

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

Media Accountability in the Internet Age

Policy recommendations of MediaAcT (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe), an EU-funded comparative research project (including 14 countries) analyzing the status quo and potential of media accountability instruments across Europe.

Future of media self-regulation

How can we ensure a free *and* responsible press across Europe? This question is currently being debated with heat, even aggression among journalists, industry representatives, media policy makers and scholars across Europe. In late 2012, Lord Judge Leveson recommended a fundamental reform of the traditional model of media self-regulation in Great Britain which has also dominated other Western European journalism cultures since the 1950ies: as a consequence of the *News of the World* scandal, Leveson suggests a new, statutory supported regulatory system. Obviously, the current self-regulation system was not able to restrict the unethical and unlawful methods of the Murdoch-owned tabloid.

EU High-Level Group

Leveson has prompted an outcry among British news outlets. Many of them consider any form of state intervention to be the end of press freedom. A similar fierce response was given by industry representatives and lobbyists across Europe to the 2013 report of the EU High-Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism. The committee was set up by EU commissioner Neelie Kroes in 2011; at that time the European Parliament was concerned about the tightening of media law in Hungary under the Orbán government. Among other recommendations, the High-Level Group suggests to drastically expand the sanctioning potential of existing press councils. They also demand mandatory media councils in EU states which, like France and Romania, do not have a press council yet.

Research question

The key question behind both the Leveson recommendations and the High-Level Group report is obvious: does the traditional model of media self-regulation dating back from the 1950ies, with press councils as its core institution, still suffice for today's converging media world – which is ever so much more competitive? Can new accountability instruments emerging online – like newsroom blogs, online ombudsmen and media criticism via Web 2.0 – successfully support or even replace these traditional instruments of media self-regulation? And are participative models of media accountability not a more

promising and “healthier” option than co-regulation models which foresee a greater role of the state?

These are also the key questions of the research project *Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe* (MediaAcT), which has studied media accountability infrastructures and journalists’ attitudes towards media self-regulation in 14 countries.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Survey of journalists

The MediaAcT’s project’s survey of 1,762 journalists in 12 EU member states as well as two exemplary Arab countries (Tunisia and Jordan) reveals sharp contradictions: even though journalists across countries unanimously support the statement “Journalistic responsibility is a prerequisite for press freedom”, journalists’ actual support for the concept of media self-regulation is mediocre at best in most countries.

Lip service to media accountability?

Journalists only ascribe a medium or even weak impact to press councils, media criticism in the mass media, ombudsmen, media blogs, and the other media accountability instruments (MAI). Obviously, European journalists in many countries question the effectiveness of the existing media self-regulation practices. The survey results also reveal another telling fact: journalists perceive those MAI that have the potential to endanger their personal professional lives to be more powerful than all the other instruments on the professional level. In almost all of the 14 countries involved in the study, journalists consider ethical guidelines given out by their newsrooms and media laws as the most influential instruments of media accountability. In comparison, traditional instruments of media self-control such as press councils and press codes are perceived as considerably less influential. In most countries journalists also ascribe rather small impact to ombudsmen, trade journals and media criticism in the mass media – let alone external critics such as media NGOs or media scholars. Thus, from an empirical point of view, it seems understandable that the European Union raises the question whether the current potential of sanctions that European press councils have at their disposal is sufficient.

Journalists observe more audience criticism online

In the past few years, many new instruments of media accountability have emerged online - like blogs run by journalists and media users, online ombudsmen, and media criticism via Twitter and Facebook. Obviously, these new instruments already have some impact on journalists. Many media professionals across countries surveyed in the MediaAcT study say that they have observed a notable increase of critical audience feedback online. Especially younger journalists and those journalists who work for online media, are open-minded towards these innovative instruments. Among the new digital possibilities, social media platforms are rated as the most important media accountability instrument: the surveyed journalists state that they have received an increasing amount of

feedback and critique from their audience via Facebook and Twitter. Especially for journalists in the two Arab countries - affected by their experiences with governmental censorship - the social media dialogue with their audience is important. But while digital MAI obviously have gained prominence, they still lag behind the - limited - relevance of the traditional media accountability instruments.

Criticism of colleagues is not common

Moreover, in many countries there is hardly any culture of criticism within newsrooms: just a third of all surveyed journalists declare to criticize their colleagues often or frequently. Only in a few countries like Finland, where newsrooms are less hierarchically organized (see below), journalists are criticized more often by their colleagues. External criticism by politicians, scientists or media users is even less appreciated - and often perceived as unfair by journalists. Does this attitude still fit in this day and age where influential institutions call for more media transparency? When journalism fails to initiate a critical debate about its weaknesses and problems, it also misses the chance to point out its strengths and its essential role for an efficient democracy in the era of Google & Co.

Not very welcome: the audience as media critic

In the digital age, it has become much easier for media users to become media critics. They can get back to journalists and news outlets via Facebook and Twitter, or use Social Media to network with other citizen media critics. Many news websites offer functions to comment, a few have already experimented with correction buttons. Is the time ripe for a participatory approach towards media accountability? Are journalists ready to give the public a significant role in holding the media to account?

Not yet, according to the MediaAcT project's data. Journalists across countries observe increasing audience criticism online. But still, they do not take their public as serious as they should. Even though the future - at least of quality journalism - depends more than ever on a stable trust relationship with the audience, journalists seem to cling to their traditional gatekeeper role: they do not consider the impact of user comments - be they offline and online - on journalism as very important. Not more than half of the journalists across countries support the statement that journalists are concerned about audience criticism. While journalists strongly favour the transparency of media ownership and also support the idea of publishing a journalistic code of ethics online, they are much less enthusiastic to explain everyday news decisions in a newsroom blog. They also want to provide a contact for users' complaints - but the support for ombudsmen and the possibility to communicate directly with journalists, is considerably lower. Journalists are also quite sceptical about allowing users to participate in the production of stories online, or providing links to original sources. Even though journalism is a public service, little value is attached to the public by journalists.

Another item in the survey may provide an explanation: when asked to whom they feel responsible, the journalists referred to their own conscience and professional values in the first place. However, the majority of journalists feel more obliged to their sources than to their target audience or the public respectively. To sum up: even though the audience makes increasing use of

online feedback mechanisms, journalists are still reluctant to acknowledge the public's role in holding the media to account. Thus, participatory accountability models cannot replace a strong organizational commitment and a sophisticated system of incentives on all levels to promote media accountability.

Media transparency: scepticism in Southern Europe and CEE

In Central Eastern and Southern Europe journalists are even more sceptical towards the concept of media transparency: many Spanish and Italian journalists as well as their colleagues from Romania and Poland believe that publishing corrections or making newsrooms processes transparent online will damage the bond of trust between journalism and the audience. Journalists from these four countries as well as from Jordan and Tunisia state with above average frequency that they have worked for distinctly political orientated media and therefore have been feeling constrained to a specific political idea or pressured by the government. In those countries journalists as well as media users probably have different expectations of credibility of journalism and an efficient media self-regulation system. But are the North European "model countries of media accountability" immune against these influences from Southern and Eastern Europe in the long run?

Promoting media accountability – stick or carrot?

Given these rather sobering results - what can be done to promote media accountability? The data clearly shows that journalists do not want state intervention – the statement "formal systems of media regulation are open to political abuse" is widely supported by the nearly 1,700 journalists who responded to our survey. But they perceive the existing instruments as insufficient as well – in sharp contrast to the industry representatives who, in reaction to the High-Level Group report, claimed that the existing systems of media self-regulation work properly and well. For example, while UK industry representatives fire extremely sharp against any form of co-regulation, journalists in the UK give highest support to the statement "to be effective media self-regulation needs more sanctions."

Towards a 'culture of accountability': newsrooms make the difference

The survey shows that the newsroom makes the difference. Journalists who report that they are being praised when they uphold standards even under difficult circumstances, and who report that they would be called in by their supervisors when media users challenge the integrity of their work, value the impact of the different MAI higher than their peers who work in newsrooms without such a "culture of accountability". This means that the newsroom management plays a considerable role when it comes to the ethical awareness of journalists. A series of additional 100 interviews with international experts on media accountability conducted by MediaACT has confirmed this: "Only enacting the instruments through practices, media accountability actually exists. Instruments, therefore, cannot be taken for granted, and for them to become established practices depends on actors' attitudes and positions in the field" (Domingo & Heikkilä, 2011, p. 10).

According to the data, journalists are open for initiatives taken by their own newsroom. As mentioned before, company ethical codes (along with media laws) are considered most influential –

arguably because deviation from company ethical standards (or breach of law) may directly affect a journalist's job. Obviously, journalists would embrace company codes, which are not very common in Europe yet. Additionally, only few media outlets— like the BBC – make their newsroom standards publicly accessible. European media companies could learn a lesson from the United States, where it is more common at least among legacy media to establish company ethical codes and publish them online.

We can also observe a strong influence of the organization on other issues: journalists from public broadcasting stations rate the impact of MAI higher than their colleagues from commercial TV and radio. Across hierarchies, freelancers are most reluctant to support media accountability instruments. In many European countries, media organizations who have pushed towards outsourcing now carry a huge responsibility: they have to make sure (in their own interest) that they do not grow a 'journalistic underclass' without any ethical awareness. There is a second lesson to learn here: it takes a pro-active media management to establish a culture of accountability in the newsrooms – but it also requires a certain amount of financial stability both on the individual and on the organizational level to be able to 'afford' accountable behaviour. This is quite a challenge in a time where journalists from all MediaAct survey countries consider economic pressure to be the greatest threat to standards in journalism.

MAI online

However, in the digital age, it is no longer cost-intensive to install accountability and transparency mechanisms in the newsroom. The survey data also shows that web-based media accountability instruments are gaining prominence: albeit on a low level of significance, media blogs written by journalists are already considered more influential than the traditional journalistic trade magazines, and newsroom blogs – who can foster transparency about newsroom-internal discussions on journalistic standards – almost equal the significance of the 'classic' ombudsman.

Southern Europe and CEE

The responsibility of media companies is even greater in Southern and Central Europe, where journalists' unions and federations are less influential than in Western and Northern Europe. Here, journalists rate the (potential) impact of company codes especially high. If media managers actively implement accountability and transparency mechanisms, they could clearly demonstrate that they care for media accountability, and thus make any form of state intervention superfluous. Should the High-Level Group – even though it is so sharply criticized – succeed in mounting the pressure on media organizations to pro-actively install MAI, the report will already have deserved its merits.

Role models for media accountability

Obviously it takes role models in the field of media accountability. In countries where leading print or broadcasting media employ ombudsmen (like in the UK, Spain, and Switzerland), journalists rate the impact of ombudsmen on standards in journalism higher. Obviously, the ombuds(wo)man's work is followed not only by journalists in

his/her newsroom, but also by colleagues in other media organizations. The same is true for newsroom blogs, who have been established by some of the most influential media in Germany and enjoy a wider prestige, as German journalists rate the impact of newsroom blogs higher than colleagues in other countries.

Education matters

Finally, the survey data also points out to the crucial role journalism education plays for responsible journalism. Journalists across countries consider journalism education as more relevant for upholding standards in journalism than any media accountability instrument. Thus, investing in journalism education itself is an investment in a responsible press – this is a message also for industry representatives, who are rather unwilling to finance mid-career trainings these days. According to the data, especially journalists in Central and Eastern Europe and the Arab countries lament an inadequate journalism education in their country. It would be a worthy investment to provide long-term support to modernize journalism curricula here. The MediaAcT survey also shows that journalists who received training in media ethics during their journalistic education display a somewhat greater sensitivity towards issues of media accountability. The MediaAcT interactive online training tool, hopefully encourages journalism educators and their students to discuss about journalistic responsibility.

Media accountability in the Arab world

The MediaAcT survey has also included Tunisia and Jordan – two exemplary Arab states in very different phases of political reform. After the uprisings in 2011, the media in many parts of the Arab World has faced a new situation. While the media remain under tight state control in Jordan, uniform content in Tunisia has already diversified, ownership structures have changed, and access to information has been freed from sheer state propaganda to a more open approach. Yet, many obstacles remain as well: the public is watching media developments critically and politicians are trying to put the media under pressure.

The data clearly shows the different notion of media accountability in these countries in comparison to the European states. For the Arab journalists, the audience and the public in general are perceived as the most important actors to which journalists feel responsible to. Jordanian and Tunisian journalists seem to regard the public as an “ally” for media freedom and journalistic responsibility - they perceive the public more positive than their European colleagues. This can be interpreted by the transitional context: individual freedoms including freedom of speech and press freedom have been part of the demands by protesters in Tunisia and Jordan since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. Because of their authoritarian past (and present) the issue of press freedom is still higher on the agenda than in established democracies of Europe. They are also strongly – high above MediaAcT average – convinced that the “Internet has increased people’s readiness to call the news media to account.” The role of online journalism as a relatively free space in Jordan and the role of online practices during some of the Arab uprisings may play a role for that perception. Yet, the

authoritarian system also still has its marks: compared to the overall MediaAcT results, Jordanian and Tunisian journalists still feel a higher responsibility towards government and/or political parties than their European counterparts. This is not too surprising given the fact mentioned above that media in authoritarian regimes are mostly held accountable by actors from the political accountability sphere through state ownership, direct or indirect censorship etc.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Although media accountability is a process and not an outcome, the MediaAcT consortium recommends five major measures to foster media accountability:

1. Monitoring (EU focus on the protection of fundamental human rights in the member states).
2. Clear guidelines for subsidies (EU focus on fair competition).
3. Promotion of media education and media literacy (EU focus on European public sphere).
4. Journalism training (EU focus on European public sphere).
5. Assistance to media systems in transition (EU focus on enlargement and European neighbourhood policy/foreign affairs and security policy).

Academic monitoring

Continuous monitoring helps to evaluate the current status of media accountability in the EU member states. The monitoring consists of an annual or bi-annual published index that monitors the activities of media professionals and media organizations in EU member states. Such an index is no intervention; it should only provide a status quo.

Such an index

- creates a ranking which contributes to find country-specific deficits.
- Furthermore, it enables media policy makers to set incentives to improve the situation.
- Moreover, the best practice countries can act as benchmarks. In the long term, the monitoring will result in an important data-set on media and journalism development, thereby contributing to raising the quality level of democracy and thus strengthening fundamental rights.

The MediaAcT project has developed a media accountability index. It is available on the project website.

Subsidies policy

The media sector is no longer only a national issue since ownership concentration processes in the European Union have accelerated. The European Commission should seek to apply competition policies and free movement not only to industry and services but to the media as well. Consequently, clear premises should be formulated for the granting of any subsidies. Both direct (e.g. press subsidies or broad casting fees) and indirect subsidies (e.g. public advertising money) should be subject to transparent guidelines.

- Regarding direct subsidies, the national public broadcasters should play a major role in accountability processes. Their major stakeholder is the audience. As they are (partly) financed by public money, they should act as benchmarks in balanced and high quality reporting, resp. entertainment. Consequently, public broadcasters should abide to clearly defined standards and act as a reference point in internal media accountability systems. This can be achieved by having adapted codes of ethics, standard complaint procedures or by making news production processes accessible and transparent.
- Regarding indirect subsidies, clear rules are needed as well. Government departments, public bodies and institutions spend a huge amount of money on advertising in all types of media. These institutions should endeavor to only advertise in media that adhere to the generally accepted accountability standards. These standards need to be defined in advance and can range from membership in a (local) press council, through the adoption of the national code of conduct, to having an ombudsman or standardized accountability procedures.

Media literacy

Europe needs more initiatives to promote and support media education and media literacy in EU member states. The European Commission already provides direct support to a number of media organizations or media projects, e.g. to EURANET, to Euronews or to the European Journalism Centre.

The MediaAcT team suggests – if not a European media education project – at least a media education (e.g. in grammar schools, high schools) and media literacy (e.g. capacity of media usage) monitoring project in the member states:

1. Media education is a core pre-condition for a fruitful contribution of the audience to media critique. Research shows that journalists are receptive to such form of feedback (e.g. via web 2.0) but profound knowledge of media is necessary.
2. Media education and media literacy would furthermore enhance the quality of discourse within the European public sphere. It would enable the public to participate in the media society and in media democracy.

Journalism training

The survey data shows that there is a need to promote journalism training. Journalism schools notably will bring a crucial contribution to an effective media self-regulation system in the context of continuous shrinking of newsrooms and decreasing media reflection. Another key point for more journalism training is easy access to online training tools (life-long learning). One tool focussing on media accountability was developed by the MediaAcT team.

Media systems in transition

Another step the European Commission should take is to offer assistance to media systems in transition in order to promote a system of media self-regulation and accountability. Such measures might include monitoring, workshops, education programs, etc. for countries going through a transition process, like many Arab countries or states seeking to join the European Union, e.g. Balkan countries.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

MediaAcT (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe) was a comparative research effort examining media accountability instruments in EU member states as indicators for media pluralism in Europe. The project analyzed 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 were 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

This project was a joint interdisciplinary effort involving 14 partners from Eastern and Western Europe as well as the Arab world. The teams used a multi-method approach.

- Firstly, all partners collected information on the state-of-the-art of media accountability in each respective country.
- Secondly, the MediaAcT team conducted a series of around 100 interviews with international experts on media accountability from Europe, the Arab world and the United States.

- Thirdly, a survey among 1,682 journalists in 12 EU member states as well as in two Arab countries, Tunisia and Jordan, was carried out.
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Practical results

- Best Practice Guidebook: Media Accountability and Transparency across Europe.
www.mediaact.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Guidebook/guidebook.pdf
 - Media Index for MAS in the participating countries.
www.mediaact.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/D18_MAS_Index.pdf
 - Media Managers' Guidelines to Quality Management and Accountability
http://www.mediaact.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Guidebook/guidelines.pdf
 - Journalism Training Tool www.mediaact.eu /
 - Citizen's platform: www.mediaspeak.eu
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PROJECT IDENTITY

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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>

Tobias Eberwein, Susanne Fengler, Epp Lauk & Tanja Leppik-Bork (2011): Mapping Media Accountability – in Europe and Beyond. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag.

Tobias Eberwein, Susanne Fengler, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Colin Prolezza & Stephan Russ-Mohl (2013): Journalists and Media Accountability. An International Study of News People in the Digital Age. New York etc.: Peter Lang (forthcoming).

Media Accountability Practices on the Internet:
<http://www.mediaact.eu/online.html>