational context at large. Based on our data we conclude that "strategic level" journalistic executives are included in the executive committee of their respective business units. These business units are generally determined based on location/region (Belgium, Netherlands, etc.) and/or product category (news media, magazines, television, etc.). However, when we move further up the organizational chain of command we notice that newsroom executives are barred. Three additional levels of authority transcend the level of the business unit. At the top of the pyramid sits the board of shareholder representatives, which appoints and monitors the executive team. This executive team consists of (at least) the company CEO and the CFO and constitutes the highest executive level. Below this level, we find the group executive team, which includes the chief executive of each of the aforementioned business units.

Figure 1. Simplified representation of organizational hierarchy

The extensiveness of this hierarchical chain of command and the considerable distance between the highest ranking journalistic executives and company executives in the pyramid leads us to argue that newsrooms have little to no possibility of formally intervening at the highest decision-making levels. Interviewees corroborate this finding:

> [Interview excerpt 6:] *"As the chief editor, you are primus inter pares in the newsroom. But in the overall executive structure, you are the very least, the one with the least power and influence."*

As a result, journalistic figureheads and executives have very limited capacity to weigh on organizational policy:

> [Interview excerpt 7:] *"Real decisions are made by the executive committee. It's the executives that decide on financial savings plans and staff reductions. […] It's at that level that essential discussions are held."*

Additional evidence of the limited influence journalistic executives have on the highest echelons of the company hierarchy is provided by interviewees' indirect referrals to hierarchically imposed decisions that coerce them to take top-down actions themselves (e.g. "*they* want you to enact budget cuts").

8.   AUTHORITATIVE CONTROL OVER THE NEWSROOM

In the previous sections, we described the organizational attributes of the examined news companies. Multiple characteristics that constitute Weber's bureaucratic ideal type were observed. In the following paragraphs, we will examine how these bureaucratic attributes contribute to the exercise of authoritative control and discipline (*Herrschaft*). For the sake of a more focused discussion, we zoom in on two phenomena that were introduced in the previous sections: formal evaluation procedures (KPIs) and centralized budget limitations.

8.1.   Herrschaft through formal evaluation procedures

As we have briefly discussed before, Key Performance Indicators are formal targets that are put in place to cultivate adherence to the company's overall financial goals. Interviewees state that KPIs usually consist of a mix of qualitative and quantitative performance indicators. The former category of indicators supposedly measures journalistic proficiency and quality according to testimonies; a somewhat unconvincing claim if we consider the examples of qualitative KPIs they provide. These include "the refurbishment of newspaper layout", "the launch of a new magazine" or (the rather vague)"new journalistic projects". These examples seem to suggest

that qualitative KPIs are primarily aimed at measuring brand development rather than journalistic quality or proficiency. The reason for a lack of indicators aimed at measuring journalistic quality is arguably the fact that it would be hard to quantify this type of performance. Therefore it is easily overlooked by formal evaluation structures that are modeled on a rationale that favors quantification. The second category of indicators ("quantitative indicators") is primarily aimed at measuring business performance and the overall financial contribution of news brands to the business concern. Examples of indicators used to measure business performance are circulation, turnover, and EBITDA (i.e. operational financial result). Other indicators mentioned by interviewees are attention time and clicks, which arguably measure a combination of both editorial impact and contribution to the advertising business proposition of the company. Testimonies suggest that newsroom executives have little control over the indicators that are used to assess the performance of their news brand. They must accept its evaluation in terms of business development and contribution to company results, though it appears that they can negotiate specific targets so as to mitigate unrealistic executive expectations.

> [Interview excerpt 8:] *"For* [chief editors] [KPI's] *are comprised of 60% quantitative and 40% qualitative indicators. For a news manager or beat manager, they are 40% quantitative and 60% qualitative. […] So for them we also look at turnover and circulation, and, I suspect attention time and clicks."*

The abovementioned quote suggests that the KPI system is not limited to the highest echelons of the newsroom hierarchy but rolled out to the hierarchical tier of "operational management" as well. The fact that quantitative indicators are deployed to measure performance at these lower hierarchical levels demonstrates the extent of authoritative control over the newsroom. Furthermore, it illustrates how control structures primarily service an organizational *Lebensordnung* of shareholder value maximization. We emphasize that these control mechanisms are not limited to the newsroom: we refer to the principles of "functional synergy" and "cross-functional harmony", which both demonstrate how adherence to a shareholder-minded *Lebensordnung* is a cooperative process to which all organizational departments are expected to contribute.

The overall performance of newsroom executives is discussed during "end-of-year" performance reviews with executives. When discussing these reviews interviewees emphasize that on-target financial performance provides job security, with some describing it as a "lifeline". Additionally, some interviewees refer to the existence of reward structures that constitute the payment of bonuses when newsroom executives succeed in meeting their targets. This is another mechanism that contributes to the propagation of the aforementioned *Lebensordnung*.

8.2.   Herrschaft through budgetary constraints

Another way authoritative control is exercised is via the amalgamation of formal budget allocation and budget control procedures. As mentioned before, the yearly allocation of budgets determines whether news brands can invest in their development or are subject to budget cuts. This leads to a highly competitive atmosphere between brands that attempt to attract as much funding as possible. According to interviewees, the allocation of funds to individual news brands is determined based on financial performance and the business development initiatives proposed by newsroom executives. In other words, resources to invest in journalistic development are awarded in a quid pro quo fashion to newsroom executives who manage to procure the financial results that are required by owners/shareholders.

> [Interview excerpt 9:] *"The yearly battle for budgets is key. And you win these by drawing investments to your brand based on the financial return you can promise to your CEO."*

After budgets have been allocated, control mechanisms are in place to assure that these budgets are managed in alignment with executive management expectations. The hierarchical structure itself is the most important instrument for enforcing budgetary discipline: beat managers are subjected to KPIs that require them to monitor expenses within their editorial turf, chief editors must make sure that beat managers remain within the limits of their budgets, and journalistic directors are expected to do the same for the news brands over which they preside. Regular formalized budget control meetings with financial executives are aimed at keeping newsroom executives mindful of budgetary constraints. A financial controller who reports directly to the executive committee is present within the newsroom and is tasked with the continuous monitoring of newsroom expenses. Based on testimonies, it appears that chief editors consider it important to keep this financial controller close to their chest as they perceive them not only as an agent that enforces top-down supervision but also as an individual that might provide support for bottom-up mitigation of budgetary constraints.

9.   CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine how the organizational structure of contemporary legacy news media companies shapes journalistic autonomy. To address this issue we invoked the theoretical framework of Max Weber. We made use of the reference points of his bureaucratic ideal type to explore the organizational properties of two Flemish-based media conglomerates (*Mediahuis, DPG Media*). Additionally, we considered the concepts of authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) and organizational

rationale (*Lebensordnung*) to interpret how the autonomy of journalists working for these companies was constrained by these organizational properties.

Concerning the bureaucratic attributes of *Mediahuis* and *DPG Media*, we conclude that many of the reference points of Weber's ideal type can be observed. Formal rationality is present in the form of standardized targets and evaluation procedures, budget allocation procedures, and division of labor in line with company requirements. We determined how centralized management of the organization is formally embedded in the organizational structure and expressed via functional synergy (e.g. in the form of centralized news desks), cross-functional harmony (e.g. in the form of coordinated key performance indicators), and internal budgetary competition. Finally, we observed that the extensive organizational structures of both examined companies are managed via a tall hierarchical chain of command that primarily functions in a top-down fashion. All of these attributes suggest that the examined news organizations show a high level of bureaucratization, a finding which in and of itself should contribute to the re-introduction of Weber's bureaucratic ideal type to the field of journalism studies. Furthermore, this finding offers proof that neo-liberal criticisms of Weber's ideal type are fundamentally flawed, as its reference points provide an appropriate theoretical basis for the analysis of the organizational reality of private corporations.

Building on Weber's theoretical framework, we subsequently argue that these bureaucratic properties contribute to the establishment and exercise of authoritative control over the newsroom. The quantifiable performance targets that dictate newsroom executives' organizational priorities, evaluation and reward structures that are grafted onto the achievement of these targets, budget allocation procedures that reward business excellence, and the presence of financial controllers tasked with the supervision of newsrooms' obedience to budgetary constraints are all expressions of authority and discipline that interfere with the autonomy of journalists belonging to the newsroom. Furthermore, the extensive hierarchical chain of command both propagates the top-down implementation of executive decisions down to the lowest hierarchical levels of the newsroom and effectively prevents newsroom executives or other journalistic representatives from formally intervening at the highest decision-making levels of the company. Finally, centralized management of the company subjects the newsroom to cost-cutting measures and coerces newsroom executives to pursue business excellence in order to achieve their targets and attract investments to their news brand.

Complementary to these explicit expressions of authoritative control, we draw attention to a more profound and implicit manner in which the totality of these organizational structures and attributes propagates adherence to organizational demands. As our analysis has shown, most if not all mechanisms that were observed in our case study are to some extent expressions of an organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) that propagates the maximization of shareholder value. Functional synergy, cross-functional harmony, and internal budgetary competition all contribute

to the formation of a mindset that commands cost-efficiency, economies of scale, and budgetary austerity. Similarly, the formalized evaluation structure based on KPIs and the budget allocation and control procedures normalize the close interconnectedness between optimal business performance and journalistic production. This "economic" or "business" rationale is for the most part at odds with the journalistic professional logic (Champagne, 2005; Andersson & Wiik, 2013). However, we argue that continuous exposure to this organizational rationale by way of the abovementioned authoritative control mechanisms has effectively led the newsroom to adopt this mindset. We have noticed during the analysis of our data that most interviewees consider it common sense that business and journalism go hand in hand, suggesting that the organizational rationale has been normalized (at least among newsroom executives). The most telling evidence of this development lies in the examples interviewees gave of KPIs that are supposed to measure journalistic quality. As we have shown, most of the given examples seem to measure business development rather than journalistic quality. This finding could support the argument that the distinction between journalism and business has become somewhat muddled in the eyes of newsroom executives. Considering the literature on the influence executives have on their subordinates in the newsroom (Breed, 1955), we must remain open to the possibility that this attitude has been adopted by the newsroom at large. This could potentially contribute to an explanation for the existence of a gap between journalists' perceptions of their journalistic prowess and the media performance of the companies they work for (Mellado, 2020). It would also further problematize quantitative research that is based on journalists' self-reported evaluations of their own level of autonomy.

To conclude this paper we emphasize that our theoretical approach to the discussion of our case study should be interpreted as an attempt to recalibrate scholarly attention within the field of journalism studies toward the sociological framework developed by Max Weber. We argue that the bureaucratic ideal type offers remarkably useful guideposts to engage in the analysis of complex organizational realities. Additionally, the concepts of *Herrschaft* and *Lebensordnung* provide opportunities to engage in in-depth theoretical discussions about journalistic autonomy. Based on our findings we reject the claim that contemporary organizations have moved past the bureaucratic organizational paradigm, a criticism that had falsely rendered Weber's bureaucratic ideal type outdated (Houghton, 2010). If anything, we argue that it would be highly beneficial to apply the Weberian lens to analyze fashionable organizational forms that emphasize self-managing teams or employee empowerment. Such an analysis might show how these too are expressions of an organizational rationale that is operationalized via the exercise of authoritative control. Other potential future applications of the Weberian perspective include the empirical verification of claimed diversity among organizational contexts wherein journalists operate (Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022) or the examination of "alternative" media companies' organizational evolution as they grow in popularity and size.

Nils Wandels has obtained a Master's Degree in Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of Ghent and a Master's Degree in Business Economics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Since obtaining his degrees in 2012 he has been active in the private sector as a corporate finance consultant for 7 years. In February 2020 he has started as a Ph.D. fellow at the department of Journalism Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His research focuses on the transformative impact of political and economic influences on journalistic values, attitudes, and practices, and on the ways these transformations are facilitated by journalists' organizational environments.

Jelle Mast holds a Ph.D. in Communication Sciences. His research is typically located at the intersection of visual communication, journalism practice, and professional ethics. Current research interests include visual gatekeeping and user-generated imagery in mainstream news media; journalism and terrorism; metajournalistic discourse; and genre hybridization in journalism and screen documentaries.

Prof. Dr. **Hilde Van den Bulck** (Drexel University) combines expertise in media structure and policies with expertise in media culture. Her work on media structures and policies focuses on the impact of technological, political, economic and cultural processes, especially how digitization and convergence affect legacy media. She specializes in public (service) media in that regard, recently analyzing how personalization strategies based on algorithms affect the core public media value of universality. Her most recent project focuses on American public media, especially on the potential of PBS as the most trusted US institution in a post-truth era. With regards to media culture, next to analyzing the relationships between media culture(s) and collective (national, ethnic, gender, and age-related) identities, she focuses on the role of mediated communication in celebrity culture and the celebrity apparatus. Before coming to Drexel, Hilde was a Professor of Communication Studies, Head of the Department of Communication, then Associate Dean of Research, and later Dean of the Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp in Belgium.

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Appendix A: list of interviewees

Interviewees	# interviews considered	Position	Company: title	Tenure	Start journalistic career	Other career highlights/positions
Karel Verhoeven	1 + 1 ("Alleen Elvis blijft bestaan")	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	2010 - today	1995	Journalist
Bart Sturtewagen	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	2006 - 2013	1988 (DS)	Journalist, chief editorialst DS
Peter Vander-meersch	2	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1999 - 2010	1988	Journalistic director, chief editor NRC Handelsblad, CEO Mediahuis Ireland
Dirk Achten	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1994 - 1999	1983	Journalist, political advisor (VLD), diplomat
Lou De Clerck	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1991 - 1995	1961	Journalist
Hendrik De Belder	1	Editorial manager	Mediahuis: De Standaard	/	1966	Journalist
Mark Deweerdt	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1989 - 1993	1981	Journalist, political advisor (CVP, NVA)
Liesbet Van Impe	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: Het Nieuwsblad	2013 - today	2004	Journalist
Pol Van Den Driessche	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: Het Nieuwsblad	1995 - 1999	1982	Journalist (DS) , political spokesman, political advisor, senator
Roger Schoemans	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: Het Nieuwsblad	1968 - 1994	1963	Journalist, writer
Jörgen Oosterwael	1	Chief editor	DPG Media: De Morgen	2018 - today	1989 (De Morgen)	Journalist, chief editor other publications
Yves Desmet	1	Chief editor	DPG Media: De Morgen	1994 - 2000; 2005 - 2007; 2012 - 2014	1982	Journalist, editorialst
Paul Goossens	1	Chief editor	DPG Media: De Morgen	1978 - 1991	1973	Journalist (DS)
Dimitri Anthonissen	1	Deputy chief editor	DPG Media: Het Nieuwsblad	2016 - today	1999	Journalist
Karl van den Broeck	1	Chief editor	Apache	2014 - today	1987	Journalist