



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Media Accountability in the Internet Age

Policy implications of MediaAcT (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe), an EU-funded research project comparing media accountability instruments across Europe

Ongoing project

June 2011

INTRODUCTION

The public's role in media accountability is undergoing a process of profound change

Sound democracies rely on independent media to provide citizens with essential information and a plurality of views. Assuring that the media fulfil their role accountably is the duty of society as a whole, and an array of instruments (from press councils to satirical entertainment programs) have emerged to address this responsibility in different European cultures.

Since the advent of the digital age, however, the relationship between society and the media has been rapidly evolving. Indeed, the Internet and *social media* have transformed public participation in debates about the quality of media content in Europe. While traditional organs of media accountability (e.g. press councils) appear to be in decline, new forms of accountability are popping up in the Internet: audiences are “twittering” about the media’s mistakes; online ombudsmen are following up on e-mail complaints; and journalists themselves are blogging critically about standards and practices in their profession.

Can such innovative instruments of media criticism supplant conventional institutions of media self-regulation? How do journalists’ attitudes towards media accountability differ across cultures? And what instruments of media accountability and transparency might develop in the future?

These questions are currently being explored by MediaAcT, a multidisciplinary research effort involving twelve partners from Europe and the Arab world. Scheduled for completion in 2013, MediaAcT is assessing traditional and new media accountability instruments in diverse cultural contexts. The consortium’s initial findings suggest the public’s role in media accountability is undergoing a process of profound change.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Diverse models of journalism culture in Europe

Media accountability instruments (MAI) are closely related to the media system and journalistic culture of a given state. Important system-related aspects include the nature of media markets and standards of journalistic professionalism. The degree and nature of state intervention into media markets are key factors as well. The following map (Figure 1) provides a useful starting point for understanding Europe's journalistic cultures. The map is partly derived from the work of Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini which identifies three models of journalistic culture in Europe:

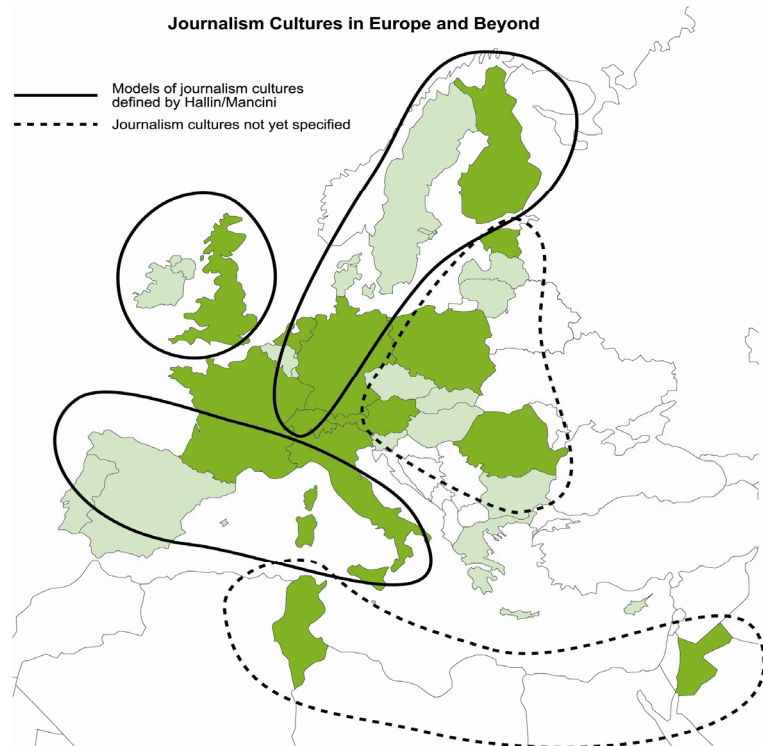
1. **The Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralist Model**
(e.g. France and Italy)
2. **The North/Central European/Democratic Corporatist Model** (e.g. Austria, Finland, Germany, The Netherlands and Switzerland)
3. **The North Atlantic/Liberal Model**
(e.g. the United Kingdom)

MediaAcT extends the concept by adding two more perspectives:

4. **The Eastern European perspective**
(Estonia, Poland and Romania)
5. **The Arab perspective**
(Jordan and Tunisia).

Mapping journalism cultures

Figure 1

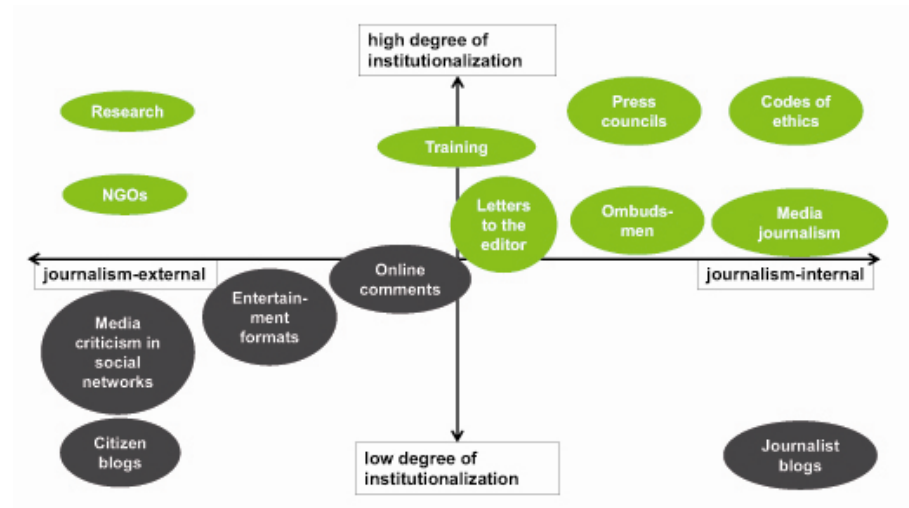


Source: MediaAcT 2011

Media accountability instruments

Within the various journalistic cultures, media accountability instruments fall into two basic categories: journalism-internal and journalism-external. MediaAcT researchers are mapping these instruments with the help of a conceptual grid. The grid divides the instruments horizontally into external and internal categories and illustrates their degree of institutionalisation on the vertical axis (Figure 2).

Figure 2. - **Typology of media accountability instruments**



Source: MediaAcT 2011

KEY PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Of relevance for policymakers, media professionals, unions and civil society actors

- The status quo of media self-regulation varies strongly across Europe: For example, only 7 of the 13 countries involved in the study have a press council.
- The concept of press councils has a long tradition in the countries belonging to the “liberal” and the “democratic corporatist” model – i.e. the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland, Switzerland and Germany.
- However, many countries belonging to the “polarized pluralist” model – like France and Italy – do not have any tradition of press councils.

In Eastern Europe media practitioners view self-regulation with suspicion

- The Eastern European countries involved in the study show that the concept of media self-regulation is still eyed with suspicion by media practitioners, probably to be explained by their recent historic experience with tight media control.
- Poland's press council is de facto non-existent, and Romania has no press council as well. In Estonia, meanwhile, two press councils compete for legitimacy and acceptance.
- In neither of the two Arab states involved in the study is there a press council. Any instruments of media accountability tend to be controlled by the government. In Tunisia, however, things have been rapidly changing since the revolution in January 2011.
- Germany and the United Kingdom – the countries with the largest media markets – also display the largest variety of other media accountability instruments. These include self-regulation instruments with mass-market reporting about the media. Non-media professionals from civil society are also involved via NGOs and media blogs.

The Internet is retooling media accountability

- Across Europe and the Arab world, the Internet is playing an increasing role in media accountability. In France and Italy, where many media owners use their news outlets for political purposes, media criticism in the mainstream news media is almost non-existent; in these countries, journalists are using their personal blogs to monitor and criticize the performance of journalists and media managers.
- A similar trend can be observed in the Eastern European countries. In these countries, TV satire and comedy often take critical stabs at journalism. However, a trend towards entertainment-based media accountability instruments can also be observed in countries belonging to the “liberal” and the “democratic corporatist” models of journalistic culture. In these countries, many newsrooms under budgetary pressures are replacing conventional instruments of media accountability (e.g. ombudsmen) with online instruments.

- Across Western and Eastern Europe, media users increasingly use social media like Facebook or Twitter to hold the media accountable and voice their protest if they consider stories biased or unethical.

Factors impacting media accountability

MediaAcT draws on economic theory (institutional economics) to identify which factors encourage or discourage the concept of media accountability among journalistic actors. The key assumption here is that individuals react to sanctions and incentives; they weigh advantages and disadvantages when following or deviating from rules or norms. Examining factors that affect how journalists make decisions regarding accountability issues, MediaAcT has identified seven spheres of influence.

Seven spheres of influence:

1. Individual disposition
2. Influences by the newsroom
3. Influences by the media organization
4. Influences by professional culture
5. Influences by the media system
6. Influences by media-external context factors
7. Globalization

“Audience” and “journalism education” are additional crosscutting factors that also seem to have an influence on journalistic behavior at different levels. A hierarchy of these influences is illustrated in the following chart (Figure 3), which is adapted and extended from the “Worlds of Journalism” project (<http://www.worldsofjournalism.org>) and serves as a heuristic model for the upcoming MediaAcT field study.

Figure 3



Source: MediaAcT 2011, Model adapted and extended from “Worlds of Journalism” project (Hanitzsch 2009)

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

MediaAcT (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe) is a comparative research effort examining media accountability instruments in EU member states as indicators for media pluralism in Europe. The project analyses the development and impact of established media accountability instruments (e.g. press councils, codes of ethics) as well as new media accountability instruments emerging in the Internet (e.g. media criticism in blogs).

The main objectives of this research project are to:

- Investigate the quantity and quality of media accountability instruments as prerequisites for pluralistic debates about media independence in times of growing media concentration.
- Compare the impact of established and innovative media accountability instruments online on different media systems and journalism cultures in Europe and beyond.

Develop policy recommendations for EU media policy makers, as well as incentives for media professionals and media users alike to actively engage in media accountability instruments.

Methodology

The project is a joint interdisciplinary effort of a team of 12 partners from Eastern and Western Europe as well as the Arab world, using a multi-method approach (survey, desk studies and expert interviews) for the analysis.

The project's central empirical work package involves a survey of more than 2.000 journalists in 13 countries: Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, Tunisia and the United Kingdom. This survey, to be conducted in summer 2011, will focus on journalists' attitudes towards media accountability and centre on five key questions:

1. How do journalists' attitudes towards media accountability and transparency differ across journalism cultures and media systems, and which similarities can be found?
2. Which context factors influence the emergence, visibility and impact of the various media accountability instruments across Europe and the Arab world?
3. How do journalists across Europe and the Arab world perceive, practice, and evaluate the various media accountability and transparency instruments?
4. Which factors enable or discourage media accountability and transparency activities among journalists?

How will media accountability and transparency instruments develop in the future?

Practical results expected

When the project has finished collecting and analysing the data, the MediaAcT team will publish a best practise guidebook directed at media professionals. The consortium will also produce an index of MAI and develop an online training tool for future journalists

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Website

<http://www.mediaact.eu>

Further reading

The MediaAct project maintains a literature database collecting international key publications on media accountability. The database is accessible online via <http://www.mediaact.eu/literature.html>

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