

Between hope and fear: Distinctiveness of media accountability online in The Netherlands

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Between hope and fear: Distinctiveness of media accountability online in The Netherlands

Harmen Groenhart

Summary

News media in The Netherlands show great variety in the extent and ways, in which they realize media accountability online in terms of actor transparency, product transparency and feedback opportunities online. It is suggested that even those news rooms that seem to adhere to transparency and public accountability still need to explore the functionality and application of media accountability instruments (MAI). Both in terms of potentials and pitfalls, news rooms need to consider about what they want to be transparent and in what ways.

To the extent that online innovations are visible, traditional news media seem to experiment, as is the case with newsroom blogs or the project of hyper local journalism *Dichtbij.nl*, part of the Telegraaf Company. Various news media have on-going projects on audience participation, online applications and distribution models. However, since many projects merely aim at *finding* new applications, processes, platforms and business models, it remains to be seen whether projects are indeed reasonably innovative and feasible at the same time.

The development of an online and therefore immediate, archived, personalized and interactive context, offers practical and ethical challenges to Dutch journalism. These challenges bring shifts in its role and responsibility to society. It means that changes occur in what journalists are accountable *for*, as well as ways in *how* they are accountable.

The Dutch media landscape lodges various professional accountability instruments like the press council and both profession-wide and news media specific codes of ethics, but some of these instruments receive only moderate support. Proactive openness is more an exception than the rule and may well be a distinctive indicator for quality journalism. Although news media often acknowledge the importance of media accountability offline and online, they often lack the resources or courage to use them or have different priorities. This ambiguous position may indicate that in relation to media accountability online, Dutch news media are between hope and fear: that it will either improve their relationship with the public and fuel professional quality, or ask too much of resources with too little benefit.

1. Context factors in the development of MA online practices

1.1 Social context¹

Freedom of speech, plurality and self-regulation characterize the Dutch media system. With fading political parallelism, strong public service broadcasting and a fair level of professionalization the Dutch media system fits the model of Democratic Corporatist media systems, as defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004): consisting of “a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organized social and political groups, and by a relative active but legally limited role of the state” (Hallin/Mancini 2004: 11). The media landscape used to reflect societal segmentation, and civic membership functioned as an accountability mechanism with society.

Although the past decade of individualization and secularization has weakened the societal structure, traits of the segmented pluralist society are still notable in the newspaper landscape and even more so in the well-developed public service broadcasting. Some traditional newspaper readers still feel that they are ‘members’ of the newspaper rather than ‘subscribers’. Nowadays, newspapers and broadcasting organizations do not have any formal ties with political parties and the state plays a more stimulating than controlling role. Media law explicitly forbids state intervention in public broadcasting service (PBS) programming, and confers a 500€ million annual budget for PBS at national, regional and local levels. The Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers (Press Stimulation Fund) currently plays a stimulating role in innovation of the media landscape. There is no structural subsidy system for newspapers, but in 2009 the government launched a financial stimulation program to fund newspaper jobs for young journalists.

Frequent debates on journalistic issues, initiated by the profession, government and civil society, indicate freedom of speech as well as a broad concern about media performance². The rise and assassination of right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn is seen as a historical demarcation of an intensifying critical atmosphere. Critics stated that the media together with politics created an atmosphere that appeared to be fertile soil for this assassination. Moreover, in line with criticism from the *civic journalism* movement at the end of the century in the USA, the press was criticized for losing touch with society and becoming too engaged with itself and the establishment.

Nowadays, it can hardly be stated that *the* media are politically correct. The rhetorical style of the provocative right-wing politician Geert Wilders, ‘shockblogs’ like *GeenStijl.nl*, and its

¹ For a more elaborate description of the media landscape see (Evers & Groenhart, in press).

² See for instance reports of governmental advisory boards RoB (2003). and RMO (2003).

informally affiliated and recently installed PBS-organization *PowNews* indicate a consolidation of Fortuyn's mission 'to say whatever one thinks'. Moreover, PBS is looking for ways to become more profiled. Another recently founded PBS organization, *Wakker Nederland*, got its license on the condition that it manages to enrich the media-landscape with a 'right-wing sound'.

Nonetheless, several lawsuits concerning libel and blasphemy indicate that the freedom of speech is a topical subject. Journalists, politicians and civil society debate whether the freedom of speech allows people to intentionally offend societal groups (Evers 2007).

1.2 Media legitimacy and existing MA institutions

The public image of legitimacy of media

As mentioned, there is a lively public debate about media performance. Criticism – partly cultivated by populist politicians or shockblogs – includes that news media tend to be left wing, politically correct, sour and cynical or state regulated. During his introduction in 2007, even the CEO of national public broadcasting Henk Hagoort claimed that the prime time public affairs programs were too left wing and needed to be profiled. His criticism accompanied the accession of the two more right wing oriented broadcasting organizations.

However, there are no signs that such criticism is reflected in a decline in consumption or trust in the media. The amount of time spent on media consumption is more stable than in decline (SCP 2004/2007), and despite unstable selling rates, newspapers are still an attractive business. Indicative, of which is the free newspapers' market. Three free newspapers have high distribution rates, two of which appear in the top 5 of all newspapers in The Netherlands (see Table 1.1). One free newspaper portrays itself as a quality newspaper and has higher distribution rates than two important quality newspapers.

Table 1.1: Distribution rates of Dutch newspapers

| <i>Newspaper</i> | <i>Distribution rate (2010 Q3)</i> | <i>Concern</i> |
|------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| De Telegraaf | 671669 | De Telegraaf BV |
| Metro* | 453279 | Metro Holland BV |
| AD | 448754 | AD Nieuwsmedia B.V. |
| Sp!ts* | 309513 | Basis Media |
| De Volkskrant | 259557 | De Persgroep Advertising |
| Dagblad de Pers* | 228085 | Wegener Media BV |
| NRC Handelsblad | 195313 | NRC Media BV |
| Trouw | 103451 | De Persgroep Advertising |

Source: www.hoi-online.nl³

* free newspaper

³ HOI (2011). oplagecijfers 3e kwartaal 2010, Het Oplage Instituut

Like the total amount of time spent on media consumption, the amount of people that say they rather trust the media seems quite stable as well. Data retrieved from Eurobarometer (see Table 1.2) suggest that there is no such thing as decline in trust in media, as is frequently mentioned in US studies⁴. In 2009, the majority of the Dutch population said they trusted the media, rather than not trusted it. Responses between years vary up to 5 per cent, but this concerns both decline and increase. More specifically, radio continues to be judged the most trustworthy medium, followed by television and the press. Moreover, as Table 1.3 suggests, media do relatively well in terms of trust, compared to governmental bodies.

Table 1.2: Trust (%) in the media in The Netherlands

| Year* | Radio | TV | Press | Internet |
|-------|-------|----|-------|----------|
| 2009 | 72 | 65 | 57 | 51 |
| 2008 | 77 | 61 | 61 | 46 |
| 2007 | 73 | 63 | 61 | 54 |

Source: Eurobarometer 72 & 69.⁵

* % of answering 'Yes' to the question 'Do you tend to trust or tend not to trust it'.

Table 1.3: Trust in governmental bodies in The Netherlands

| Institution | % tend to trust |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Government | 49 |
| Parliament | 52 |
| Public authorities | 57 |
| Political parties | 37 |

Source: Eurobarometer 72 / autumn 2009

* % of answering 'Yes' to the question 'Do you tend to trust or tend not to trust it'.

We ought to be cautious in concluding that trust in media is not a problem in The Netherlands, because data from the last three years can not reveal any trend on a macro level. Moreover, the US study from Pew Research Center that shows a decline in trust, covers more than two decades. Nonetheless, the data from Eurobarometer is useful for the purpose of this study. We want to understand trust in media as a contextual factor in describing media accountability online. For that purpose it is sufficient to know that trust in media is still relatively high compared to other institutions; that trust in media is relatively stable and that people trust the media enough to rely on them as primary sources of information. Taking this into consideration, it may also follow that

⁴ PEW (2009). Public Evaluations of the News Media: 1985-2009. Washington D.C., The Pew Research Center.

⁵ TNS-Nipo (2007). Eurobarometer 67. De publieke opinie in Europese Unie. Lente 2007, Europese Commissie, TNS-Nipo (2008). Eurobarometer 69. De publieke opinie in Europese Unie. Lente 2008, Europese Commissie, TNS-Opinion&Social (2009). Eurobarometer 72. Public Opinion in the European Union. Fieldwork October-November 2009, European Commission.

the public is willing to trust content that relates to media accountability processes like columns by an ombudsman, a readers' editor or the editor-in-chief.

In respect to different levels of trust between media types, we refer to a study by Kiousis (2004) who pointed out that trust in online media is indeed lower than trust in traditional media like newspapers and television. But additionally, Kiousis observed that in relation to online media, people's trust tends to increase when they talk about news from these online sources. This observation points to the potential of increasing trust by means of discussion. The backlog of trust in online media may be overhauled by explicitly discussing the news or inviting the public for media accountability dialogue.

The prestige and authority of traditional MA institutions: Press Council

The Dutch Press Council (DPC) was founded in 1960, after criticism of the competence of its preceding Disciplinary Board. The Disciplinary Board's competence – to cancel a journalist's union membership – was limited to journalists that were member of the professional union, and membership is not mandatory for practicing journalism professionally in The Netherlands.

After statutory adjustments in 1960 the DPC enlarged its competence to judge any professional journalist, irrespective of union membership but at the same time, the DPC's sanctioning power declined, as the institution lost its right to cancel union membership. The authority of the DPC is merely based on voluntary support from media organizations. Media that acknowledge the DPC are only morally bound to participate in its procedures and to publish its verdicts. This lack of sanctioning power causes some journalist to taunt the DPC as a 'toothless tiger'. Nonetheless, the majority of Dutch news media acknowledge the DPC. Only a handful – most of which are important media players – reject the DPC: *De Telegraaf*, *Elsevier*, *HP/deTijd*, *Tros Radar*, *Tros Opgelicht*, *Geen Stijl* and *NOVA/Nieuwsuur*.

The DPC seems responsive to serious criticism. A few years ago, a PBS public affairs program (NOVA) withdrew from the council, after criticizing two verdicts which seemed unjustified in the eyes of the editor-in-chief. NOVA criticized the lack of the possibility to appeal against the verdicts. The Council acknowledged this criticism and changed its statutes; soon the current affairs program will revoke its withdrawal from the Council⁶. Moreover, the DPC initiated an international comparative study of Press Councils in Western Europe, which has been fundamental for recent changes in the procedures and organization of the Council (Koene 2008).

Following this reports' focus on the online context of media accountability, we elaborate on the impact digitalization and online journalism seem to have for the DPC, based on an interview with the DPC's secretary Daphne Koene. Some criticize the DPC for not being up to date with new technological and professional developments; Koene, in defense, argues that technological

⁶ Personal communication from Carel Kuyt, editor-in-chief of *Nieuwsuur* (formerly known as *NOVA*).

developments and their implication for the professional context emerge quicker than the institutional processes of the Council. Although the majority of the DPC's workload is related to traditional journalism, Koene mentions four challenges that the DPC faces due to digital innovation: **1) its own competence and functioning, 2) new ethical issues in journalism 3) changes in professional conduct, 4) fear of retribution.** These challenges may be indicative for challenges that journalism as a profession is facing on the whole and are described in detail below.

1) The DPC's competence

Due to technological changes in publication platforms and the raising of user generated content and citizen journalism, the question of who is a journalist becomes more and more compelling. As the variety of (seemingly) journalistic platforms and the quantity of their content seems to increase the DPC – like press councils in other countries – questions its own competence: in what cases and to what type of information product does the DPC pronounce?

“In case of a website of a national daily there is no doubt whether it concerns a journalistic action, although more and more the council is being approached concerning publications that cannot be clearly seen as journalism.”
(Daphne Koene, DPC's secretary)

Normally, the DPC judges every individual complaint on the journalistic value of the concerned publication. The DPC does not judge private publications. Private postings on Facebook or other social media – even when they are posted by a journalist - are not seen as journalistic publications per se. However, it is not always clear whether a publication has a private or professional character. The DPC's secretary supports the idea that the determination process whether a publication is journalistic or not, will be easier when news platforms – whether individuals or organizations – explicate their professional intentions.

Representation of the profession

One measure that the DPC uses to determine whether something is journalism is to consider whether a news outlet is represented by any collective body of the profession that is affiliated to the DPC. For instance, because the Dutch Newspaper Publishers Press⁷ (DNNP) is affiliated, the DPC considers all news outlets that are represented by the DNNP as journalism. Concerning this representational measure, the council faces the problem that online only news media are not (yet) represented in some kind of collective body. In this light, practical and technological developments run out institutional inertia.

⁷ Translated from Dutch by the author: Nederlandse Dagbladpers Uitgeverij (NDU)

Redefining the competence

To cope with these problems that touch upon the DPC's competence, it is working on a change in its statutes. The Council aims to enlarge its competence from journalistic conduct to journalistic production.

"If we focus on a journalistic act, we limit ourselves to acts in name of performing the journalistic profession. If we focus at journalistic production – which may be determined by the impact of it – we include aspects of a news outlet website that is potentially not produced by a journalist."

(Daphne Koene, DPC's secretary)

Redefining its competence to publications entails that the DPC can be addressed for any production on a journalistic website. This will include non-professional content like readers' comments and publications by citizen journalists.

2) New ethical issues: Privacy

Frequently, the DPC gets complaints against media publishing personal information that has been published somewhere on the Internet. A typical defensive argument of journalists in these cases may be that media responsibility for safeguarding privacy vanishes as soon as private information is publicly available – either on personal profiles on websites or social media, either on other journalistic platforms. However, the DPC argues that information on the web *per se* does not imply a right to publish for news media. The DPC makes distinction between platforms on the base of their target audience.

"Information on Hyves [a dutch facebook] is not meant as a general publication, but is meant for your friends. An outlet with a broader reach cannot simply state: it is allowed to publish, because the information is in the public domain."

(Daphne Koene, DPC's secretary)

Case 1.1: A specialist discussion forum is not public domain

Book publisher, Bert Bakker defended his decision to publish the full name of a crime suspect because other crime reporters used the full name somewhere in an online forum. The DPC argued that the forum discussion was not a publication for a large audience and hence, the suspects name was not known in the public domain. Hence, the DPC disapproved publishing the full name. (RvdJ 2009)

3) Changes in professional conduct

Online technology has induced changes in professional behavior of news media. The DPC recognizes four issues that characterize complaints related to these professional changes: speed of publication, archiving, hyper linking and publishing readers' comments.

Speed of publication

Publishing on a website means that an outlet can publish news instantly. Sometimes this leads to inaccuracy in the news, as some news goes unchecked and some sources may seem unreliable. A typical argument of a journalist may be that they are just covering the news while it is unfolding and that any mistakes or omissions may be corrected in future updates.

However, the DPC argues that an error in an early published article may be copied by many other platforms which distribute the error. A correction afterwards by the primary source does not correct the distributed error.

“The DPC opposes the view that journalists may be less accurate online because it is easier to correct the content.”
(Daphne Koene, DPC’s secretary)

Nonetheless, the DPC may accept an adequate update or correction of an online article –whether after intervention of a complainant or not – as sufficient. The Council does not accept lower standards of accuracy of the initial publication, but treats updates online as corrections in a newspaper. This logic leaves room for the concept of process journalism: publishing unfinished news articles that evolve online.

Archiving

People that have been the subject of news media attention, complain about publications archived on the Internet, not only because the articles may have been erroneous, but also because the article is annoying for the news person due to its high accessibility.

“The PC holds the view that one should assume completeness of any archive, but on some cases, news sources and subjects can be made anonymous.”
(Daphne Koene, DPC’s secretary)

Sometimes the Council is asked by complainants to delete or make anonymous its own verdicts. Mostly this concerns verdicts from many years ago, even from before the digital era, which have been published online in retroaction. Sometimes even journalists complain that they are annoyed by a publicly available verdict. When cases date from longer than five years ago, the Council accepts these requests to delete names of individual journalists, although the name of the outlet stays public.

Hyper linking and reader comments

A final point that Koene addresses is a question of responsibility: to what extent are news media responsible for the information they publish? This question applies to both linking to other websites and publishing user generated content, like readers’ comments. Internationally, PCs hold different principles on this issue with some European PCs arguing that readers’ comments

become the outlet's responsibility only after moderation. The DPC assumes responsibility for every item that is published within the domain of a news outlet. The DPC position is formalized in its own guidebook.

"Readers' comments on a news media website – moderated or not – fall under the council's competence. [...] The council understands that an editor-in-chief cannot be expected that all comments are checked beforehand. However, he has the responsibility to act when he is called to account."
(Daphne Koene, DPC's secretary)

Comparing the new ethical dilemmas and changes in professional conduct to the research literature on journalism ethics online, similar issues come to the fore. Moreover, there seems to be little difference in publications concerning the Dutch media landscape⁸ and the more internationally oriented publications⁹. All publications mention the issues of privacy, online comments, high publication speed and corrections, archiving, and hyper linking. A quarter of a century after Robert Mason concisely summarized the new ethical challenges of the information age with the acronym PAPA (Privacy, Accuracy, Property and Accessibility) (Mason, cited by Evers, 2002), this acronym still seems adequate for online journalism.

4) Fear of retribution

Resulting from these issues that are due to online journalism, another aspect can affect the role of the DPC in holding media to account. The DPC's secretary mentions the problem of people's fear of retribution that prevents them from hold media to account with a specific rude and perky style, like shockblog 'Geen Stijl'. The shockblog may be called to account by a complainant for grievance or privacy matters, however, in the aftermath of the verdict the shockblog may exploit the verdict to gain even more attention and forum discussion on the complainant. The logic of the shockblog would be: 'those who are being shaved should not move'. The PC observes *and condemns* the notion that people are hesitant to call the website to account because of this fear.

The procedures of the DPC prescribe that for every admissible complaint, the DPC asks the denounced news outlet to react to the criticism of the complainant. Consequently, the outlet knows exactly who is complaining and about what, which precipitates a public counter-attack.

"I know of people who intended to complain, but finally withdrew because of fear of follow-up publications of the outlet that they intended to complain about. This is problematic. Media should realize more what power they have over the persons they write about."
(Daphne Koene, DPC's secretary)

⁸ Evers, H. (2002). Internetjournalistiek. Nieuwe ethische vragen? Amsterdam, Aksant, Pleijter, A. and A. Dasselaar (2010). Handboek Crossmediale Journalistiek en Redactie. Culemborg, Van Duuren.

⁹ Singer, J. and C. Friend (2007). Online Journalism Ethics. Traditions and transitions. New York, Sharpe.

How may the council benefit from technological changes of the Internet?

The DPC deliberates on the role of its own website. Till now, the Council rejected the suggestion to publish forum discussions on the website, mainly because the DPC does not want to interfere in the evaluation process of any media performance, before the Council receives a complaint.

Linking to the council?

The secretary of the DPC does not know, to what extent news media in The Netherlands link to the DPC – either online or in print and broadcast. Although the council is interested in this, it lacks the resources to investigate this. She argues that a reference to the Council is part of the news media's responsibility.

An inventory of the websites of Dutch news media (see Table 1.4) shows that most are not very proactive in informing the public about the Council. Whereas, about 23 per cent of Dutch newspapers and broadcasting organizations have links to the Council on their websites or in the newspaper; online only websites do not have any links at all.

Table 1.4: News media proactively linking to the press council

| <i>Practice</i> | <i>Newspapers (print and online) N=23</i> | <i>Broadcasting organizations N=22</i> | <i>Online only websites N=3</i> |
|-----------------------|---|--|---------------------------------|
| Link to Press Council | 5 | 5 | 0 |

Source: www.mediaverantwoording.nl

In summary, the Dutch Press Council (DPC), and other media accountability institutions, may benefit from online technology by means of a lower communication threshold and possibilities for increasing visibility- either on their own website or on news media websites – but institutions may face problems as well. First there is a small, but persistent resistance towards the interference of the DPC in the independent work of journalists. This aspect may gain importance as the total number of freelance journalists increases as well as the variety of platforms that may reproduce journalistic content. Moreover, MA institutions may cope with institutional problems, for being complex and therefore slowly and less flexible.

1.3 Professionalism in journalism

The Dutch media system has a fair level of professionalism as reflected by the existence of a trade union, collective labor agreements in the media sector, editorial statutes, a press council, several codes of ethics, various academic and vocational education programs, prizes and awards, and frequent debates and conferences. The dominant trends of contemporary media ethics

debates in the Netherlands are discussions about the new customs and practices at websites and blogs. As sketched in the Paragraph 1.2, these practices put the traditional moral standards of privacy protection, caution and reliability under pressure. In recent years, the notion that news media ought to be more transparent and accountable towards the public has gained ground among professionals.

The attitude of journalists towards media accountability and the perceived need for media accountability practices

Both professional and governmental bodies stress the importance of self-regulation. However, concerning self-regulation of the press, some critics argue that news media in The Netherlands are more accountable to commercial and juridical forces than to society. One typically defensive argument is that media are accountable to their public when they are in fact accountable to the market. Joustra, editor-in-chief of a high rate opinion magazine, is known among the profession for this 'puritan' economic focus. Concerning the Press Council's legitimacy, those media with a more economic accountability focus are the ones that have withdrawn from the council – allegedly because 'they do not need others than their audience and the judgment to assess the quality of their work'.

Respondent Laurens Verhagen¹⁰ acknowledges that his news site is not very open and transparent when it comes to a code of conduct, a mission statement and other 'static information'. By contrast, he claims that through email the website is responsive to the public. Although he thinks it is important to be transparent, *"it is not very high on my 'to do' list"*. Comparable is respondent Bart Brouwers'¹¹ assertion that editors-in-chief will probably argue that they think it is very important to be accountable to the public, but need their time for other things. *"You'll get the priority answer"*, or as Verhagen puts it:

"It is ambiguous, because I think it is important, but yet we do not do it very well. Everybody thinks it is important. However, it is at the bottom of our priorities, because there is always something more important in the rush of the day. Moreover, it may be interesting for just a small group of people."
(Laurens Verhagen, editor-in-chief)

Journalists' attitude towards media accountability varies. Some media adhere to the economic discourse in media accountability and refuse external media accountability institutions like the press council. Some media claim to be accountable in terms of public accountability¹² as well. As we will see, this variation becomes visible in the difference between media in their tendency to

¹⁰ Laurens Verhagen is editor-in-chief of *Nu.nl*, the largest online-only news site.

¹¹ Bart Brouwers is executive project manager at *Dichtbij.nl*, a hyper local media platform pilot.

¹² Heikila & Domingo's theoretical paper of Work Package 4 of the MediaAct project elaborates the difference between various types of accountability; professional and public accountability both of which 'tend to constitute a space of certain autonomy with regard to the systemic powers of the state or market'.

publish their own codes of ethics, mission statements and publications by ombudsmen, and the like.

Both media experts, Jan Bierhoff¹³ and Bart Brouwers argue that traditional media are 'reluctant' to become transparent and open to criticism, which may turn out to be essential. Traditional media start to embrace public feedback, but still seem to operate from an 'ivory tower'. Bierhoff delineates an extreme scenario: traditional news media will disappear, not because they are 'old-fashioned print', but because they seem blind to the changing context: people become self-aware, will adjust their own news menus and relevant organizations and companies start to communicate directly with audiences. The professional journalist as transmitter will disappear, the new journalist as communicator may survive¹⁴.

Respondent Theo Dersjant¹⁵ mentions that a few years ago, Dutch journalists debated the transparency of their own profession by means of publishing their names, email and short biographies (Dersjant 2007; see also Roodenburg 2007). Opponents in this debate consider that publishing an author's name in the byline of an article is only relevant when it concerns their own work. Upgraded articles from press agencies or foreign correspondents heavily leaning on the work of international colleagues do not need to publish their names. Proponents however, claim that a journalist should always be traceable. They argue that anyone who published news has responsibility for that text, whether it is their own text or somebody else's.

In general, journalists seemed to be hesitant towards opening up to the public, according to Dersjant (2007). First, they fear that direct communication lines with the audience will increase their workload unrealistically. Second, they remain hesitant towards publishing biographies for reasons of maintaining the separation between the private life and the professional domain. Another recurrent argument against publishing names of authors, either online, TV or print, is that it may be just a kind of vanity.

Nonetheless, many news organizations experiment with modern instruments like newsroom blogs, as it is suggested that newsroom blogs create opportunities for increasing transparency, profile and public feedback. Other media intensively experiment with User Generated Content platforms, for example Brouwers' project of hyper local news *Dichtbij.nl*, initiated by *The Telegraaf Media Group*.

¹³ Jan Bierhoff is associate lector Infonomics & New Media - European Centre for Digital Communication (INM-EC/DC) *Hogeschool Zuyd*.

¹⁴ The notion of a shift in societal role for journalistic profession has been elaborated in various academic publications e.g. Bardoel, J. (1996). "Beyond Journalism. A Profession between Informatin Society and Civil Society." *European Journal of Communication* **11**(3): 19.

¹⁵ Theo Dersjant is a former media journalist, lecturer for over ten years at *Fontys University of Applied Sciences*, Department of Journalism.

These initiatives are still in an experimental phase, and from a business model perspective success seems still moderate. Finding ways to generate income continues to be the Holy Grail for any experiment in terms of audience feedback and public accountability.

The tensions generated by detachment and neutrality

Due to the nature of the journalistic profession, there is a strong tendency to act against any apparent threat to professional autonomy. For instance, this tendency comes to the fore in the refusal of some media to acknowledge the authority of the DPC as described above. Furthermore, any professional debate on the issue of quality assessment is thorny. The idea of a quality mark is repeatedly launched in debates¹⁶ and without exception this suggestion triggers an allergic reaction in the majority of the profession.

1.4 Internet user cultures

As the focus of this report and the overarching research project is media accountability online, it is reasonable to shed light on Internet culture as well. Internet penetration and use are conditional for establishing web based media accountability. From a national point of view, it may seem evident that the Internet plays an important role in society and journalism, but for an international comparative perspective explicit on penetration and use, data is indispensable.

In The Netherlands, the Internet is widely accessible. Only 9 per cent of households do not have an Internet connection. The steady growth of recent years has leveled off. Meanwhile, wireless and mobile phone Internet access are still developing. Growth in mobile phone Internet access is significant attribute of younger generations.

Table 1.5: Internet access in The Netherlands 2007-2010

| <i>Internet penetration</i> | <i>% of households with Internet access</i> | <i>% of individuals with wireless use*</i> | <i>% individuals with mobile phone use*</i> | <i>% 16-24 years with mobile phone use*</i> |
|-----------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| 2010 | 91 | 21 | 7 | 12 |
| 2009 | 90 | 20 | 7 | 12 |
| 2008 | 86 | 19 | 5 | 6 |
| 2007 | 83 | 14 | 4 | 8 |

Source: Eurostat (retrieved February, 2011)

* *Used in the last 3 months*

¹⁶ See for instance: Van Vree, F. (2008). Het colofon als journalistieke bijsluiter. *De Nieuwe Reporter*. Bardeel, J. (2010). Toekomst van de Journalistiek. *Oratie Hoogleraarschap Journalistiek en Media*. Nijmegen, Radboud Universiteit

Internet access seems adequate, but is not a guarantee for a lively online culture. At least we need to consider Internet use as well as active participation. Table 1.6 shows detailed data on Internet use and allows us to say that on average 3 out of 4 individuals in The Netherlands use the Internet on a daily basis.

In contrast to the use of mobile phone applications, these statistics do not vary a lot by users' ages, with 88 per cent of 16-24 year olds and 85 per cent of 24-54 year olds being the dominant users. Notwithstanding these high numbers, even the majority of 55-74 year old users access the Internet on a daily basis. Variations in education show a similar range: a high level equating to 91 per cent and a low level equating to 59 per cent accessing the Internet each day.

Table 1.6: Internet users in The Netherlands

| Internet use | % individuals daily |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 2010 | 76 |
| <i>Gender</i> | |
| Male | 81 |
| Female | 72 |
| <i>Age</i> | |
| 16-24 years | 88 |
| 25-54 years | 85 |
| 55-74 years | 54 |
| <i>Level of education</i> | |
| Low | 59 |
| Medium | 79 |
| High | 91 |

Source: Eurostat (retrieved February, 2011)

The critical mass of active content producers on the Internet

Readers' comments have a potential as media accountability instrument. In spite of figures about Internet use indicating that a fairly large proportion of the population is finding its way through the online world, we need to be cautious about translating these data into media accountability potential. In contrast to these convincing figures, only a minority of the Dutch population actively adds content to the Internet.

Table 1.7: User Internet participation (%) in The Netherlands

| | Uploading content ^a | Posting messages ^a | Facebook account ^b | Twitter account ^b |
|------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2010 | 27 | 39 | 16.8 | 4.4 |
| 2009 | 26 | 39 | . | . |
| 2008 | 19 | . | . | . |
| 2007 | . | . | . | . |

^a Source: Eurostat (retrieved february, 2011)

^b Source: STIR Establishment survey 2009/2010

Being actively online, does not necessarily imply a readiness to hold media to account. It may be expected that if we take age and participatory Internet use into consideration, the potential amount of critical citizens holding media to account may be drastically lower.

Respondent Tom Bakker¹⁷ is wary to judge reader feedback as an effective MAI. Readers' feedback may serve for discussing the content of the news, discussing the quality of the news or as an outlet of sentiment, but readers' forums risk being rude and badly argued. According to Bakker, around 5 or 6 per cent of the Dutch population say they add comments or blog postings online at least once a month. His recent study of citizens' use of participatory platforms in The Netherlands showed that the online involvement of citizens is not as widespread as often thought.

Nonetheless, although the quality of readers' comments is low concerning content and coherence, it creates a feeling' of openness:

“News organizations should take [low quality aspects] for granted [...] if they want to benefit from the attractive appeal of openness.”
(Tom Bakker, researcher at University of Amsterdam)

1.5 Online journalism development

Contrary to some traditional journalists' fear for workload and intrusion into private life, some journalists appreciate the idea that the web increases their visibility. Some even have their own website with a portfolio, to present themselves and to facilitate communication with employers and the public.

“Since I have my own personal website, I got more mails by people that are explicitly looking for me. People find it easier to speak openly when they have personal contact, because its not in the public domain. Moreover, it lowers the threshold for people to get in contact, for it is impossible to find personal email addresses in our newsroom and the phone-desk is horrible.”
(Joop Bouma, journalist)¹⁸

As a school of journalism lecturer, Dersjant observes that some students also appreciate their visibility online. They see their early professional footsteps in the context of their vocational training as a way of presenting themselves to a larger professional audience, ideally to potential employers. Dersjant states that students feel a higher urgency for good performance as they know that their production may be judged by future colleagues. This aspect of visibility may gain importance as more and more journalists in The Netherlands have to acquire jobs and projects as freelancers.

¹⁷ Tom Bakker is scholar at University of Amsterdam, expert in online and citizen journalism.

¹⁸ Joop Bouma is an investigative journalist at a national daily. Personal communication, retrieved from interview for PhD-study.

Integration or segregation of print and online journalism?

As Jan Bierhoff argues, online journalism exists in The Netherlands, but most of the actors in this field do traditional journalism in an online setting; they transmit journalistic content, rather than create it in a communicative way. Indeed, every print and broadcast news outlet has its own website. More communicative forms of journalism are still in an experimental phase. Recent decisions at *De Persgroep*, publisher of four major newspapers¹⁹ in The Netherlands, underline this ambiguous perspective.

Box 1.2: Restriction of editorial control online at four major newspapers

De Persgroep announced that it will separate the online newsroom from the newspaper newsroom and create one online newsroom for all four newspapers. The editors-in-chief of the print editions lose their control over the online edition. The four online editions will be managed by one autonomous online editor-in-chief. Managing editor of *De Persgroep*, Hans Deridder, thinks this is necessary for improving the online editions. According to him, online development used to be difficult, because “[n]ewspaper journalists have important competences, but they lack those competences needed to be successful online. The online offices used to be frustrated by people that did not understand the web, neither did they want to understand it” (Deridder cited in Pleijter and Boon 2011) Opponents of this separation fear a decline in unity of the brand, they assume that consumers see both the print and online edition as part of the same brand (Bogaerts 2011).

It may be expected that a separation of editorial control of print and online newsrooms complicates the process of media accountability. If any problem related to the professional quality of the website occurs, readers, news sources or people in the news may be confused who to call to account. For instance, is a reader of the newspaper *Trouw* able (or willing) to understand that if they want to complain about an online article, they should not address the editor-in-chief of the newspaper? And what about articles that are written by newspaper journalists, but published on the website?

State stimulates innovation in journalism: The Press Stimulation Fund

As described in section 1.1, the state plays a rather stimulating than controlling role in respect to the press. Noteworthy is the existence of the Press Stimulation Fund ²⁰, an independent governing body that offers financial support for both newspapers in need, and research and development in press innovation. In 2007 the Fund changed its name, to stress this stimulating function. In addition, in 2010, government adopted a law called ‘Temporal Support Press Innovation’:

“This support regulation is designed for projects that aim at journalistic products, services or processes that relate to news gathering, news analysis and opinion making on actual public affairs. These projects have an innovative nature, which means that the support leads to innovation of journalistic functions, which in turn improves diversity of the press and journalistic information distribution. The regulation offers

¹⁹ i.e. de Volkskrant, Trouw, Algemeen Dagblad and het Parool.

²⁰ Translated from Dutch: Het Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers.

8.000.000 euro, which is provided in two rounds. At least 50per cent of which is spend on local and regional activities.”
(Staatscourant 2010)²¹.

For instance, on 22-4-2010 the Press Stimulation Fund granted 395,000€ to Brouwers’ hyper local media initiative *Dichtbij.nl*. This project will be described more in detail below. The focuses of other supported projects are a mobile e-reader (94,000€), a new exploitation model for a regional newspaper (395,000€) and a ‘data-driven-journalism’ project called *HackTheGovernment* (24,500€).

Despite the best intentions, the Fund is criticized for not being up to date and missing a general view of innovation in journalism. This criticism is somewhat acknowledged by the Fund itself. Evaluating the two rounds of funding innovative projects, the Fund stresses that ‘innovativeness’ of grant requests is hard to determine; and since many projects aim at *finding* new business models, it is impossible for the Fund to judge whether project requests are financially feasible²² (Verbei 2010).

“To be honest, this support regulation is a step-by-step approach and we learn by trial and error. None of the granted requests had a clear indication in what direction journalism is evolving.”
(Press Stimulation Fund Chairman Wim Noomen cited in Verbei 2011).

Concerning media accountability and stimulating internal criticism within the profession two grants of the Fund are interesting. 1) For various years, the fund supported an online professional magazine for news and discussion in the journalistic sector, called *The New Reporter*²³. After a trial period the magazine is trying to survive independently. Generating income still seems a little tricky, but the website is well known among the profession and its articles are cited frequently. 2) Another project concerns an initiative called *Lies*, an online platform that uncovers lies by politicians, scientists etc. This platform may be characterized as a media blog, therefore it will be described in section 3.1.

Hyperlocal journalism: Dichtbij.nl

As executive manager of *Dichtbij.nl*, an innovative hyper local media project, Bart Brouwers embraces the idea that participation of citizens in hyper local media can be seen as an innovative way of being responsive. *Dichtbij.nl* creates an online information environment for any city, village, neighborhood or even a street.

“When citizens feel they need a platform for discussing local topics or exchanging specialist information, a specific subpage can be created within the domain of [Dichtbij.nl].” (Bart Brouwers, head of Dichtbij.nl)

²¹ Translation by the author

²² As stated in the Funds’ newsletter *De Nieuwe Pers*, 1, oktober 2010.

²³ Translated from Dutch ‘De Nieuwe Reporter’; see www.denieuwereporter.nl



Screenshot of OverWoerden.nl; a UGC based local community platform
(One of the three pilot schemes of Brouwers' hyper local journalism project)

Brouwers' enthusiasm is illustrative for the belief in the potential of citizen based journalism. Others are more skeptical about public participation in journalism, after the failure of various user generated content initiatives, like *Skoops.nl*. Nonetheless, Brouwers has a balanced view about the function for the platform *Dichtbij.nl*: although he believes that hyper local media will serve a public information function, he is determined to create a financially healthy organization. His project, still in its pilot phase, faces two major problems as related to civic participation:

- *Problem 1*: the problem of relative **high participation threshold**. Registration procedures are rather difficult, but lowering the threshold results in lower quality of content.
- *Problem 2*: the problem that the power of these media is related to **their credibility**. At times social media trust may be harmed, when they apparently violate privacy matters or other crucial aspects of civic life.

Process journalism

One typical development in online journalism – which is also gaining ground in The Netherlands – is the idea of process journalism²⁴. With the rise of news-sites, speed is increasingly becoming a driving factor and news media publish their news before they have 'fully' checked the story. Internet changes the context for journalism fundamentally. Instead of fixed publication deadlines, news media online are facing a product that is never finished. It asks for continuous updating of stories and content.

²⁴ For the concept of process journalism, see for instance Meier, K. (2009). Transparency in Journalism. Credibility and trustworthiness in the digital future. *The Future of Journalism*. London.

“In a perspective of both technologies, content and societal meaning we cannot say anymore: ‘I’m done with my job’. In fact, we are never finished. There are always thousands of people knowing more and better than the journalist does. That creates a new responsibility for the professional.”
 (Bart Brouwers, head of Dichtbij.nl)

Online news seems to justify a less severe application of existing professional norms – an issue raised at the Press Council as well. The immediacy of the online society lowers the verification standards of journalistic organizations. Bakker observes a trend of increasing production transparency in Dutch news media, but usually that does not go as far as many bloggers that publish meta-information on their journalistic process, like ‘updated’ or ‘comment added’.

2. Practices initiated by the media

2.1 Actor transparency²⁵

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. News media in The Netherlands are generally open for academic researchers. Only the *Telegraaf*, the largest and most popular newspaper, is rather selective in accepting scholars to scrutinize its professional organization. Talking about transparency with professional journalists, they refer to the interview itself to indicate their actor transparency. As such, news media in The Netherlands may be judged transparent *per se*.

However, this report operationalizes actor transparency as any online application that enhances transparency of information about the actors. From that perspective, news media in The Netherlands show great variety. It is suggested that online actor transparency is a dimension for differentiation between news media.

Table 2.1: Practices fostering actor transparency in Dutch online news websites

| Practice | Availability at online news websites ²⁶ |
|---|--|
| Bylines | Low |
| Profiles of journalists | Low |
| Journalist blogs | Low |
| Published mission statements | Medium |
| Published Code of Ethics (GJ) | Very low |
| News policy document, in-house Code of Ethics | Very low |
| Public information on company ownership | Low |

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Values in this figure are estimations by the author

Research at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences (School of Journalism) sheds light on the occurrence of some of these instruments of actor transparency. (See Table 2.2.) Publishing mission statements is a rather common practice. Most newspapers and broadcasting organizations publish their statement online. However, it has to be noted that some statements are limited to a couple of vague notions like ‘distributing information’, ‘binding the community’ or ‘providing the best service’. Only a few media meticulously describe their funding principles and their view on society.

Table 2.2: Actor Transparency in Dutch online newspapers and news websites

| <i>Instrument</i> | Newspapers N=23 | Broadcasting organizations N=22 | Online only website N=3 |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Published Mission Statement | 17 | 17 | 0 |
| Published Code of Ethics | 5 | 3 | 0 |
| Link to Press Council | 4 | 5 | 0 |
| Editorial Statute | 0 | 1 | 0 |

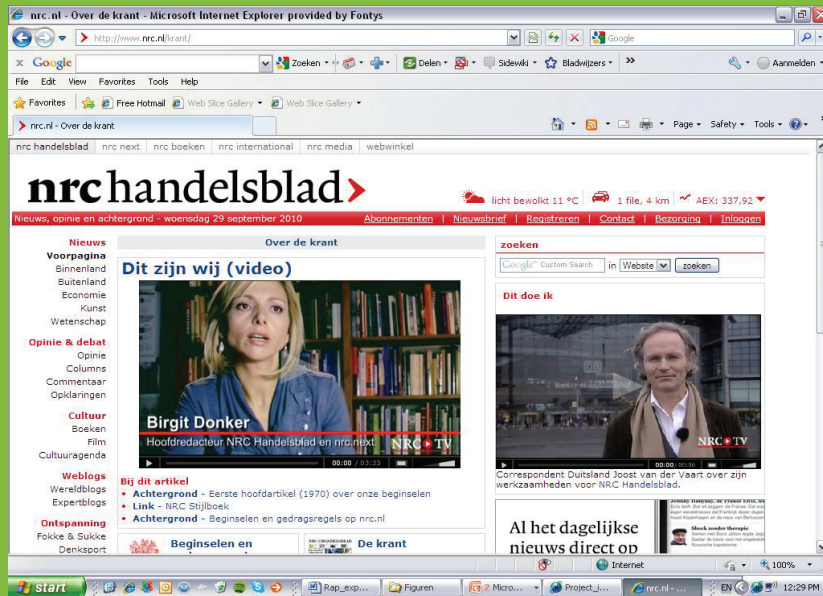
Source: www.mediaverantwoording.nl (retrieved January 2010)

Remarkably, online-only websites do not display (recognize) any actor transparency instruments. It indicates that editors-in-chief of online-only media do not consider it very important. Although Laurens Verhagen, editor-in-chief of the main online-only website www.nu.nl, acknowledges the importance of these instruments, he gives them a low priority. This limited priority that the journalistic profession seems to give to their own transparency is not restricted to those media that do not have the intention of being transparent. Media that apparently seem to have the intention of being transparent, usually the ‘quality media’ and some regional broadcasters and newspapers do not have a very high priority of online transparency.

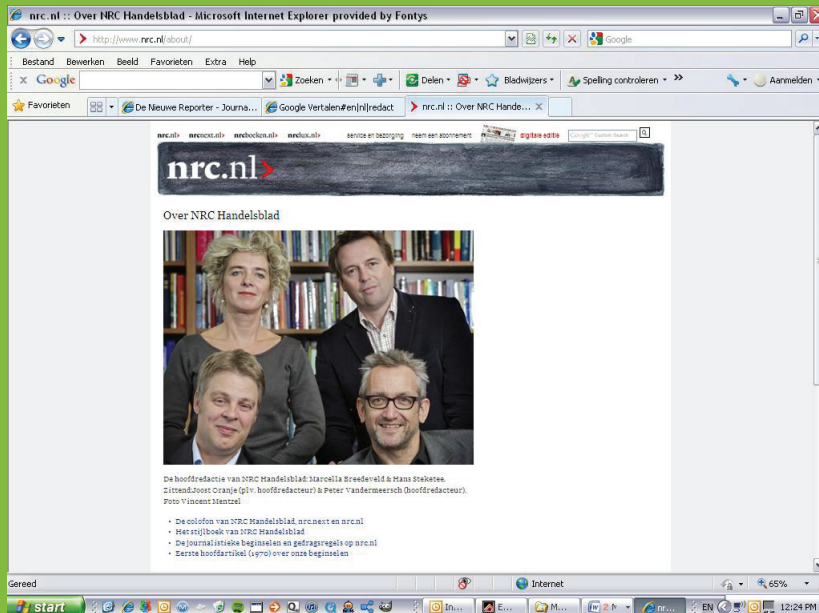
Recently, two quality newspapers changed their websites after a take-over by *De Persgroep* (see Box 1.2). This action resulted in a diminishment of online actor transparency, as neither newspaper publishes their mission statements on their websites. Now, for background information, the websites of these newspapers link to wikipedia instead. Another example of the low priority for online actor transparency is shown in Box 2.1.

Box 2.1: Low priority for actor transparency in quality newspaper website

Illustrative of the low priority that is given to actor transparency is the former online colophon of NRC Handelsblad. The colophon still mentions the old editor-in-chief Birgit Donker, a month after the installation of new editor-in-chief Peter Vandermeersch.



Screenshot of former inline colophon of NRC Handelsblad [retrieved 29-9-2010; new website was launched on 12-12-2010].



Screenshot of current online colophon of NRC Handelsblad with the new editor-in-chief [retrieved 24-1-2011]

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. Similar to actor transparency, news media in The Netherlands vary to the extent and ways, in which they realize production transparency. Especially newsroom blogs – either by a journalist, readers’ editor, ombudsman or editor-in chief – vary over time. Some media publish a newsroom blog, and only a few media publish more than one newsroom blog.

The total number of readers’ editors – typical for regional newspapers – is in decline. In some cases the column of the resigned readers’ editor is replaced by a column of the editor-in-chief. Only the broadcasting organizations use their websites to publish these columns. Newspapers limit the publication of these columns to their print version or their digital versions behind a ‘pay to view’ wall.

Table 2.3: Practices fostering production transparency in Dutch online news services

| Practice | Availability at online news websites ²⁷ |
|---|--|
| Links to original sources | Low |
| Newsroom blogs | Medium ²⁸ |
| Presence in Facebook | Medium |
| Presence in Twitter | High |
| Collaborative news production | Experimenting |
| Citizen journalism, initiated by the news media | Experimenting |

Correction boxes

Correction boxes can be seen as an instrument for production transparency, as they show whether an earlier journalistic product was erroneous or incomplete. Usually this instrument concerns only factual errors. If a news outlet cares to refer to errors in terms of biased and misleading coverage, it does so in columns by ombudsmen, reader’s editors or editors-in-chief. In the light of media accountability online, it is relevant to compare the occurrence of correction boxes in a traditional print and broadcast environment with the occurrence online. Table 2.4 shows a clear tendency in publishing correction boxes: only newspapers publish corrections in recurrent and distinctive sections in their print outlets.

²⁷ Values in this figure are estimations by the author

²⁸ In February 2011 12% of Dutch newsmedia published a column of a readers’ representative or ombudsman, 32% published a column by the editor in chief.

Table 2.4: Occurrence of correction boxes in Dutch news media

| <i>Instrument</i> | Newspapers N=23 | Broadcasting organizations N=22 | Online only website N=3 |
|--|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Correction boxes in print or broadcast | 13 | 0 | - |
| Correction boxes online | 0 | 1 | 0 |

Source: www.mediaverantwoording.nl (retrieved January 2010)

The difference between print and broadcasting organizations seems evident due to restrictions in airtime. However, one might expect that broadcasting organizations today benefit from the unlimited space of the web. To date, there is no sign that broadcasting organizations have any interest in this possibility. The same reasoning may apply to online-only news sites. In addition, difference may be explained in terms of tradition (newspapers are more or less familiar with the feature) or outlet specific characteristics (newspapers may produce more content than broadcasting organizations). However, one reason not to publish correction boxes is a lack of resources:

“It will ask a lot of time to correct our articles [online]. It is hard to realize that. In an ideal world I would be pleased to do it. I would be thrilled if I had a student or internship that would do that”. (Laurens Verhagen, editor-in-chief)

Introspective newsroom blogs

Newsrooms are starting to adopt the idea of newsroom blogs written by individual journalists – other than an ombudsman or editor-in-chief. Bloggers experience that it offers more space for background information on their news stories and the professional process behind it. For this report, two journalists and an editor-in-chief were asked to share their experiences: Fleur Besters²⁹, Marieke de Vries³⁰; and Laurens Verhagen. Besters’ crime blog (ED) is well known, and is regularly referred to at conferences and professional meetings. She also gives informal lectures at other newsrooms. Although these practices may be illustrative, introspective newsroom blogs are not yet a common practice.

Besters’ crime blog

Besters started blogging as she was unsatisfied with the way she was informed by the police and the justices. Frequently she got her information too late and incomplete, which frustrated her newspaper publications. With the blog she created a platform to express these frustrations, and show the unwillingness of the police department.

²⁹ Fleur Besters is a crime reporter at the regional newspaper *Eindhovens Dagblad*.

³⁰ Marieke de Vries is reporter at the main PBS news program *NOS Journaal*.

Box 2.2: A crime blog advocating openness



Screenshot from Bester's newsroom blog

As the police department realized that she had found a platform to publish her complaints about their communication office, the department tried to prevent damage to their image. The police improved their communication and posted an excuse on Besters' crime blog.

“It generates a lot of tips and I can put pressure on third parties. First I was aiming at readers of our newspaper, but it turned out that the police department's head, the spokespersons, lawyers and suspects are reading as well. The department's public relations officer bundles my blogs posts and distributes them among the organization. Sometimes I write on my blog that I am waiting too long for requested information. Normally, that is not published in the newspaper, but now I have a platform to publish my frustrations and put pressure on the department.” (Fleur Besters, crime reporter)

Besters explained to the public why and how she had to deal with poor police information and to share her frustrations with the public. In general visitors to her blog appreciate her explanations and reflections and according to Besters the information service of the police department improved notably after this. Moreover, the Communication Department openly apologized in a comment to her blog:

“The Communication Department acknowledges the criticism on the late announcement of the arrested suspects in this case. In balancing the interest of the investigation and reporting, we did not make the best choice. This has led to delay in the communication of the arrested suspects. The Corps apologizes for this.” (Police Department Brabant Zuid-Oost 11/12/2009)³¹

2.3 Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organizations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. Another function of Besters' blog is getting information *from* the public. Besters uses both her blog and Twitter (crowd sourcing) to get access to different circles and groups in society. In her opinion these are the means to leave the ivory tower of traditional journalism and to engage with the (local) community as a whole and to get in touch with various levels of society.

³¹ Apology posted on Besters' blog in reaction to “*Is it feasible to keep silent on arrests?*” (translated from Dutch: *Stilhouden arrestaties moordzaak: ken dat?* – 09/12/2009)

Any news organization in The Netherlands may claim that it is open for feedback from their public. Indeed, every organization has a phone number to a service desk. However, news organizations vary in the extent, to which they publish email addresses of the newsroom, editors-in-chief, or even personal email addresses of individual journalists. There is great variety as well in the amount of ombudsmen or editors-in-chief who publish columns or blogs of their interaction with the public.

Table 2.5: Online practices fostering responsiveness in Dutch online news services

| <i>Practice</i> | <i>Availability at online news websites³²</i> |
|----------------------------|--|
| Feedback form and tip-offs | High |
| Correction buttons | None |
| Online news comments | High |
| Audience blogs | Low |

De Vries: reporters blog

Marieke de Vries, employer of the main PBS news outlet *NOS*, claims to be open about the way she works. She asserts that a tendency to openness is representative for the whole culture of the *NOS*. The editor-in-chief, anchormen and many reporters have their own weblog; until recently they had an ombudsman; published their code of ethics and annual reports. Although *NOS* journalists are not obliged to write blogs, they are encouraged to do so. De Vries suggests that the culture of openness is partly initiated – or at least emphasized – by a few individuals in managing positions.

She uses her own blog to explain editorial choices and communicate with the public. In one case, however, she had a bad experience for she wrote something that triggered a lot of fierce criticism (see Box 2.3).

³² The values in this figure are estimations by the author.

Box 2.3: Fierce reactions on Turkish Airlines crash (1)

In 2009 De Vries covered a plane crash at Schiphol and wrote a blog, that day. She described how she had to drive with the satellite car – illegally - on the emergency lane on the highways to the airport. Moreover she added how she was annoyed that other road users tried to block her car. That blog led to a huge amount of negative readers' comments. Contributors were 'disgusted' by the idea that 'the reporter thinks she lives above the law'.

"The first time you are being lynched it scares you. I stayed inside my house. You must keep quiet when they bash you" (Marieke de Vries, reporter).

The negative tone and scope of the criticism caused her to retreat and oversee other feedback among the comments. She forgot about the positive comments, although she remembered that they slightly sustained her morale in that period. Nonetheless, these positive comments as well as other more critically argued ones, and the on topic comments were suppressed by the negative ones. **It clearly shows the limitations of readers' comments as a feedback mechanism.**

The experience of this blog has no impact on how she works however. As such, it is not an internal quality tool. The main lesson she learned was on how to be transparent.

"This really was a lesson for us on the practical frontiers of transparency. It is nice to have a view behind the scene, but we should not be open about all our vices when we do our job, like trespassing or taking the emergency lane" (Marieke de Vries, reporter).

Verhagen: editor's blog

Mostly, Verhagen's blog posts mention visitor statistics and the introduction of new features on the website. These blogs seem rather advertiser oriented. Sometimes, his posts concern the editorial process of the newsroom. Verhagen thinks that principally the blog is a way of being responsive to the public in a personal and non-abstract way.

"The weblog puts you closer to the reader. In stead of some abstract notion of a newsroom, it gives the impression to people 'Hey, I can talk to this guy'. Whenever people know that they communicate personally, things become friendlier."
(Laurens Verhagen, editor-in-chief)

Although he thinks it is an important tool, the online reactions to his blog and its page views (about 2000 a day) are rather limited.

"Sometimes I only get one or two reactions to my postings. You have to ask yourself 'for who am I doing this?'. At times, it seems that nobody is interested."
(Laurens Verhagen, editor-in-chief)

Nonetheless, his postings are the result of comments of the public, usually via email. He estimates he gets about 100 emails a day. One employee is charged with handling these emails.

3. Practices outside media

3.1 Media Bloggers

The rise of a perky and rude anti-establishment journalism: GeenStijl.nl

The website *GeenStijl.nl* builds upon a mix of entertainment, anti-establishment criticism and strong community engagement. The website is popular, and this summer an affiliated broadcast organization *PowNed* got a PBS license. The website may be seen as a selective and commentary news outlet (around 6 postings a day), although they do not follow traditional journalistic norms and they portray themselves as ‘tendentious and abusive’. They are transparent about this motive, and make great use of online applications to refer to other sources.

In terms of responsiveness, they know very well how to make use of a community. From time to time they explicitly ask their public to participate in any activity (voting, boycott, bashing).

The website is notorious for its perky and rude style, and may represent a larger tendency of rude and daring journalism. Some look at this as a new development (and unwanted, as it symbolizes normative decay); while others refer to similar but earlier journalistic projects in the 1980s and 1990s (Van de Griend and Donkers 2010). Organizations and companies respond to this and retrain their spokesmen and public figures to become ‘GeenStijl-proof’.

Box 3.1: Fierce reactions on Turkish Airlines crash (II)

De Vries got many negative and rude reactions on her own blog, and she of her fear of a GeenStijl reaction. “The publicity gets a sort of dynamic that you cannot control anymore.” To her surprise, GeenStijl did pay attention to her case, but contra intuitively the website reacted against the narrow-mindedness of the critical contributors, and not against the reporter. This may be slightly ironic for GeenStijl’s contributors often behave in a similar narrow-minded way.

State supported debunkers: Leugens.nl

As mentioned before, the Press Stimulation Fund financially supports initiatives that improve diversity and innovation of journalism. One remarkable project concerns an initiative of Internet journalist Peter Olsthoorn, called *Lies*³³. It portrays itself as an ‘independent professional Internet platform where the audience explores the borders between truth and lies in the field of politics, science, religion, arts, sports, amusement and advertisement’. The platform was supported with 76,500€ and collaborates with schools of journalism. In contrast with *The New Reporter*, this website generates little attention among the profession. Therefore, it may seem

³³ Translated from Dutch ‘Leugens’; see www.leugens.nl

rather limited as a media accountability instrument. However, it is remarkable that the state financially supports a platform that, due to its name, may unmask potential ‘lies’ by politicians.



Screenshot of the website: www.leugens.nl

For instance, in November 2010 the platform published an article, explicitly portraying the Minister of Defense, Hans Hillen, as a liar. He was ‘accused’ of being a tobacco industry lobbyist, putting pressure on the policy of his Christian Democrat colleague, the former minister of Health, Ab Klink.

“The new Minister of Defense is successfully aiming for an everlasting record at Leugens.nl. Hans Hillen, Minister of Defense and former Christian Democrat senator, received revenues for his advice to the Dutch enterprise British American Tobacco.[...]. Hillen’s spokesman declares that the Minister had forgotten about this additional function. By doing so he is doubling his mendacity. Chapeau!”
(Olsthorn 2010)

3.2 Social media

Twitter is a very important platform for professional media criticism and addressing questions of journalistic quality. The minute proportion of the population that uses Twitter, only 4.4 per cent of society, ensures it remains clear and effective and much more influential than Facebook or LinkedIn. Twitter has a high activity, is publicly accessible and implicitly compels good conduct. Those accounts that misbehave may be ‘un-followed’ and excluded from the community. According to Bakker, the functionality of Twitter as an MAI however is still hypothetical and needs to be researched.

In Besters opinion a blogging journalist has to keep in mind the same distance and objectivity in blogging as in writing reports, while a ‘tweeting’ journalist can be more open about their private life and activities. Besters’ Twitter account indeed varies between professional and personal life oriented postings. The other respondents merely publish professional postings.

Box 3.2: Two cases of problematic use of Twitter

1. 'Bunch of swines'

An internship student of Bester's newspaper was unsatisfied with his employer and called them 'a bunch of swines' on his Twitter account. Despite Bester's idea of personal oriented postings, the newspaper she works for developed a 'Twitter code' for all employees, calling for prudence in posting comments that may be harmful for the outlet's image and that personal thoughts were being considered as editorial opinions.

2. 'The early death of a writer'

On 10/10/2010 a famous Dutch writer, Harry Mulish, died. As he was famous (and old), many news outlets had already prepared his obituary. Contrary to their agreement with the writer's family, the news was accidentally published before all members of the family were informed about his death. NOS, the main PBS, immediately withdrew the article from the website. However, on Twitter, there emerged a discussion about the trustworthiness of that news. Many wanted to know whether Mulish was really dead and why the NOS withdrew the article so fast. One employer explained on Twitter the agreement with the family. Afterwards, the editor-in-chief stressed that he prefers to explain the NOS' policy to the public himself. After this incident, there followed an internal mail with do's and don't's about NOS-journalists and Twitter.

De Vries observes a general tension between her drive to publish in social media and the interest of the news media company. Her PBS employer demands her to be neutral:

"Sometimes it is hard to contain yourself. You cannot express your opinion very explicit, for that may backfire to the organization you're working for" (Marieke de Vries, reporter)

Another use of twitter is promoting transparency features. Verhagen, uses Twitter to promote his blog posts. De Vries, also, announces her news stories that will be broadcasted later that day on Twitter. A quick scan of Twitter accounts of prominent journalists like anchormen, TV-reporters and editors-in-chief show that this promotional use of Twitter is broadly practiced.

De Vries uses Twitter mainly as a tool to tap information from her 2500 followers, as a tool for journalistic research. She feels that it helps when she 'feeds her followers' from time-to-time with some novelties or pictures. *"I show them what I do during the day, and that seems attractive. People like to have a view behind the scene."* Sometimes she asks for feedback and discusses with followers, as does email, it may serve as a gauge stick but that use is only secondary to her.

Box 3.3: Correction by Twitter feedback

Marieke de Vries experienced the corrective function of Twitter in case of small errors. During a live coverage of a major sailing event around Amsterdam, she mentioned the incorrect size of the tall ship 'Amerigo Vespucci'. Immediately, a follower corrected her on Twitter and mentioned the right size of the ship. In the ensuing live coverage she was able to correct herself and report more accurately.

Facebook and the Dutch equivalent *Hyves* seem less commonly used by journalists individually. De Vries however cultivates a public profile on *Hyves* to connect with members of the audience on a more personal level. She reaches another audience, but as she says, it is not so quick and widely used as Twitter.

3.3 NGO and Academia

News monitor

The Dutch News Monitor is a project of the Amsterdam University and started in 2005. The project was partly funded by the Press Stimulation Fund, and initiated by the government. The objective is to provide empirical data to be used as the basis for discussion about the quality of journalism. The News Monitor does not judge the quality of journalism, but rather *'provides the objective data needed for a broad discussion about journalistic practices'*.

The Monitor focuses on the general characteristics of news coverage: themes, forms of news coverage, and sources. The research concentrates on high-profile matters, revelations or scandals that – often in a relatively short period of time – attract a great deal of attention. Both newspapers' and television news' coverage about certain issues is being examined for a longer period of time. The coverage on these issues will be followed up over time, making it possible to discover shifts in the tone and perspective in the public debate that might be related to actual events. Recently they reported on the following issues:

- Politics and politicians in the news in five national dailies,
- The U.S. elections in Dutch dailies,
- Shifting frames in a deadlocked conflict? News coverage and the Israel/Palestine conflict,
- The role of 'tweeting' politicians and journalists in the election campaign 2010.

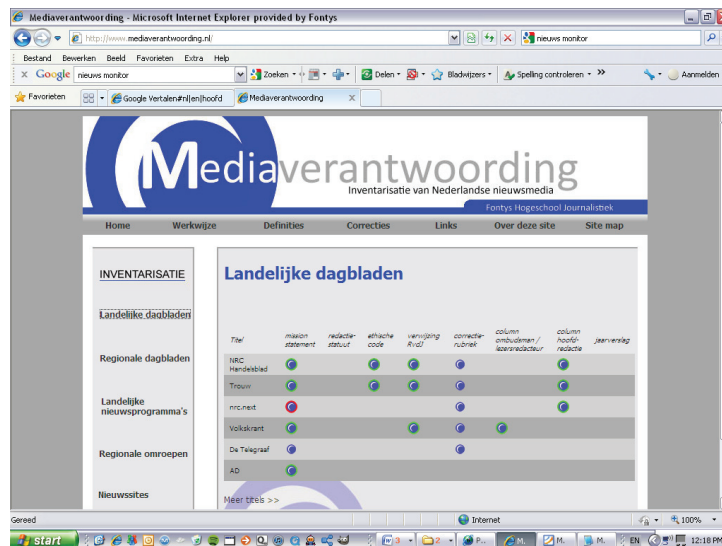
A special feature of the Monitor shifts is its reach to the scope of online media accountability. Any individual may subscribe to the database and personalize their account to follow the news attention about political parties, individual politicians or specific topics.

"Users of the Digital News monitor may find answers to questions like: How successful is a political party according to various news media? Which parties or organizations are supporting or criticizing us? To what extent are our press releases cited in the news?"³⁴

Transparency Monitor

The School of Journalism at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences publishes a website that makes an inventory of the occurrence of various media accountability instruments. The site provides an overview of hyperlinks to ombudsmen, codes of ethics and the like, categorized per outlet type. The idea behind the website is twofold. First it facilitates reference to these instruments by journalism students or anyone that is interested. Second, it gives a signal to news media that they are being watched in terms of transparency instruments.

³⁴ Retrieved from: www.nieuwsmonitor.nl



Screenshot of the website www.mediaverantwoording.nl³⁵

4. Conclusions

Taking the context of the Dutch media landscape into consideration, various societal factors create potential for media accountability online. A high degree of professionalism and constitutional freedom open up ways for media accountability practices in general. In addition, a strong prevalence for this freedom and persistent objections to any external quality assessment of professional journalism emphasize the inevitable voluntary character of media accountability in The Netherlands. The contrast between high volume Internet use on the one hand and moderate levels of trust in online media and low audience participation add to this environment. Moreover, the web as a stage for journalistic content and processes leads to new ethical issues or topics, about which media are held to account. The development of an online and therefore immediate, archived, personalized and interactive context, offers practical and ethical challenges to Dutch journalism. These challenges may coincide with a shift in journalism's role and responsibility to society. It means that changes occur in what journalism is accountable *for*, as well as ways in *how* it is held to account.

Along with technical web based applications, online media accountability seems still in an experimental phase for traditional news media. Some online media may explore new paths, but it cannot be said that online-only news media are at the forefront in realizing media accountability. News media in The Netherlands show great variety in the extent and ways in which they realize media accountability online in terms of actor transparency, product

³⁵ 'Mediaverantwoording' means 'media accountability'.

transparency and feedback opportunities online. It is suggested that even those news rooms that seem to adhere to transparency and public accountability still need to explore the functionality and application of media accountability practices. Both in terms of potential and pitfalls, news rooms need to consider about what they want to be transparent and in what ways.

Innovativeness is hard to determine, especially when it comes to business models. Since many projects aim at *finding* new applications, processes, platforms and business models, it is hard to assess whether projects are indeed reasonably innovative and feasible at the same time. Although news media often acknowledge the importance of media accountability, they often lack the resources or have different priorities to use them. This ambiguous position may indicate that in relation to media accountability online, Dutch news media are positioned between hope and fear: that media accountability will either improve their relationship with the public and fuel the professional quality, or that it asks too much of resources with only an uncertain outcome.

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Respondents:

Tom Bakker: scholar at *University of Amsterdam*, expert in online and citizen journalism.

Jan Bierhoff: associate lector Infonomics & New Media - European Centre for Digital Communication (INM-EC/DC) *Hogeschool Zuyd*.

Fleur Besters: crime reporter at a Dutch regional newspaper *Eindhovens Dagblad* with a personal newsroom blog.

Bart Brouwers: executive project manager at *Dichtbij.nl*, a hyper local media platform at Telegraaf Media Company.

Theo Dersjant: former media journalist, lecturer for over ten years at *Fontys University of Applied Sciences*, Department of Journalism.

Daphne Koene: Secretary of the Dutch Press Council.

Laurens Verhagen: editor-in-chief at *Nu.nl*, the highest rated online only newssite.

Marieke de Vries: reporter for *NOS* (Dutch Broadcasting Foundation), the main Public Service Broadcasting news channel) with a personal newsroom blog.

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