Media Accountability —
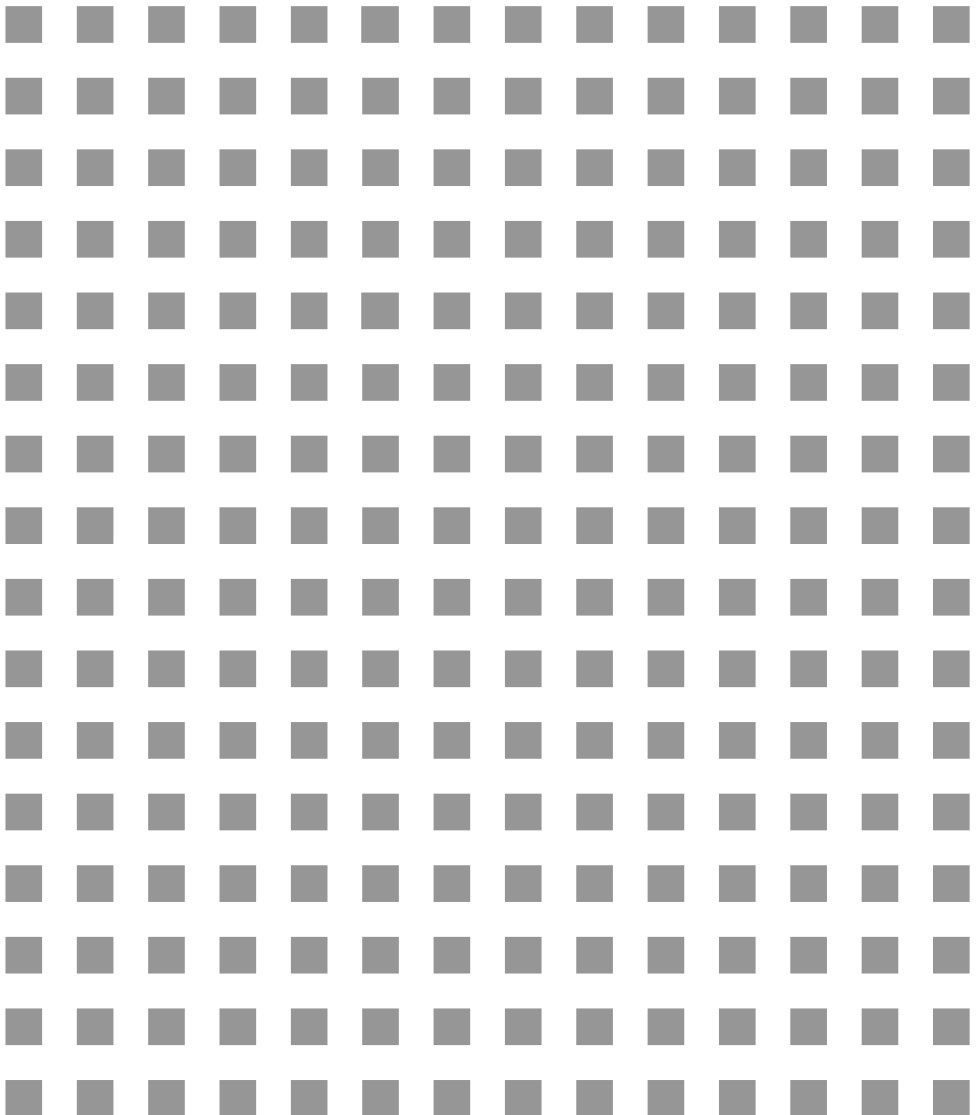# Between Tradition and Innovation

Editors' introduction:
Media accountability —
between tradition and innovation

■■■■■■■

Epp Lauk[1]
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ, FINLAND

Michał Kuś
UNIVERSITY OF WROCŁAW, POLAND

Media accountability systems are more necessary now than ever given the unprecedented privatization and deregulation of electronic media throughout the world (Christians & Cooper, 2009).

This statement is only one example of multiple voices claiming for development of media accountability instruments in contemporary media, as a countermeasure for their numerous deficiencies. The seven articles of this issue of *Central European Journal of Communication* focus on various topics related to media accountability, both in the context of traditional and innovative forms.

Unlike the other contemporary (globalized) industries, aimed at producing profit, the media have another important role in democratic societies — that of providing essential information and analysis, and liaising between governments and their electorate or, in other words — serving the public interest. However, the increasing competitiveness and power to "control the gates of publication" as well as impersonality of publication decisions (McQuail, 2004) contribute to disregarding public service obligation. Furthermore, "increasingly conscienceless media have become willing to victimize individuals for profit, in respect of their privacy, reputation or innocence" (Ibid.). The recent *News of the World* phone hacking case serves as an edifying example of how far journalists can go in violating moral and legal norms in the hunt for sensational stories. Such cases also demonstrate the scarcity of society's means for holding powerful media corporations within acceptable limits without substantially restricting freedom of expression.

The enduring tension and balance seeking between the business and public service roles of the media have been articulated in the concepts of media's social re-

---

sponsibility and accountability since the 1940s (e.g. Hutchins Commission, 1947; Hodges, 1986; Christians, 1988; McQuail, 1997; 2003; Bertrand, 2000; Plaisance, 2000, etc.), and have produced a number of means for monitoring the quality of media performance — the more or less institutionalized media accountability instruments (e.g. Bertrand, 2003; von Krogh, 2008; Ettema, 2009; Koene, 2009; Eberwein et al., 2011). The accountability concept is widely contested by media researchers who have suggested different definitions (the best known one coming from Louis Hodges, 1986) and pointed out difficulties of its compatibility with the professional autonomy of journalists and with news organizations' editorial independence. McQuail's definition encapsulates the core aspects concerning media accountability and its relation to responsibility in the following way:

> Accountable communication exists where authors (originators, sources, or gatekeepers) take responsibility for the quality and consequences of the publication, orient themselves to audiences and others affected, and respond to their expectations and those of the wider society (McQuail, 2003, p. 19).

The permeating question in the academic research and discussion, as well as at a practical level is about finding efficient means of accountability, consistent with social responsibility and with principles of free expression (McQuail, 2004), and which would also contribute to the media's credibility and trust building between the media and their audiences. In the current issue, Torbjörn von Krogh (*Changing political attitudes towards media accountability in Sweden*) gives a diachronic insight into Swedish policymakers' debates in the parliament (in 1967–1970 and 2005–2010) on media deficiencies and suggested means for improvement. He demonstrates the change of attitudes over time towards media accountability measures from government to governance.

McQuail outlines two components of accountability for free media: answerability and liability. The "liability model" is realized through legislation and aimed at preventing (or punishing for) harm with material penalties (McQuail, 2003, p. 203). However, the statutory regulation and laws do not much contribute to trustful communicative relations with the audiences, based on moral and professional values and adherence to quality standards of content and performance. Considering the current media political developments, especially in the light of EU directives and guidelines, which emphasize "light touch regulation" (less state intervention) and self-regulation,[2] the importance of the "answerability model" appears higher than ever. Answerability is most consistent with freedom of expression and is based on voluntary dialogue and debate without a threat of material penalties (Ibid.). Answerability presupposes openness and readiness of news media organizations and journalists for accepting criticism, either internal or external. It also presupposes focusing and

---

[2] E.g. European Audiovisual Media Services Directive. Retrieved March 18, 2012, from http://ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/reg/tvwf/index_en.htm.

keeping public attention to media quality issues. Therefore, answerability seems to have the greatest potential of raising media's credibility among their users.

On the other hand, in practical application, the strengths of the "answerability model" often appear as its weaknesses: media organizations are not eager to open up debates on their newsgathering and publication practices; adherence to ethical principles is voluntary and can be easily ignored; the threshold for accepting criticism, especially from outside the media, is often very high.

Various established "answerability"-based mechanisms exist in order to meet the accountability demand, such as codes of ethics, press councils, ombudsmen and readers' editors and "public hearings" or "social auditing" (cf. Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Jaehnig & Onyebady, 2011). There are also a number of non-institutionalized forms of accountability, such as media critical pages and articles, correction corners in the newspapers, academic media criticism (studies), journalists' blogs, etc. Along with the spread of the Internet and social media, new accountability instruments that involve active participation of audience have appeared: users' comments to the articles and broadcasts, blogs, various Facebook groups and pages, etc. The Internet has undoubtedly enlarged the range of accountability instruments, but the question is if (and how) can they make media organizations more accountable to the public? Is the Internet solving old problems or rather creating new problems with media accountability? Susanne Fengler in her article (*From media self-regulation to 'crowd-criticism': Media accountability in the digital age*) examines potentials of new online forms of media accountability, emerging in the era of dynamic development of media technology (especially in context of Web 2.0), and their impact on traditional instruments of media self-regulation.

The efficiency of the "traditional" self-regulative accountability instruments, the press councils and codes of ethics, has been largely questioned. As a concept, self-regulation clearly aims at ensuring quality of journalistic performance in serving the public interest. On the other hand, "they protect professionals by letting practitioners decide for themselves and by themselves what matters in the realm of ethics" (Glasser & Ettema, 2008, p. 528). Quite obviously, from the perspective of the media industry, the major incentive of self-regulation is not serving public interest but avoiding external, especially state, intervention and not to explain, but justify their activities. In some countries (e.g. Finland, Norway, the Netherlands), ethical codes and press councils have a long tradition and tangible prestige among journalists and public. Their relative success is, among other factors, based on a developed civic culture and public control able to keep the critical attention on media's ethical issues. These countries are also known as having news cultures that encourage reflexivity and debate about journalistic standards. Mostly, however, where the press councils exist, they have been described as dysfunctional and having little authority and influence on journalists' behaviour and news media's performance at large (Eberwein et al., 2011). Furthermore, cases of using self-regulation as a blind behind which business interests are pursued have also been described (e.g. Lauk,

2008). The codes and self-regulatory bodies remain toothless and have limited impact as accountability instruments as long as they continue functioning as a "shelter for the guild" and do not prove the validity of their practices through an open public debate. However, as Glasser & Ettema (2008) argue, the public seldom plays a meaningful role in creation, application or revision of the codes. Very often, the larger public is even unaware of the existence of such codes, although they may help the readers and viewers to acknowledge where journalists are committed to the professional norms and where the norms are breached. A study presented in the current issue by Harmen Groenhart (*Users' perception of media accountability*) investigates the rather neglected, but very important, field of media accountability research, concentrating on public perception of media accountability. He argues that communication about the quality of the professional process is important for giving the media users insight in the profession. The awareness of the existence, variety and nature of accountability instruments used by the media increases the public's trust in the news media. News media "may improve their image by creating and maintaining an infrastructure of accountability instruments that is accessible for those who are looking for it."

Another aspect is how to increase people's fastidiousness towards media content and performance. Hence a degree of media literacy among the public is vital. Media literate citizens may create a substantial source of pressure against the media's commercial goals and for their public service duties.

Ombudsmen are seen as mediators between the news organizations and their audiences, functioning as transparency agents for the public. Giving regular account of their outlet's successes and failures, ombudsmen have great potential of generating and keeping up public attention on media critical issues. Efficiency of their activity, however, does not solely depend on professional competence of individual ombudsmen, but far more on the economic situation of their media organizations, who tend to give them up when facing budget cuts, as Huub Evers tells us on the Netherlands' example (*The news ombudsman: Lightning rod or watchdog?*). Moreover, the double loyalty problem — being simultaneously the readers' "ambassador" and the company's representative — generates a dilemma between the commitment to professional values and commitment to company's other interests (e.g. avoiding from damaging its imago). However, Fernando Oliveira Paulino, Laurindo Leal Filho and Luiz Martins da Silva (*Radio ombudsman services of Brazilian Public Radio (EBC) as media accountability instruments*) describe a positive experience of introducing an Ombudsman's Office in Brazilian public service radio, where the ombudsman contributes to the dialogue with various sectors of public, and transparency.

Meaningful accountability presupposes self-examination and reflexivity of the news media. First of all, it means developing and maintaining a "tradition of sustained, systematic, and intellectually sound criticism of the press" (Carey, 1974, p. 227). This definitely presupposes admitting and correcting mistakes and exposing unethical practices of journalists. Principally, the journalists should apply

to themselves and their professional behaviour the same high standards to which they hold others (Glasser & Ettema, 2008). In practical terms, however, there is little readiness and initiative of the news media and journalists for such critical scrutiny. As a recent survey on 12 countries[3] confirms, journalists cross-nationally tend to assess the impact of the criticism in news media on their professional behavior low (54% of respondents). The proportion of journalists who are actively involved in media criticism is small (16% of respondents). The majority of journalists (59%) occasionally or never publish media critical articles. On the other hand, journalists are highly committed to their news organizations' internal rules and regulations, which journalists mentioned as the most influential factor that motivates their behavior. This also indicates that journalists tend to internalize the newsroom's requirements and act accordingly. Loyalty to the employer's interests and solidarity with the peers in the field seem to be strong barriers to reflexivity. News organizations, even if they are able, are not motivated to exercise self-examination. The British *Guardian* is the only newspaper in the world with transparent practice of auditing organization's performance from ethical and journalistic perspectives (Jaehnig & Onyebady, 2011).

An integral element of any form of accountability is "responsiveness" — listening to, and considering the public (cf. Bardoel & D'Haenens, 2004). "Responsiveness" refers to an ongoing dialogue and debate between the media professionals and their audiences, as well as a readiness to explain the motives behind editorial decisions, to justify argumentations, etc. (Lauk & Denton, 2011, p. 223). Certain traditions of media critical debate exist in countries with a high level of journalistic professionalism and developed civic culture (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands, UK, Switzerland). In the countries without a tradition of public dialogue in combination with low level of professionalism, media critical issues are discussed rarely if at all. However, increasing economic pressure and market competition are de-motivating factors for such dialogue cross-nationally.

The Internet has created an unlimited opportunity for networked individuals to monitor and critically analyze the performance of journalists and the news media. New practices and instruments, including user generated content and citizen journalism have emerged in the online space, allowing users to take an active part in the media critical debate today. It means that also the number of stakeholders involved in media accountability processes has increased significantly. Research however, shows that the potential is still much larger than the actual use of these means for media critical purposes. The most popular means for public feedback

---

[3] These are preliminary results of the 2011 online survey of an EU funded MediaAct research project (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe) among journalists in 12 countries: Austria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Jordan, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia; total 1732 respondents. The project's homepage: www.mediaact.eu.

and criticism are online comments to articles and broadcasts. They are, however, very seldom analytical, but more often than not emotional and opinion-loaded. Competent analyses appear more likely in the blogs of journalists, academic researchers and independent analysts. Empirical evidence, however, tells us that so far, the potential of journalists' blogs as means of journalistic accountability seems to be problematic for many reasons. Halliki Harro-Loit, Juhan Lang and Marju Himma-Kadakas in their article (*Assessing potentials of journalists' blogs as an instrument of media accountability in Estonia*) demonstrate that journalists hesitate to criticize peers or another publication; they rather use their blogs "for self-promotion than expressing the mode of personal freedom and responsibility," and for some journalists, the blog serves as their personal portfolio. The authors conclude that making use of a blog as a journalistic medium largely depends on the individual journalist's personality.

Individual journalists are not necessarily free to take responsibility for their actions (cf. Phillips et al., 2010). As Bourdieu (2005, p. 41) argues, journalism is a "weakly autonomous field" where the freedom of action of a journalist depends on where she is situated within a particular field. Editors-in-chief, sub-editors and reporters all have different degrees of freedom for personal decision-making within a news organization. Journalists' ability to independently solve ethical dilemmas depends on the internal climate and commercial or political ambitions of news organizations, as well as the level of professionalism and journalistic culture at large. In highly commercially oriented media the working environments are not conducive to supporting journalists' ethical considerations, but heavily influenced by economic interests of advertisers and owners. In her article, Anastasia Grynko (*Ukrainian journalists' perceptions of unethical practices: Codes and everyday ethics*) argues that accepting cash for news coverage is a widespread practice in Ukrainian news organizations. Majority of journalists regard this practice unethical from their personal point of view, but they also tend to justify it with low salaries and general high level of corruption. They do not much feel personally responsible regarding cash payments on the organizational level (to the editors-in-chief or other high ranking staff), as this seems to be beyond their control. This attitude also seems to harmonize with the aforementioned survey's results revealing that journalists feel first of all responsible for their own conscience and only after that their sources, public and other stakeholders.

The question of media's social responsibility and accountability goes back to the 1940s and has been topical ever since. However, as Bertrand (2000) observes, we can find also the interesting paradox that "media are accused of every sin at the time when they have never been better." It means that the expectations towards the media have increased significantly in the process of their historical development, especially in the era of the Internet. The question remains, how the media will respond to these expectations.

REFERENCES

Audiovisual Media Services Directive. Retrieved March 18, 2012, from http://ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/reg/tvwf/index_en.htm.

Bardoel, J., d'Haenens, L. (2004). Media meet the citizen: Beyond market mechanisms and government regulations. *European Journal of Communication*, 19 (2), pp. 165–194.

Bertrand, C.J. (2000). *Media ethics & accountability systems*. New Brunswick: Transactions Publishing.

Bertrand, C.J. (ed.) (2003). *An Arsenal for Democracy: Media Accountability Systems*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2005). The political field, the social science field, and the journalistic field. In: Benson, R., Neveu, E. (eds.). *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, pp. 29–47.

Carey, J.W. (1974). Journalism and criticism: The case of an undeveloped profession. *The Review of Politics*, 36(April), pp. 227–249.

Christians, C. (1988). Can the public be held accountable? *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 1, pp. 50–58.

Christians, C.G., Cooper, T.W. (2009). The search for universals. In: Wilkins, L., Christians, C.G. (eds.). *Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*. New York: Routledge, pp. 55–70.

Eberwein, T., Fengler, S., Lauk, E, Leppik-Bork, T. (eds.) (2011). *Mapping Media Accountability — in Europe and Beyond*. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag.

Ettema, J.S. (2009). New media and new mechanisms of public accountability. *Journalism*, 10 (3), pp. 319–321.

Glasser, T.L., Ettema, J.S. (2008). Ethics and eloquence in journalism. *Journalism Studies*, (9) 4, pp. 512–534.

Hodges, L.W. (1986). Defining press accountability: A functional approach. In: Elliot, D. (ed.). *Responsible Journalism*. Beverly Hills: Sage, pp. 13–31.

Hutchins Commission (1947). *A Free and Responsible Press. A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspapers, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books*. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago. Retrieved March 18, 2012, from http://www.archive.org/stream/freeandresponsib029216-mbp#page/n5/mode/2up.

Jaehnig, W.B., Onyebadi, U. (2011). Social audits as media watchdogging. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, (26) 1, pp. 2–20.

Koene, D. (2009). *Press Councils in Western Europe*. Diemen: AMB. Retrieved March 18, 2012, from http://www.rvdj.nl/rvdj-archive/docs/Research%20report.pdf.

Krogh, T. von (ed.) (2008). *Media Accountability Today… and Tomorrow. Updating the Concept in Theory and Practice*. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Lauk, E. (2008). Freedom for the media? Issues of journalism ethics in Estonia. *Informacijos mokslai/Information Sciences,* 47, pp. 59-65. Retrieved March 18, 2012, from http://www.leidykla.eu/mokslo-darbai/informacijos-mokslai/informacijos-mokslai-2008-47-tomas/.

Lauk, E., Denton, M. (2011). Assessing media accountability — in Europe and beyond. In: Eberwein, T., Fengler, S., Lauk, E, Leppik-Bork, T. (eds.). *Mapping Media Accountability — in Europe and Beyond*. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag, pp. 217–228.

McQuail, D. (1997). Accountability of media to society — principles and means. *European Journal of Communication*, 12, 4, pp. 511–529.

McQuail, D. (2003). *Media Accountability and Freedom of Publication*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

McQuail, D. (2004). Open lecture, May 5, 2004, University of Minho. Retrieved March 18, 2012, from www.cecs.uminho.pt/events/mcquail/D_McQuail_openlecture.pdf.

Phillips, A., Couldry, N., Freedman, D. (2010). An ethical deficit? Accountability, norms and the material conditions of contemporary journalism. In: Fenton, N. (ed.). *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*. London: Sage, pp. 51–68.

Plaisance, P.L. (2000). The concept of media accountability reconsidered. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 15 (4), pp. 257–268.