Users' perception of media accountability

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ABSTRACT: Theoretically, the public is engaged in the accountability process, mainly in two ways: it conceives an image of professional quality and it may call journalism to account. Therefore, this study explores the meaning and functionality of media accountability from a users' perspective: *How do news media users perceive media accountability in relation to journalistic quality?* Focus group analysis highlights how the mechanism of quality deduction strengthens the link between perceived media accountability and journalistic quality. Supporting the normative-economic rationale, this study identifies media accountability as a quality assessment tool, a quality trade mark and as journalistic value on its own. However, threshold perception clearly discourages news users to engage in accountability processes. It is suggested that news media may benefit from an accessible but proportional media accountability infrastructure.

KEYWORDS: journalism quality, media accountability, transparency, media literacy, focus groups

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars in the field of journalism studies usually attribute great potential to media accountability, assuming it enhances quality of journalism and democracy. It is frequently framed as a positive force against popularization of the news, commercialization of the media sector and other indicators of professional deterioration. In particular grassroots journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004), advanced communication technology (Singer, 2005), and civic empowerment (Hasebrink et al., 2007; O'Neill, 2010) have been praised as promising circumstances to hold media to account. Even more promising is the observation that new online accountability instruments also find their way in countries without a strong professional journalism culture or civil society (Lauk & Denton, 2011).

Either in terms of *voice* (Hirschman, 1970) or *forum* (Bovens, 1997), economic theory assumes the public to criticize institutions and call them to account. Voice is theorized as a compelling mechanism for journalism as well. Many authors emphasize the interactive nature of media accountability (Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000; McQuail, 2003; Von Krogh, 2008). However, as a crucial stakeholder in media ac-

countability, the audience seems underrepresented in scientific literature. Most empirical studies on media accountability focus on the existence of instruments (e.g. Bertrand, 2003), content (e.g. Nemeth, 2007) and professionals attitudes (e.g. Pritchard, 1993; Bacon, 1995). Moreover, the few studies that do assess the role of this stakeholder (Roberts, 2007; Meier & Reimer, 2011) have a difficulty in demonstrating the positive relation between accountability and perceived quality of journalistic content. Therefore, this study aims at understanding the position of the public as a stakeholder and explores the potential of media accountability from a users' perspective. Its central question is: *How do news media users perceive media accountability in relation to journalistic quality?*

In this article, we focus on three aspects. How do news users perceive quality of journalism and media accountability? What functions can be attributed to media accountability from a users' perspective and what are the quality determinants for media accountability from a users' perspective?

We intentionally employ the neutral term *users* instead of consumers or citizens to avoid theoretical bias, for media accountability may be conceived from different frames (Glasser, 1989; McQuail, 2003). The regulatory frame captures the juridical context of libel law and governmental media policy, the market frame captures commercial forces that influence journalistic decision making, the professional frame refers to peer orientation of journalists and self-regulatory institutions in the profession, and the public responsibility frame describes the public service orientation in professional decision making. Especially the market frame and the public responsibility frame conceive the audience as an essential stakeholder. In these frames journalists consider either consumer preferences or democratic needs of the public. Some authors argue against such categorization, and say that democratic and commercial values are intertwined (Rosenstiel et al., 2007). Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) labels this connection as the normative-economic rationale, implying that "what is good for democracy, is also inevitably good for business" (p. 122).

This study evaluates the normative-economic connection through the eyes of the public and reconstructs the way how news users define journalistic quality and accountability. It shows different levels of awareness, and the mechanism of quality deduction that either harms or strengthens the image of a news medium. The results confirm the notion of the "normative-economic rationale" and define media accountability as a quality trade mark, a quality assessment tool, and a journalistic genre on its own. Further, it formulates the apparent quality criteria of media accountability that play an essential role in users' appreciation.

METHOD

The perception of *the* public is a theoretical construct rather than a plausible empirical object. Therefore, this study treats the audience as a heterogeneous group: a composition of users with different conceptions and preferences. We focus on

differences and similarities between users. We used qualitative focus group analysis as a form of descriptive-interpretative research, suitable for exploring phenomena in detail (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stewart et al., 2007).

Focus groups were composed of users of four preselected Dutch news medium titles: a regional public broadcasting news organization; a national quality newspaper; a regional newspaper and a national public broadcasting current affairs program.[1] In a pilot study we identified these geographically and technically different media types as 'information-rich cases': cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). In terms of media accountability manifestations, these media were proactively transparent about their mission statement and code of ethics, and published an introspective column regularly. Participants ($N = 33$) were diverse in terms of sex, age and education. Selection and recruitment was done in collaboration with the research departments of these news media.

Both moderation of the sessions[2] and design of the interview guide[3] was done by the author. To grasp the assumed positive relationship between manifestations of accountability and credibility (e.g. Roberts, 2007; Rosenstiel et al., 2007; Meier & Reimer, 2011) we first had to consider how news users assess journalistic quality. Subsequently, dealing with the multifaceted character of media accountability (e.g. Bertrand, 2003) and the public perspective, we concentrated on publicly available manifestations of media accountability. We started with open questions on how participants conceive journalistic accountability. Thereafter, we introduced elicitation material. Participants were asked to read and discuss journalistic codes, published corrections, letters from the editor-in-chief and journalistic items. Sessions were recorded and transcribed following Krueger and Casey's guidelines (2000, pp. 142–143). For the consecutive phases of open coding, axis coding and selective coding QDA-software was used.

RESULTS

The results are presented in five paragraphs, i.e. conceiving quality, conceiving accountability, functionality of accountability, determinants of accountability and determinants of voice. The paragraphs elaborate the main finding of qualitative analysis, represented by quotes of the participants.

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[1] Respectively *Omroep Gelderland*, *Trouw*, *Eindhovens Dagblad* and *Nieuwsuur*.

[2] I want to thank Ingrid van Melis, Mark Zaremba, Monique Paes, Birgit van Beek, Dick Bond and Marie-Louise Klerkx for assistance in either transcribing, organizing or co-moderating the sessions.

[3] The interview guide was pre-tested with panels of journalism students of the Fontys University of Applied Sciences.

Deduction of quality

Participants were invited to express their expectations and criticism about journalistic quality. Not surprisingly, their reactions were diverse and sometimes even contradictory. When a participant said that journalists are "curious," "persistent" and "neutral," others replied that journalists are "nosy," "pushy" and "biased" as well. Focus groups on regional news media attached more importance to traits as "engaged," "nearby" and "friendly." Focus groups on national news media stressed traits as "profound" and "competent." This underlines the image of a heterogeneous profession that can hardly be treated as a collective.

However, despite these variances, the way in which participants formulated their ideas seemed rather similar. Asked to describe the quality of their medium, they tended to compare it with other media. They used the contrast with other media to praise specific aspects of their own medium.

> Concerning neutrality of the news, I am happy to say that in the public broadcastings I do not observe a bias in the news like in the commercial broadcastings (R7/ regional PSB).[4]

Incidentally, participants expressed a negative judgment about their own medium. In these cases they also used contrast, but within their own medium. Some said to be bothered by specific items, just because it "does not fit the style" of the medium. However, these negative judgments did not seem to affect the image of the medium as a whole. As one participant put it:

> For such a futility I am not going to change my opinion about my paper (R11/ regional newspaper).

Besides this comparison of contrasts, participants used comparison of similarities. Positive judgments of their own medium were underpinned with references to individual journalists working for that medium, and vice versa. This phenomenon also occurred with evaluations of journalists and their individual items.

> Every time you see a good article with the name of the reporter, and next week you see it again, then you start to feel connected with someone, you start to know him (R9/ regional newspaper).

Participants used both contrasts and similarities to express their opinion about journalistic quality. On the one hand, other media and journalism in general serve as a negative benchmark to contrast with their own medium. On the other hand, individual journalists and their items serve as a benchmark to confirm the positive image of the participants' own medium. This mechanism of deduction of quality is visualized in Figure 1.

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[4] Brackets refer to the number of the respondent (R7) and medium type (regional PSB). PSB = public service broadcasting.
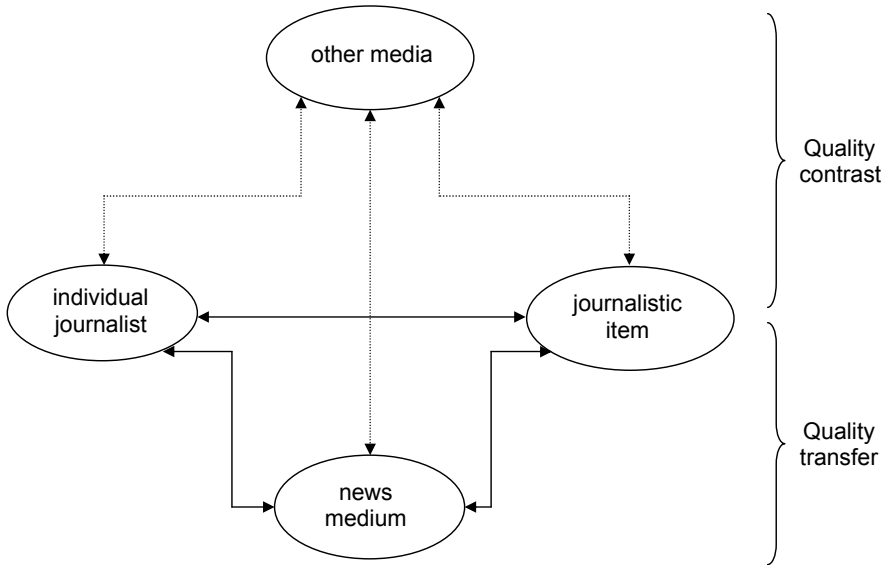
Figure 1. Deduction of quality

Source: author.

The phenomenon of deducing quality from one element to the other is related to the notion of credibility, a trait that users attribute to the elements source, message or medium (Schweiger, 2000). The shift of these attributions from one element to the other is called *credibility transfer* (Metzger et al., 2003). An experiment by Fico et al. showed that readers of balanced news stories rated the responsible news medium more credible that readers of imbalanced stories (Fico et al., 2004). Translated to the observations in the focus groups it seems that credibility transfer in particular appeared positively within the medium. Against the background of this mechanism we are able to understand the potential and functionality of media accountability from a users' perspective.

Conception of accountability

The concept of accountability offers a wide range of manifestations, and risks to err or stay vague. Therefore, the public's perception was approached in two ways. Firstly, participants were asked what *they think* accountability is and whether their medium is accountable. These questions elicited primary reactions with a more generic character. Secondly, they were asked to react on specific instruments of media accountability.

The respondents conceived accountability mainly as "explaining why certain choices were made," and as "acknowledging your mistakes." Translated to the context of professional journalism, participants recognized manifestations of media

accountability in various journalistic sections or elements, like letters of the editor-in-chief or correction boxes. Table 1 gives an overview of all appearances spontaneously mentioned by participants.

Table 1. Manifestation of accountability mentioned by participants

> ✓ Letters from the editor-in-chief
> ✓ Readers' representative or ombudsman
> ✓ Corrections and rectifications
> ✓ Documents of principles, code, editorial statute
> ✓ One-on-one communication
> ✓ Letters for the opinion page
> ✓ Reactions online
> ✓ Authors' curriculum vitae
> ✓ Textual transparency

Source: author.

Contrasting with clearly separate journalistic sections or elements, some participants said that journalists' accountability is not a specific instrument, but rather a characteristic of journalistic texts. This relates strongly to what McQuail calls 'checkability' of journalism (McQuail, 2003). As one participant puts it:

> The accountability of the medium is visible in hearing both sides of the story, that a medium is not politically correct, reveals sources and explains the relevance of selected material. A somewhat scientific approach (R20/ national newspaper).

Related to inventories in scientific literature (Bertrand, 2003; Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Eberwein et al., 2011) it appears that participants have similar notions on what accountability could be, however their notions are far less multiple.

Moreover, participants showed great variety in their awareness. Some mentioned various appearances, while others were not aware of any appearance. Many users are not aware of the existence of media accountability instruments, or at least do not associate these instruments with accountability. Roughly, we deduced four levels of awareness:

1. *Unaware.* News users have no idea of accountability of their own medium. They either do not know what accountability is, or have never thought about the accountability of their own medium.

2. *Assumption.* News users assume that their medium is accountable, either proactively or reactively when it is called to account. They assume this, because it matches their image of the medium as being responsible, but they cannot confirm their assumption.

> I assume that a self respecting organization like this one has a mission statement, an editorial statute and a correction box. But I do not know for sure (R33/ national PSB).

3. *Deduction*. News users deduce the accountability of their medium, because they have at least once seen a letter from the editor or alike. They know it exists, but they cannot actively evaluate the content or nature of it.

4. *Observation*. News users know their medium is accountable, because they have actively observed at least one accountability instrument. They are able to evaluate the quality of these instruments.

This variety in awareness helps to understand the perception of media accountability and is inherently linked to its potential. Obviously, those who do not perceive accountability cannot actively perceive a relation with quality. Increased awareness may be beneficial for perception effects. However, as we shall see, the highest level of awareness is not conditional for media accountability to have effect.

Trust, literacy and entertainment as functions

Participants with higher media accountability awareness differed in appreciation. In fact, some users want to know "everything" from what goes on behind the scenes, while others said to have no interest at all. Therefore, we concentrated on motives of news users to observe the content of accountability instruments, and the possible effects of this observance. We deduced three functions that can be attributed to accountability: trust, media literacy and entertainment.

First, participants stated that instruments of media accountability "increase trust." More specifically, many participants suggest that the existence of these instruments is sufficient. To increase or confirm trust, they do not need to attentively read its content, because they interpret it as a kind of "quality mark."

> This weekly letter of the editor-in-chief, I never read it but I think it is good. The mere fact that he writes this letter appeals to me. It gives me enough confidence that the paper is controlled from within (R23/ national newspaper).

Obviously, users do not intentionally use this type of content to increase trust. Trust is rather the result of observing such instruments. Paradoxically, this effect also counteracts. The more users trust the medium, the less they demand explicit accounts. Various participants endorse this counter position. They do not need explicit accountability instruments, because they assume the integrity and professional quality of the medium. In this respect, accountability instruments may play an important role particularly for those that do not (yet) know the medium or even potential new members of the audience.

A second function is related to a more cognitive aspect: media accountability increases users' knowledge and understanding of the professional process. Unlike trust, this function requires attentive observation. Participants said that reading letters from the editor or the code of ethics increased their capacities to interpret the content of the medium. Some said it gives them the opportunity to "check"

whether the medium lives up to its standards, or to compare it rationally with other media. Briefly, it gives them an instrument to gauge the quality of the medium. In theoretical terms: it makes them more media wise. Although being media wise is treated here as a separate function, it is also related to trust. The more understanding users have *of* the journalistic process, the more understanding they may have *for* this process. Media literacy fuels loyalty or goodwill for some difficult aspects of journalistic activity.

Entertainment is a third function of accountability instruments. Some participants mentioned "enjoying" seeing what goes on behind the scenes, without the intention of understanding or controlling the news medium. Obviously, this is a matter of taste, as other participants said that they were not interested at all. Like media literacy, this function is clearly motivated. Users observe such content on purpose, because they want to be entertained. In this respect, manifestations of media accountability may be treated in the same way as other journalistic items. News users choose their object of attention according to their individual interests.

What does "proper" accountability look like?

The goal of this study is both academic and practical. Not only does it critically weigh the issue whether media should be accountable, it also aims to describe how. Discussion on the various characteristics of media accountability instruments leads to three quality determinants: accessibility, proportionality and honesty.

Participants with higher interest in media accountability state that instruments should be clearly visible, for instance in credit lines or text boxes. For most respondents however, it would suffice if manifestations of media accountability are at least accessible.

> It ought to be accessible when you're looking for it. It does not necessarily have to be on top of every journalistic article, but it should be traceable or referred to (R11/ regional newspaper).

Expectations about *accessibility* varied, depending on the type of instrument. Most respondents appreciated information about journalistic method and guest authors in or nearby the journalistic article itself. However, formal and institutional types of accountability need reference as well, but deserve less prominence. Generally stated: participants expected that the media accountability infrastructure is accessible in such a way that they can check the medium performance whenever they wish to. It means that the medium is approachable for questions and criticism and that it gives quick responses.

The expectation of accessibility also applies to the language that is used in manifestations of media accountability. In reaction to one of the letters from the editor, one focus group was rather critical about the jargon of one of the editors. Some respondents did not understand the message of the letter, because they lacked

knowledge of specific professional vocabulary. They claimed that accounts of the medium should be clear, understandable and adequate.

> This letter is meant for a larger public, so it should be written in clear language (R31/ national PSB).

Related to the expectation of accessibility is the issue of *proportionality*. What expectations do news users have about the size, content and frequency of accounts? Besides a few enthusiasts, most participants had modest expectations: accounts and references should be traceable but not abundant. One important finding is, as a participant put it, that accounts about the journalistic process should not drown the primary journalistic content. This aspect is akin to journalism in general; it should select the most relevant topics and background information.

> I do not want to know all the details. I think it is fatiguing and it distracts me from the main topic (R11/ regional newspaper).

Besides distraction as a reason for proportional accountability, some participants thought it undesirable that a journalist reveals the entire process. It might have a negative impact on the willingness of sources to reveal touchy topics and abuses, a notion generally referred to as a chilling effect. Indicating how transparent they expect their medium to be on a scale from one to ten, one participant said "six"; just enough.

Regarding accounts that deal with journalistic errors, participants were rather unanimous. Not surprisingly, everybody said that errors need to be corrected. And significant errors obviously need more attention and cautiousness than small errors. Nobody expected the medium to correct every minor language error. Remarkable however, were expectations about explanations and apologies. Participants attached more value to restore mistakes and prevent any further damage, than to explaining how a mistake could have happened. This expectation intensifies with the severity of the error. Moreover, participants were critical towards excessive apologies. Only in major cases did apologies seem appropriate to the participants, but still not more than once.

> I do not expect them to humiliate themselves, but to try to bear the consequences. That is more effective (R7/ regional PSB).

The third characteristic for proper accountability is *honesty*, an obvious but problematic criterion. Honesty, a general human value, is hard to assess. One participant mentioned that he can only assume that the accounts of the medium are honest. Therefore, the focus groups were asked what elements of media accountability indicated honesty and dishonesty. To elicit their responses, participants had to read several existing letters from the editor-in-chief. Three indicators came to the fore. First, participants disapproved of accounts that were internally inconsistent.

For instance, in one account an editor-in-chief framed manipulation of photographs as a sin, but nonetheless admitted that it occasionally occurs in the newsroom. Although it seems frank to admit such weaknesses, some participants concluded that this "sin" is probably more common than the editor wants to admit. Second, participants disapproved reference to other news media to mitigate mistakes and errors, a common strategy for editors-in-chief (Hindman, 1999; Groenhart, 2009).

> I think this is very mean. You are hiding behind others and looking for a justification for something undesirable (R15/ regional newspaper).

Thirdly, participants tend to judge the medium as "honest" when it acknowledges its own weaknesses. Admitting a mistake — either by means of a correction box or in an editorial — was positively evaluated. Some even said that they would lose confidence in an editor's integrity if he would never admit a mistake. This is an important observation, for it suggests that editors may consider admitting mistakes strategically.

A threshold for the public

Some authors literally claim that the public has the duty to improve quality of journalism (Kunkel, 2000; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Voice is assumed as a powerful mechanism to hold media to account. Due to the weight of this argument in the debate on media accountability, we asked the respondents whether and why they would contact the medium. We found several determinants for voice: a sense of joint responsibility, urgency, self-esteem and perceived responsiveness.

Respondents hardly recognize themselves as *jointly responsible*. This is a strong contrast with the normative notion. Only one respondent supported this idea literally.

> If I observe an error, I feel sorry for the journalist as long as it is not corrected. I feel a joint responsibility, so I let them know (R7/ regional PSB).

Another respondent was "ashamed" that she never consults the website for features as the code of ethics. Although indirectly, a feeling of shame implies that this respondent somehow feels a responsibility for taking note of the context of journalism. For the rest, all other participants clearly rejected the notion of joint responsibility because it seems inapposite for the role of the public. One participant ironically stated that it would be a day-time job to contact the medium for every error made, another said he would apply for a job as a journalist if he would feel responsible. This latter argument was underscored by a rather general feeling among participants that they had to abide by the decisions of the journalist.

> Who am I to tell the professional journalist to do what he has to do? (R8/ regional PSB)

Besides the controversial idea of joint responsibility, participants adverted to their limited cognitive capacities to hold a medium to account. Various participants said they had not enough expertise or foreknowledge to assess the work of a journalist. The journalist's objectivity cannot be assessed by the content of his article alone. Additionally, respondents judged their own opinion about journalism as irrelevant and negligible. This indicates *self-esteem* as a crucial factor. This aspect as well caused controversy among participants. Some stressed the increasing empowerment of citizens today, compared to decades ago.

Lastly, participants stressed the importance of the perceived openness of the medium. Both negative and positive experiences point in that direction. Some said to be pleasantly surprised when someone "actually answered the phone," where others were offended if the medium or journalist did not listen to their input. One respondent said it discouraged him to contact the medium ever again.

EVALUATION

The aim of this study was to explore the relation between journalistic quality and accountability of news media from a user perspective. Qualitative focus group analysis resulted in three main functions of media accountability: trust, media literacy and entertainment. These functions are affected by the characteristics of accessibility, proportionality and honesty. Additionally, it seemed that news users vary in conceptions and levels of awareness. What does this mean in the light of the main question: *How do news media users perceive media accountability in relation to journalistic quality?* We suggest that from a user perspective media accountability means at least three different things.

Firstly, publicly accessible instruments of media accountability communicate about the quality of the professional process, either by means of revealing principles and daily routines, either by explicitly evaluating these means. It gives users insight in the profession, which ideally leads to a media wise public. Conceived this way, perception of media accountability serves as a *tool for assessing journalistic quality*. Referring to earlier publications, it offers the public a "critical vocabulary" for meta-discussion on journalism (Christians, 1985).

Secondly, perception of media accountability is related to public trust in news media. The presence of media accountability instruments, like biographical information about authors, letters from the editor-in-chief and documents of principles may indicate professional authenticity and thoroughness. From this perspective, media accountability serves as a *trade mark* for quality journalism. Attentive processing information is not conditional in this perspective, as users mentioned that seeing the trade mark may be enough to establish confidence.

Thirdly, media accountability instruments contain *journalistic news value* on their own. Users show a variable interest for these instruments, as they show vari-

able interest for other journalistic fields, like politics, economics, technology or sports. On the one hand, this value is found in appreciating the journalistic product, which is covering a topic of special interest. On the other hand, journalism has considerable power in democratic societies, which legitimizes journalistic attention for *the* public interest as well. As a newsworthy topic, content of media accountability instruments is part of the larger field of media journalism.

This study exemplifies the overlap between a market frame and a public responsibility frame of media accountability. These frames, as McQuail mentioned before, are not "mutually exclusive" (2003, p. 211). Taking the threesome relation between quality and accountability one step further, this study offers an argument that the potential of media accountability should be found in connecting these frames rather than in opposing them.

Media accountability as news value and as a trade mark appeals to both frames: it creates loyalty and goodwill from both consumers and citizens. For a news medium's financial administration office the commercial reading will prevail, but the journalistic professional may prefer the public service orientation. The bigger the audience, the stronger his professional effect. Moreover, positive effects on perceived quality may increase with quality deduction. This mechanism suggests that perception of accountability at any level of the organization can have beneficial implications for other levels.

Media accountability as a quality assessment tool, however, rather fits the normative notion, for it enhances capacities to critically judge and discuss the democratic quality of journalism. However, to conceive voice and interactivity as inherent components of media accountability, as many authors do, is problematic. The term *interactive* suggests a level of reciprocity that is unlikely in journalism. *Voice* is no obvious strategy for news users; it does not occur unless the public has a compelling urge to express discontent. Besides, low self esteem and low accessibility constitute a fair threshold. Media literacy, trust and entertainment as functions of proactive transparency may be stronger components of media accountability potential than voice.

Together, it shows the dual nature behind media accountability from the perspective of the public. Wahl-Jorgensen's argument (2002) that "what is good for democracy, is inevitably also good for business" may be rather generally stated, but at least in the case of accessible, proportional and honest media accountability it holds true, although the effect may counter as soon as media accountability is perceived hidden, abundant or dishonest. It means that not the fact that a medium really *is* accountable is crucial, but the fact that the medium *is perceived as* properly accountable. At least, 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. According to the taste of the target audience, news media ought to consider how prominent they want to present this infrastructure.

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