

## **Entrenched in detachment:**

Professional values are the main constraint  
to accountability in the United States

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# **Entrenched in detachment: Professional values are the main constraint to accountability in the United States**

*David Domingo*

## **Summary**

In a media system where self-regulation is poorly institutionalized, the development of media accountability online practices is in the hands of initiatives of the newsrooms under the scrutiny of a vibrant of media bloggers. The polarization of political positions in the blogosphere and the principles of journalistic neutrality clash with a dynamic that seems to deter transparency practices. Online-only news sites seem to be more keen than traditional media websites to be responsive to the audience, but accountability is seen more as a natural feature of the Internet than as a journalistic principle.

## 1. Context Factors in the Development of MA Online Practices

### 1.1 Media Legitimacy and Existing MA Institutions

The USA has one of the lowest levels of trust in journalism in Western countries. Trust in media has declined since the early 1990s, from around 40 per cent of people trusting newspapers in 1991 to 25 per cent trusting in newspapers and 22 per cent trusting TV news in 2010 (Table 1). Jay Rosen, associate professor at New York University (NYU) and media critic argues that the war in Iraq starting in 2003 was a crucial moment in the loss of credibility by American media: “...we had one of the greatest press failures ever since we have [had] the press watchdog. We had a war that was approved ... by public opinion based on a false case. That is a spectacular failure.” Furthermore, from a media accountability perspective, he thinks it is even more disappointing that there has been little effort in the newsrooms to analyze this failure:

“To this day none of the major [broadcasting] networks have even conducted a review of their performance. There has been no apology. The *New York Times* did a review that said they did lots of mistakes. *The Washington Post* did something like that. ... To me there should have been something like a truth and reconciliation commission.”

*Table 1: Americans’ confidence in newspapers and television news. Percentage answering “A great deal” or “Quite a lot”*

Media	1991	1995	2001	2005	2010
Newspaper	39	30	36	28	25
Television news	no data	33	34	28	22

Source: Gallup, July 2010, cited in Morales, 2010

A different survey by TNS (Ives, 2008) reported that trust in media in 2008 was led by online news (38 per cent), followed by newspapers (34 per cent) and TV news (33 per cent). Rosen and other interviewees connect the lack of public trust in media with the professional culture of detachment, and therefore advocate that increasing transparency and responsiveness would change this trend. Rosen passionately defends the need for actor transparency for news organizations to gain trust from the audience and considers it requires dropping the idea of neutrality: So far journalists have thought that not telling their background helps the audience trust them, and Rosen thinks that is a big misconception.

“This is really hard for journalists to understand, but trust is not up to the people that are trying to be trusted, but up to the people that are trusting. The nature is changing today, the production of trust is shifting. Now it is easier to trust news providers that say this is where we are coming from. And that is related to accountability because what is saying is that this is how to view us, and how to hold us accountable.”

But Michael Schudson, professor at Columbia University thinks that media mistrust is historically embedded in American society, and doubts that media accountability can be a panacea:

“If news organizations were more transparent about what they do they would actually have a good chance of increasing people's respect for them. But the goal of 'regaining the trust' is impossible. They never had the trust of American people: They are big, impersonal organizations and they won't ever have the trust. If the goals are more modest, [such as] getting more respect and understanding of the hard working operations they do... that's worth doing. But there is nothing in media accountability that is a solution, it is a contributing factor.”

Indeed, the decline in trust has been parallel to a progressive dismantlement of accountability institutions. Many newspapers have given up their ombudsperson positions, and there are just three press councils left, in Minnesota<sup>1</sup>, Washington<sup>2</sup> and Hawaii<sup>3</sup>. Scott Maier, associate professor at University of Oregon, points out a simple reason for this: In moments of crisis, “media organizations look for ways to save money”. Rosen agrees in that ombudspersons are “a luxury”, which newsrooms see as “expendable”. It is hard to find specific data on the number of ombudspersons in US media, but it is a clear symptom of the decadence of the role that the international News Ombudsmen Association deleted from their website the list of regular members. Reviewing their earliest list<sup>4</sup>, updated in 2008, and checking the links to ombudsperson columns online at that time, nine ombudspersons from local newspapers and broadcasters no longer had online columns in 2010. However, the biggest media organizations (and also some of the regional newspapers and broadcasters) have kept their ombudsperson or created the position in recent years: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, National Public Radio, PBS, ESPN, The Plain Dealer (Cleveland), San Antonio Express, Kansas City Star. This may confirm that available resources are critical for the position, as well as some sense of prestige linked to it.

There is consensus among interviewees that media accountability practices have never been widespread or highly institutionalized in the USA. C.W. Anderson, assistant professor at City University of New York (CUNY) and Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism, point out the American radical ethics of freedom of speech, formalized in the First Amendment of the Constitution, as the main conceptual framework shaping the media accountability culture in the country. To them it is not surprising that there are no collective institutions for media oversight. Self-regulation is taken in the most literal sense, and that explains the preference for ombudsmen, internal to the newsrooms, over press councils and external regulation bodies. “The idea that the Society for Professional Journalists in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://news-council.org>

<sup>2</sup> <http://wanewscouncil.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://mediacouncil.org>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.newsombudsmen.org/regmem.htm>

the US could ever call someone else on their ethical practices or their lack of transparency seems absurd to me... I can't imagine it ever occurring," admits Anderson. "We never had a media accountability system compared to some European countries," adds Schudson.

A more informal peer-review system has been in place through media critic columns in newspapers and professional magazines like the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Anderson sees these spaces as para-ombudsmen, as they are outside the newsrooms they criticize, but still are part of the same constituency and talk about their colleagues. Vos *et al.* (2010: 8) recall that the influential communication theorist James Carey complained that the US never had a "sustained, systematic and intellectually sound" media criticism. The Internet may not be fostering all these features, but it has definitely expanded the tradition of media commentary exponentially and bloggers "have become self-appointed 'watchdogs of the watchdogs'." In this context, Rosenstiel makes a provocative argument on the decline of traditional accountability institutions: "It may be that the notion of these traditional systems is less important as they used to be." The multiplication of blogs commenting on media issues, the fact that the audience is able to respond much more directly to journalists "increases and enlarges the peer-review system, the self-regulation system." At the same time, the very definition of journalism is being challenged even within mainstream media: "... there is no single model that journalism should be anymore: Fox News operates with a different model than *The New York Times*." The idea of a neutral press is being challenged by opinionated forms of journalism that may also oblige redefinitions of media transparency.

For Andrew Alexander, ombudsman at one of the heralds of the neutrality model, *The Washington Post*, the new participatory environment is actually a boost for his role, which is still the guarantee that the newsroom will enact the principles of transparency:

"There is some truth to the fact that the rise of the Internet provides greater pressure on the newspaper to be accountable to readers. But the value of having a truly independent ombudsman is that readers who simply comment on an article do not have the ability to go into the newsroom to put very hard questions to reporters and editors, and to essentially act as a reporter on the scene trying to get to the bottom of allegations of journalism transgressions. Working together the ombudsman and the growing component of online... I think that is good that leads to greater transparency."

Rosen and Rosenstiel, instead believe that the institution of the ombudsperson is no longer sufficient in the new context: "All reporters ... should be engaged, two-way, dialogical. This should permeate the whole organization, not be limited to one office," argues Rosen. The traditional institutions of media accountability that were never a strong player in the US media system are therefore more questioned than ever at a time when economic pressure is pushing them out of the few newsrooms that still had them. The Internet is seen by some of the interviewees as providing a better alternative for more transparent media.

## 1.2 Internet User Cultures

The Internet is part of everyday life of most of the population in the USA: 78 per cent used it regularly in May 2010 (PEW Internet, 2010a) with 75 per cent getting news online and 43 per cent on a daily basis (PEW Internet, 2010). That has not detracted them from using other news media: Only 2 per cent of users get their news solely on the Net (Purcell *et al.*, 2010). Blog readership is steadily declining, while social networks are becoming the center of active engagement on the web: While 32 per cent read blogs, 61 per cent are on a social network and 17 per cent on Twitter alone (PEW Internet, 2010b). The percentages of users actively producing content online are not as high as in other countries, but the fact that the country has a huge population makes absolute numbers suggests there is a critical mass of active content producers online. Various surveys by PEW Internet offer different but comparable statistics: 14 per cent of users have their own weblog and 26 per cent have commented on blogs or other websites (PEW Internet, 2010b), while another survey indicates that 9 per cent have contributed material to news websites and 25 per cent have commented on news stories at least once (Purcell *et al.*, 2010).

Interviewees disagree on how to interpret the impact of this active user culture on media accountability. Some share an optimistic perspective, arguing that it increases the urge for transparency, such as Rosenstiel and Alexander in the previous section; while others do not think that it is going to make a difference, at least in the short term, because transparency is the responsibility of journalists and they do not see newsrooms very eager to engage with their audiences. Nonetheless, all of the interviewees have the perception that participation on the Internet is quantitatively a highly significant phenomenon, confirming that despite the low percentages of participation, active users are extremely visible in the US online media landscape. Even the most skeptical think that active users will change the rules of media accountability for the better, sooner or later. In a forthcoming section we will discuss how professionalism in journalism hinders this possibility.

Rosenstiel is one of the most enthusiastic about the active publics scenario. In his recent book with Bill Kovach, *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload*, he synthesizes the powerful discourse that has prevailed in US scholarship and media conferences, that the media monopoly on the production and diffusion of information is over. He explained in an interview with *Columbia Journalism Review*:

“We now live in a user controlled media world. People are their own editors, and the ability of the press to function as a gatekeeper over what the public sees, or to force-feed the public what it should know, is over. Our public discourse is now going to be a collaboration between citizens and consumers of information, and the sources from which they get that information ... we think we have the potential and the capacity for a far superior journalism in this more open system than we ever had with the old.” (Silverman, 2010)

For Rosenstiel the context for media accountability has, in the last decade, changed dramatically. While earlier, the media was used to provide news top-down, only reviewing its work practices if there was a particularly “outrageous” problem, the Internet has transformed this quite unscrutinized production environment into something constantly exposed: “Today we are in an atmosphere where press performance and its evaluation is an ongoing dialogue with the audience and interest groups that can’t be ignored. And that is a positive thing.” Rosen thinks the main change comes because the Internet allows the formerly atomized audience to communicate horizontally: “One of the things that the Internet changed is that people dissatisfied with what they are seeing in the media are now not just alone in their dissatisfaction, they can find each other; they can collect at blogs and media criticism sites, they can pool their dissatisfaction.” Rosenstiel, nonetheless, relativizes the assumption that active users are the only factor fostering media transparency:

“We have moved back happily to that original definition [of journalistic objectivity as a methodology]. Not because of a new idea, or because Internet people have come up with it. Transparency is the old objectivity. ... [I]t would be an oversimplification to think that media bloggers have created transparency. They are as much a reflection of these cultural changes as they are a cause.”

He thinks that the loss of credibility of the press has also motivated newsrooms to embrace the idea of transparency.

Craig Silverman, a media critic specializing on error corrections, argues that as accessing all sorts of information online has become so easy, some media users have made a hobby out of fact-checking the news and that is “raising the level of scrutiny of journalism.” Schudson recalls a journalist sharing with him the feeling that she was more fearful about what her readers will say about her reporting than whether her editor could challenge it. Silverman insists that mistakes by lack of accuracy or willful bias in news are “caught today more than they did before.” As these users are writing stories themselves, they understand better the challenges of reporting. He sees an opportunity here to foster a collaborative spirit: “There is an opportunity for news organizations to tell this people, help us, fact-check us, and make this something that is open and collaborative rather than an adversarial relationship.” However, he acknowledges that the audience tends to see journalists as arrogant, which is one of their motivations to do media criticism. Michele McLellan, citizen media consultant at the Knight Digital Media Center emphasizes that the Internet levels the playing field of media accountability: “The web increases anyone's ability to hold big media accountable because if a big news organization makes a mistake anybody can get out on the web and point that out. If they are networked enough people in their network

will pick up on it and it will get out there exponentially.” But this has also a downside, Silverman warns:

“The access to this global library of information is wonderful stuff for verification. The other side is of course that a mistake can be spread around the world in seconds: It can be shared, it can be blogged, cached by search engines... It is seldom the case that a correction flows as far and as fast as the incorrect information in the first place.”

Also, public scrutiny of their work is something that journalists are not as used to as software developers who use “beta” releases of their work to get users to help them find bugs in their programs: “This notion of permanent beta works more as a stress inducer for most reporters than as a guiding norm. It is not a norm as objectivity. It will be interesting to see if it ever changes into a norm”, reflects Anderson.

From a pessimistic position, Tim Vos, assistant professor specializing in media accountability at the Missouri University, dismisses the discourse of revolutionary changes in journalism: “The revolution may still come, I just don't think it is happening.” Vos acknowledges that “the public criticism is easier to formulate and easier to hear”, but for him that is not enough: “The network itself won't produce the level of transparency that it promises to have” if newsrooms do not want to listen to the criticism. Gillmor, from the same perspective, cannot avoid having hope for the future: “It is a way too soon to decide that [active participation] has been a failure [for media accountability]. We should not be in any panic about the slow pace of change. These things take a lot of time and people are reluctant to change. But change is inevitable, and I think it is coming for everybody.” Anderson thinks that is hard that user criticism changes the relative lack of transparency of newsrooms: “They have not penetrated the operation of media institutions. The active analyzing citizen has not created new practices that make media institutions more accountable.” He acknowledges, though, that on an *ad hoc* basis there are things happening and the mindset of some journalists is becoming more open to the idea of an engaged public.

Most of the interviewees agree that two elements are essential to connect the active publics to media accountability: Media literacy of the users and an attitude of openness in the journalists. Therefore, both ends of the equation require an active engagement for media accountability to work. Dan Gillmor, a former technology journalist and now director of the Knight Center for Digital Media Entrepreneurship (Arizona State University) argues about users:

“If they can't be bothered to learn more about what they are being told and to be active rather than passive in their consumption of news, then nothing that we are talking about makes any difference, it is completely irrelevant.” He has recently published *Mediactive* (Gillmor, 2010), reflecting on this issue. Rosenstiel says about the journalists: “They need to see the audience as a community who has something of value.”

At a practical level, journalists Jim Brady and Andrew Alexander, in two very different media newsrooms, positively value the volume of feedback from the public and the quality of a significant part of it. At TBD.com, where Jim Brady was online editor at the time of the interview,

they have branded themselves as a media organization that is open to their audience, and Brady feels users like the conversational tone of their news and engage in collaborating. Alexander thinks the critical mass of active users is a reality, with thousands of emails reaching his ombudsman mailbox every week. He selects the thoughtful ones and addresses their queries, and discusses them regularly with the newsroom. Furthermore, there is more media engaging in practical discourses regarding an open relationship between the newsroom and the readers. As we will see later, this is happening mainly in new operations like TBD.com, but also some legacy media are reinventing themselves in the context of the crisis, like the newspapers of the Journal Register Company whose new CEO called in 2010 to create: “[a]n open and questing company, allowing us to experiment in ways to truly participate with the audience. By opening ourselves up to ideas and partnerships within our communities and those companies that are harnessing technology to both create and distribute information, we can participate with the audience in ways we have never done before. And we can become better providers of local journalism” (quoted in McLellan, 2010). Nonetheless, empirical research on audience participation management suggests that many newsrooms keep for themselves the gatekeeping control and tend to separate user-generated content from professionally produced content (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Domingo *et al.*, 2008; Singer *et al.*, 2011).

### **1.3 Social Context: Political Polarization Alienates Journalists**

One factor affecting decisively the relationship between the audience and journalists, and especially the willingness of journalists to accept media criticism from the audience, is the polarization of politics in the USA. This factor resonates with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) category of “political parallelism”, but is much more complex than their formulation. American mainstream media, as Rosenstiel noted, is no longer homogeneous in standing in the position of neutrality towards politics. They claim to be neutral (even Fox News has the motto of “Fair and balanced”), but they are not perceived as such by a public that has become more polarized in the last decade. The recent political history of the USA, with the terrorist attack of 2001 being used by the government as a justification for more social surveillance, the war in Iraq based on lies (or “truthiness”, as discussed in Zelizer, 2009), the suspicion of fraud in the election of George Bush in 2000... It mobilized and radicalized the left and took Obama to the White House, and as a reaction has also radicalized the right. In this context the Internet matured as an everyday technology and that self-publication websites became widely available. Anderson summarizes:

“There is a historical context to this active participation: In the last decade this has been a hyper-partisan country. You can discuss about what the Internet contributed, but forget that: for whatever reason this online thing has happened at the same time that we had this [political] pendulum, crazy. It is hard to say what is more important, how to separate all that out.”

While in the 1990s the American public was characterized as apathetic, in the 2000s the minority that care passionately about politics grew and was more visible than ever because the Internet became the best tool for them to voice their opinions with a wider reach.

All interviewees agree that most of the media criticism on the blogosphere is partisan and ideologically motivated both on the left and right extremes of the political spectrum. We will discuss later the dynamics of this media accountability practice, but it is relevant to note here that the reaction of many journalists, according to the interviewees, is to close themselves up, instead of striving to be more transparent: “In general the reaction to outside criticism is that they are idiots, they don't understand the pressures in the newsroom,” argues Schudson. Rosen quoted an NBC political editor saying: “Media critics of the left bash me and media critics from the right bash me. And it is always that. But they are both wrong.” A common reaction, explains Rosen, is “withdrawing even more, and building up bigger defenses”, an extremely adverse attitude to developing media accountability practices. Anderson calls it the “bunker mentality.” Despite this, Schudson and Anderson acknowledged that partisan criticism can still be valuable: “It is better to live in a world with partisan criticism than a world without any media criticism.” Vos, instead, thinks that partisan watchblogs “hinder media accountability,” as journalists may become reluctant to any kind of media criticism.

#### *1.4 Professionalism in Journalism*

As already detected by Hallin and Mancini (2004), professionalism is a crucial factor shaping the characteristics of media systems, and it seems essential in defining the attitudes and practices of media accountability in the USA. For Rosen, this is the ultimate reason that stops the development of accountability in American newsrooms: “[H]ow professionalism was constructed in the first place.” Many accountability practices require little effort from journalists (especially efforts regarding actor and production transparency), and therefore it is not (only) practical issues that hinder their adoption, but rather aspects of the professional ideology of journalism, the aspiration for autonomy that Bourdieu describes as essential to define the journalism field (see Benson, 2006). In the historical process of the construction of journalism as a profession, one of the main ingredients was detachment to guarantee a neutral observation of reality. The rhetoric was that the best way to serve to the public was being detached from it, explains Rosen. This has important consequences for media accountability:

“When they say that they are self-regulating it means that the regulation is peer-to-peer rather than profession to public. There is a connection between being insulated from the public and being a profession with a public-service mission. That makes them think they are close to the community by being far, they don't see themselves as closed, but they are. It is something in the way the profession was imagined, that keeping people out of the newsroom was not only feasible and desirable, but professional. ... They were physically barricaded, and by their own attitudes.”

For Schudson, this is not unique to journalism: “Any professional group is likely to become a cult and insulate itself from criticism from their clients. It is true to medicine, and it is true to journalism.” Anderson recalls from his ethnography of news production in Philadelphia that “people did not care about outside criticism because they were too busy trying to produce the product.” Professional goals, Anderson argues, define the priorities of the journalists: “Newsrooms are still for better or worse primarily designed to produce a finished product, the ultimate goal of the system is spitting a story. This other stuff is extra...”

Most of interviewees assume that transparency is not only necessary but desirable, even more in the Internet age where corporate ownerships are more complex and sources multiply. But journalists tend to take it for granted as “self-evident”, complain Maier and Silverman. Striving for professional legitimacy makes them averse to admit errors. “I think [this] is exactly the wrong thing: The more readily you admit a mistake, the more people will actually trust you,” argues Gillmor. Rosen explains how difficult is for him to convince journalists exactly of this idea. “They think that when we ask them to be transparent we want them to express their personal views.” This debate has been especially spurred by the regulation of the use of social media by journalists, as we will see later. Rosenstiel pledges for a return to the original meaning of the concept of *objectivity* as borrowed from science by Walter Lippman, central to the foundations of American journalism: “In science, objectivity means transparency and replicability. It does not mean that I don't have a thesis, or that I am utterly neutral, [but that] I have tested the thesis. The method of reporting was objective, not the reporter.”

The most Kafkaesque forms of rejection of media accountability have to do with the litigious culture of the USA: Gillmor notes that lawyers of media companies recommend less transparency, because the more the journalist explains about their production, “the more there is to work with if someone has been sued for libel”. Alexander confirmed that *The Washington Post* was reluctant to share their internal newsroom policies with their audiences:

“I know the fear of editors is that if you publish these policies, readers will take certain phrases and clap you over the face with them, saying 'you didn't hold up to that standard or that other.' My response to that is that it is fine, [readers] should do that. They pay for the product. On balance, by having those policies out there and being as transparent as possible I think it benefits the credibility of the paper.”

He had got the commitment from the managing editor to publish the documents and was hoping it to happen before his term ended in three months.

### *1.5 Online Journalism Development*

Considering the previous factors, the overall picture of media accountability in the USA is that of an extremely high level of active media criticism outside media organizations, which are mostly reluctant to engage in transparency and responsiveness practices. Only 5 per cent of members of the Online News Association think that the Internet is fostering increased accountability, while 45 per cent think it is loosening the standards of journalism (PEJ/ONA, 2009). When asked what online journalism does well, they mention mostly “using technologies well” and “giving readers a voice” (30 per cent each), and “speed” (16 per cent). But this general picture has nuances in the figures of ombudspersons in some specific newsrooms and also in two distinct groups of online media: “old”, or newsrooms linked to traditional media, and “new”, or net-native projects. While the “old” media tend to have a reluctant attitude towards accountability, the “new” ones have a more open attitude. However, they seem to endorse this transparency and engagement with the public as a natural tenet of the Internet as a medium than rather as a journalistic principle. Lack of transparency is understood by most interviewees as a tenet of the traditional model of journalism.

Audience engagement is one of the bigger debates in US online journalism in the last decade, along with the quest for a sustainable business model. In the context of the second aspect, many new journalistic projects are opting for non-profit solutions (Downie & Schudson, 2010), with involvement in their local communities as a key aspect for financial survival. These new projects are very eager to explore the opportunities of audience participation to gain market presence and report from a position that is closer to their publics. Established online media linked to legacy brands (newspapers, broadcasters) have also actively explored audience participation features. Rosenstiel feels that in the last five years the attitude in newsrooms towards the audience is less defensive and more prone to discover possibilities. “There is finally and understanding that the audience does not actually want to supplant journalists. People have their own jobs and don’t want to be their own reporters, but they want to be able to speak to their reporters, and they are experts and they could be able to contribute their expertise...” The most utopian discourses proposing that everybody could be a journalist are over, and participation is becoming part of the everyday routines in newsrooms.

When it comes to responsiveness and transparency, most interviewees can see differences between these two models of online journalism: “There is more eagerness by the new participants than the traditional media that have gone online,” says Gillmor emphatically, and other interviewees agree. On the side of traditional media online, Vos perceives resistance towards transparency:

“I’m still not seeing grand movements, grand gestures, enormous changes in mainstream media. In some respects the reaction is in the opposite direction: *The Washington Post* basically tells its staff that they have to put less of themselves out there, and put out a persona of objectivity. They are trying to maintain that old world”.

Silverman adds: “I think they want to distinguish themselves by being seen as responsible and reserved and professional.” He believes that the reason for these “diverging” attitudes is “different organizational definitions”. Alexander agrees: *The Washington Post* has a brand based on neutrality and detachment that makes their readers expect that distance, users themselves demand it and would react angrily to other styles of reporting. Brady argues that, instead, new projects “cannot have the old rules,” they have to distinguish themselves of the established actors in order to find their position in the media ecology.

Some of the interviewees saw a generational factor in the attitudes towards openness. For Brady, young journalists have “a different set of beliefs” than veteran journalists and when they reach commanding roles “[w]e will start to see newsrooms understanding the value of transparency and a two-way conversation.” Vos agrees that younger journalists are less bond to the professional ideology of detachment and “seem to be more interested in what people are saying,” as they are users of social media themselves. Rosen thinks that traditional newsrooms have a hard time incorporating the ideas of these younger journalists and many end up frustrated and leave to start their own projects. Young journalists, Brady adds, “are not being asked to be open, because the ones running the organizations aren’t.” And while traditional newsrooms lag behind, start-ups have an opportunity to “get in there and create this new kind of dynamic.”

### 1.6 The Future Ahead

There may be some amount of technological determinism in the interviewees when they connect accountability with the possibilities opened by the Internet, while seeing traditional institutions of media accountability as fading and mostly inefficient. This is a common reaction to new technologies, which are usually welcome with mythical discourses that assume they will solve all the problems of the current situation (Domingo, 2008). But at the same time, the interviewees identify several factors that are crucial in the shaping of media accountability practices online, and acknowledge that technology by itself is not going to produce change. The relationship between factors has multiple directions, some fostering accountability and others hindering it. The active user culture connected with the polarization of political life, along with the low credibility of journalism, fosters media criticism outside media organizations, but at the same time seems to provoke an aversion towards responsiveness and transparency in the newsrooms. Existing professional values tend to keep journalists away from their audiences, suggesting that

the decades of tradition in media accountability have not yet permeated to the core of journalistic professionalism. Instead, the interviewees see in the possibilities of the Internet an almost inevitable spur for transparency and responsiveness. A generational gap regarding the use of the interactive tools of the Internet and the lack of institutional tradition of new projects seem to be factors fostering a more open attitude.

Some interviewees try to put current developments in historical context in order to interpret them. The evolution of professionalism to embrace a more dialogical relationship with the audience would be the ultimate element to foster media accountability. Rosen reminds that professionalism is a historical construct, and Vos underlines that changes in journalism have taken decades so far: The move from a partisan press to objectivity took almost a century. Vos sees a mix of factors shaping the professional principles, with technology being not necessarily the crucial one: “So possibilities that may happen with new technologies are going to take other factors to happen: economic situations, policy situations, that will have an effect in making these changes happen. It may take a long time.”

Maier insists that many of the media accountability practices require little effort and they are mainly a matter of “commitment.” That would reinforce the necessity of professionalism to evolve in the direction of openness. He admits that it is also a matter of resources, which are dwindling in the current situation of decadence of the existing media business model. He thinks that convincing media companies that accountability is not only good for their credibility but also for their business would definitely foster the practices. Rosenstiel reminds that most organizations have reacted to the crisis by cutting staff, a terrible policy for the quality of their product in the long-term. In this context, editors have very little energy left to innovate. One way out of this complicated situation would be highlighting successful role models where accountability practices have made a difference. “The news industry is very imitative,” reminds Rosenstiel.

## 2. Practices Initiated by Media Organizations

### 2.1 Actor transparency<sup>5</sup>

Actor transparency involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. This set of practices is, in general, not widespread and it is even less visible online (Table 2), despite this Vos identifies actor transparency online as the kind of accountability that better

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<sup>5</sup> The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

fits the tradition of press criticism in the US, that considers that bias depends on the authorship, the political inclinations and economic ties of the media companies. “So it seems natural to stand up and say where you come from in terms of viewpoints and move on from there.” But here the interviewees distinguish traditional and new news organizations: “I see very little willingness on the part of traditional organizations to be as transparent as I believe they should be”, points out Gillmor.

Table 2: Practices fostering actor transparency in US online news websites

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Present in online media</i>
Published Mission Statement	Quite usual, but generic
Published Code of Ethics	Not usually, even if they have it
Profiles of Journalists	Few, mostly email and lists of articles
Public information on Company Ownership	Available, but not easy to reach

Rosen defends the argument that media companies should do more efforts for actor transparency as a key aspect to regain public trust. Schudson disagrees, as he thinks it will be used by extremists to erode the credibility of media organizations. Brady also thinks that transparency needs to have limitations and he is more willing to develop production transparency practices than actor transparency.

### *Mission statement*

According to a study by Duffy *et al.* (2009), 80 per cent of news websites of a sample of over 200 local and regional media had some sort of mission statement posted on their websites. In most cases they are very neutral and standardized texts that do not achieve the kind of openness regarding the social and journalistic values that Rosen insists they should disclose. “General mission statements are there, but there are no forward looking revolutionary mission statements that say that this is where we stand politically or this is the kind of journalism we are going to do,” confirms Vos. The statements are not published in a prominent place on the websites.

### *Company ownership*

News websites usually offer a link at the bottom of their pages to the corporate owner's website. But making sense of who owns that particular media company, and to what extent, can be difficult. Someone who really wants to understand the scope of a newspaper's corporate owners has to do some investigating. “That information is surely available, but you need to go and look for it,” says Maier. Several media observatory websites offer financial information of media companies.

Schudson thinks that informing openly about the ownership of media companies is “a mistake”: It would be used by the public on the far left of the spectrum to prove “that mainstream media has been sold to the right wing and you can't trust anything in it.”

### *Ethical codes*

Most newsrooms have internal codes of ethics and policies, but few publish them online. They tend to supplement the general code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, which is available on the association website. This and other professional organizations (broadcasting journalists and photographers have their own) have different versions of a journalistic code of ethics, but affiliation is low. Vos explains the reason for the lack of public newsroom policies:

“They are very reluctant to publish this kind of thing because if they do there is increased accountability, and specially their legal accountability, and in the American litigious society you may not win libel cases, but you main inflict a lot of suffering in media organizations by saying "This organization did not even follow their own code of ethics.”

In 2009, the ombudsman of *The Washington Post* convinced the editor to publish their internal policies once they were updated. By the end of 2010 that had not yet happened. “The reason I think this is important is that when you read the policies of *The Washington Post* they are very inspiring, they set the bar very very high and I think that readers would have more faith in *The Washington Post* if they saw that the policies are this well thought out.” He thinks the concerns of the newsroom regarding being kept accountable for what the policies say is actually a right of their readers and that the boost of credibility is a benefit that they should seek. At TBD.com, Brady thinks this step for them is a natural one, as soon as they have the newsroom policies written: “Certainly seems that it would be hard to explain if we claim to be transparent if we don't put the code of ethics online.”

Alexander also suggests that transparency should be extended to more specific aspects that have ethical implications, like the links to Amazon in book reviews. He thinks that a statement is needed to let the users know very clearly that *The Washington Post* will get revenue from any book bought on Amazon through those links.

### *Journalist profiles*

While Rosen defends the need for journalists to disclose “where do you come from”, Schudson thinks that professionalism and ethics should be enough guarantees for the public.

“Would it be useful to know that 80-90 per cent of editorial staff at the NY Times and WP voted democratic? The result of publicizing that event would be to confirm the views of the right that you can't trust these media. ... [Journalists] believe in facts, in holding their own views to themselves, in balance of sources... That is more important to what you see in the paper than the personal affiliations of the employees.”

Few online newsrooms offer profiles of their journalists on their websites. *The New York Times* and magazines like the online-only *Salon.com* and *The New Yorker* are the exceptions. Aspects which are more spread are contact emails and a list of articles written by a reporter, but that has little to do with actor transparency. Steve Outing pointed out in the collaborative document the irony that “[w]e know more about most bloggers than we do about journalists working for the big names of old journalism.”

Alexander highlights a case of best practice: Reporters that write about financial matters and technology at *The Wall Street Journal* add a full paragraph of disclosures to their stories: they do not accept gifts, they list their financial holdings. “That builds their credibility. They show that they care about their reputation and their credibility and they are not afraid to share their own personal standards. There could be more of that.”

## 2.2 Production transparency

Production transparency denotes practices where media organizations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news. The interviewees agree that production transparency is the set of practices that newsrooms could more easily implement without challenging existing professional values. The keywords are accuracy and reliability. Rosen argues: “[Journalists] should be willing to be held accountable for their practices, because that is a very good way to make yourself more reliable. And reliability is a key index of quality.” Correction of errors is framed by the interviewees under this category, as they see it as a form of transparency of the production process, rather than mere responsiveness. But there are few stable practices in this area beyond the basics (Table 3).

*Table 3: Practices fostering production transparency in US online news websites*

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Present in online media</i>
Authorship stated by each story	Yes
Precise reference to sources	Yes
Correction of errors	Yes, but not systematic
Links to sources in stories	In net-native sites
Journalists’ personal blogs	Few use it for accountability
Newsroom blogs	Seldom, few for accountability
Collaborative story writing with citizens	Very few cases

Alexander thinks that newsrooms should not only be transparent about their policies and work procedures, but also provoke discussions with their readers about those policies and ethical implications of the news production, especially considering that the Internet is not as consolidated as print-media in terms of journalistic standards.

“We are all trying to figure out the ethical lines in this new world and I don't think we should do it alone, we should engage readers. For two reasons: They are customers; that's one thing. But also they are very smart and have very good ideas. When they take the time to engage in a discussion about ethics is because they care about it.”

Alexander explains from experience that when *The Washington Post* uses explicit pictures of violence or death on their front page, the mere practice of adding an editors' note explaining the motivations to publish it reduce complaints of readers to a minimum, “because they see that we took the time to consider their feelings.” Schudson would like to see more articles explaining how a journalist got a story. He suggests it to be a weekly column, because he always feels he learns something about journalism when a reporter explains him this kind of behind the scenes recollections.

### Authorship

Experts participating in the collaborative document believe authorship is usually clearly stated in online news sites. However, a study by Maier in 2008 found that print media did better than online in being transparent about the authorship of news stories. However, the presence of bylines (usually with a contact email, which fosters the responsiveness aspect of accountability) in many cases does not clarify how much of a story is original reporting and how much is pulled from a press release or an agency wire. “It is the mix of authorship and information sources used that isn't always transparent,” complains Nora Paul.

### Sources

Duffy *et al.* (2009) found that 76 percent of news stories in local and regional online media had clear sources, and 46 per cent at least two or more. Links to websites of sources, however are much less common. Net-native websites do better than legacy newsrooms in this regard, that tend to limit their links to previous stories within their own publication. Maier argues how important for credibility this practice is, as it would let audiences “judge for themselves”, and confesses that it is “disappointing” to see that it seldom happens. “It takes time, energy and courage,” he admits. In his own research, he found that online news organizations were doing a poorer job than traditional news in reporting where their information did come from.

“Surely it is not intentional. My guess is that online news organizations reporting the news, try to get it out very quickly taking it from a variety of sources, but mainly from their parent organization or wire services and frankly they don't want to admit that is information they have collected and put together from a variety of sources.”

Transparency in sourcing would simultaneously ease the practice of transparency in authorship.

### Corrections

A study by Follman and Rosenberg (2010) on the correction policies and practices of mainstream online news sites found that broadcasters were doing much better than newspapers and magazines. Except for Fox News, that does not have any trace of correction policies or practices (as if they never committed any errors), the other three networks involved in the study have clear sections for corrections. Among 35 online newspapers, which were analyzed, 25 do not provide a link to a corrections page or archive of current and past corrections on their websites' home pages and article pages. Only about half, 17 of the 35, provide a corrections policy of any kind. The most common feature (in 21 of 35) is a contact channel (email, phone, or Web form) for the public to report an error to the newsroom. "However, in most cases this information isn't prominent or easy to find," the report concluded.

Craig Silverman started a blog in 2004 called *RegretTheError.com* as he realized that there was little discussion about corrections and fact-checking of news despite the fact that most journalists would refer to accuracy as one of their top priorities. "I ... saw it as a problem that we see it as so important but we don't talk about it." He thinks one of the reasons is that accuracy is taken for granted. "And on the other hand there is a lot of shame associated with errors ... We have a culture that punishes people rather than fostering sharing and improving." Rosenstiel thinks that newsrooms would benefit from being more transparent about error correction. He argues that research shows that the public is aware of minor errors (typos, names misspelled) and that journalists should be transparent about correcting them because that "strengthens your

#### Case 1: A minor typo at TBD.com

TBD.com, the net-native local news site for Washington, DC born in 2009 has a foundational commitment to report any correction of errors made them post a note stating that a blog post of their staff writers had a typo\*. It was a tiny error, but unfortunately of laughable consequences: "This blog post originally stated that 'one in three black men who have sex with me is HIV positive'. In fact, the statistic applies to black men who have sex with *men*." Brady, at that time editor of TBD.com argues that once the story was published, fixing the typo without acknowledging it would have been a bad policy: "We did not get a story wrong. It is an unfortunate typo, but we were right to put the correction up there. ... [T]his one was easy to cover up, but we did correct it because it is the policy that we have." As the correction spurred discussion and mocking on Twitter, they posted an article\*\* on the newsroom blog explaining the reasons why they thought that acknowledging the correction was the right thing to do, sticking to their commitment to correction transparency.

Brady added: "If people really do believe that you are transparent about the mistakes you make they will trust you as a source more. Many media companies are transparent when it is convenient for them. We made the commitment of being totally transparent about the journalism we are producing." He admits that they may have overdone the plea for correction transparency after this case, talking for too long about it, but he thinks that overdoing the call for transparency is better than opacity. Silverman backs their reaction: "There's no reason not to behave like a human and say 'Yes, it is funny, we know, but it is a mistake and we want you to know that we acknowledge our mistakes'." Vos is worried about the reaction of professional media commentators who criticized TBD.com for overreacting on a typo: "I wonder if they are marginalizing a transparency norm as being silly, a silly effort."

\* [http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/tbd\\_and\\_the\\_accuracy\\_boast.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/tbd_and_the_accuracy_boast.php)

\*\* <http://www.tbd.com/blogs/tbddc/2010/10/yes-transparency-can-seem-like-boasting-but-tbd-favors-transparency-3107.html>

credibility.” That would also make journalists commit more strongly to avoiding the bigger mistakes and the unconscious biases that the audience most regrets: “[I]f you are more diligent about transparency, then you will be more vigilant of larger errors that you may make, because they are going to be more difficult to explain and you will have to explain.”

An antithetic case involves *The Washington Post*: They unfortunately misspelled the title of a rap song (instead of “911 is a joke” -for the emergency number- a copy editor, who did not know the song, wrote “9/11 is a joke” -for the terrorist attacks in 2001). People on Twitter made fun of how little the newspaper know about rap, and created a hashtag for imaginary errors that could be made with rap songs. *The Washington Post* corrected the error, but did not follow up the Twitter discussion with a story. According to Silverman, the reporter wanted to write about how much people were talking about the mistake and how she felt about it, “but the editors said ‘No, you can’t do that’”. The ombudsman wrote a column on the issue criticizing the harsh reaction of Twitter users and bloggers to a minor error<sup>6</sup>. I prefer the TBD approach. “We have to acknowledge what is going on in the world outside, we have to engage”.

Maier (2007) has studied how corrections are dealt with in print newspapers, and he concluded that only 1 in 10 factual errors are reported to the newsroom by sources, and just 2 per cent of those reported are corrected. There is no similar research on online newspapers, but Maier insists that journalists make mistakes “all the time” and on the Web the need for correction is even bigger because “errors may be repeated and passed on and do not die.” Silverman agrees: “There is a lot of information pollution, staying there forever”. The push for immediacy of the Internet also increases the chance of publishing errors: “Speed is the enemy of accuracy. The faster you go the more errors you will make,” warns Rosenstiel. The practice that most interviewees were very positive about was correction buttons, for the audience to report errors easily”. It is seldom present in US news websites, but in November 2010 the “Report the Error Alliance” was created to promote their use.

### **Case 2: Report the Error Alliance and correction policies**

The “Report the Error Alliance”<sup>\*</sup> was launched by MediaBugs and Craig Silverman in November 2010 to encourage a standardized system for error reporting in news websites. “Readers do not usually report errors because they don’t know how. Most people won’t bother”, explains Maier, who thinks that the help of the citizens is the only way to get newsrooms aware of errors in a fast-pace production environment. Silverman agrees: “We rely on the public to do it, and it is our responsibility to encourage them and to offer them an easy way to report.” The Alliance proposes to add a button to every news story that triggers a form where readers can fill in their correction suggestions right on the spot. *The Toronto Star*, *The Huffington Post* and *The Register Citizen* (a local newspaper in Connecticut<sup>\*\*</sup>) were some of the few North-American news websites with a correction button before the Alliance started. Brady is skeptical about the actual impact of the initiative, because adding the button to the websites is easy, but there needs to be new practices created to incorporate the mechanisms to handle the complaints and correct the articles. Corrections should be part of the “daily operations” of newsrooms, and Brady thinks that only some will take the opportunity to set it up.

Rosenstiel is more optimistic and considers that the speed that the Internet allows for readers to report errors also can be transported to a more efficient management of the correction process, as the author of a story could take care of the correction themselves. In newspapers, it is a top editor, or a corrections office in the case of *The New York Times*, that decides an error should be corrected and a note about it posted on the second page, the next day. Now, Rosenstiel argues, the responsibility of corrections can be institutionalized across the whole newsroom and the whole website.

In February 2011, *The Washington Post* adopted the philosophy of the Alliance<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, with a prominent link labeled "YOUR FEEDBACK: Corrections, suggestions?" that leads to a form to send feedback to the newsroom. After two months of setting up the form, they had received 540 submissions, but only 200 dealt with corrections: 32 pointed out factual errors, and 180 grammar problems or linking errors. The rest expressed opinions about the stories. The ombudsman has addressed some of the corrections in his blog.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>

\* <http://reportanerror.org/>

\*\* [http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/a\\_fact\\_check\\_box\\_on\\_every\\_page.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/a_fact_check_box_on_every_page.php)

\*\*\* <http://www.pbs.org/idealab/2011/02/see-an-error-at-the-washington-post-now-you-can-easily-report-it039.html>

\*\*\*\* <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/126262/washington-post-redesign-features-report-an-error-form-making-it-easier-to-report-mistakes-and-respond/>

As important as detecting and correcting the errors, the interviewees insist that it is crucial that newsrooms have transparent practices in acknowledging and explaining them. "Just fixing the error violates the contract we have with the readers," argues Brady. At TBD.com, they usually delete the error from the story, replacing it with the correct information, and post an explanatory note of the existing error and how it was corrected at the top of the stories, to make them visible to new users reading the article and people going back to it. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have a corrections page that gives access to the articles that have been corrected, which have a paragraph at the bottom or the top (respectively) explaining the error. Slate.com has a page where corrections done across the website are actually discussed, and each story has an asterisk at the paragraph where a correction has been performed, as well as an explanatory text at the bottom of the story. Some news organizations have RSS feeds of their corrections, which is another practice to foster transparency.

Other initiatives promoting corrections work outside the media: MediaBugs.org is a community to share and discuss the reporting of errors. The administrators contact the newsrooms to ask for clarifications and corrections. Maier, who follows the project closely, explains that they have a hard time getting newsrooms to be responsive. Nonetheless, in October 2010, the site shifted focus from the local San Francisco area where it started towards national media<sup>7</sup>, as most of the users were submitting queries regarding the major media, which naturally gets more attention. An example about a minor error in *The Washington Post* stating the location of a crime scene shows how inefficient the process of correcting online errors still is in many

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/10/mediabugs-revamps-its-site-with-a-new-national-focus/>

cases: After few days of being contacted by MediaBugs.org, the newsroom posted a correction in the print edition (reproduced online at the corrections page) but only corrected the online story after the case was published at PBS MediaShift<sup>8</sup>. The correction on the online story was not acknowledged, though. The ombudsman, in one of his columns, urged the newsroom to be quicker in addressing correction requests by readers.<sup>9</sup>

Silverman argued that despite the long way to go in correction transparency, the next step is an even bigger challenge: An error prevention system. *The New York Times* has an internal database of corrected errors that could be a starting point to help journalists avoiding them in the future.

### *Blogs by journalists*

Gillmor thinks that columnists are more transparent than other journalists, as their articles already allow them to have a more personal voice. But that does not mean they are more transparent in their production. Gillmor has advocated for years for journalists to use their blogs as a place to explain how their reporting on a topic develops and get ideas from the audience. Vos does not see this happening most of the time, and thinks that the use of blogs by journalists is full of “awkwardness.” Nora Paul agrees that most blogs are, as any editorial content, tightly overviewed by the editors. Even newsroom blogs that explicitly were presented as a space for production transparency like the Dallas Morning Views<sup>10</sup> end up being a space to express the positions of the newsroom, like editorials in newspapers. Rosen recalls, as a best practice the example of Brian Stelter<sup>11</sup>, at *The New York Times*, who actively explains through the day how his stories are developing. Stelter starts with a post in the morning explaining what he knows so far, asking for tips from the audience or for questions for an interview he is going to do later in the day. In the afternoon he posts again, a rough draft of the story he will be publishing in the newspaper the next day.

Braun (2010) offers a thorough analysis of how US newsrooms, specifically those of national broadcasters, adopted the use of blogs by journalists. The discourses of the editors to justify the creation of blogs connected very explicitly with accountability and transparency, but practices ended up falling more into mere news reporting and promoting the content of the TV programs. Technical staff admitted that blogs were created because it was trendy and very easy to set up. Many were abandoned quite quickly, as they did not fit the newsroom routines or they could not find the appropriate tone. “Like the newspapers, the networks have been largely reactive in their

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/idealab/2010/08/washington-post-caught-napping-at-imaginary-intersection238.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/04/AR2009120403075.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://dallasmorningviewsblog.dallasnews.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/author/brian-stelter/>

adoption of new technologies, including blogging,” concludes Braun (2010: 40). There are, however, specific examples of best practices, where journalists engage in debates with users, but more as experts in topics than fostering production transparency: “In general, little access has been granted to back stage processes” (Braun, 2010: 37).

### *Crowdsourcing*

There are few examples of systematic crowdsourcing of news production. American Public Media has a database of almost 100,000 citizens that are willing to collaborate with journalists to enhance their reporting. In the Public Insight Network, each participant states their expertise and may be contacted by journalists covering stories on that topic. Rosen thinks this idea, initiated by Minnesota Public Radio, has a lot of potential, but journalists end up reducing its use to getting quotes for articles, instead of getting advice on story ideas or using the volunteers as peer reviewers. “Imagine how that network could be as an accountability tool. It would be an amazing powerful machine,” he envisions.

TBD.com has the policy of being very explicit in stories when they are lacking data because they could not reach a source or did not find the information. “We try to engage the audience to help us complete the story, and we will credit them,” explains Brady. He admits that there is a limit to this openness, such as some exclusive stories that can put the competitors on their track. He thinks this open approach is especially useful in local stories. At CNN.com, citizen reporting is a playground completely separated from news production. iReport allows citizens to send in their material unfiltered, and the newsroom may pick footage for their stories if they did not have a camera on the spot, but the journalists' production work is not open to the public.

### *2.3 Responsiveness*

Responsiveness denotes news organizations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. In the few news organizations that do have an ombudsperson, the position is the most visible feedback channel for media accountability issues. The ombudspersons at NPR, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have blogs where they post a weekly column that readers can comment on. There are also online forms for contacting them. Rosen defends the need for this engagement to be widespread: “This should permeate the whole organization, not be limited to one office.” Most newsrooms have email contacts for all their journalists, but they do not invite readers to use them as a tool for accountability. For Anderson, there is a lack of systematic practices to integrate the feedback of users into the workflow of the newsroom. “One thing is integrating web statistics. The other is integrating the debate out there.” That would also include discussions by citizens in blogs and Twitter regarding

the stories published by the news organization. Anderson suggests that in editorial meetings, one reporter every week could devote five minutes to summarize what bloggers are saying about a story. “That would force a person to find out, which itself is huge. It would get in people's minds.” In this area of practices, net-native projects are much more active than traditional newsrooms (Table 4).

*Table 4: Practices fostering responsiveness in US online news websites*

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Present in online media</i>
Comments in news	Yes. In net-native projects are used for feedback
Button to report errors	Few.
Twitter account	Yes. Net-native projects use it more for feedback.
Facebook account	Yes. Net-native projects use it more for feedback.

Alexander, as an ombudsman, explains the quantity and quality of feedback he gets from the audience: Every week on average they get 1,200 emails. Easily half of them are from people that have emailed *The Washington Post* and 20 other newsrooms or people who just want to rant. But every week there are 400-500 emails that have specific allegations about some inaccuracy or some level of bias. Many of those get a simple response like “Thank you for writing, I appreciate your thoughts”. But there are a certain number that are sufficiently substantive and are making precise claims about shortcomings in the newspaper coverage. “I pay a lot of attention to those, I take them seriously.” Alexander sees himself as the advocate of the readers and visits the reporters and editors to try to get a response for them about readers’ complaints. In some cases, he ends up writing about the issue in his column. He acknowledges that journalists are not comfortable, but accept his role:

“I think [reporters] react professionally. The reason they act professionally, to me, is that they have a fear that I will write about them publicly, and for better or worse, an ombudsman in my position, who has a platform, a weekly column and my blog, I think that that is extra pressure on the newsroom to pay attention to me. When I forward an email from a reader to someone at the newsrooms they almost always react professionally and quickly with me. When I write about them, they don't always like it.”

### *Comments in news*

Most of the interviewees see this space as a lost opportunity for responsiveness. Newsrooms prefer high volume of contributions rather than quality. “It is generally speaking, a wasteland,” summarizes Gillmor. Comments tend to be offensive and abusive, McLellan recalls, and she thinks that many newsrooms are not doing enough to lead the discussions to constructive debates. There are initiatives that may raise the quality of contributions: *Las Vegas Sun* and the *Buffalo News* have started new systems with verified commentators; users are required to use their real name and their identity to be verified. The Huffington Post is involving the users in the

curation of relevant contributions: It lets users recommend the best comments and they can be filtered.

Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) surveyed readers of the *Sacramento Bee*, and the mean agreement to the statement “I would like reporters to respond to the comments on their stories in order to clarify or answer questions” was 5.79 out of 7. Their interviews with journalists in the newsroom showed that they also valued the idea of engaging in conversations with the public, but editors were reluctant to allow journalists to do it. The concerns were threefold: (i) They feared it would take too much time from reporting; (ii) that reporters would be prone to expose personal opinions and harm the credibility of the paper, and (iii) that there would be no editorial oversight as comments were published right away. Editors, therefore, insisted on describing the comment space as the readers' arena. Vos also recalls an unpublished ethnographic thesis confirming that, in legacy media newsrooms, journalists do not read the comments to their stories. Online news organizations seem keener to engage in discussions: “I have seen other places, online news organizations, where the author is responsive, will respond to criticism and questions.” At *The Washington Post*, the ombudsman “frequently” reads comments on stories. They get around 20,000 comments on a weekly basis, and Alexander admits he cannot even try to read all of them, but rather focuses on controversial stories. “They are typically uncivil and pretty raw at times. But in many cases they have good points in there, and I like to see what they have to say.”

### *Social networks*

The interviewees agree that the use of Twitter and Facebook by US newsrooms is mainly restricted to promotional initiatives or as another distribution channel, rather than as an engagement opportunity for responsiveness. “Just looks like marketing to me,” concludes Vos. “Now, every organization that can afford it has a social media person on staff. But I don't feel what those folks are doing is responding to criticism. I think they are more PR,” adds Anderson. The exceptions are individual journalists on their own initiative. There are seldom institutionalized uses of social networks that foster accountability practices. Indeed, when newsroom managers define policies for the use of social networks, they tend to restrict their use, fearing the credibility of their brand may be compromised by foolish unsupervised postings by the reporters on their profiles. Braun (2010: 39) summarizes the situation in broadcasting newsrooms:

“In the case of the networks, it's clear that while some correspondents manage to use Twitter —like the blogging platforms that preceded it— in a playful and experimental fashion, there are distinct boundaries, and penalties for crossing them, when it comes to what parts of the news gathering process can be made public and what should be kept back stage.”

### Case 3: *The Washington Post* and social networks

*The Washington Post* has been at the center of most of the debates about the journalistic use of social networks. In 2009, the newsroom approved a policy\* that asked journalists to keep their neutrality at all times even in their personal accounts. “All Washington Post journalists relinquish some of the personal privileges of private citizens,” argued the policy document. It also forbade journalists to use social networks as a production transparency tool: “Personal pages online are no place for the discussion of internal newsroom issues such as sourcing, reporting of stories, decisions to publish or not to publish...” Many bloggers\*\* criticized this attitude, and among them Gillmor\*\*\* argued that this was *Post* a missed opportunity to break down the myth of neutrality and start building trust based on what we call actor transparency: Journalists should be honest about their viewpoints. Both Alexander and Brady defend the position of *The Washington Post*. Maier thinks that readers may “appreciate” a personal voice of journalists, but sees social media as a “slippery slope” when reporters may post immediate reactions to events they are covering. Brady calls it an “old school” position, but argues that political reporters should not reveal their opinions on the topics they are working on. Alexander thinks that if *The Washington Post* newsroom would start to express their viewpoints on Twitter, “the newspaper would start losing readership very very quickly. That is because readers in large percentages read *The Washington Post* because they are looking for neutral, unbiased reporting, even if that is very very hard to achieve.” He thinks that that is different for other media like the Huffington Post, where readers go to look for opinionated views on current events.

Alexander gives an example of the perils of the use of Twitter by journalists: When the senate did not pass a healthcare budget, a managing editor tweeted “How can we not afford this when we can afford planes for the war in Afghanistan.” The ombudsman goes on: “That is a very dangerous thing for a managing editor to be doing, because right there you have taken sides in a heated debate on Capitol Hill. To many readers it comes off as this managing editor having a personal opinion that will sway the coverage of that issue.” Anderson admits that it is very hard to imagine *The Washington Post* allowing journalists to “vocally freelance” and argues “*The Washington Post* sells a lot of papers based on its brand, not the personalities of their reporters”.

\* <http://paidcontent.org/article/419-wapos-social-media-guidelines-paint-staff-into-virtual-corner/>

\*\* <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/09/is-transparency-the-new-objectivity-2-visions-of-journos-on-social-media/>

\*\*\* <http://mediactive.com/2009/09/30/washington-post-social-networks-and-transparency/>

Other US media have published their newsroom social media policies, with less stricter approaches than *The Washington Post*, but insisting on similar principles. Both *The New York Times* and the NPR<sup>12</sup> guidelines welcome the use of social media as fruitful tools for journalists, and ask their reporters to be prudent in their use, also touching upon the idea of keeping an image of neutrality. At TBD.com reporters actively use Twitter to contact their readers and there is no written policy, but the recommendation is to “stay off personal opinions.” The debate, therefore, has mostly been framed as if social networks could just foster actor transparency, and when newsrooms reject it, they reject at the same time the possibility of using it for production transparency or responsiveness without even exploring those options. Only *The Wall Street*

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.npr.org/about/aboutnpr/ethics/social\\_media\\_guidelines.html](http://www.npr.org/about/aboutnpr/ethics/social_media_guidelines.html)

*Journal* goes further than their competitors, and explicitly forbids the use of social media for production transparency: “Let our coverage speak for itself, and don’t detail how an article was reported, written or edited ... Don't discuss articles that haven't been published, meeting you've attended or plan to attend with staff or sources, or interviews that you've conducted.” (Ward, 2009)

Rosen thinks that the debate has been misplaced: Newsroom policies seem to be reductionist and interpret transparency as “being opinionated.” Schudson recalls that this debate has existed since the 1960s, when reporters could be reprimanded for participating in political demonstrations. Social networks just seem to revive that discussion even more intensely. Alexander admits that those who defend an open use of social networks by journalists are making points that are “provocative and worth discussing”, and leaves a door open to production transparency. His perception is that readers do not want to know the opinion of the journalists, but they appreciate knowing what a reporter did experience when covering a story. “And I think that is perfectly appropriate, I think it is possible for reporters to share their emotions without sharing their opinions.” At TBD.com, Brady explains that the social media reporter replies to all the queries sent by users and they try to have a conversational tone not only on Twitter and Facebook, but also on the news stories themselves:

“A lot of times in the middle of a breaking news situation we would tell 'This is what we know so far, we will let you all know as soon as we get an answer to this question.' We are talking to them. Lots of newspapers never address the audience directly. It is a law. I think the conversational tone makes people feel more comfortable and that formality does not work anymore. If you are trying to build a two-way relationship, the mainstream newspapers tone does not work. TV is much better in this. Journalists in other media find it off-putting. But it is not off-putting to the reader. For them, they are in a relationship with TBD.”

### 3. Practices outside Media Organizations

Despite the fact that there are many media-watch organizations in the USA, some of them are ideologically motivated, others simply have an accountability aim, most of the discussion with the interviewees revolved around the figures of media bloggers. This was because the visibility and volume of their criticism is much bigger than that of organizations such as MediaMatters, TruthSquad or Columbia Journalism Review, to name three very different initiatives.

#### 3.1. Media bloggers

Vos *et al.* (2010) have thoroughly analyzed the media criticism of ten of the most read US political bloggers, from a Bourdieu-esque perspective. They found that bloggers see themselves as external to the journalistic field and do not challenge it with their criticism, but rather try to push journalists to keep up with the standards of the profession, such as accuracy, impartiality and independence. “Since these historically rooted criteria constitute, in no small part, the cultural capital of the journalistic field, this blogger-situated media criticism speaks strongly to the stability in the journalistic field.” If bloggers were to challenge the journalistic field, they could criticize the lack of actor transparency, but that was seldom the case. Production transparency received a bit more of attention, with bloggers praising best practices and criticizing newsrooms that hid the identity of their sources.

Those blogs, self-labeled as “watchblogs”, have been an influential movement in the USA since the consolidation of weblogs as a tool for personal mass communication in 2003-2004. Bloggers have forced journalists to cover stories they overlooked, to admit to errors in reporting and in some cases have resulted in resignations. However, those famous cases have ended up being more anecdotal than a change in the media landscape. The interviewees had a hard time trying to recall recent cases of bloggers influencing the reporting of mainstream media.

Brady thinks that blogger media criticism is “healthy” for journalism. Gillmor also thinks that bloggers do a commendable effort to hold media accountable. But the situation is not completely positive: “Some of the best media criticism is taking place on blogs, as well as some of the worst media criticism. The difficulty is finding the good material.” Gillmor argues that there are roughly two main motivations for media criticism from bloggers: Some want to help journalism be better, hold it on to its standards, but many others have a political motivation, and they just want their political views to be the ones that news media adhere to in their reporting. Furthermore, this second group can be extremely aggressive and unfair in their judgments of the work of reporters they do not like. For Silverman, this is not a problem “as long as they are dealing with actual facts.” Maier also thinks that these ideologically loaded contributions may have a positive effect

on media quality even if that is not their main intention. Vos disagrees, and thinks that the aggressiveness of bloggers may hinder the development of media accountability practices within media organizations that become reluctant to reach out to their publics in general, discouraged by the attitude of the bloggers. Rosenstiel thinks that ideological bloggers complicate the ability of bloggers committed to journalistic quality to influence journalists. He tries to bridge the positions of the other interviewees: “[Ideological bloggers] are generally not helpful because they make some people think of all media criticism as ideological. To some extent they give media criticism a bad name. But, just because they are ideological doesn’t mean that all the work they do is baseless.” He argues, as does Silverman, that when bloggers deal with actual data can make very powerful points for media accuracy and transparency.

Vos feels that media bloggers are not overtly influential in the newsrooms, as journalists tend to reject their criticism or do not give them any credit. Brady admits that many newsrooms “react defensively” and they have the challenge of learning how to deal constructively with blogger criticism. “Journalists still use the word blogger as if it is a curse that helps create the environment of conflict.” Alexander admits that he does not systematically read watch-blogs, but the audience of *The Washington Post* points out to him relevant posts doing criticism of their newsroom practices. His attitude is of respect, but makes clear that they do not have the intention of letting bloggers influence their reporting:

“I think reporters and editors should not worry or be concerned about people speaking openly about them. I think that is what is great in a democratic society, the more voices the better. That does not mean you have to respond to everyone. Just like in capitalism, in the capitalism of ideas, those ideas that have weight, those bloggers that have credibility will eventually move to the top and will be given more recognition and more people will pay attention to them.”

On the side of the bloggers, Vos sees sometimes the seed for interesting developments regarding their contribution to the ‘objectivity versus transparency’ debate:

“[T]here is something more subtle going on: Sometimes the conversation [by bloggers] is more explicit in saying ‘Of course you are biased, what you should do is be more transparent about those biases.’ But they do not say that in so many words. Blogger criticism has not found a revolutionary voice yet. They are not trying to make some sort of paradigm shift for transparency. That is where they want to go... but this is a period of rhetorical experimentation. Ultimately we are going to move to a formalization of points of criticism that point out transparency as a change that can be revolutionary.”

The most recent of the remarkable cases of the dynamics of the relationship between bloggers and media accountability confirm the resilience of newsrooms to accept criticism. While journalists are prone to pick up stories from bloggers when they suggest possible political scandals, they are less eager to accept that they were fooled by these sources. Several of the interviewees recalled how the public editor of *The New York Times* took months to react to the

well documented criticism by left-wing BradBlog.com<sup>13</sup> to their reporting about the ACORN (a nationwide antipoverty organization) story, based on a right-wing blogger's video that seemed credible. Anderson thinks the blogger fooled the newspaper because the paper did not know anyone at the organization. ACORN, Anderson says, was "off their mainstream radar screen." For months, any references to developments of the story were flawed with the same original errors, and the public editor defended their reporting against the criticism in the blogosphere lead by BradBlog. The public editor finally admitted that the newspaper got it wrong and gave a number of reasons, basically pushing away responsibility from the newsroom. Even then, the newspaper did not make a correction to clarify the story.

There was another case where the mainstream press took false reporting by a right-wing blogger and spread it critically. Shirley Sherrod, a member of the Department of Agriculture of the US, resigned because she was accused of inverse racism by a manipulated video. Instead of looking at the source and making their independent assessment, they made a 'he-said, she-said' story. There was consequently a discussion regarding how the press kept getting things wrong for so long, but with no outcomes.

Another kind of conflict between bloggers and newsrooms occurs when the blogosphere criticizes media decisions: NPR decided to use the phrase "enhanced interrogation" instead of "torture" even after Bush was out of the White House and the case started to be investigated. "The comments of their users were brutal in their criticism," recalls Vos. There were a lot of bloggers taking this on and that drove people to the website, which used the comments in news to point out their anger. NPR did not really respond to that criticism. "They were dismissive about bloggers being far left, dismissive of the critique," says Vos. The ombudswoman ended up writing up<sup>14</sup> the reasons for the choice of the conceptual phrase, arguing that journalists should not take sides in this discussion, and the loaded content of "torture" as a crime was not acceptable when there had not, thus far, been a trial of the situation. She acknowledged having received "a slew of emails." Bloggers were the mobilizers of this uproar. For Vos, this means that traditional accountability institutions, such as the ombudsperson, faces new pressures: "Bloggers are amplifying these messages, sending people to those sites to comment, there is a relentlessness in keeping the story alive that makes the ombudsperson less likely to dismiss it."

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.bradblog.com/?p=7755>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.npr.org/blogs/ombudsman/2009/06/harsh\\_interrogation\\_techniques.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/ombudsman/2009/06/harsh_interrogation_techniques.html)

### 3.2 Citizen journalism

There is a vibrant scene of citizen journalism initiatives in the USA, but both the interviewees and research suggest that they are not making a significant contribution to foster media accountability practices. Vos thinks that as mainstream media is reluctant to develop accountability practices these alternative media could make a difference:

“We need to see how bloggers and citizen journalism become part of the news ecology. If they are going to be more transparent, because that seems to be their mode of operation, that's where changes may happen. It is not that mainstream media are going to change, but that they are going to be a smaller part of the system. I'm not optimistic about that either, as in the US the bigger players of online news are in the hands of mainstream media.”

McLellan has put together a list of local citizen media initiatives<sup>15</sup>. Her assessment is that citizen media is still too fragile to make a significant impact:

“It doesn't mean that the potential isn't there. It is that the new organizations are so young, and they are quite fragile, and many of them are led by journalists that have been displaced from the mainstream, but they don't know anything besides journalism. They don't know the business; they don't know web culture of engagement.”

In 2009 citizen media grew particularly in local communities, while many newspapers closed down. But a study found “serious limitations in the ability of these sites to compete with traditional journalism. The citizen news sites offered less news, fewer updates and were less open to interaction with readers than traditional news websites” (PEJ, 2010). They did not have the resources to produce news as regularly as professional sites, and they were also less transparent about their funding and less likely to encourage citizen participation. Lastly are the results of a study by Duffy *et al.* (2009), which compared 145 local citizen journalism initiatives, such as news sites (LCN) and blogs (LCB), with the websites of local professional news media (PN)<sup>16</sup>. The majority of the LCNs (66 per cent) were run by people with a background in traditional journalism; a larger proportion of LCNs (91 per cent) had a mission statement than either PNs (80 per cent) or LCBs (65 per cent). Legal information about the sites were more available in PNs (69 per cent) than in LCNs (51 per cent) and LCBs (32 per cent). The proportional content mix of LCNs was news (56 per cent), opinion (16 per cent) and practical content (28 per cent), which was a distinct contrast the PNs news content (89 per cent) the LCBs opinion content of 47 per cent.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.rjionline.org/projects/mcellan/stories/community-news-sites/index.php>

<sup>16</sup> The acronyms LCN, LCB and PN are the creation of the author and not Duffy et al. (2009)

## 4. Conclusions

The continuous dwindling of media legitimacy in the last two decades in the USA has raised many voices advocating for more transparency and responsiveness of media organizations, in order to regain public trust. However, traditional media accountability practices are scarce, ruled by an individualistic understanding of self-regulation of journalism and a strongly embedded value of detachment and neutrality. The principle of detachment is being challenged by legacy and new media (Fox News, Huffington Post), but that does not mean these more opinionated models of journalism are more prone to develop accountability practices. The economic crisis is also hindering media accountability, as newsrooms decide to scale down existing practices (ombudspersons) and are more hesitant to invest in developing new ones. The national market leaders are the few that stay more active than the average in accountability initiatives.

The strong political polarization of society in the last decade has fostered ideologically loaded media criticism in blogs, and most journalists have reacted to it reinforcing their principle of detachment. Anyhow, there is a critical mass of active users on the Internet engaged in media criticism, and experts interviewed share a sense of hope in the future that could be interpreted as being influenced by technological determinism: Change is perceived as a generational factor, with young journalists being naturally inclined to a dialogical relationship with the audience because of their familiarity with the Internet. The connection to professionalism or existing media accountability practices of this trend are not traced by the interviewees, as if technology was the main factor of change towards a greater deal of accountability in newsrooms. Accountability is also seen as a market proposition for net-native initiatives that need to distinguish themselves from traditional media based on the detachment model. Online-only projects, therefore, are more eager to develop media accountability practices than legacy newsrooms.

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