

# 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

February 2012

One sound indicator for freedom of the press and freedom of expression is media accountability. A multitude of instruments on several levels exist to keep media accountable and keep them fulfilling their role in a democratic society. Those range from ones within the industry (e.g. press councils) to ones within media companies (e.g. ombudsman) or instruments that empower the audience to participate in the production process of news (e.g. user blogs).

Especially the possibility of user empowerment dramatically changed in the last years due to the advent of the digital age. A new relationship between society and the media was and still is evolving. The possibilities of public participation in debates about the quality of media content have increased, be it on the level of actor transparency or on the level of post-production correction. This can be seen in the sprouting of media watch blogs all over Europe and of diverse news outlets starting to include the users in their professional routines.

Can such innovative instruments of media criticism complement or even supplant conventional institutions of media self-regulation? How do journalists' attitudes towards the different forms of media accountability differ across cultures? And what are the future trends of media accountability instruments in the creation of accountability and transparency?

These questions are currently being explored by MediaAcT, a multidisciplinary research effort involving 14 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.

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## 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:

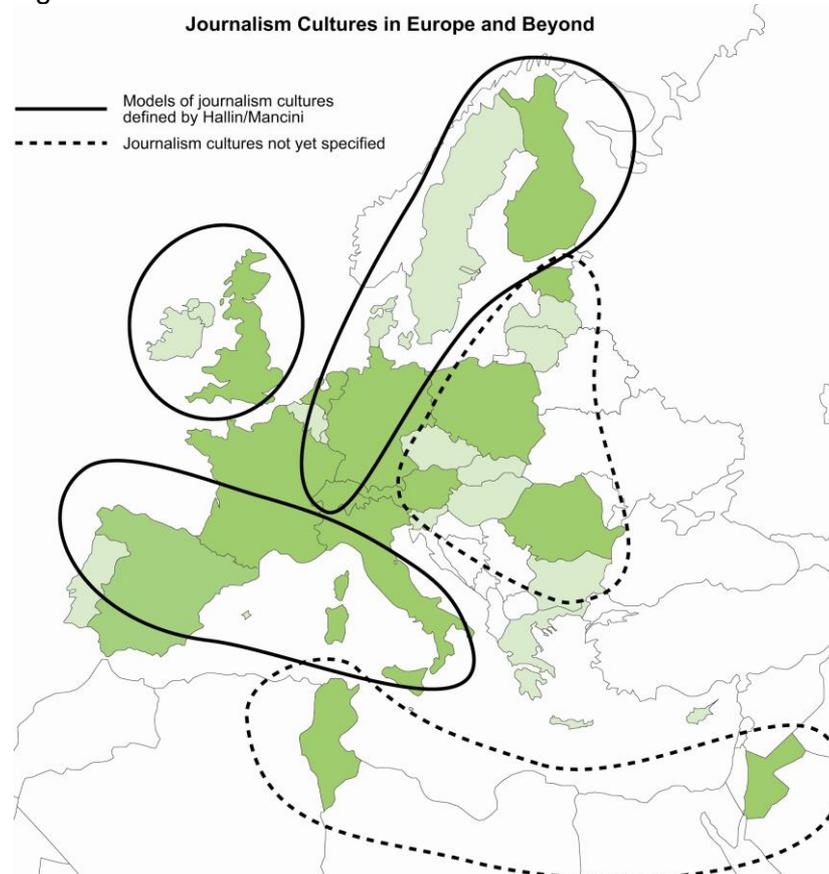
1. **The Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralist Model**  
(e.g. France, Italy and Spain)
2. **The North/Central European/Democratic Corporatist Model** (e.g. Austria, Finland, Germany, The Netherlands and Switzerland)
3. **The North Atlantic/Liberal Model**  
(e.g. the United Kingdom)

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.



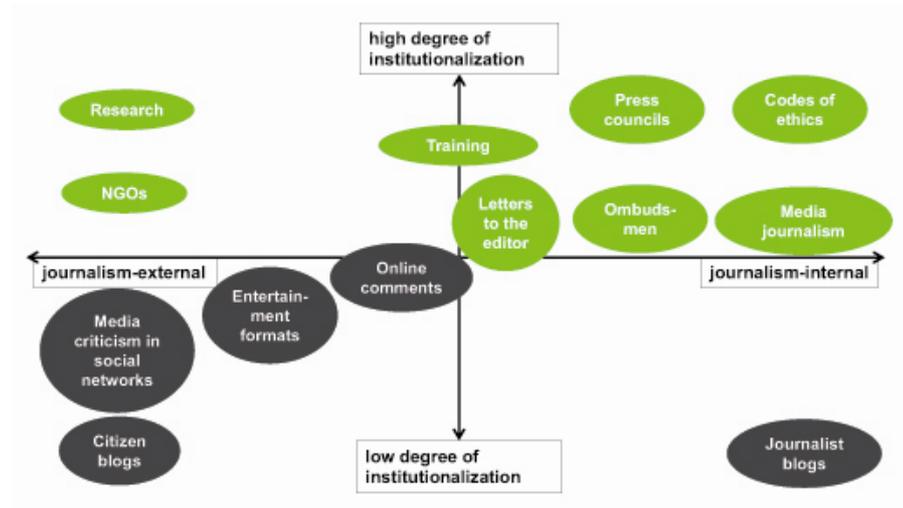
Source: MediaAcT 2011

### 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

### State-of-the-Art Analysis of Media Accountability Structures in 14 Countries

- The status quo of media self-regulation varies strongly across Europe: For example, only 7 of the 14 countries involved in the study have a press council.
- A high level of journalistic professionalism leads to an established tradition of media-critical debate and a variety of forms of responsiveness.
- Several examples confirm the potential of innovative online MAIs to become efficient tools for raising media's respect and interest towards civil society groups to an extent that the media cannot ignore them.
- Media governance by incorporating civil society into active participation in the media regulatory process would positively contribute to balancing market-oriented interests with public interest.
- Measures on every level (Commission, Parliament, Member States) seem necessary in order to stimulate MA (will be specified in coordination with the EU-funded Project MEDIADEM in the 3. policy briefing)

### Qualitative Interviews with 80 International Experts in Online Media Accountability

- Online practices for media accountability have been developed very unevenly in the 14 countries submitted to the analysis, depending on the economic and technological development.
- There is a gap between Western Europe and North America as well as Eastern Europe and the Arab world when it comes to online practices for media accountability.
- Online media accountability practices do not travel easily around the world. They are bound to social practices rooted in historical developments and limited by social conditions.
- The attempts to establish practices that hold the news media accountable are most numerous in countries where the lack of media legitimacy seems most articulate.
- The ways in which news organizations are open to media accountability practices depend very much on the attitudes of editors and journalists. Those attitudes are shaped by external relations (e.g. state, audience) and internal relations (e.g. cultural struggles inside media organizations).
- Even in the more developed countries, very few of the interviewees assumed that online media accountability practices would change the situation dramatically.
- But online media accountability practices are important for addressing and negotiating tensions between the journalistic field and the audience by watching the media.

**First Results:  
Journalistic Culture  
and Media  
Accountability**

- The individual ethical orientation of journalists seems to exceed a stakeholder orientation (e.g. their own conscience of journalists is most important in terms of responsibility).
  - The significant differences between countries and cultures seem to decrease, but are still valid and relevant.
  - Economic pressure endangers journalistic quality generally more than governmental influence.
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### Factors Impacting Media Accountability

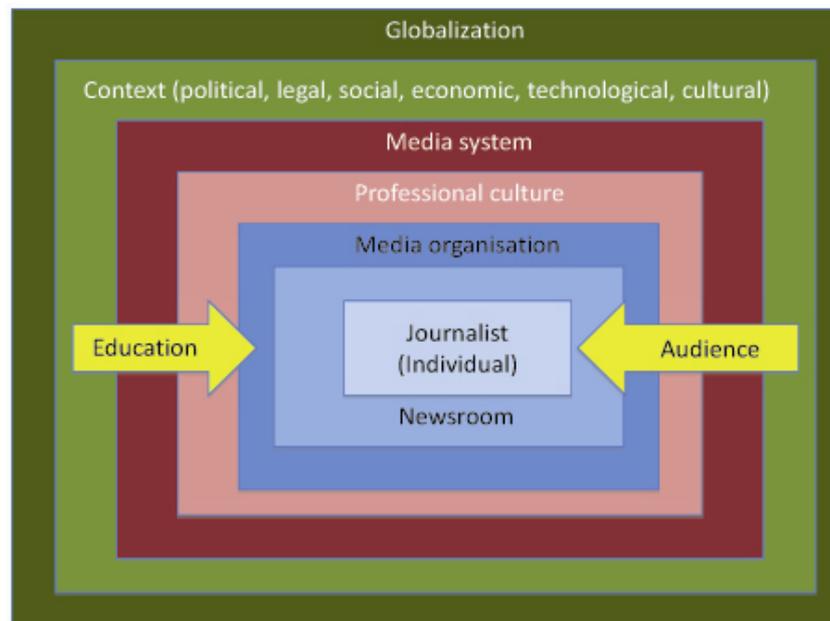
MediaAcT draws on economic theory (institutional economics) to identify which factors encourage or discourage the concept of media accountability among journalistic actors. The key assumption here is that individuals react to sanctions and incentives; they weigh advantages and disadvantages when following 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 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 14 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 almost 2.000 journalists in 14 countries: Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia and the United Kingdom. This survey was conducted in 2011/2012 and focused on journalists' attitudes towards media accountability.

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

The results will be made available to the public from spring 2012 on.

### 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

### Coordinator

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### Consortium

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- **France:** Olivier Baisnée, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Toulouse (IEP)
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- **United Kingdom:** Mike Jempson, University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE)

Additionally represented by a project team at the Erich Brost Institute:

- **Jordan,** responsible: Judith Pies, Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism, University of Dortmund (EBI)

Associated partner:

- **Spain:** Salvador Alsius, Grup de Recerca en Periodisme (GRP), Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), Barcelona

### Duration

February 1, 2010 – July 31, 2013 (42 months)

### Funding Scheme

European Union Seventh Framework Programme, Topic: SSH-2009-5.1.1. Independent media and democracy in Europe

### Budget

EU contribution: 1,468,811 €

**Website**

<http://www.mediaact.eu>

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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>