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Colin Porlezza

Guest editor's introduction

Online Media Accountability – A New Frontier

>   1. *The News Media Landscape is in Turmoil*

Journalism faces radical changes. Economic constraints are disrupting traditional business models, particularly within the print media, causing an increasingly strong bottom-line emphasis among media managers. Resources are squeezed and newsrooms cut back as newspaper revenues continue to fall – in the U.S. for instance back to their lowest level since 1984, in fact. In consequence, continuous layoffs of journalists contribute to a loss of experience and knowledge within newsrooms, in addition to a greater de-professionalization with severe consequences for the profile of the media in terms of credibility. These drastic changes only accelerate the erosion of traditional media outlets and boost other trends such as media concentration and commercialization (cf. Kamber & Imhof, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that entertainment news is becoming much more important when compared to hard news, bringing forth a kind of "one-size-fits-all" journalism. Such a change, as Schudson (2003: 90) argues, indicates "an intrusion of marketplace values into the professionalism of journalists." The incessant blurring between journalism and advertising as well as PR stories and wire material (what British investigative reporter Nick Davies (2008) called "churnalism") show that journalistic norms are indeed threatened by the fierce economic situation. As a result, quality criteria are increasingly neglected.

The big difficulties that many media organizations have in adapting their business models and production processes to new circumstances are also due to a fundamental technological change. The Internet, the digitalization of media and the resulting convergence of print, broadcasting and mobile telecommunications have altered the media landscape significantly in recent years. In effect these changes altered the news production process as well. With its global 24/7 news dynamic, the Internet forces journalists to publish news as fast as possible. Deuze (2008b: 20) is correct in asserting that "the routinization of news work becomes a crucial strategy in managing the accelerated news flow." Many news organizations have adopted the concept of news desks with their institutionalized routines based on converging media. However, the immediacy sometimes results in the publication of provisory, incomplete and unchecked news that would need further professional care.

From the public's point of view, this may be one of the main reasons why journalists fall short of their high-held principles. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center (2009), the public's assessment of the accuracy of news stories is currently at its lowest level in the United States. Just 29% of Americans say that news organizations generally get the facts straight. Opinion surveys on the performance and credibility of the media are similar (BBC, Reuters & Media Centre Poll, 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). Even if media criticism is all but new, throughout the last decade opinion polls and media scholars painted a depressing picture when it comes to credibility and trust in traditional news outlets. On top of that, critical episodes such as the case of Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* or the controversy about U.S. author Mike Daisey and his partially fabricated story about Apple's supply chain in China have not necessarily contributed to the strengthening of media credibility.

The public and the media never had an easy relationship. Although journalists observe society and thus keep citizens informed, they tend to a more self-referential behavior and are usually not very open to voices coming from outside the newsroom. According to Brants and de Haan (2010: 411f), the relationship has become even more complex due to two developments occurring within the journalistic realm. First of all, the public is no longer a passive consumer. The traditional mass media is confronted with a variety of new online competitors, resulting in the shift from a supply to a demand market in communication. Furthermore, the growth of citizen journalism as well as the broader phenomenon of user-generated content allows the audience to access a huge amount of information never seen before. Besides the increasing importance of the

public's interest rather than the *public interest*, the technological developments have created numerous opportunities for interaction. Social media pages like Facebook, Twitter or Google+ allow users to easily connect with each other. At the same time, the possibilities of Web 2.0 have given the media several options to connect with its audience, although it seems that many journalists have been forced to come out of their ivory tower and to get in touch with the so-called "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006).

The increased opportunities of exchange and communication blurred the traditional distinction between the journalist and the public, actually even questioning the very definition of what a journalist is. Today readers, viewers and listeners can publish information on their own. The continuous process of disintermediation shapes and transforms the relation between people, media and society and causes a certain uncertainty and complexity with regard to a multi-voiced discourse, so that the notion of journalism itself becomes fuzzy. This is what Mark Deuze (2008a) calls "liquid journalism," a journalism that will successfully embrace this media system that changes continuously, coming to terms with an enhanced responsiveness. For journalists, this also means that the value of their work is now rather determined by the interactions between users and producers than by the media content itself.

The new two-way nature of the medium (Singer, 2006: 7), the continuous loss of credibility and trust as well as concerns about the quality of media performance launched a debate about "the responsibility of media and the journalists and how they can be held accountable or act with a higher degree of responsiveness" (de Haan & Bardoel, 2011: 231). The fact that questions of media responsibility and accountability have even become policy issues in the last years is also due to the visibility of more established forms of media accountability instruments such as ombudsmen or press councils. However, the greatest challenges for media organizations occur online: "Via blogs, Facebook and Twitter, comment functions, the website of online ombudsmen and the like, members of the audience can easily communicate and comment on the quality of journalistic products in a digital public sphere" (Fengler, Eberwein & Leppik-Bork, 2011: 15).

Due to the much more important role of the public in holding the news media to account, we will need to change the notions of media accountability itself. The conference held on January 27 and 28 at the Università della Svizzera italiana, entitled "Media Accountability – Potentials and Pitfalls in the Era of Web 2.0" aimed to explore innovative instruments of media responsibility and accountability as well as the impact of these new venues of public debate about media and journalism. The conference was part of the EU-funded project Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaAcT),[1] a comparative research project on media accountability instruments in 12 European and two Arab countries. The purpose of the project is to map and compare established and innovative forms of media accountability, to provide evidence-based analysis for all stakeholders in the news media with a view to enhance press freedom and journalism standards and, last but not least, to assist the EU in matters of policy issues regarding accountability. The articles in this thematic section are a selection of the papers presented at the conference.

  2. *Between responsiveness and transparency: towards a new concept of online media accountability?*

One of the dominant issues in the debate about the deteriorating media performance is the question of responsibility in terms of the media's obligation to society (McQuail, 2003). However, the media does not only have certain obligations towards society, but should also be held accountable for the quality of their performance – particularly when it comes to addressing the public while the media landscape is subject to structural changes. Hodges (1986, as cited in Bardoel & D'Haenens 2004: 7) distinguishes between responsibility and accountability: "Responsibility thus has to do with defining proper conduct; accountability with compelling it." In his definition, Pritchard (2000: 2) alludes to the importance of the public in stating that "media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account of their activities to their constituents." Following this line of argumentation, de Haan and Bardoel (2011: 232) connect the concept

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[1] For further information about the project please take a look at www.mediaact.eu.

with the stakeholder approach. Media accountability is not limited to formal regulation, but embraces "the wider obligations media have to their stakeholders and the way in which they render the account for their performance. Similar concepts evolve around the notion of media governance: it encompasses statutory regulation in the same way and combines different forms of private and collective forms of rules" (e.g. Puppis, 2007).

The focus on accountability and stakeholders demonstrates the elevated importance of the relationship with the public, as it is the main actor in this constellation. The increased pressure on media performance due to declining audiences, economic constraints and some public embarrassments in major news organizations (Singer, 2007: 87) compelled the media to take the public's concerns into consideration by demonstrating their involvement. The concept of responsiveness takes the feedback and wishes of the public into account, "whether media listen to and provide a platform for the expression of anxieties, wants and opinions, or whether they focus on needs defined more in market terms" (Brants & Bardoel, 2008: 475). For a very long time journalists felt uncomfortable dealing with the public. They were readers, listeners or viewers – consumers, after all. But today, the newly self-assured public addresses the media performance with issues about credibility and trust since they are no longer self-evident. Times are gone where journalists could simply ask their audience to trust them for being truthful (Hayes, Singer & Ceppos, 2007: 271).

Thanks to new technological instruments online it is now possible for the audience to "publicly contribute to, criticize and intervene in media organizations' journalistic processes through their own websites and/or discuss issues in various social media" (Karlsson, 2011: 291) – making news production in democratic societies a more open, collaborative and dialogical experience. In this time where journalism tries to rethink itself, participatory news is just one aspect of this new digital and self-expressive culture. Increased user participation by means of interactive tools, ranging from simple user comments to outsourced data journalism, has radically changed the news production of journalists and challenged their authority as the exclusive and unquestionable gate-keepers of information. Brants and de Haan (2010: 425) are correct to claim that "journalists have to, and do come out of their ivory tower, which until recently rested on the trustee model and professional self-referentiality."

However, practices of responsiveness are not yet as widespread as one would expect. A recent study on emerging online practices and innovations by Heikkilä et al. (2012), carried out within the MediaAcT project showed that tools for responsiveness are still raising a number of doubts. Albeit the practice of publishing user comments in connection to online news stories is widespread, other instruments such as ombudsman-like institutions or correction buttons are still very limited. The same occurs with social media: even though they are engineered for interaction and participation they have not become very established yet. One of the reasons may be that the public exchange of comments and opinions between journalists and users is not highly regarded, particularly when it comes to criticizing the performance of journalism.

Particularly in the online realm, media accountability can be operationalized in another way by being transparent – being honest about the nature of what is known and how that knowledge has been generated (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, cited in Singer, 2007: 89). Several scholars state that increased user participation in the news production leads to greater transparency and "lifting the curtain" in order to see who stands behind the news (e.g. Deuze, 2005; Lowrey & Anderson, 2005). Transparency can thus be seen as the process where media producers show and explain how news is being produced, where users can – at least to some extent – participate in the creation of content and where news media provide users with additional information about the published items (Heikkilä et al., 2012: 50; Karlsson, 2011: 285).

It is no longer the journalist to declare what (relevant) information is and what is not credible (Hayes et al., 2007: 274). *Openness* in terms of transparency, personal disclosure and responsiveness is the approach through which news organizations can restore public trust in today's media environment. Being transparent can be particularly vital as new media players like bloggers are there to scrutinize and dissect the publications of traditional mass media. Phillips (2012: 143) underlines the opportunities offered by the

Internet in making transparency possible: in particular, through linking and attribution the audiences can – if they wish – follow up and check the facts. However, most news organizations rarely make use of these possibilities as research shows (e.g. Bettels et al., 2011; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Redden & Witschge, 2010).

Many bloggers, on the other hand, appoint transparency to their general principle. From their perspective truth is not a concept that can claim universal validity, but rather a work in progress. Setting links and revealing sources are thus ethical norms agreed to online (Phillips, 2012: 143). In the words of Singer (2007: 86), "What truth is to journalists, transparency is to bloggers." This does not mean that journalistic principles like truth-seeking, objectivity and autonomy are outdated or that journalists can publish rumours waiting for the public to uncover the whole story. Transparency is no substitute for rigorous fact-checking, quality management in the newsroom or investigative reporting. It should rather be seen as an additional instrument of media accountability, as a way of demonstrating sincerity towards the public. Being transparent also means that news organizations take the public seriously and acknowledge that journalism has to deal with the reader, viewer or listener out there.

With its interactive and dialogue-oriented communication, the Internet changed the way journalism works and made it more democratic. New online-based instruments like social media offer additional opportunities for transparency and responsiveness. Nowadays the public is far more prone to raise its voice and to engage in debate with the media, also because the transaction costs are by far lower than twenty years ago when someone had to write a letter to the editor. Aside from generating great expectations, these new instruments also put pressure on journalists and media organizations as new activities and roles – and therefore also additional costs – unfold. As Brants and de Haan (2010: 426) observe, being more open and responsive creates particular discomfort in two areas: The first deals with the question of how these new technologies can be integrated into the journalistic production process, and second is the fact that journalists seem quite uncertain in coming to terms with their own roles.

The fact that these innovative instruments of (online) media accountability are adopted with such great hesitance may illustrate that journalists and media organizations are still sceptical towards these new principles. Hope remains that media organizations are not using online media accountability in a strategic way or as a form of window dressing or for minimizing regulation (cf. Phillips, Couldry & Freedman, 2009). In the end, journalists will not be able to get away from the new media ecology and they have to find new means, in one way or the other, to connect and interact with the public while still preserving their autonomy. Transparency and responsiveness are good instruments to start with.

3. The papers in the thematic section

This volume of SComS focuses in its thematic section on the potentials and pitfalls of media accountability in the realm of Web 2.0. The section starts off with a paper by Harmen Groenhart and Jo Bardoel on the essential question: What does transparency mean for professional journalists and how does transparency affect the journalistic process? Based on several in-depth interviews with Dutch journalists, the authors discuss three different types of transparency: production transparency, actor transparency and dialogue transparency. They conclude that the debate about a transparent and accountable journalism should not only include normative and commercial logic but should also encompass an additional "currency" – an operational logic – in order to explore the potential of transparency.

The following article by Ghislain Deslandes and Mollie Painter analyzes how the identity crisis that increasingly characterizes contemporary media industries influences the traditional way news professionals handle questions of accountability. They discuss the accelerating speed and pace of publication within the media industry and its threat to media accountability by drawing on the work of cultural theorist Paul Virilio and his concept of dromoscopy. Finally they propose a more participation-oriented notion of accountability, where it relies on the co-responsibility of multiple actors to each other, thus being less imposing and more relational.

Yael de Haan and Jo Bardoel look into how public and commercial Dutch broadcast media respond to increasing pressure in terms of accountability and responsiveness. The authors point out that there is indeed an increased leaning among journalists towards openness and connection with the public. However, when it comes to the daily routine they are still hesitant to include new ways to engage with the public as it seems not to live with their professional autonomy and authority. In particular, they highlight that innovative online instruments of accountability are not only creating opportunities but at the same time generate pressures within the media organization in terms of costs and new unforeseen roles and activities.

The fourth paper by Christian Wassmer and Otfried Jarren analyses how new services in the Internet are profoundly changing media communication structures and by doing so, also change the norms and rules of public communication. The two authors investigate the internal regulation of social media providers, paying specific attention to two relevant aspects: The rules of the providers and the status of users. Based on the results of their study, they suggest a concept of regulated self-regulation, which requires governmental, private and other relevant actors to discuss certain rules of conduct in order to establish a culture of responsibility.

The following paper by Tobias Reitz and Kersten A. Riechers offers an alternative perspective on the topics of accuracy, online fact-checking, and online corrections management. The authors propose an innovative way to disconnect the discussion of quality in journalism from the carrier medium and to directly involve the reader. The paper aims to provide an overview of media accountability with regard to online journalism and to offer answers as to how a crowdsourced media accountability service should look. While completing their Master's Thesis, the authors conceived of the service "Corrigo," which enables users to report objective errors in online media outlets.

In their provocative paper, the two authors Ralf Spiller and Matthias Degen point out that from a normative perspective, watchblogs are an appropriate instrument in a holistic media accountability framework. They argue that in order to be effective, bloggers have to carry out their work on a regular basis and should reveal a suitable self-understanding. In their article they provide evidence that most watchbloggers do not understand their role as a controlling and corrective institution with regard to traditional media. According to the results of their study, they classify watchblogs as a rather weak and unconvincing instrument of online media accountability.

Finally, the paper written by Marlis Prinzing discusses the (so far primarily in Germany successful) political movement called the Pirate Party, and its position towards media policy. The author investigates whether the Pirate Party is a new star, a blend of elements, or an innovative media accountability instrument like a "political" media-watchdog, given their strong support of Internet freedom, a fundamental reform of copyright law and the denial of online regulation. Prinzing presents data on how the Pirate Party's opinions on media self-regulation are delivered in the traditional media.

Overall, the papers create a stimulating thematic section and address significant issues with regard to the topic of online media accountability. Before passing the torch to the authors, I want to thank them once more for their valuable contributions. And last but not least, I would like to thank the editorial board for the opportunity to present a thematic section on such a relevant topic encompassing the changing conditions under which journalism is practiced and the many new implications for democracy.

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