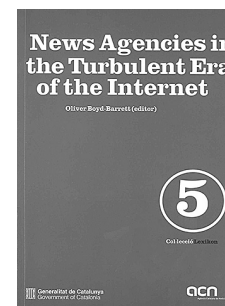


BOYD-BARRET, O. (editor) *News Agencies in the Turbulent Era of the Internet*. Barcelona: Government of Catalonia, Catalan News Agency, 2010. (Col·lecció Lexikon; 5). 313 p. ISBN 978-84-393-8303-1

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### News models to overcome technological and economic challenges

News agencies have been the focus of numerous studies since the mid-1970s, although not so much from a professional perspective as from a political interpretation: their hierarchical, oligopolistic structure, the world expansion linked to the development of capitalism, their already pioneering nature as a global medium in the 19th century, their relationship with states or influence on decisions regarding client media's news agendas have largely been the focus of attention.

The academic and research career of the Irish professor, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, editor of the book reviewed here, has been related to studies of international communication and particularly to the first thorough studies of international news agencies. His work is a splendid multidisciplinary contribution in which his analysis of the media provides us with a precise portrayal of other political, economic and cultural aspects of international society.

This new book provides an interesting, critical view of the current state of agencies, although it has an evident geographical imbalance: eight chapters (out of a total of fourteen) are dedicated to European agencies, almost all of them very well-known and with a lot of literature available on them, while Latin America (Brazil?) and Africa (why not include PANA Press?) are not represented at all in the study. There are fifteen international specialists and professionals who analyse, together with Boyd-Barrett, the agencies' search for solutions given the crisis in their business model. The book does not have a defined structure in spite of its length; the chapters come after one another without any logic that allows them to be grouped geographically or into similar or opposing agencies, nor to explore similar solutions to the crisis they are facing.

In chapter 1, Boyd-Barrett reviews the overall evolutionary trends of agencies over the last ten years and analyses the many varied reasons why they have managed to survive, from direct sales to individual consumers as a new source of revenue to the continuation of state aid, including the great devel-

opment of multimedia services and their enterprising and pioneering nature in searching out highly specialised market segments. Nevertheless, in spite of the agencies' capacity to adapt to all crises and to emulate their new environments, the author puts forward the threats, fundamentally economic, they will have to face in a near future that combines great potential with equally great professional and economic uncertainties: the possible divide between users and agencies, the interdependence of old and new agencies in the BRIC countries (an acronym for the emerging countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China), the analysis and self-criticism concerning how effective they are in giving a voice to new social groups and how to get the most out of their historical brand image are just some of the issues these media will have to tackle over the next ten years.

In chapter 2, lecturer and journalist Anna Nogué analyses the ten years of the Catalan News Agency (ACN), which has not suffered from the adaptation problems of other agencies as it was set up in the midst of the digital era with a public service mission.

In chapter 3, Camille Laville, a lecturer at Nice University, reviews the history of the French news agency Agence France Presse (AFP) which, although the agency has had an international vocation since it was established (the old Havas), its francophone coverage and economic dependence on the state have helped it to retain a strong historical component of national identity.

In the next chapter, Marco Tortora, with training and experience in economic geography, presents an original point of view by analysing the news industry in Italy, comparing the different strategies adopted to tackle the crisis, on the one hand by a national agency such as ANSA and, on the other, by two international media, namely Associated Press (AP) and *The Washington Post*. Uncertainty is the common denominator for these three agencies.

Chapters 5 and 6 abandon the European scene to tackle, firstly, the parallels and occasional differences between the Australian Associated Press (AAP) and the New Zealand Press

Association (NZPA). In his analysis, Gavin Ellis, a New Zealand journalist, includes the effect of the small national market on the two media, as well as the ownership structure of both. Secondly, Canadian Patrick White, with professional experience in various media, presents the Canadian agency scenario, where the historic Canadian Press must take on the new services that have appeared in the last few years. Returning to Europe, Jürgen Wilke, a lecturer at Mainz University, ends this first half of the book with an analysis of the German news market, dynamic and competitive, in which Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) stands out in terms of volume of clients, technical and human resources and its diversification of content and resources.

In chapter 8 Ignacio Muro, Director of the EFE agency until 2005, proposes more balanced news coverage which abandons the national perspective and interests in favour of a more global, transnational view, looking for wider cultural identities. EFE's experience in Latin America and intranational space (pg. 173), which is seen as regional space, forms the basis of the author's proposal.

Alternative agencies are also present in the book with Stijn Joye's review of the Inter Press Service and its journalism for global change, a well-established project dating back to the 1970s, together with others such as the pool of non-aligned agencies, also mentioned by Joye (Pérez del Pozo 1994).

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with two models of genuinely national agencies. In the first, journalists Jonas Batista and Susana Ribeiro make a laudable effort to gather data and analyse the Portuguese agency LUSA, probably the least well-known of the European agencies and the most traditional today in terms of its business model as a medium for the media. Compared with the Portuguese case, the British Press Association, analysed by renowned author Chris Paterson, reveals its chameleon-like nature in the fight to control the market and exploit content.

The last three chapters are dedicated to news models and agencies from emerging countries (India, Russia and China) whose development, although these agencies have not been recently set up, is quite illustrative insofar as it runs parallel to the political and economic changes happening in their countries. Here we also feel the book's lack of other geographical scenarios.

In his review of the complex history of India's agencies, the specialist K. M. Shrivastava highlights their limitations (even the PTI, which has the greatest international presence) to bring about, even today, Nehru's dream of a large international agency for his country.

In chapter 13, lecturers I. Vartanova and T. Frolova study the complex media system in Russia, an instrument used to transform the previous regime. In spite of the complexity of the subject in question, the authors provide a systematic, clear explanation of how the old, propaganda-based structures evolved towards the new news institutions that had to overcome the contradiction between what is global and what is local (pg.

265), finally describing the huge impact the economic crisis is having on the media industry.

The researcher from Westminster University, Xin Xin, is the author of the last chapter, dedicated to the Chinese agency Xinhua and its new commercial operations, such as "Xinhua 08", which might serve as an example for agencies from similar political and economic systems, as well as the dual informative and propaganda function carried out systematically by the agency. Although it's true that this Chinese agency is one of the most interesting systems today, the author deserves equal merit for composing a chapter that, like the agency, defies the classic concepts used to study this medium, such as the distinction between national and international agencies or agencies' role as "wholesalers" or "retailers" (pp. 287-288), concepts that do not correspond to the new functions of this medium in a global society.

In short, the crisis caused by the internet for the business model of news agencies is affecting the quality and credibility of international information from all media. It seems that free access en masse to content, far from facilitating more specialised, critical knowledge, is helping to standardise and globalise opinions and trivialise content. Agencies' professionalism and the value they add to information is their brand image, which they must revalue with regard to their clients, be they media, non-media or individuals. Their raw material is delicate; it creates knowledge, destroys prejudices and brings cultures together through their specific traits, not by globalising them.

In conclusion, the book provides researchers, academics and professionals with up-to-date, useful knowledge on the most well-known agencies, as well as being a guide for others who are sailing in the uncertain waters of global news that combine the challenge of technological development with a harsh economic crisis.

## References

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