**Abstract Ecrea – Bart Vanhaelewyn – Perceived autonomy in Belgian newsrooms: a systematic overview of different media, beats and role perceptions based on a representative survey**

Journalism today is perceived as undergoing major changes due to presumed intertwining with commercial and political actors as well as with stakeholders from civic society and the echo chambers of social media. Therefore journalists are facing new (or reinforced) challenges as well as a decreased sense of autonomy. This subject has been broadly documented in academic literature focusing on specific journalist groups, specific medium typologies or specific news beats (e.g. Henderson, 2019; Mathisen, 2017; Skovsgaard, 2014). It is however less clear how these perceptions can be related to the way journalists themselves assess their professional role and professional values. This paper will first analyze extensively how perceived autonomy differs for a wide typology of professional journalists. Secondly we will analyze how journalists professional role perceptions schemes will mediate this relationship.

A profiling survey was taken among a representative sample of 1,223 professional journalists in Belgium in 2018. The dependent variables included in the analysis were 'satisfaction with individual autonomy', 'satisfaction with editorial autonomy against commercial interference' and 'satisfaction with editorial autonomy against non-commercial pressure' using 5-point Likert scales. The independent variables include elements of media characteristics (public/commercial, global/national/regional/local, media typology) and field of topics. In a second phase, professional role perceptions were introduced as mediator variables.

In general, it appears that journalists are particularly satisfied with their individual autonomy, while the satisfaction with the editorial autonomy against commercial and non-commercial pressure is lower. However, we do find significant differences when segmenting for different media types and topics. While media type is more related to the satisfaction of the individual autonomy, the characteristics of the news beat is closely related to the satisfaction with the editorial autonomy against commercial and non-commercial interference. Journalists working for television news outlets, especially for commercial broadcasters, report significantly lower satisfaction with the individual autonomy. Journalists covering topics related to entertainment (media, celebrities, culture, lifestyle and tourism) or related to science, health and environment report a lower satisfaction with the editorial autonomy against commercial and non-commercial pressure. Moreover, the professional role perception mediates this effect. In the relation between news beat and satisfaction with the editorial autonomy against commercial pressure, the market-oriented role perception (providing entertainment, creating context for advertisers, reporting on new trends) operates as a mediator, while in the relation between news beat and satisfaction with the editorial autonomy against non-commercial pressure, the disseminator role perception (delivering objective and reliable news, reporting in a comprehensible way) operates as a mediator.

These findings implicate that journalists perceive their individual and editorial autonomy not only in relation to the media they work for and the beat they cover. Journalists scale their autonomy also in relation to their perceived role in society. Having a market oriented role perception make journalists more susceptible to commercial interference, while those adopting a disseminator role experience less pressure by non-commercial agents. Future research and new policies on perceived autonomy should not only focus on the sector and news beat, but should also take the professional role perception into account.