

# WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN TALK ABOUT “MEDIA INDEPENDENCE”

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*Media independence is a contested concept that carries different meanings in different contexts. As a normative ideal, independence can be discussed on many levels, and media organisations, journalists, researchers and regulators often invoke the term in contradictory ways. In contemporary European media policy, the conceptual contestation over the meaning of independence has been further reheated by commercial media's attempts to reframe the distinction between commercial and public service media as a choice between “independent” and “state” media. The digital transformations and the emergence of new media actors and platforms also challenge the meaning and relevance of different conceptions of media independence and dependence. In this article, we discuss the changing uses of the notion of independence in current media policy discourse, including controversies between public service and commercial media, but also other settings where the notion is invoked. We then develop a more fine-tuned understanding of the different dimensions that media independence contains in a contemporary media environment. Finally, we discuss how the relational nature of independence makes it problematic to employ as a normative principle in media policy.*

**KEYWORDS** media independence; media policy; transparency; journalism; public service broadcasting

## Introduction

Independence is a central normative principle in media policy and journalism. It is also a controversial term that carries different meanings and connotations. Media independence is discussed among media industries, activists, journalists, researchers and regulators from varying perspectives. In different contexts, including debates on the position of media in authoritarian societies, the status of European public service broadcasters and “indie” media, different actors understand independence differently. By declaring independence—from state control, market forces or mainstream conventions—media organisations and actors seek to bolster their legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of audiences, peers as well as policy-makers. At the same time, however, as a concept, media independence gets increasingly difficult to pin down.

None of this is news. Independence is an “essentially contested concept”, inherently subject to endless revisions and interpretations (Gallie 1956; Karppinen and Moe [2013, 2014] for related discussions of “media governance” and “media markets”). Like other key concepts in political thought, its meaning cannot be settled by logic only. The tug of war over the meanings of media independence is at least as old as the idea of press freedom. Yet in the context of European media policy, the conceptual contestation over the meaning of independence is topical because of two tendencies. First, at both European

and national levels, commercial media actors have actively sought to reframe the distinction between commercial and public service media as a choice between “independent” and “state” media. Second, the digital transformations and the decline of legacy media organisations have given rise to new actors as well as new aspects of control and dependence. As a consequence of these transformations, the traditional line between journalism and advertising, for example, has increasingly become blurred by new forms of sponsored content. Furthermore, the increasing power of multinational news aggregators, search engines and social networking sites has also reheated the question of what we mean by media or journalistic independence.

Nick Couldry (2009) among others has argued that the technological, social and political dynamics of the current digital transformations are undermining our sense of “the media” as a privileged site for accessing a common world. For some, these changes mean the obsolescence of traditional media, as a detached institution with its own established professional codes and organisational forms, and their replacement with new models of collaborative and participatory communication.

In this context, the notion of media independence—like other core values of the “high modern” journalistic ethos (see, for example, Hallin 2006)—is now increasingly contested and even put into question. For many of the new actors that now produce journalism, including citizen initiatives, lone individuals or think tanks, independence might simply not be as relevant as other normative values, such as transparency, diversity or participation (McBride and Rosenstiel 2013). So is media independence just one of the mantras that legacy media organisations repeat, hoping it would bring them back to relevancy, even though its meaning remains vague and the practices it refers to are increasingly becoming irrelevant?

In general terms, independence refers to an absence of external control. Independence means freedom from the influence of others, but also describes the capacity of an individual or institution to make decisions and act according to its own logic. As a normative principle, independence can be debated on different levels, and linked to a variety of frameworks and discourses. On the level of general social theory, independence can be traced back to modern society’s functional differentiation of various spheres or fields of social life, discussed in classic sociological works from Weber to Bourdieu. In such contexts, independence relates to autonomy; self-government or the right of an institution to make its own rules and administer its own business. Following the deliberative turn of democratic theory (for example, Bohman 1998), the notion of media independence as a normative principle has often been linked to the Habermasian ideal of the autonomy of the public sphere from the systemic forces of state and economic power. As Habermas (2006, 411) put it, “mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimisation processes in complex societies only if a self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments”.

Here, independence is also closely intertwined with other basic ideals of the liberal-democratic understanding of media’s role in society, such as freedom of the press, critique of power, media as the fourth estate and journalists’ watchdog role. These positive connotations of the term make media independence an attractive idea for both those who assess the functioning of the media and for media organisations themselves to gain credibility. As James Bennett (2015, 2) argues, “media independence functions as a utopian vision of the media’s role in society for those who regulate it, own it, work within it and even study it”.

This article aims to discuss the changing uses and contexts of media independence, and to scrutinise its value in media policy. We first review some of the different uses of the

notion of independence in current media policy discourse, starting with controversies over public broadcasting and then moving beyond that to look at uses in other settings. On that basis, we develop a more fine-tuned understanding of the different dimensions the notion contains in a contemporary media environment. Finally, we discuss how the relational nature of independence makes it problematic to employ as a normative principle in media policy. We argue that, even though it fails to provide a neutral yardstick for assessing all types of media, the concept continues to serve a role as a normative ideal in many media policy debates.

### Conceptual Contestation in European Media Policy

The meaning of media independence as a normative value clearly depends on the context in which it is used. Many of the established discourses and connotations around the term can thus be traced back to specific historical and cultural contexts where media organisations have purposefully used the notion to legitimise their position. In countries with a politically aligned press, for instance, party papers’ attempts to declare independence from historical party political affiliations can be seen as part of a strategy to widen their readership from specific political segments to a mass audience (see Hallin and Mancini 2004, 26–27). Similarly, other types of media organisations’ interpretations of independence are always tied up with their own strategies of distinction.

Besides newspapers, public service broadcasting has traditionally been one of the central contexts where the notion of independence has been employed as political and normative value. Ever since the institutionalisation of the idea of broadcasting as a public service, the independence from the state, on the one hand, and commercial competition, on the other, has been a central concern in European broadcasting policy.

The ideal of independence can be found, in different forms, among the values and guiding principles of most European public service broadcasters. The Royal Charter of the BBC (2006), for example, states that “The BBC shall be independent in all matters concerning the content of its output, the times and manner in which this is supplied, and in the management of its affairs” (§6). Similarly, the statutes of the Norsk rikskringkasting (NRK) require that “NRK shall have editorial independence. NRK should guard its integrity and credibility in order to act freely and independently in relation to persons or groups who for political, ideological, economical or other reasons wish to influence the editorial content” (NRK-plakaten (2014) <http://www.nrk.no/informasjon/nrk-plakaten-1.12253428>, §12d, accessed 30 March 2016).

Importantly, however, the specific arrangements set up to facilitate independence have differed widely. Consider West Germany after the end of World War II as an example: while the British in the early 1920s, and later other European countries, opted for a national service, in 1945 each of the Allied occupants set up broadcasting services in their respective sectors of West Germany. The occupants all sought to steer radio and television away from the clasp of private actors, the state, politicians and other sectional interests. They were influenced by the British model, but they all decided on a decentralised solution in keeping with the general administrative and economic structure they were imposing (Humphreys 1994, 128–129; Lucht 2006, 96ff). This lay the foundation for the regional broadcasting system still in force in Germany, a design inherently meant to foster independence from undue political influences.

In practice, public service media in different countries and contexts have struggled to retain their real (political) independence with different means and results. The public media

systems in Germany and Nordic countries, for example, are generally considered to enjoy strong *de facto* independence, while in many other places (e.g. in southern Europe, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand) the procedures for assuring autonomy from governmental control have been seen as increasingly threatened (see, for example, Benson and Powers 2011; Hanretty 2010). Despite different institutional arrangements and their varying success in fostering independence in practice, in scholarly debates public service media have still been regarded, at least in principle, as the institutional space that best approximates the Habermasian ideals of autonomy from both state and commercial pressures (for an overview, for example, Garnham 1986, 1992; Moe and Syvertsen 2009).

In recent years, the debates between public service broadcasters and their commercial competitors over the status and remit of public service media around Europe have re-highlighted the contested nature of the concept. What seems new in recent European media policy debates is that commercial media actors across Europe have systematically attempted to reframe media policy debate by referring to public service media as “state media” and to themselves as the “independent” or “free” media. At the European level, the European Newspaper Publishers’ Association, for example, has consistently employed the distinction between the “independent press sector” or “free and independent press” and public service media as “state media” (for example, ENPA 2016). The insinuation is clearly that the main danger to media independence lies in undue state inference or public funding, and that public service media are, by their very nature, less independent and more susceptible to outside political pressures than market-based media outlets.

This line of argumentation has also been widely adopted by national media industry lobbyists. In Germany and Finland, for example, the advocates of private media industry objected to the new tax-based funding system of public service media on the grounds that it would threaten the operating conditions of the “independent media sector” and thus decrease genuine diversity and pluralism in the media (Herzog and Karppinen 2014). What counts as genuine diversity and pluralism, of course, is another example of conceptual contestation in media policy (see Karppinen 2013). Here, it clearly refers more to a market-driven definition of diversity as consumer choice, rather than the more complex ideas of social, cultural and political pluralism that the European public service media have historically advanced.

The independence of media—publicly funded media in particular—from politicians and the government is clearly a relevant aspect of media independence. It is only one such aspect, however. The rhetorical distinction between state media and independent media says nothing about other forms of external control or influence over journalism, such as advertising, media ownership and public relations.

The selective uses of independence in European media policy debates thus reflect the value of the notion as a means of news media organisations’ political lobbying and strategic communication (see, for example, Brüggeman, Esser, and Humprecht 2012). In the face of digitalisation, new actors and the disruption of traditional competitive dynamics of media markets, legacy news media, including both public service broadcasters and newspapers, have gradually lost the unquestioned, unchallenged status of “a fact of nature” in the digital age (Couldry 2009, 447). As a consequence, they increasingly need to legitimise and reaffirm their position in the eyes of both audiences and media policy-makers.

The centrality of independence in the strategic communication and lobbying of media organisations can be seen as a way to distinguish them from other types of media; in this case, private media from public service media, but more broadly also from

other actors that compete with mass media, such as social media and blogs. Alongside other notions such as quality, freedom and diversity, independence offers a central keyword in these efforts. The interest of different types of media varies, and so their rhetorical strategies also emphasise different dimensions of independence. While the rhetoric of private media industry systematically articulates independence with the context of state funding and government influence, the defenders of public service media tend to emphasise independence from advertising, media owners and other external economic and social interests.

It is important to note that different meanings and framings associated with politically contested notions, such as media independence, do not emerge spontaneously. Instead, media organisations and their interest groups often employ calculated discursive strategies to influence the framing of public and political discourse (see Brüggeman, Esser, and Humprecht 2012).

To be fair, a critique of public service media’s political dependence has some merits in various contexts. Comparative work on the relations between political systems and media systems has shown how ways in which independence are operationalised and governed vary between countries (for example, Hallin and Mancini 2004).

In some countries the public broadcasting institutions were deliberately set up as extensions of pillars of society so that radio and television channels came to closely represent pre-defined social groups, religious or political strands. The Netherlands would be a prime example. Elsewhere, such political parallelism was less of a deliberative design than an unwanted end result of the public service media system. An often-discussed instance of this would be the Italian system (for example, Hibberd 2001). In yet other places, the organisation of public service broadcasting, and media more generally, included an institutionalised distance from the state. This kind of institutionalised distance from the state is often referred to as “the arm’s length principle” (the following builds on Moe and Mjøs [2013]).

In a broad sense, the arm’s length principle is “implicit in the constitutional separation of powers between the judiciary, executive and legislative branches of government” (Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey 1989, 43). More specifically, the principle is often linked to cultural policy, where a system for funding was established after World War II in many countries (Mangset 2009, 276). In these set-ups, the governmental branch—for instance, a Ministry of Culture—is “facilitative not executive, so influence is exercised through setting broad policy and audit guidelines”, while “non-departmental public bodies operate and implement policy” (Taylor 1997, 449–451). In effect, then, the arm’s length principle entails delegating both the decisions and the contracting of a service, such as cultural activities, including the media. The idea is to institutionalise independence. “Independent regulatory authorities” of the media, found in Europe, represent such an institutionalisation of the arm’s length principle in media policy.

Laid out in this manner, the principle might appear uncontroversial. However, this is not the case, as illustrated by, for instance, cultural policy in France. Here, an active government agency has tended to intervene in cultural life by prioritising tasks, distributing funding and initiating projects (for example, Andrault and Dressayre 1987). This is mirrored in the actual governance of the media, such as in public service broadcasting regulations, where historically political interests have also reached within the organisation of the public broadcasters and media institutions more generally – much in line with what Hallin and Mancini described as the “Mediterranean or polarized pluralistic model” (2004, 106).

But even if we zoom in on a region of the world where the arm's length principle is applied in media policy, such as the Nordic region, the actual success of institutionalising independence differs over time and across systems (Moe and Mjøs 2013): the measures taken to hinder political appointments in public service broadcasting institutions, for instance, have not always been taken for granted. It was not until 2001 that the Norwegian NRK got a Director General with a political background from the political right, rather than the left. A similar pattern can be found elsewhere in the Nordic region: the current head of the Finnish Yleisradio (Yle) appointed in 2010 was the first director in 40 years to not come from the Social Democratic Party.

The nuances of independence in public and private broadcasting regulations are interesting in their own right. From a broader perspective, however, both public and private media tend to employ the notion of independence in a very selective manner. If we look beyond the context of European public service broadcasters and traditional newspapers, we see how the notion of media independence has many histories and is used differently in various contexts.

### Beyond Public versus Private Media

Public service media and commercial broadcasters or newspapers are not the only media outlets that have a claim on the term independence. Especially with new digital actors, the potential meanings of the term have multiplied.

Besides signifying independence from the state or business interests, independence can also mean distance from the mainstream conventions and the prevailing powers of the media industry itself. Often associated with the term "indie", the notion of "independent media" is used to refer to alternative, often non-profit or subversive media outlets. This label has also been picked up by many online activist, alternative and citizen media formations. Indymedia,<sup>1</sup> a media network established in 1999 associated with the broader global justice movement, for example, refers to "independent media" as grassroots, non-corporate and radical. In this sense, independent thus comes close to what has been called "alternative media" (Bennett 2015, 10–11). Similarly in the domain of film and music, independent has often meant a particular aesthetic style and creative distance from the mainstream or major corporations (for example, Hesmondhalgh 1999).

In comparison with the policy debates between public service media and commercial media around Europe, a distinct understanding of independence comes into play here. In addition to independence from the state authority and/or commercial interests, independence also refers to a particular way of doing things that is an alternative to the mainstream media and its logic. As opposition within the media industry complex, independence thus comes to mean distance from "the mainstream", which is seen as reflecting conventional or mass tastes and restricting creative freedom. If the mainstream media presents itself as independent because it follows its own logic of journalistic culture, for other independent media the same term means freedom from that very notion of mainstream journalistic culture. Instead of non-commitment or detachment, independent or indie, then, can also mean radical politicisation, orientation to social justice or political commitment.

In the digital era, independence can also refer to new voices and forms of journalism that are financially independent from the "legacy" media industry, such as social news or crowd-funding initiatives (Hunter 2015). Distance from institutional and corporate constraints of legacy media can be seen as empowering audiences and communities and

allowing stories to be funded that would otherwise not be covered. At the same time, however, it can be argued that the precarious nature of such work and the lack of institutional support mechanisms of large media organisations renders these new forms of digital journalism even more vulnerable to outside pressure from funders or other special interests (Hunter 2015).

Another related use of the term is “independent producers”, which, in European audiovisual media, is used for private television production companies who make programme content for broadcasters. For these companies, “independence” signifies distance in ownership from a certain other kind of media institutions, not dependence on the state or other external forces. Equally importantly, however, the independent producers are assumed to make content that differs from the traditional broadcasting institutions—or at least that is implied in EU directives which require certain percentages of broadcast content to be made by the so-called independent sector. But just as close scrutiny of broadcasting regulations uncovers discrepancies from the normative ideal of independence, so does a closer look at the sector of audiovisual media labelled “independent” reveal large, well-established actors owned by conglomerates clearly representing the mainstream.

With the emergence of the Internet as a media and communication platform, another layer of complexity has been added to media independence. Audiences are spread over a larger territory, and the advertising market became much more complicated on the Internet (for example, Turow 2012). The regulators are not contained within the clear boundaries of nation-states. Still, in principle, providers of media content answer to market forces and regulatory bodies in the same way traditional media providers do.

What makes for the complexity is perhaps the hyperbole surrounding online media (for critical perspectives, for example, see Fuchs 2014; Curran, Freedman, and Fenton 2012; van Dijck 2013). As illustrated by speeches and manifestos like the Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace by John Perry Barlow (1996), the promises commentators and industry actors find with the Internet seem greater than with new media technologies in the past. For many, the Internet, or specific services such as social media, harbours the potential to create a radically different media environment. The massive information available through search engines coupled with how easy it is to speak up in public could make us think the Internet provides media independence of a new kind.

Yet the possibilities go hand in hand with limitations: we now pay for our communication services by giving up metadata and data about ourselves and our everyday lives (van Dijck 2014). This has revitalised discussions of privacy and made more people attentive to issues of anonymity online (see, for example, Bartlett [2014] on the problematic aspects of online anonymity). Native advertising and other practices online that blur the line between journalism and sponsored content have also been seen to threaten the fundamentals of journalistic independence (Piety 2015). The power of new gatekeepers, such as search engines and social media platforms, to influence what people see and do not see online constitute new algorithmic or computational dependencies. Taken together, the growth of online media is obviously a key factor that forces us to reconsider the meaning and relevance of media independence.

While different uses of independence discussed here matter across borders, we should not ignore the relations between media independence and the political system and culture that lie within. Just as the current European debates on the independence of public service media are closely tied with specific national political cultures and media systems, and by no means cross-culturally generalisable, the term indie and its connotations are strongly rooted

in western popular culture and its institutional and aesthetic traditions. Thus, if media independence is a contested concept in European-level media policy debates, its meanings are even more varied in different media systems and political cultures.

In authoritarian regimes, the term can be used to refer to mere pseudo-freedom. Based on cross-national comparison, Daniela Stockmann (2013) argues that media independence in various authoritarian regimes does not directly follow from the introduction of market forces into previously state-controlled media systems. Instead, the meaning and reality of “independence” and its threats vary greatly between different political regimes and media systems. For instance, a number of “non-official” or “independent” media outlets have been formed in China over the past years. In this case, the label does not mean that these media would be any freer from state censorship than state-owned media. Instead, these outlets use independence as a label that serves to make them more credible in the eyes of the audiences, which in turn actually improves their efficiency as a tool for state propaganda (Stockmann 2013). Similarly, ideas of media and journalistic independence in Russia have not followed a linear path envisioned by many after the fall of the Soviet Union. Rather, the realities of media independence have been inseparable from the complexities of the political and economic and cultural environment of the country (Rodgers 2015).

Given its varying meaning, then, how can we go about separating and sorting the different dimensions of media independence?

### **Independence from What, for Whom and by What Means**

So far, we have argued that independence is a central rhetorical means for legitimation purposes for various types of media in different contexts. Based on its changing uses, it is clear that media independence is a relational concept. We must always ask by whom and for what purpose it is invoked (Bennett 2015). A relational concept has no essential content; there is no such thing as total or absolute independence in the realm of media. Instead, any media will always have to deal with a multitude of different types of constraints and external influences. Which of these are regarded as the most pertinent, or politically relevant, inevitably depends on the context.

We can heuristically separate these different uses by analysing whose independence, from what and by which means it is that we talk about. On this basis, we can suggest an initial, non-exhaustive typology of different aspects of media independence, listed in Table 1.

The first column in the table describes who the independent entity is. At the broadest level we can talk about the independence of a media system as a whole, either as a theoretical construct or when comparing different national media systems. Media organisations are the institutions and outlets for media production. These range from established media businesses and public institutions, to less obvious candidates such as telecom companies or online platforms. Journalism can be defined either broadly, encompassing a profession or a culture, or more specifically, as journalistic practices or products. The final entity that can enjoy more or less independence is the individual speaker. This category incorporates journalists, but also actors such as bloggers or citizens participating in public debate.

The second column presents social forces, from which these entities can be deemed more or less independent: the state or government; political parties or interests groups (cf.



**TABLE 1**  
Aspects of media independence

Whose independence?	From what?	By which means?
Media system	State/government	Law and statutes
Media organisations	Political parties	Organisational arrangements
Journalism	Special interest groups	Self-regulation
Individual voice/speaker	Market forces	Ethical guidelines
	Major media corporations	Professional culture
	“The mainstream”	

political parallelism); market forces or commercial interests; and the mainstream, typically understood as aesthetics, tastes and cultural conventions associated with popular media culture.

While all these forms of independence matter, they can be fostered by a variety of different formal and informal means. In many settings, a constitution lays down basic measures for media independence (e.g. in the form of press freedom paragraphs or freedom of speech more generally). In some systems, the roles of specific media institutions find their definitions in the constitution or in interpretations of it. German public service broadcasting, for instance, is understood to get its remit from the basic law’s (*Grundgesetz*) provisions of freedom of opinion and information (for example, Humphreys 1994). Elsewhere, specific acts or statutes cover specific media (such as broadcasting or audiovisual services), specific media regulatory provisions (such as must-carry rules for television) or specific institutional requirements. Laws governing public service broadcasters, for example, typically mention independence as a general guiding principle, but also stipulate more specific organisational arrangements concerning, for example, funding, appointment procedures or external supervision. Within media organisations, independence can also be fostered with other organisational arrangements, such as the separation of the editorial and advertising departments.

Independence can further be anchored in the form of self-regulation or professional guidelines. Ethical guidelines for journalists typically include independence from external influences as a central ethical principle. Individual media organisations or self-regulatory bodies can also issue their own rules or recommendations on journalists’ professional status or, for example, gifts or benefits that might compromise journalist’s independence. Beyond such formal recommendations, the ideal of journalistic independence is more informally embedded in the self-understanding and everyday practices of journalists almost universally (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013).

Whereas established media organisations might have a legally defined independence, along with a long history that gives precedent when it comes to manoeuvring issues of independence, many emerging actors might not. Importantly, formal does not necessarily equal better, or even well functioning: the independence of journalism as a profession is formally laid down in professional guidelines, statutes, ethical manifests and, in many cases, also laws. Still, the actual functioning of journalistic independence depends on a range of factors, and can be assessed not only based on the prescriptive definitions but more importantly based on actual performance (for example, Trappel, Nieminen, and Nord 2010; Syvertsen et al. 2014).

The categories are clearly not mutually exclusive: a journalist would ideally be independent from state and also commercial interests, and subject to laws, professional guidelines as well as her own ethical beliefs. One could thus draw lines between relevant entities

in different columns, depending on the specific case in question. While these aspects are by no means exhaustive of all the different contexts in which media independence may be brought up, what [Table 1](#) helps us do is distinguish between different levels of independence, and how they can work individually or in unison.

It is also important to note that actors can influence independence in different roles: the state can be a media owner but also a media regulator. The state can pose a threat to independence by various means of censorship or through the exercise of its monopoly on the use of force, something which to a saddening extent remains a problem in many parts of the world. Similarly, business actors can act as media owners and as employers of individual journalists, but also, for example, as buyers of advertising or content.

To sum up, laying out the different meanings, uses and contexts of media independence helps us sort out and explicate whose independence we are talking about, what they should be or are independent of, and by which means. This makes it easier to connect different claims and assess actual independence in specific debates. For the current claims of independent versus state media in Europe, for instance, the distinctions make it easy to see that the commercial companies downplay their dependence on the market, while simultaneously overemphasising the relations between public service broadcasters and the state or political parties.

Such an explication clearly only goes so far: it cannot “solve” the inherently controversial nature of the concept of independence. The meaning and relevance of independence always depend on the setting. In specific contexts, the notion is clearly useful. Besides debates on the political independence of public service media, the influence of advertising or media ownership on journalistic content, for example, continues to be a relevant issue for critical media research. Independence also continues to be a central notion in studies of journalistic culture and its professional norms. Research on journalistic cultures across the world, however, reveals that its conditions, limits and perceived threats vary across countries (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013).

In these contexts, independence clearly continues to be a central principle and in each case we should try to single out what aspects of independence/dependence we consider relevant. But if independence is understood as a thoroughly relative concept that can be invoked by almost anyone for almost any purpose, does it have any value left as a general normative principle in media policy debates? Is there any common standard for evaluating which media are more independent, or do we need to assess them all against their own conception of independence?

### **Beyond Independence?**

Independence can be seen as an example of a “high modern” journalistic principle that many regard now as increasingly irrelevant and unattainable. As Hallin (2006) has argued, the idea that journalism, as the fourth estate, could be truly independent of other institutions and rise above social divisions and contradictions to produce knowledge of universal validity was central to the “high modernism” of journalism. In a postmodern perspective, it is fashionable to instead emphasise subjectivity, relativism and the ubiquity of power relations within which all media and journalists operate.

It may even be questioned whether independence is always desirable. The notion of media independence is almost always understood positively. As already discussed, it has

clear critical element associated with self-determination, critique and progress. Yet, at the same time, the notions of independence and autonomy can also be linked to negative associations, like apolitical isolationism, self-sufficiency, lack of commitment, false objectivity or "the view from nowhere" journalism (for example, Rosen 2010). It can be argued that true independence from all outside interests is neither possible nor desirable. All media are interdependent with their social environment and its power relations, and the idea that the media should only be guided by their own insular logic and normative codes is not necessarily even very appealing.

As we have argued, the digital media environment and its complex interdependencies have only underlined this impossibility of genuine or absolute independence. All this raises questions of whether media independence, as a normative value used to assess media organisations in society, should be replaced with other, more fashionable values, such as transparency, openness or diversity.

Kelly McBride and Tom Rosenstiel (2013), for example, have explicitly argued for replacing "act independently" with "be transparent" as a guiding ethical principle of journalism. When journalism comes from varied sources, and not only a homogeneous group of professionals working for established media organisations, they argue that "the concept of journalists as clearly independent of those they cover will be more complex" and, "as a principle, transparency will drive journalists to actions and accountability that independence did not" (2013, 2 and 4).

Amit Schejter (2007) has also called for the media consumers' "right to transparency", implying that the calls for independence should be judged in relation to the stated aims and purpose of different media organisations. Instead of only rhetorical declarations of independence, Schejter argues that the various types of media should openly disclose their loyalties and underlying interest, so that citizens can assess them in their own right. In current media debates, the emphasis on such transparency is prominent in many ways. The debates on native advertising (Piety 2015), for instance, often end up calling for disclosure and transparency, so consumers can clearly distinguish promotional content from editorial content. Similarly, debates on the power of algorithms and new forms of gatekeeping highlight the importance of "algorithmic accountability and transparency" (Diakopolus 2015). In other words, when algorithms increasingly influence our exposure to information, software companies should disclose the ways in which they work so that users can understand their influence.

Because of the difficulty to establish any universally recognised standards for evaluating "media independence", it can be argued that normative judgements regarding the media, whether they concern their structure or the content, have increasingly shifted towards emphasising transparency, diversity and openness. If no media outlet can claim to be truly independent or objective, then the best we can hope for, it seems, is that there is the widest possible range of different types of media available that users can openly evaluate.

Transparency, openness and diversity too, however, are notions that almost anyone can embrace. This can also make them somewhat evasive and vacuous, leading many to believe that they too are becoming catchwords with little critical content. Transparency and diversity do not themselves identify any specific values or objectives that need to be advanced or protected. The problem with replacing independence with these other notions is therefore that they too are equally vague and contested concepts. Transparency alone cannot resolve the problems associated with media structures and democratic regulation of the media any more than media independence can.

## Conclusions

It is easy to criticise the notion of media independence for being unattainable and utopian, since no media outlet can truly claim to be absolutely independent. It is also clear that media independence is a concept that does not have a universal meaning. Instead, it can signify radically different, and often contradictory, ideals. As we have discussed, even in the specific context of current European media policy, its meaning vary between sectors of the media and between different types of media organisations.

Besides this basic ambiguity, the concept of independence can be further criticised for its instrumental uses in political lobbying. The notion is increasingly used by various sectors of the media to promote their own agenda and bolster their own legitimacy against unwanted challenges. What Damian Tambini (2012, 1) has said about the abuses of the term “press freedom” also applies to “media independence”: at its worst, “the term is increasingly used to protect the self-interest of one of many converging media sectors, to block reforms, and close down debate about the appropriate form of media accountability”.

Does this entail that the meaning of media independence has dissolved with its many uses? We should be careful not to assume that the current period in the history of media policy is more complex than previous ones. Actors have undoubtedly differed in their uses of media independence in earlier periods, too. The fact that the meaning of a concept is ambiguous or contested does not necessarily make it irrelevant. Otherwise, we could argue that many other normative concepts, including media freedom and democracy, have also become irrelevant mantras. It might be that the critical potential of the term seemed more effective at earlier stages of media history, such as the introduction of public service broadcasting from the 1920s or the fading of the party press in the Nordic region in the 1970s. Nevertheless, media independence, we have argued, does have relevance in current media policy debates.

As Bennett (2015) holds, as long as media independence serves as a positive vision or “utopian ideal” for journalists, activists, policy-makers or media organisations, then it clearly matters. Besides motivating people, the debate over the meaning of independence, and the various forces that it needs to be guarded from, is in itself often useful for clarifying the position of different types of media formations in society. But from the perspective of media policy and critical research, it is essential to acknowledge that the meaning of the concept cannot be fixed into any universal definition. Understanding media independence as a relational concept allows it to serve a role in debates about the position of different media in relation to other social forces, but it hardly provides a neutral yardstick that could be used to measure all types of media with common normative criteria.

What we talk about when we talk about media independence, then, are the characteristics of the relations between, on the one side, specific entities ranging from media institutions, via journalistic cultures, to individual speakers, and, on the other, their social environment, including the state, political interest groups, the market or the mainstream culture. Media independence is not one definite thing, and acknowledging that would often lead to a more fruitful media policy debate.

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1. See indymedia.org (accessed 30 March 2016).

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