

Pro-active media accountability? — an Austrian perspective



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ABSTRACT: The article analyzes media accountability instruments in Austria and how far they are designed to allow transparent, pro-active and participative operations. Firstly, the authors will have a look at traditional media accountability instruments and examine how they act, what their deficits are and to what extent they include audiences. Secondly, web-based accountability processes will be analyzed, focusing on their participation possibilities and on the problem of reactivity. Thirdly, the state of the art and the chances of online transparency of news production will be discussed. Next to a practice check, the implementation of such tools will be discussed. The authors argue that transparency on all these levels is an important, yet undervalued principle to media accountability. The analysis will be completed with recent data from the Austrian part of a comparative study on media accountability done in the context of the EU-funded RP7-framework research project MediaAcT.

KEYWORDS: transparency, media accountability, participation, Web 2.0, Austria



INTRODUCTION

A reader of a regional newspaper finds in his paper a compromising article. He wants to complain about this article and decides to address his complaint at the press council. After two months, a decision is made. But who remembers this article after two months? Should there not be faster ways of keeping the media accountable, at least for small errors?

In order to not only depend only on reactive¹ tools judging about journalistic misbehaviour, there has to be a system of different media accountability instruments.

¹ Reactive in the meaning of reacting to an already made mistake.

In this article, the authors want to have a look at pro-active² and participative media accountability instruments in Austria. After having a closer look at the traditional media accountability instruments in Austria (e.g. press councils, correction boxes, readers' advisory boards or ombudsman) and their ways to include audiences, the article examines innovative, web-based accountability processes (e.g. media watch blogs or user integration processes). Another look will be taken at the potential and in practice implementation of online transparency of news production in Austria. A focus is put on journalists' perception of the available instruments.

Based on the results of a survey on media accountability among 100 Austrian journalists and on an analysis of online operations of Austria's most important media outlets, the authors argue that the practice of media accountability is characterized by reactivity. Media answers as well as actions set by the audience, be they protest emails or satirical blog entries, are always just reactions to previously published or aired items of news coverage. As a matter of fact, those media critiques, as well as decisions by media councils, are done as reactions to journalistic misbehaviour (Stapf, 2006). The same problem occurs in most legal provisions that regulate media practices, for example provisions on reporting: There are some basic regulations to ensure personal freedoms, but castigating such violations in practice takes time (Saxer, 1996).

But media accountability could be much more than castigating journalistic misconduct post factum. The concept of media accountability is not one of criticizing, monitoring and checking. It is rather a pro-active transaction before and especially during the production process of news, creating transparency at all levels of production. Providing audiences with insight into the circumstances of reporting, the sources of information, but also with ways and means of handling mistakes are major quality criteria for journalism (see for example Meier, 2011). A recent Delphi Study on measures to improve journalistic quality shows that experts from the industry and academia alike put a strong emphasis on transparency (Schönbach & de Waal, 2011).

From this perspective, media accountability instruments are potential ways to implement journalistic quality standards and to advance audience participation, involvement and confidence. Russ-Mohl (1994, p. 96) suggests a magical polygon ("magisches Vieleck"), a model with several levels to ensure accountability and journalistic quality. This results in a long-lasting *modus operandi* that includes preventive instruments that accompany the production process, providing correcting elements. Furthermore, Russ-Mohl (1994) highlights the inclusion of user initiatives and individuals into the production process, in order to reduce organizational blindness and to foster discussion about journalism, news coverage and media production.

² Pro-active in the meaning of trying to avoid mistakes by letting other stakeholders participate before or in the news production process.

In order to provide enhanced user loyalty to their products, one of the essential goals of media companies could be transparency. Hence, transparency is important not only from an ethical or socio-political, normative perspective, but also from an economic one. Such decisions can be vital, especially in times of economic crises (Karmasin, 2002).

But how is this done in the Austrian media? How far does the inclusion of audiences and other stakeholders in news production processes go? This article aims at answering these questions by analysing the level of media accountability in Austria in terms of a) traditional media accountability instruments, b) web-based media accountability processes and c) especially production transparency in Austria.

To that end, the authors examined the major studies on media accountability and transparency, monitored the situation of media accountability instruments in Austria and analyzed the initial results concerning the Austrian media landscape of a 14-country, comparative survey of journalists' opinions on media accountability. This study was conducted in the context of the EU-funded RP7-framework research project MediaAcT.³

To conduct this quantitative survey, the MediaAcT team developed a comparative online questionnaire in several steps, based on theoretical discussions, desk-research, country analyses and qualitative expert interviews. After a pre-test phase and some adaptations, all countries started their field phase.

The target group defined: journalists who earn over 50% of their income from journalistic activities, work for a journalistic medium and exercise a journalistic profession.

The Austrian part of the survey was conducted from June to August 2011. For Austria, 100⁴ journalists were chosen randomly, based on a two-step quota strategy: a) covering the categories of nine different types of media (daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, magazines, public service/or state-owned radio, private commercial radio, public service/or state-owned television, private commercial television, on-line news media, news agencies), and b) covering the journalistic hierarchy (management level and operational level). The Austrian quota sample was based on data from Kaltenbrunner et al. (2007). The clear focus in the sampling process and the fulfilling of the quota sample generated valid results, drawing the problem with

³ The MediaAcT research project is an EU-founded research project with 11 teams of partners from Eastern and Western Europe, as well as one partner from the Arab World. It is funded by the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme. Starting in February 2010 and lasting for 3 and a half years, its aim is to investigate the quantity and quality of media accountability systems, to compare the impact of established and innovative media accountability systems online and to develop policy recommendations for EU media policy makers, as well as incentives for media professionals and media users alike to actively engage in media accountability systems.

⁴ The decision for 100 cases was based on the statistic calculations for all MediaAcT countries, depending on the size of the country's population but at least 100 cases.

self-definition of leadership into a conclusion. Overall, the Austrian part is a representative study with valid and stable results.

TRADITIONAL MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY INSTRUMENTS

Next to several other instruments of media accountability, the best-known appear to be press or media councils. They can be found in several European countries, dealing with different media and having different powers of punitive actions. A comparative survey by García-Avilés et al. (2011) showed that the impact, the structure and the range of such councils widely differ. E.g. while the German press council deals with print but not with audio-visual media, the Finnish deals with all types of media.

After a conflict-laden hiatus of nearly 10 years, Austria has a press council again. The conjoined efforts of the Verband Österreichischer Zeitungen (VÖZ, Austrian Newspaper Association), the Union of Journalists, Österreichische Zeitschriften- und Fachmedien-Verband (ÖZV, Austrian Magazine and Special Interest Magazine Association), the Presseclub Concordia, the Association of Editors-in-Chief, the Verband der Regionalmedien Österreichs (VRM, Association of regional media of Austria) led in 2010 to the re-establishment of the press council in Austria. Although it is a cooperative instrument within the media industry, it is partly financed by the state. Unfortunately, no members of the civil society or entities outside the industry are represented in the two senates. The new press council deals with newspapers and magazines which agreed to participate, and their additional products, especially their online editions. Its decisions are based on the “Ehrenkodex der österreichischen Presse,” the Austrian Code of Conduct for the Press which was last updated in 1999 (Karmasin et al., 2011).

In its first year after its re-establishment, the press council dealt with approximately 60 complaints. In October 2011, the supporting associations agreed to allow the publishing of decisions concerning non-participating newspapers or magazines, provided that this subject is of high relevance (Wallner, 2011).

The new press council's online presence disseminates its decisions, reports about relevant activities and provides links on its website, on twitter (where it has only 403 followers), and on its Facebook page (liked only by 78 users).⁵ By comparison, the media watch blog *kobuk* has more than 7900 fans on Facebook.⁶ Although there is some discussion on the press council's Facebook page, it has not been able to keep up with alternative media accountability instruments in terms of users/followers and interaction.

The initial results for Austria from the above-mentioned comparative survey on media accountability, conducted in the context of the EU-funded RP7-framework

⁵ Data retrieved May 10, 2012.

⁶ Data retrieved May 10, 2012, from <http://www.facebook.com/kobuk>, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/%C3%96sterreichischer-Presserat/196820707024486>, <http://twitter.com/#!/Presserat>.

research project MediaAcT, show that Austrian journalists have not been affected by press council decisions so far. This might be attributed to the fact that the press council had only been active for a half year when this study was conducted. Only 20% of the surveyed journalists thought that the press council has a (very) high effect on journalism practice in Austria. This might change over the next few years, as such institutions need time to become (re-)established and better known to a broader audience and to a bigger group of journalists.

Only a few media companies introduced internal media accountability instruments, like correction boxes, Readers' Advisory Boards or have an ombudsman who deals with the audience's concerns (Karmasin et al., 2011). As a result, 79% of Austrian journalists asked in the MediaAcT survey have never been criticized by an ombudsman and only 11% think that such an internal institution has a (very) high impact on Austrian journalism practice.

In the audio-visual sector, no form of self-regulation can be found in Austria. The public broadcasting sector is regulated via the ORF-law, neither the Stiftungsrat nor the Publikumsrat are instruments of co-regulation; the private sector is only regulated in terms of broadcasting frequencies and some minor content issues like illegal content (detailed information: Karmasin et al., 2011). There is also no form of self-regulation pertaining to blogs or social media in Austria. There are two major authorities dealing with illegal online content. One is called stopline. It is a contact point for reporting illegal content on websites (e.g. child pornography, national socialist or racist content). It is financed by the Association of the Austrian Internet Service Providers and operates in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter Terrorism. Another contact point is Meldenstellen of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (www.bmi.gv.at/meldestellen), which is the general registration office for complaints regarding illegal contents (not only online content) or actions.

The current situation of traditional media accountability instruments in Austria features two major problems: the media accountability instruments do not cover all media types, e.g. an industry-established council responsible for media accountability can only be found in the realm of print media; and such instruments are mostly reactive. Traditional media accountability instruments in Austria, like the press council, regulation authorities and ombudsmen all deal with previously produced items of news. Only some internal instruments try to incorporate the users in the production processes, as the Readers' Advisory Boards do, e.g. as done by the daily regional newspaper *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten* (Dh, 2010).

WEB-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESSES

The most recognizable innovations in media accountability within the last few years were not initiated by the government, by associations or by the industry, but emerged from civil society, based on participation and crowdsourcing. Some

alternative online formats try to keep the media accountable, also being recognized by the users. Next to classical watch blogs, some blog platforms dealing regularly with media-related topics can be found. There are also some media critical activists who mainly post comments on online forums on news websites and try to do critical “media journalism” via these platforms. The Austrian media critical online formats reach up to 4,000 users a day regularly, on controversial topics, the numbers rise up to over 10,000. They deal with different topics, ranging from simple critique of media coverage to in-depth analysis focusing on media politics, media economy, or media convergence. Up to now, the Austrian online media critics do not reach as much public attention as the German *BILDBlog* does, one of the benchmarks for all authors (Bichler, 2010). But the Facebook page of the biggest Austrian watch blog *kobuk* has more fans compared to the population than its German benchmark (*kobuk*: over 7,900 users/8.4 million inhabitants; *BILDBlog*: over 30,000 users/81.7 million inhabitants).⁷

But online formats have some major problems with their structure: For online media watch blog formats it is necessary to have several authors who contribute in order to keep the format updated regularly. Although the audience is quite active on the blog and on the Facebook page of the biggest Austrian watch blog *kobuk*, a regular update, especially in summer (July–September) seems to be a problem. Another problem is the financing of blogs and the unclear legal situation for bloggers in Austria. The second one especially, is a big issue. Some bloggers are not well informed about the legal situation in Austria, especially defamatory statements and libeling seems to bear big financial risks. Bloggers are also treated differently in comparison to journalists. As a media outlet, they have to publish an imprint, but they do not have the same rights as journalists do, e.g. there is no protection of sources for bloggers (Bichler, 2012).

When the authors of media critical online formats think that their critique does not have a big effect on Austrian journalists they seem to be right. Asked how big the influence of media critical journalistic blogs on journalism practice is, 55% of journalists thought that there is not such an influence at all, or not just a small influence. Only 36% of surveyed Austrian journalists were criticized by media critical user blogs seldom or sometimes, and 56% never. Only 2% were criticized often or frequently.⁸ This data shows that the range of such formats is not big up to now.

Nevertheless, the data of the MediaAcT journalists’ survey shows as well that such new forms do not reach journalists directly and/or not in an adequate way, although these formats have a broad range of coverage: They deal with newspaper, TV or radio reports or existing media-related problems like media financing. They are a vital form of media accountability, much faster than most of the traditional instruments and they are participative and incorporate media users as well. But still,

⁷ Data retrieved October 31, 2011.

⁸ Six journalists refused to answer.

they are reactive instruments. So, the question remains: What could media outlets or individual journalists do to actively foster accountability?

PRODUCTION TRANSPARENCY

In journalism, third party transparency can be distributed via media journalism, media self-regulation and also via audience-driven tools. But especially internal transparency should be something to be improved for media companies (Meier & Reimer, 2011).

Thus, as a major aspect of media accountability we name transparency in production. That includes transparency of the relationships between journalists and their sources, transparency of norms and empowerment of audiences to check whether these norms are fulfilled within working processes. “For example, journalists should explain why in a particular case the privacy of a suspect is not protected. This can be done on a case-by-case basis by those journalists responsible for it, but also in outlet-specific guidelines, or more discursively and selectively by media ombudsmen” (Schönbach & de Waal, 2011, p. 415).

Transparency instruments are useful and easy to implement, particularly in online operations. Nevertheless, when it comes to website transparency, the Austrian results of a comparative study made by the EJO in 2010, show that this is not a big issue for Austrian online media outlets. In this study, different means of transparency, from simple forms of information on the staff and the company up to more sophisticated forms of transparency were observed. The online outlet of the two quality daily newspapers as well as the website of the *ORF* (the public service broadcaster) try to create a minimum of transparency through giving deep links and making the research processes transparent. This cannot be found on the website of the online edition of the *Kronen Zeitung*, Austria’s bestselling tabloid with a market share of 38%. Regular columns, discussing mistakes and errors can be found online at the editions of the two quality daily newspapers, *derstandard.at* and *diepresse.com*.

When it comes to actor transparency, most Austrian online news editions offer information about the staff and offer different ways to contact journalists, although some only for their “main” journalists. Again, this is not the case for the boulevard newspaper *Kronen Zeitung* with one of the biggest online news platforms in Austria.

Each news website offers the possibility to comment on articles, information about the owners of the media outlet and a policy description (*Blattlinie*), which is mandatory by law and can be found on all news websites. Other online tools, like webcast of the editorial conferences or editorial blogs cannot be found at any surveyed news website (Leitner & Bichler, 2011).

Austria’s media has not adapted to the idea of “process journalism” as described by Jeff Jarvis in his manifesto-style Article, with the significant title *Product vs process journalism: The myth of perfection vs beta culture*: “We have our standards, too, and they include collaboration, transparency, letting readers into the process, and

trying to say what we don't know when we publish — as caveats — rather than afterward — as corrections” (Jarvis, 2009).

Interestingly, individual journalists in Austria seem to be more in favour of the idea of working transparently than the decision makers in their newsrooms. Thus, in the 2011 survey, 55% of journalists claimed that it is important to explain journalistic decisions to users in an extra section on the website or in a weblog. Despite the problem of socially desirable answers, the results show that journalists might not have such a big problem with production transparency. Still the question why these practices are not introduced by (more) media outlets is to be answered, especially when considering the low costs of such an instrument and the possible high value for user binding.

Meier and Reimer (2011) mention some concerns of news organizations when it comes to transparency in the media: They are stretching from a high time and money exposure to the fear of threatening the autonomy of the editorial team and the fear of losing the reader through too much “side information.” As Meier and Reimer (2011) point out, new instruments might increase transparency in journalism and have a high potential due to their interactivity, speed, storage capacity and the lack of space reduction. Especially in digital journalism a main issue is to mention and link to your sources and to correct the mistakes.

Surprisingly, such (good) practice in journalism is not self-evident for the Austrian journalist: Only 61% of the 2011 interviewed journalists think that news organizations should set web links to their original sources.

Also crowdsourcing or other forms of user incorporation in the production process is no issue for Austrian news websites (Leitner & Bichler, 2011). This coincides with journalists' opinions: only 20% think that users should have the possibility of joining the production process online.

Benchmarks like the newly established *newslist* of *The Guardian* show that there are formats which work well and that are easy and inexpensive to establish. On this website (complemented through Twitter) the users are able to see which stories are discussed or produced, where the input for stories comes from or what the editors think about their coverage. Of course *The Guardian* does not show everything, especially when it comes to scoops and investigative reporting, but the readers get a notion of how the news they see or read becomes news. The users also become informed by the team of how they are dealing with the website of the *newslist* and they can post what they think of the stories and suggests lines of inquiry via Twitter or via Email.⁹

Austrian journalists do not appear to be highly interested in such forms of active and pro-active user incorporation, respectively. Some care about user comments — 57% think journalists should show an interest in user suggestions and 48% think

⁹ Data retrieved May 10, 2012 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/help/insideguardian/2011/oct/10/guardian-newslist>.

users should have the possibility to contact journalists, e.g. via Facebook or Twitter. Asked if media companies should give the audience the possibility to take part in the production process, only 20% believe that this is required in Austrian journalism practice.

Thus, even if individual journalists tend to have an interest, or at least do not object to work transparently, transparency is not part of a newsroom's policies in Austria. This might be due to the fact that structures and hierarchies are affected by traditional patterns in Austrian journalism (see Karmasin & Kraus, 2010, p. 214–216). It might also be due to the experiences made with user comments so far. To our knowledge, no systematic analysis of user comments in journalistic online operations is available. Monitoring of user's comments, however, shows that users who are commenting on the production process often do not argue with facts but rather insult journalists or their profession. Journalists' statements in public and in private conversation alike indicate that this might be a reason for their lack of trust in the audience's judgments.

CONCLUSION

Online operations offer great new possibilities to implement pro-active media accountability instruments on different levels and at different stages of journalistic production (e.g. newslist of *The Guardian*, streaming editorial conferences or asking users for participation in choosing the topics). Yet, they remain widely unused in Austria, and so do the chances they bring for a stronger involvement and engagement of the audiences.

Transparency and new forms of user integration (crowdsourcing, process journalism, *The Guardian*'s "mutualization," interactive journalism) could not only help journalism in finding new forms and more trustworthiness but may also be tools for deliberation. Since the uprising of the World Wide Web scholars came to believe the internet can foster a deliberative public sphere better than the one dominated by the old mass media (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). Transparency and participation are made possible in the Internet.

But, as it seems, this new thinking of an easy to handle and inexpensive way to enable these new forms of dialogue is not a widely spread concept in Austria.

On an institutional level, traditional media accountability instruments like press councils or media laws remain reactive per definition. However, given the possibilities of stakeholder integration as e.g. the involvement of audiences, NGOs, academic experts or others in the development of norms and standards, are neither used.

On a professional level, Austrian journalists do not seem to care much about online participation of the audience; no new initiatives can be found when it comes to transparency within news companies. It seems that the journalists and news companies still insist on their point of view: they do the reporting and they have the

prerogative of interpretation. Generously, the audience is allowed to criticize them if they make mistakes. But the decision about how to deal with it should still be in the hands of journalists.

It is recommended to implement easy-to-use transparency tools in the journalistic process.

Finally, on a user's level, the audience has a co-responsibility towards democratic institutions and with this also a co-responsibility for media. Funiok (2010) mentions one example: the public service broadcasters that are owned by society (not by a party or by governments). Therefore, an obligation to contribute exists: the audience should not leave accountability practices to certain institutions, but should demand their right to contribute to the self-regulation processes. The media watch blog *kobuk* for example, is an important new instrument that keeps the media accountable and they present it to the audience in an interesting way. But still, even such instruments remain re-active and often remain stuck in criticism without animation or suggestions for advancement.

There is no doubt that the need for a pro-active attitude towards media accountability is necessary. The method of choice for reaching this goal is transparency. If one of the key tasks of journalism in a modern democracy is defined by bringing transparency to as many parts of society through reporting, then journalism must find some mechanisms to be transparent as well (Pöttker, 2010).

That requires transparency and dialogue when implementing traditional media accountability instruments, transparency and dialogue when developing web-based journalistic production processes and, from the industry's side, transparency and dialogue when designing production processes. Yet, both producers and audiences have to take joint responsibility for turning media accountability from re-action to pro-action.

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