Between isolation and interference

Managing the independence of scientific authorities: the case of EFSA

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Basic (analytical) distinction

- Independence from business, non-governmental organizations (and the media)
- Independence from politics (and national agencies)

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Strict independence: important value in terms of impartiality, neutrality, objectivity

- No interference from business, non-governmental organizations
- Enhances professional reputation, moral authority

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But: does not reduce information asymmetry

- How effective is isolation when it comes to regulating food safety?
- Strategic behavior
- Information asymmetry even further increased, with possible negative effect on scientific quality, professional reputation, moral authority

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Strict independence: science-based rather than politically driven decisions

- Separating science (risk assessment) from politics (risk management)

- Strengthens continuity and credibility of decisions and increases public confidence

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But: may not always be feasible and desirable

- Science is not completely objective
- It cannot wholly resolve conflicts of value and interests
- Too much emphasis on separation might even be counterproductive, elicit political interference, and come at the expense of public confidence

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Dilemma

- Maintain strict independence, in splendid isolation?

Or

- acknowledge dependence on other actors, cooperate, with risk of interference?

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Way out: structural independence or rather institutional autonomy

- Independence is 'all-or-nothing' concept
- From independence to autonomy
- *Granted* autonomy versus *acquired* autonomy

What would this mean in the case of EFSA?

- Organizational governance
  - Management board
  - Executive director
  - Staff

- Organizational culture
  - Declarations of interest
  - Culture of independence

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Way out: cooperation and 'checks and balances'

- Yet, in the actual scientific process:
  - cooperation, i.e. interaction with and involvement of business, non-governmental organizations, national agencies
  - building in 'checks and balances', i.e. not relying on single client or stakeholder for information, or single expert for assessment

What would this mean in the case of EFSA?

- EFSA scientific committee and panels
  - Assessment criteria
  - Decision making
  - Independence of experts (the issue of balance)
  - Involvement of other actors (process management)

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Managing EFSA's independence: a paradox

- Reduction of information asymmetry through cooperation is likely to *increase* scientific quality, professional reputation, moral authority, and thus to *enhance* institutional autonomy.

- The *more* frequent the interaction and involvement, the *more* varied the actors with whom cooperation, the *more* structurally independent the agency will probably be.