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Accountability in the newsroom:
Reaching out to the public or a form of window dressing?

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ABSTRACT

Pressure from politics and the public has created a greater demand for the media to be more accountable. Moreover, growing structural changes in the media landscape – including media concentration, commercialization, fiercer competition, an increasingly fragmented public, and the advent of new media – have also challenged how media should be accountable and responsive.

This article looks at how Dutch broadcast media are responding to increasing pressure in terms of accountability and responsiveness through a case-study research from two leading broadcast news organizations.

The need for more openness to and connection with the public is acknowledged, and among many journalists this is now even considered a necessity. However, when it comes to routinized daily application, there is a general resistance as it does not live within their professional autonomy and authority. New online instruments have created opportunities with more platforms and possibilities for the public to participate. However, at this point the online instruments put new constraints on the social system of organization with unforeseen activities and costs.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the role of the media and journalism in the Netherlands has come under increased scrutiny. Political actors blame the media for exaggerating the facts and creating media hype, for being too focused on strategy and conflict, and for focusing more on entertainment than information. Moreover, politicians feel the media is misusing their increasing power in society (Brants, 2000; Brants & Bardoel, 2008; Brants & Van Praag, 2005; Vasterman, 2004). They blame the media for the loss of public trust in politics. Politicians hold the media responsible for the rising number of indecisive voters and a loss of public trust in politics. But in addition to the politicians, the public is similarly agitated – or at least there seems to be a general sense of discontent about the way media perform (Bardoel, 2003). Likewise, in other Western European countries, media (public broadcasting organizations in particular) have been criticized for being closed institutions, not open to the public (Hermida, 2010; Van Liempt, 2005). Heated debates in the public arena have focused on the media after specific incidents brought various roles into question.

In the Netherlands, criticism focused on how the media covered the role of the Dutch military during the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 and the position they took during the rise and death of populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002. These pressures from politicians and the public have created a greater demand for the media to be more accountable. Moreover, the growing structural changes in the media landscape including media concentration, commercialization, fiercer competition, increasingly fragmented publics, and the advent of new media have obliged public service broadcasters in many Western European countries to rethink ways to serve the public through accountability and responsiveness (Born, 2003; Collins, 2007; Coppens, 2006; Jakubowicz, 2003).

The Dutch broadcasting sector is a particularly interesting case due to the peculiar structure of the public broadcasting system. Public service broadcasting was created in the 1920s, initiated by citizens, resulting in a decentralized system with numerous broadcasting associations of distinctive religious and ideological profiles. For many years, being accountable to the public was not an issue since public broadcasters were there to meet the public's interest (Bardoel, 2008; Brants & Bardoel, 2008). Public legitimization in Dutch public service broadcasting has had a long tradition in a pillarized system of social movements in which broadcasting was financed by voluntary member support. The end of the gradual secularization process (in the Netherlands depillarization) in 1960s and the entrance of commercial broadcasting in the 1990s brought

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the self-evident loyalty of the members to decrease, which obliged public broadcasters to rethink their relationship with the public. Currently, public service broadcasting has a market share of 34%. The commercial broadcasting enterprise RTL Nederland has a 24% share and the commercial media enterprise SBS Nederland has a share of 18% (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2009).

This article looks into how the Dutch broadcast media is responding to increasing pressure on their performance and structural changes of the media in terms of accountability and responsiveness. Before we present the results we will explain the methods utilized and describe the two main theoretical concepts relevant to this paper: accountability and responsiveness.

2. Methodology

Data was collected through two in-depth case studies of the two leading Dutch broadcast news media organizations, *NOS Nieuws* and *RTL Nieuws*. Case study research allows for an in-depth look at a phenomenon in its natural setting (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 1989). As the aim of this contribution is to understand how media organizations and the journalistic profession cope with criticism and structural changes, case study research offers a view of media practice which facilitates an understanding of which measures are taken and *how* they may be embraced in the organizational structure and culture.

NOS Nieuws is the central news organization within the Dutch public service broadcaster NPO [Nederlandse Publieke Omroep]. It has a strong tradition in Dutch television culture as public service broadcasting had a monopoly position until 1989. With more than 400 employees, it is the largest newsroom in the Netherlands and provides news on television, radio, teletext and Internet. This case study was conducted between August and October of 2009. The largest competitor of *NOS Nieuws* is the commercial equivalent *RTL Nieuws*. When in 1989 the dual broadcasting system was introduced, the commercial media enterprise RTL Nederland introduced the news bulletin *RTL Nieuws*. With approximately 120 employees, it provides news on television, teletext and Internet. This case study was conducted between November of 2009 and January 2010.

Spending almost full-time hours at each newsroom for three months, data was gathered using multiple sources of evidence, including document analysis, observations and interviews. The documents included annual reports, academic reports, internal memoranda and weblogs. The observations consisted of joining the daily journalistic processes including formal meetings, informal get-togethers, observing the daily decision-making process and engaging in informal talks. In total 70 interviews were held with editors-in-chief, deputy editors-in-chief, heads of editorial units, editors, reporters and presenters. Finally, not only to understand the media organizational and professional view but also the institutional perspective, the first author spoke with the chair of the Board of Governors of Dutch Public Service Broadcasting and the CEO of RTL Nederland. The documents, the notes of the observations and the transcripts of the interviews were analyzed according to the principles of the grounded theory. The basic idea is that the complexity of a large amount of data is reduced into categories and concepts, after which patterns are identified (Bryman, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The qualitative software program MAXQDA was used for the coding process. Even though the analysis took an inductive approach, the theoretical notions were taken into account. In the segment to follow, the two main theoretical concepts will be elaborated on.

3. Conceptualization of accountability and responsiveness

Accountability is a broad concept, not only limited to formal regulation, but it also embraces the wider obligations media have to their stakeholders and the way in which they account for their performance in a dynamic interaction between parties involved (McQuail, 1997, 2005; Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000).

McQuail (2005) and Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) distinguish four accountability types, each having a different, although not mutually exclusive approach: the political, market, professional and public accountability. Political accountability relates to law and regulation and is enforceable. Market accountability means that the media is held accountable and judged by (the interest of) the consumer. Public and professional accountability are self-regulatory, which means that the initiatives are on a voluntary basis. The former is often linked to indirect pressures and its main objective is that the media operate on behalf of society and to voluntarily choose an active participatory role in society (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; McQuail, 2003). Professional accountability is associated with professionalism and is directed towards the media professional. Professional and public accountability mechanisms are preferred by media institutions and professionals, because they supposedly fit the principle of freedom of the press.

Another concept related to the public is responsiveness, which indicates that media take the public's concerns and wishes into consideration, "whether media listen to and provide a platform for the expression of anxieties, wants and opinions, or whether they focus on needs defined more in market terms" (Brants & Bardoel, 2008, p. 475). The difference between responsiveness and public accountability is that the former relates to acknowledgement of public concern by engaging, participating and showing involvement, while the latter means being held accountable by the public for one's performance. Brants and De Haan (2010) distinguish between civic, strategic and empathic responsiveness. The first is based on taking the *public* into account, listening to and connecting with the public and putting their agenda first. Media are also connecting with the public as a way of binding to one's public as *consumers*, taking the form of more commercial or strategic responsiveness. This relates much to market accountability. In fact, we argue that responding to the market is more about being responsive to the consumer and less about being accountable to the market. It is taking the wishes of the audience into account and not being held accountable by the audience. Market accountability at most is being accountable to advertisers and shareholders. Lastly, empathic responsiveness, journalists side with the public *victims*, who have come into problematic situations with public authorities. In the following sections, the rather theoretical concepts accountability and responsiveness are translated into concrete instruments that the three news organizations use.

4. Media's response

In this contribution we want first to look into the different types of instruments of accountability and responsiveness the news organizations adhere to or have introduced to come closer to the public. Secondly, we want to evaluate *how* well different instruments are adopted within the organizational structure and culture. Lastly, we want to provide an explanation for the possible differences and similarities between the cases.

4.1. The case of the public news organization NOS Nieuws

Public service broadcasting has historically been bound to forms of political accountability to secure the scarce wavelengths and to guarantee media diversity. While at the institutional level (NPO) this is still the case, at the professional level the management of *NOS Nieuws* has attempted to be more directly accountable to the public. The year 2002 was significant following the murder of politician Pim Fortuyn. After the media were accused of having