How effective is media self-regulation?
Results from a comparative survey of European journalists

Abstract

This paper presents key results of a comparative journalists' survey on media accountability, for which 1,762 journalists in 14 countries have been surveyed online. The article explores how European journalists perceive the impact of old versus new media accountability instruments (MAIs) on professional journalistic standards – established instruments like press councils, ethics codes, ombudsmen, and media criticism, but also more recent online instruments like newsroom blogs and social media. Thus, the study also adds empirical data to the current debate about the future of media self-regulation in Europe, ignited by the Leveson Inquiry in the UK as well as the European Commission's High-Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism. Drawing on Hallin & Mancini's model of journalism cultures, the study furthermore analyses national differences in journalists' attitudes regarding media accountability and media transparency.

Keywords: Media accountability; media self-regulation; media transparency; journalists' survey; comparative research.

Introduction

Media accountability is back on the political agenda. How can we ensure a free *and* responsible press across Europe? This question is currently being debated among journalists, industry representatives, media policy-makers and scholars across Europe. In late 2012, Lord Judge Leveson recommended a fundamental reform of the traditional model of media self-regulation in the United Kingdom, which has also dominated other Western European journalism cultures since the 1950s. As a consequence of the *News of the World* scandal, Leveson suggested a new, statutory regulatory system.[1]

Leveson has prompted an outcry among British news outlets; many of them consider such a form of state intervention to be the end of press freedom. A similarly fierce response came from industry representatives and lobbyists across Europe to the 2013 report of the EU High-

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[1] See http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk

Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism.[2] The committee was set up by EU commissioner Neelie Kroes in 2011, when the European Parliament was concerned about a tightening of the media law in Hungary under the Orbán government. Among other recommendations, the High-Level Group suggested drastically expanding the sanctioning power of existing press councils and also demanded mandatory media councils in all EU states.

The key question behind both the Leveson recommendations and the High-Level Group report is obvious: does the traditional model of media self-regulation dating back to post-war times, with press councils as its core institution, still suffice for today's converging media world – which is so much more competitive? Or can the new accountability instruments emerging online – like newsroom blogs, online ombudsmen and media criticism on the social web – successfully support, or even replace, these traditional instruments of media self-regulation? And are participative models of media accountability a more promising and 'healthy' option than co-regulation models, which foresee a greater role for the state?

Furthermore, the question is not only how effective infrastructures of media accountability can be preserved under tough economic conditions in the established media systems of Western Europe, with its decade-long experience of press freedom and media self-regulation. We also need to ask how they can be implemented in countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which still live through a period of transformation (Jakubowicz and Sukosd 2008), as well as in Southern Europe, where highly politicized media systems (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009) have discouraged the development of sound infrastructures of media accountability so far.

Media Accountability – Why? Media Regulation versus Media Self-Regulation

Western democracies have developed detailed legal frameworks for their media industries in past decades in order to ensure media pluralism (Psychogiopoulou 2012). Furthermore, organizations at the European level, like the European Union via the Audiovisual Media Services Directive[3], are involved in the legislative process shaping national media structures (see for example Nikoltchev 2006; Keller 2011).

In contrast to the legislative framework regulating the *structures* of the media industry, journalistic *output* is safeguarded from almost any regulation by the state (Puppis 2009, 57, 61). Basic law ensures journalism's independence from state intervention and consequently

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[2] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/sites/digital-agenda/files/ HLG%20Final%20Report.pdf

[3] http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:095:0001:0024:EN: PDF

(at least in theory) the state has, with very few exceptions, no right to interfere in the processes and products of journalism – as it had done for centuries, and still does in autocratic states. However, precisely because journalism fulfils a public watchdog function, and because it can also be considered as a 'public good', media needs to be responsible to 'society'[4] for the consequences of the journalistic practices employed and their journalistic output (see Russ-Mohl 1994; Bertrand 2000; Bardoel and d'Haenens 2004).

Bertrand defines *media accountability* as "any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public" (2000, 107). Bertrand thus offers a wide definition of media accountability, including not only media professionals, but potentially also media users to the process. *Media self-regulation* then is, more narrowly, a process of setting, implementing and sanctioning rules by the members of the profession themselves (Puppis 2009, 36, 57). Recently, the concept of *media transparency* has been increasingly discussed as another promising means to re-gain or preserve trust in journalism (Ziomek 2005). It implies that media organizations make information about editorial processes, as well as the journalistic actors involved, available to the public (e.g. media ownership, profiles of journalists, newsroom blogs, and links to sources).

A Typology of Media Accountability Instruments

In past decades, media professionals have developed various media accountability instruments (MAIs) to reinforce the rules of journalism, i.e. the self-imposed codes and norms that members of the profession have agreed upon (North 1990). We can classify these MAIs by using a slightly modified version of Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) five-level model of spheres of influence on journalism.[5] Russ-Mohl (1994), Nordenstreng (1999) and Hafez (2002) have similarly suggested classifying MAIs according to the specific actor groups involved in the accountability process – be they on the individual, the organizational, the professional, or the extramedia level.

The earliest MAIs were located at the *professional level*: Ethics codes and trade journals were published by journalists' associations and unions since the late 19th century, and press councils were set up to decide cases of malpractice in journalism since the 1950s (Brown 1974; Wiedemann 1992). Moreover, after the de-regulation of the broadcasting sector in

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[4] See e.g. the normative concept of social responsibility by McQuail ([1983] 2000, 148).

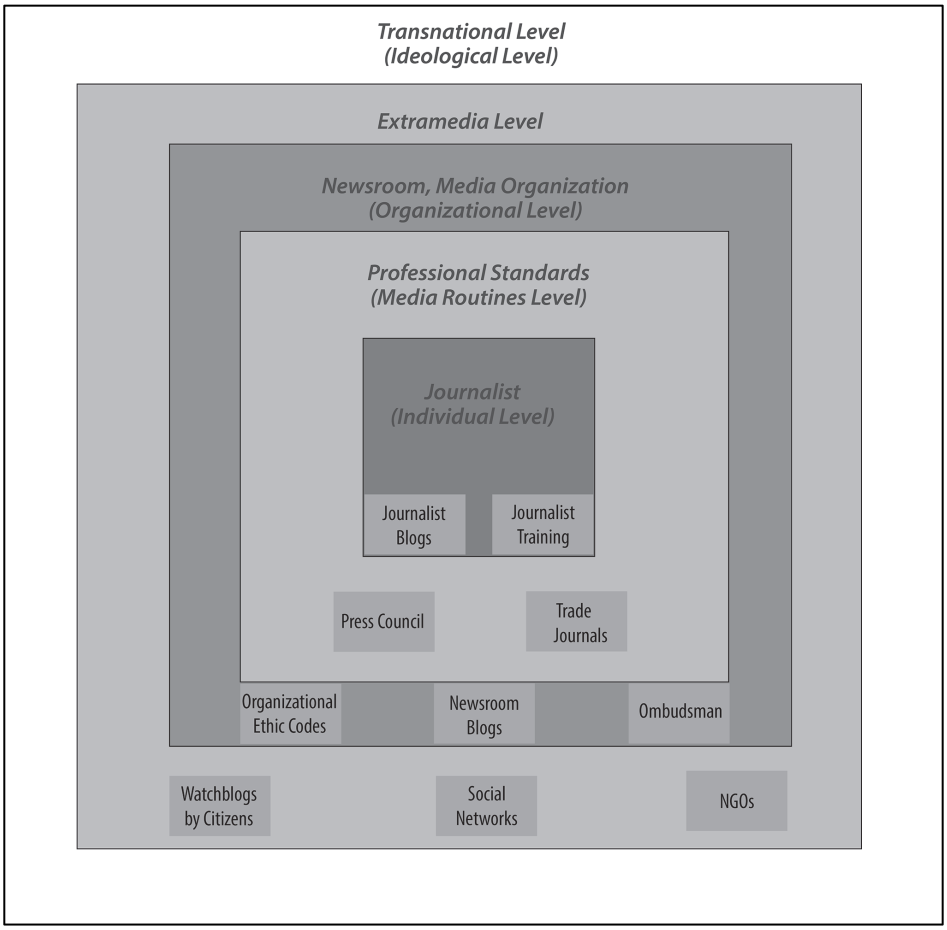
[5] For our model, we suggest replacing the "ideological level" (Shoemaker/Reese 1996, 214) with the "transnational level", in line with other similar models of influence on journalism (e.g. Hanitzsch et al. 2010).

Western Europe in the 1980s, media journalism in the mass media gained some prominence (Fengler 2004).

Accountability efforts by individual news outlets (the *organizational level*) have played an increasing role since the 1970s, when media organizations started to employ ombudsmen and introduce organizational codes of ethics (Marzolf 1991, 196).

In the digital age, many new media accountability initiatives have emerged online, among them media and newsroom blogs (e.g. the *Editors' Blog* of the BBC News[6] in the UK); but also media watch blogs run by media users (like the British *Tabloid Watch*[7] and the German *BILDblog*[8]), and other media-critical activities in the social web. These new instruments increasingly have participatory features and extend the existing portfolio of MAIs both at the organizational and the *extramedia levels* (see Domingo and Heinonen 2008).

Figure 1: Classification of Media Accountability Instruments


Transnational Level
(Ideological Level)
Extramedia Level
Newsroom, Media Organization
(Organizational Level)
Professional Standards
(Media Routines Level)
Journalist
(Individual Level)
Journalist Blogs
Journalist Training
Press Council
Trade Journals
Organizational Ethic Codes
Newsroom Blogs
Ombudsman
Watchblogs by Citizens
Social Networks
NGOs

Source: Model adapted from Shoemaker and Reese 1996, amended by the authors

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[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors

[7] http://tabloid-watch.blogspot.co.uk

[8] http://www.bildblog.de

Mapping Media Accountability: A Comparative Approach to Media Accountability

Accountability practices display remarkable differences across countries (*source anonymized*), which make them a fruitful subject for comparative analysis (see Esser and Hanitzsch 2012). Obviously, the emergence of MAIs – or even broader a 'media accountability culture' – in a country is closely connected to the political and economic context, but also cultural factors (Örnebring 2009). Benefiting from the earliest deregulation of the media sector, many of today's MAIs were conceived by journalists in the United States and the UK (see Campbell 1999; Puppis 2009) and later emulated by media professionals abroad.[9] In contrast, even today no press council exists in France, and media journalism is non-existent in Italy: both are countries with a considerable influence of politics on the media (*source anonymzed*). Even though most countries in Central and Eastern Europe still lack almost any infrastructure of media self-regulation infrastructures, a few countries like Estonia and Bulgaria have (more or less successfully) started to emulate Western accountability practices, in the case of Estonia due to cultural proximity to Finland (*source anonymzed*). Furthermore, in the digital age, new spaces of freedom for media criticism have emerged in Eastern and Southern European countries; one can find a relatively active media blogging scene in France and Romania (*source anonymzed*).

Our study will also critically assess whether we are currently witnessing a globalization of accountability structures and practices across journalism cultures, as debates about standards in journalism – see the Leveson and HLG debates – increasingly transcend national borders.[10] Hallin and Mancini (2004) have long argued that media systems are converging towards the liberal model, and recent comparative journalists' surveys (Hanitzsch et al. 2010) also claim that journalists' professional role models are moving towards the Anglo-Saxon example.

Thus, we look for differences and similarities between journalism cultures as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2012), who distinguish between

- the *liberal model* (e.g. the United Kingdom, the United States), characterized by highly deregulated media markets, little state interference in the media sector, and a highly developed culture of professionalism among journalists (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 198);

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[9] Campbell (1999, 748) has argued that the lack of any mention of press freedom in the constitution has led to more pro-active self-regulation activities in the UK.

[10] Limor and Himelboim (2006, 280) critically observe the prominence of Western values in African countries with a colonial past. See also Hadez' (2004) criticism.

- the *democratic corporatist model* (e.g. Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria) which is also associated with high professionalism among journalists, but differs from the liberal model with regard to the influential role that public broadcasting plays in those countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 143); and
- the *polarized pluralist model* (e.g. Italy, Spain, France) characterized by the high influence of political actors on both private and public news organizations, a weak professional culture among journalists, and the somewhat marginal role of the print media (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 89).

Our study covers countries from the three above-mentioned journalism cultures:

- Liberal model: United Kingdom;
- Democratic corporatist model: Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Switzerland;
- Polarized pluralist model: France, Italy, Spain.

The study goes beyond Hallin and Mancini by adding three Central and Eastern European countries in different stages of political transformation (Dobek-Ostrowska 2012): Poland, Estonia, and Romania. As these countries have much more recent experiences of political transformation and the authoritarian restrictions that their media sectors operated under, we expect journalists to display specific perceptions of media accountability.

The survey also includes two exemplary two Arab states, in order to expand the study to media systems and journalism cultures with little press freedom. However, due to limitations of space, our results for Tunisia and Jordan are excluded from this paper and discussed elsewhere in depth *(source anonymzed)*.

Literature review

Media accountability is an academic field still understudied. Of the existing volumes and articles, few compare media accountability and MAIs across countries and cultures. Laitila (1995) and Bertrand (2000) have pioneered in the comparative analysis of media accountability instruments by comparing the content of European press codes; Bertrand additionally studied the existence of press councils and ombudsmen in Europe. Nordenstreng (1999) has analysed structures and practices of media self-regulation in several European countries. Hafez (2002) as well as Limor and Himelboim (2006) have compared international press codes. Wiedemann (1992), Pöttker and Starck (2003), and Puppis (2009) have compared the history and structure of press councils across Europe. Eberwein et al. (2011) have compiled a comparative overview over international media accountability cultures.

Studies focusing on the impact of media accountability instruments are rare as well, and most reduce themselves to specific aspects. After an analysis of the US media sector, Campbell (1999, 755) concludes that the examples for self-regulation she looked upon "do not provide a great deal of support for the claimed advantages of self-regulation." European scholars come to a similarly sceptical conclusion (Pöttker, 2010). Qualitative studies with media journalists in the USA and European countries (e.g. Fengler 2002) have shown that even journalists who cover media issues for quality media shy away from criticizing their colleagues and supervisors. Studies dealing with ombudsmen (Evers and Groenhart, 2010) reveal similar self-imposed restrictions. Content analyses (e.g. Weinacht 2009) come to the conclusion that media outlets frequently use media journalism to voice their specific media policy interests.

Given the obvious insufficiency of traditional instruments of media self-regulation – which mainly result from the collective or individual self-interest of media professionals (Fengler and Russ-Mohl 2008) –, engaging the audience might be a promising option to strengthen media accountability, but only very few small-scale studies on innovative instruments of media accountability exist so far (Babcock 2012).

As the concept of media self-regulation is still new or not deeply routed in countries beyond the USA and Western Europe, almost no literature exists on media accountability in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe and beyond Europe, with the exceptions of Wyka (2005), Dimants (2010), and Hafez (2002).

Methodology

With regard to the explorative character of the comparative survey, the research consortium decided to identify three key research questions to be tackled, instead of developing specific hypotheses:

RQ1: How do journalists from different countries perceive, practice and evaluate the various media accountability and transparency instruments?
RQ2: How do journalists perceive the impact of new web-based media accountability and transparency instruments?
RQ3: Which factors influence journalists' attitudes towards media accountability?

In order to gain insights into journalists' perceptions of media self-regulation and media accountability in quite heterogeneous media systems and journalism cultures, a standardized questionnaire was jointly developed by the international research consortium. Here, the researchers also took into account the results of two preceding project steps (desk study and pilot interviews with almost 100 international experts on online MAIs, *source anonymzed*). The questionnaire contained 25 subquestions related to the various levels of influence on journalistic behaviour. Journalists were asked to rate the perceived impact of various MAIs and describe their own experiences with media self-regulation. Furthermore, they had to assess numerous statements regarding the impact of their own conscience, professional values, newsroom management, media policy, media economics, and the audience. The questionnaire, which can be downloaded from the project's website[11], also served to collect statistical data about the social and professional status of the respondents. For the sake of variety, questions using Likert items alternated with several multiple choice questions, questions allowing multiple answers, and very few open questions. The first national teams started their field phase in May 2011; the last partners completed their surveys in March 2012.[12]

Paying respect to the problems associated with comparative journalism research (see Livingstone 2012; Harkness 2012), the research consortium sought to avoid cultural bias, and instead ensure instrument equivalence, by translating the original English-language version of the questionnaire into all relevant languages of the survey countries, then using the method of back-translation into the original language to check whether there were deviations from the original wording.

As a quasi-experimental design, the study could not aim to create entirely representative samples. Nonetheless, with help of a theory-based sampling scheme, it was possible to recruit comparable populations that came close to representativity, despite the evident lack of reliable statistical data on journalists in some of the analysed countries, such as Romania.

To provide a starting point for the process of identifying journalistic populations in the survey countries, the project followed the definition by Weischenberg et al. (2006, 227) who describe journalists as professional actors who are occupied full-time or almost full-time with the collection, description and publication of topical, fact-oriented and relevant information in journalistic media. Based on this definition, all of the project teams collected statistical data on the basic population of journalists in the country they were in charge of – some of them relying on previous representative surveys (if available), others on informed guesses. As Table 1 shows, the sizes of the populations varied considerably, with Tunisia (accounting for 1,004 journalistic actors) at the low end, and Germany (with 48,381 journalists) at the top of the list.

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[11] *Source anonymized.*

[12] The UK survey took place amidst the national debate about the *News of the World* scandal and the ensuing Leveson inquiry. This had considerable impact on the research project, as journalists were extremely hesitant to answer sensible questions related to accountability. Consequently, the response rate in the UK was low (10%).

Table 1: Basic populations of journalists and sample sizes in the 14 research countries

Country	*Basic population*	*Sample size*
Austria	6,405	100
Estonia	1,193	100
Finland	8,349	100
France	37,416	183
Germany	48,381	237
Italy	25,000	123
Jordan	1,330	100
Poland	11,989	100
Romania	17,000	100
Spain	25,000	123
Switzerland	10,292	100
Netherlands	15,000	100
Tunisia	1,004	100
United Kingdom	40,000	196
Total sample size		*1,762*

In order to calculate the sample sizes for each of the participating countries, it was necessary to determine the total sample size first. For this, we evaluated the response behaviour in the pre-tests and defined the maximally estimated standard error as 0.05. With these data, it was possible to calculate a minimum total sample size of 1,762 (see Buttler and Fickel 2002, 151), which was distributed proportionally among the participating countries according to their respective basic populations. In order to be able to evaluate the data, the minimum individual sample size was fixed at 100; the biggest sample sizes, in those countries with larger basic populations, were as high as 237.

The journalists who took part in the survey were selected with the help of a two-step sampling scheme, which was adapted to cope with the idiosyncrasies of the different countries, in order to reach a meaningful sample in each national survey. The underlying strategy differentiated between nine different *media types* (daily newspapers; weekly newspapers; magazines; public service radio; private commercial radio; public service television; private commercial television; online news media; news agencies) and five levels of *journalistic hierarchy* (management level – chief and leading editors; operational level – reporters, freelancers and trainees), taking into account the influence of job positions on the social habitus of the interviewed journalists.

Mainly due to the differing quality of the address registers that were used and the different ways of approaching interviewees in the analysed populations, the discrepancy between the number of contacted journalists and the number of respondents who actually completed the questionnaire varied significantly from country to country. The response rates for the online survey are between 5% in Austria and 43% in Finland.[13] At first sight these variations can be interpreted as an indicator that the validity of the results might be limited in some of the national surveys. However, a comparison of the basic sample parameters and the socio-demographic data of the basic populations in the analysed countries shows that a noticeable sampling bias had been avoided. Overall, the survey achieved an average response rate of 23%, which is more or less in line with the turnout that can generally be expected in web-based surveys among well-researched populations like journalists (see Nulty 2008).

Due to limitations of space, this paper focuses on the results for selected survey questions. A comprehensive analysis of the survey is available *(source anonymized).*

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[13] The Tunisian response rate is much higher, presumably because the local collaborator deviated from the standard procedure of conducting online interviews. As journalists have to fear secret service control of their telephone and online activities, the Tunisian research team decided to conduct the interviews face-to-face, using a printed questionnaire.

Findings

RQ1: How do journalists from different countries perceive, practice and evaluate the various media accountability and transparency instruments?

Our survey reveals sharp contradictions: even though journalists across Europe unanimously support the statement "Journalistic responsibility is a prerequisite for press freedom", journalists' actual support for the concept of media self-regulation is tepid at best in most countries. Journalists only attribute a medium or even rather weak impact to press councils, media criticism in the mass media, ombudsmen, media blogs, and the other media accountability instruments discussed in this article. Obviously, European journalists in many countries (with the notable exception of Finland and Switzerland, see below) question the effectiveness of the existing media self-regulation practices. Of the eight instruments analysed, only three of them exceed the average value on the rating scale of 1 to 5.

Table 2: Journalists' perceptions of media accountability through traditional instruments

	Company codes	*Media laws*	Professional codes of ethics	Press council	Media criticism	*Regulatory Authority*	Ombuds-man	Trade journals
Total means	3.74	*3.70*	3.44	2.96	2.73	*2.70*	2.32	2.22

Interestingly, what the two instruments with the highest ratings – company guidelines (Av 3.74) and laws regulating the media[14] (3.70) – have in common is that they are precisely the two most normative instruments, which can have direct effects on the journalist in the case of transgression. Other traditional instruments that have long been present in most countries, such as professional codes of ethics (3.44) and press councils (2.96), are viewed to have a medium impact. This would suggest uncertainty in the profession about the effectiveness of these instruments, which have no direct consequences for the professionals who breach them. MAIs such as media criticism in the news media (2.73), ombudsmen (2.32) and trade journals (2.22) are perceived to have even less impact, which can partly be explained by the uneven implementation of these instruments in some countries (see *source anonymzed*). Indeed, the data show that journalists rationally calculate how much it would personally 'cost' them to break rules of journalism (Entorf and Spengler 1998, 348), and thus confirm more recent suggestions towards an economic theory of journalism (Hamilton 2004; Fengler and Russ-Mohl 2008).

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[14] Which have been included in the survey in order to compare their perceived impact as opposed to the various (voluntary) media accountability instruments.

The survey also shows that journalists’ attitudes towards the various media accountability instruments differ among journalism cultures. Even though our findings in general only partially prove the Hallin and Mancini model,[15] journalists’ response patterns clearly vary among countries, and journalists from countries with a developed profession – characterized by established journalists’ unions or federations, and a tradition of journalism education – as well as developed infrastructures of media self-regulation place considerable more emphasis on professional values.

Figure 2: Perceived impact of professional codes of ethics on standards in journalism (mean values)

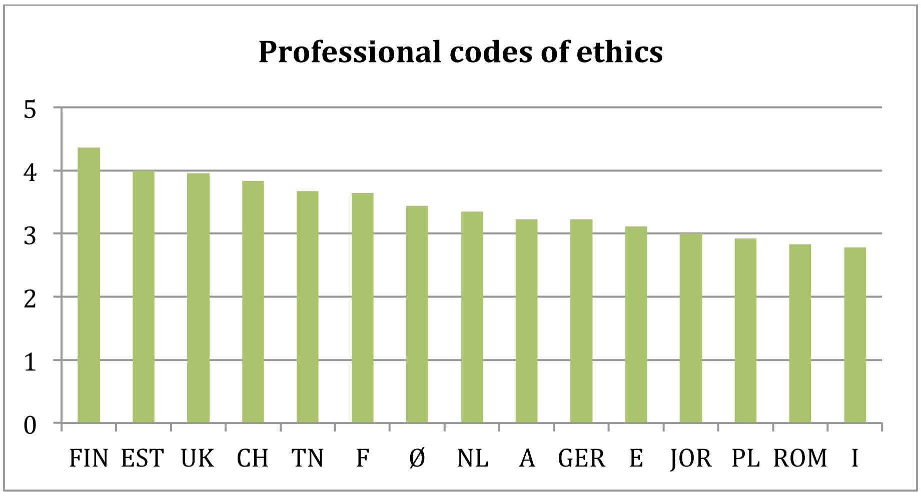
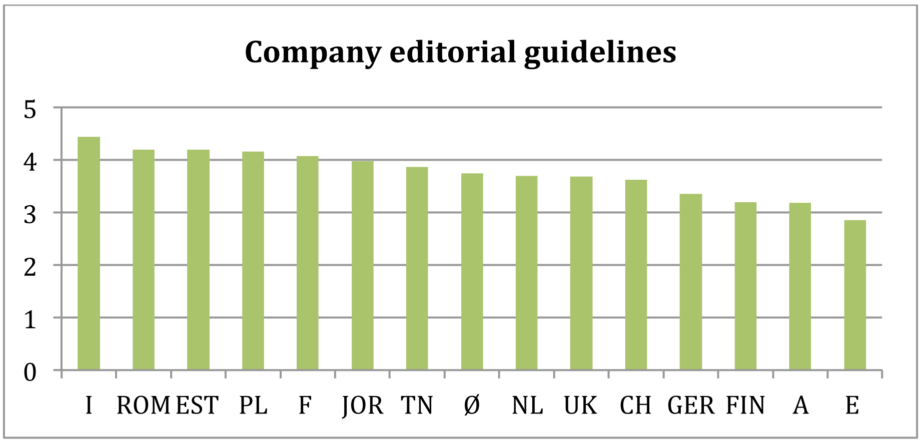


Figure 3: Perceived impact of company codes of ethics on standards in journalism (mean values)



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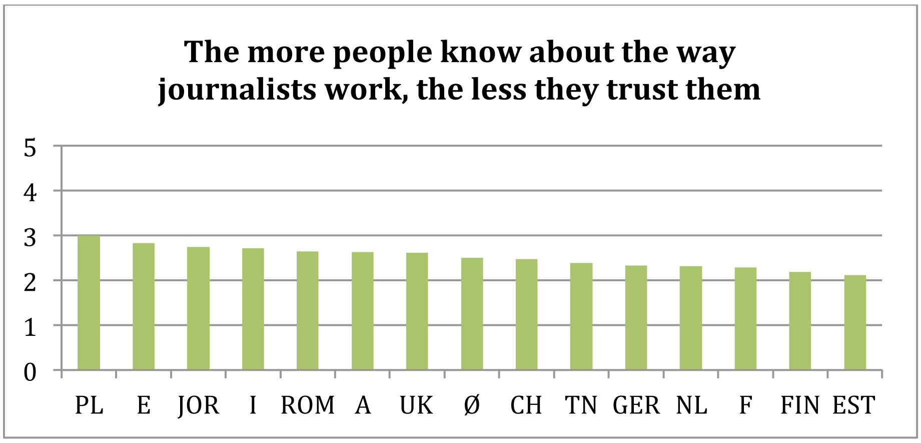
[15] As part of the data analysis, a multi-factor data analysis was conducted to test the validity of the Hallin/Mancini model with regard to journalists’ attitudes towards media accountability. The results can be found in *(source anonymized).*

Journalists from Northern and Western European countries involved in our study (UK, Finland, Germany, Switzerland, Austria) ascribe higher impact to professional codes as compared to company codes. In contrast, journalists both from Southern Europe (France, Italy) and from Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Romania) – where no press council exists and several small journalists' federations, each with a different set of codes, fight each other for legitimacy – place much more emphasis on company codes: Here, the newsroom is, or has the potential to be, *the* place to reinforce rules of journalism. Spain is an exception, as journalists rate the impact of professional codes higher; this might be traced back to a relatively developed infrastructure of media self-regulation that has evolved after the end of the Franco regime, including national and regional press councils and several ombudsmen both in the print and broadcast media *(source anonymized)*. Similarly, Estonia displays more analogies with Northern European countries, which probably mirrors the developments in the professional field: after the end of the Soviet regime, even two press councils have emerged, and the profession is in high esteem in Estonian society *(source anonymized)*. To the opposite, journalists in the Netherlands stick out of their neighbouring Northern European countries by preferring company ethics, which again might be traced back to the decade-long separation of society along confessional lines *(source anonymized)*.

In line with these findings, Central and Eastern as well as Southern European journalists are more sceptical towards the concept of media transparency: while a majority of journalists from Northern and Western European countries was convinced (at least in theory) that being transparent about journalistic procedures, as well as publishing corrections and apologies, leads to more trust, the majority of Spanish and Italian journalists as well as their colleagues from Romania and Poland believe that publishing corrections or making newsrooms processes transparent online will damage the bond of trust between journalists and the audience.

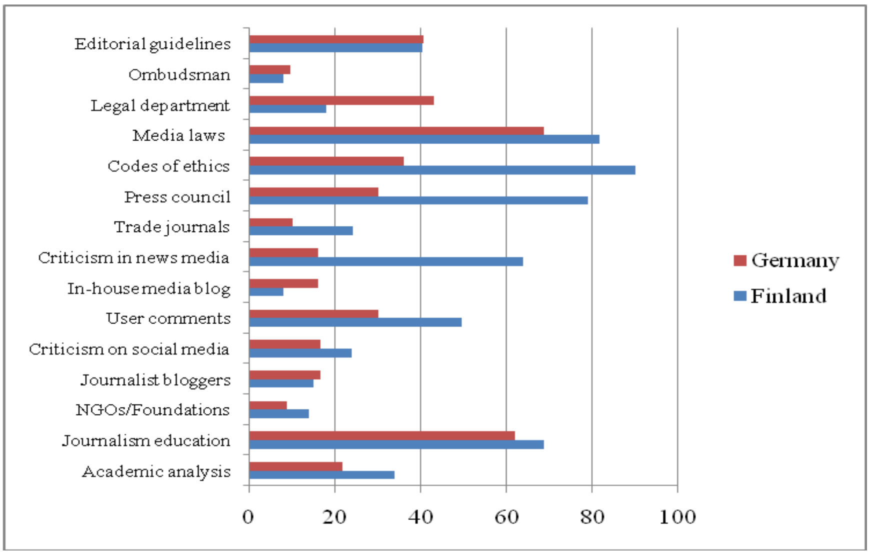
Figure 4: Journalists' perception of media transparency effects (mean values)



Journalists from these four countries also told with higher than average frequency that they worked for distinctly political orientated media, and therefore felt constrained to a specific political idea or pressured by the government. In those countries journalists as well as media users probably have different expectations of credibility of journalism and an efficient media self-regulation system.

However, even among North European countries notable differences emerge; different newsroom cultures obviously can have a deep effect on the viability of MAIs. Finnish journalists, along with their colleagues from Switzerland, showed the highest support for almost all MAIs. The results for Finland and also Switzerland contrast notably, even with countries like Germany, which are placed within the same journalism culture in Hallin and Mancini’s model.

Figure 5: Support for selected MAIs in Finland and Germany: Percentage of respondents ascribing a “high impact” or a “very high impact” to the mentioned MAIs



What is different in Finland? We might find one clue when we take a look at the responses interviewees provided to another question about how often they criticize colleagues, or are themselves criticized by their peers. In both instances, journalists from these two countries reported criticizing fellow journalists quite frequently, and being frequently criticized by other journalists and supervisors as well. The results stand in sharp contrast to countries like Germany, where peer criticism is the exception rather than the rule, according to our data. Obviously, newsroom structures are an explanation; they are rather flat and informal in Finland, allowing constructive criticism. Finland and Switzerland are also two countries with still relatively affluent media industries, receiving considerable state subsidies – and thus they might be in a better position to afford 'accountability', as compared to countries with stiff media competition. Finally, both countries have relatively small populations of journalists (Finland: 8,000; Switzerland: 10,000). This might make peer surveillance and *naming-and-shaming* in the journalistic community more effective than in large media systems like the UK and Germany, with journalistic populations of 40,000 or 50,000 respectively. Here, many more ethical dilemmas may arise, but simply vanish from the professional radar without debate.

RQ2: How do journalists perceive the impact of new web-based media accountability and transparency instruments?

In many countries, media accountability 'goes online', with online ombudsmen replacing their traditional counterparts, user comments replacing letters to the editor, and press councils experimenting with podcasts (Bivens 2008; *source anonymized*). There is also clear evidence that journalists are increasingly aware of, and responding to, comments made by the public on social media platforms (see Social Journalism Studies 2012; Joseph 2011).

However, according to our data, journalists are hesitant to acknowledge that criticism on such platforms impacts on their behaviour to a significant degree. While the majority of journalists agreed to some degree that the Internet has increased people's readiness to call the news media to account (59% of journalists 'agreed' or 'fully agreed' with this statement, the overall mean score was 3.60), the survey shows that the 'traditional' accountability instruments still have a bigger impact. The level of impact attributed to 'digital age' instruments was generally low, ranging between mean values of 2.61 for criticism on social media (Facebook, Twitter), 2.47 for journalists' blogs, and 2.28 for newsroom blogs respectively 2.25 for audience blogs.

Meanwhile, when asked to consider complaints that had been made either against them or their work, journalists were clearly reporting that they were being criticised via online MAIs more than in many other, more traditional ways. The total of journalists who said they were criticized 'sometimes', 'frequently' or 'often' by the public on blogs (12%) and on social media (20%) was much higher than that for the press council (2%) and the legal department (3%). The percentage who said they had never been criticised e.g. by the ombudsman (79%), the legal department (81%) or academia (79%) was higher; the percentage of journalists who said they had never been criticised by the public on blogs or on social media were 65% and 50% respectively. Criticism by fellow journalists on blogs or social media was rarer than by the public using these methods.

Furthermore, there were marked differences on the question of the impact of social media criticism. Over a quarter of journalists in the 19–29 and 30–39 age groups said this criticism had some impact. While it is perhaps unsurprising that younger journalists are more open to the impact of social media, this might be a clear indicator that they will most likely develop more impact in the future. Even though new online and participatory MAIs do not rival the – mediocre – acceptance of the traditional MAIs yet, they have already gained relevance as a source of criticism.

RQ3: Which factors influence journalists' attitudes towards media accountability?

Our survey indicates that across countries, newsrooms are a key factor which can encourage or discourage media accountability. Journalists from news outlets who report being praised for outstanding efforts ("My supervisors acknowledge if members of the newsroom maintain high standards even under difficult circumstances") as well as sanctioned for (potential) malpractice ("I would be called in by my editor if the integrity of my work were challenged by members of the public"), value the impact of the different MAIs higher than their peers who work in newsrooms without such a 'culture of accountability'.[16] This means that the newsroom management plays a considerable role when it comes to the ethical awareness of journalists, also confirming a one-country qualitative study by de Haan (2011).

Our data also show that journalists are open to initiatives taken by their own newsroom. Among the MAIs, company ethical codes are considered to be most influential (see above). Clearly, journalists would embrace company codes, but they are not very common in Europe yet. Only a few media outlets – like the *BBC* and the *Nederlandse Omroep Stichting (NOS)* – make their newsroom standards publicly accessible. European media companies could learn from the United States, where it is more common, at least among legacy media, to create company ethical codes and publish them online.[17]

We can also see the strong influence of the news organization on other issues: journalists from public broadcasting stations rate the impact of MAIs higher than their colleagues from commercial TV and radio. And freelancers are more reluctant to support many media accountability instruments. Media organizations that have pushed towards outsourcing in many European countries now carry a huge responsibility: they have to make sure (in their own interest) that they do not grow a 'journalistic underclass' lacking in ethical awareness. There is a second lesson here: it also requires a certain amount of financial stability, both at the individual and at the organizational level, to be able to 'afford' accountable behaviour. This is quite a challenge in a time where journalists from all survey countries consider economic pressure to be the greatest threat to standards in journalism.

Our survey data also show that it takes role models (Ripperger 2003, 157) in the field of media accountability. In countries where leading print or broadcasting media employ ombudsmen (like in the UK, Spain and Switzerland), journalists rate the impact of ombudsmen on standards in journalism higher. Obviously, the ombudsman's work is followed not only by journalists in the ombudsman's newsrooms, but also by colleagues in other media organizations. The same is true for newsroom blogs, which have been established by some of the most influential media in Germany (like the *ARD* "Tagesschau", *ZEIT*, *taz*)[18] and seem to have a certain clout, as German journalists rate the impact of newsroom blogs higher than colleagues in other countries.

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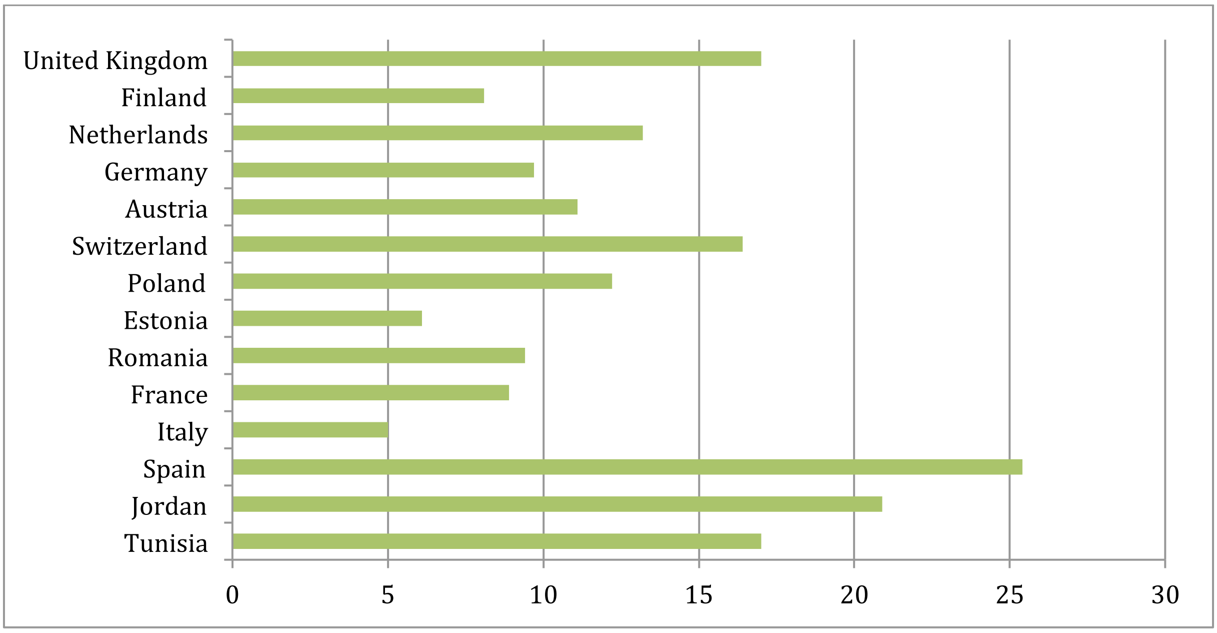
[16] Sum score Q5 (perceived impact of MAIs) and Q4 (perceived role of newsroom management), T-Test significant.

[17] E.g. http:// www.nytco.com/company-properties-times-coe.html or http://ethics.npr.org/

[18] http://blog.tagesschau.de/; http://blog.zeit.de/zeitansage/; http://blogs.taz.de/hausblog/

Figure 6: Percentage of journalists ascribing 'high' or 'very high' impact to ombudsmen/readers' editor



Discussion: More incentives for self-regulation

European journalists don’t want state intervention – the statement “formal systems of media regulation are open to political abuse” was strongly supported in our survey by journalists across countries (total average mean value 3.67). However, they obviously perceive both the traditional and the new online instruments (yet) as insufficient as well, as this paper has shown – in sharp contrast to the industry representatives who, in reaction to the High-Level Group report, claimed that the existing systems of media self-regulation work properly and well. Interestingly enough, while UK industry representatives were extremely against any form of co-regulation, journalists in the UK gave the highest support to the statement “to be effective media self-regulation must include some form of sanctions.”[19]

To strengthen media accountability infrastructures, media policy-makers should encourage industry activities by creating strong incentives for media companies – reminding journalists and media companies of their normative duties ‘to behave well’ may be less successful than offering concrete rewards for accountability activities. These rewards can be both material and immaterial, as the example of the Irish press council shows. Here, “courts may take […] membership into account when considering public interest defences in defamation cases. The framework under which the Irish Press Council has been established thus identifies certain privileges accorded to the press and then recognises Press Council membership as a demonstration that a publication is worthy of those privileges.” (Fielden 2010, 17)

Creating incentives for media companies to invest in media accountability would be a strong political statement for a free and responsible press, while suggesting sanctions would probably inevitably result in protests by the industry.[20] Policy-makers could make a visible statement for media accountability and set clear incentives if they ensured that public advertising spending only goes to those media which are – in one way or another – involved in media accountability activities. Of course it is not up to the state to intervene in the application and content of these MAIs in any way, but it would be a clear statement that governments do care about compliance in the media sector. Also, the EU could consider introducing an advertising policy that favours those news outlets that have a track record in media accountability. Many media outlets in the EU already gladly accept financial subsidies from the state. Tying those subsidies to an ethical commitment could be another promising way of rewarding media accountability.

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[19] UK mean value 4.01; total average mean 3.34.

[20] Different national contexts may require different priorities: monitoring the quality of media self-regulation may be the first step towards creating a ‘culture of accountability’ in Southern and Central European countries.

Media accountability initiatives at the organizational level could also be promoted when activities at the newsroom level are more closely interconnected with activities at the professional level. Such a network approach to media accountability could result in press councils acknowledging ombudsmen as the first port of call for media complainants, as recently suggested by the German Ombudsman Initiative. Thus, press councils would promote the establishment of ombudsmen as an MAI on the organizational level, and the ombudsmen would reduce the workload of press councils.

Finally, the media industry should regularly monitor the quality of its media self-regulation systems. However, as the industry has failed to do so to date, the EU should start monitoring current self-regulation practices across EU member states, and also in candidate countries. Comparing infrastructures of media accountability across EU countries will allow a much more realistic assessment of a single country’s strengths and weaknesses, and will ideally result in a national expert discussion about which MAIs could possibly be successfully imported to a country showing severe deficits.

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