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.

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 pub- lic 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 dis- content 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, commercial- ization, fiercer competition, increasingly fragmented publics, and the advent of new media have obliged public service broadcast- ers 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 broad- casting 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 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 acknowledge- ment 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 account- ability 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 contributed to a climate which led to his death, the editor-in-chief came out strongly in favor of 'stepping out of the ivory tower' and he tried to stimulate a journalistic culture of openness, account- ability and public dialogue. In recent years a range of instruments were introduced for the public to hold NOS Nieuws accountable, like a public complaints desk, an ombudsman and an online correction box. Moreover, weblogs and the Chat on Friday, a weekly interactive instrument focusing on a topical issue between the public and an invited speaker, are used pro-actively to explain journalistic choices and errors. Besides these self-initiated measures, the news organization also collaborates with the Council for Journalism and the media debate organization, Mediadebat. Internally, professional accountability is arranged through formal evaluation moments. Moreover, planning, discussing and coming together with colleagues are part of the daily routine of NOS Nieuws.

In addition to a range of new accountability measures predominantly aimed at the public, the editor-in-chief has emphasized the need of being more responsive to the public. When in 2002 the editor-in-chief introduced his memorandum 'In Attack', NOS made a clear attempt to invest in the public's concerns and be responsive to the life issues affecting ordinary citizens. He urged the news to be accessible for all

citizens, thereby creating a closer bond with the public and an understanding of their perception of society – a measure that has the potential to link the news 'of the state with the street' (NOS, 2002). In other words, the editor-in-chief clearly wanted to make a shift from institutional to public oriented journalism (NOS, 2002). Online instruments such as weblogs, social networking sites and the Chat on Friday have facilitated the process of public accessibility and interaction. In March 2010, the most recent digital interactive mechanism was introduced, NOS Net. Based on the idea of the aggregated weblog Huffington Post in the United States, specific people within society are addressed to inform the news organization on issues and concerns within their working and living environment, such as local politicians, police- men and tenants. According to the editor-in-chief this is a way to "find out what people know, and not so much what people think." It is not about collecting the opinions of people, but using their knowledge and experience to obtain a better understanding of a specific issue.

4.1.1.Practicing accountability and responsiveness
Looking at the number of introduced instruments of account- ability and responsiveness one can speak of an increase of introduced instruments in a short period of time. However, initi- ated and often formally introduced primarily by the editor-in-chief and deputy editors, the question remains as to what extent the instruments have been adopted in the organization.

The interviewees at different levels of the organization believe that being accountable by responding to complaints and providing explanations are a must for a public organization and this has increased in importance today. This attitude has clearly developed over the years. A unit head said, "In the past we would push those things aside and we were also inaccessible so the public's concerns didn't reach us". The public accountability instruments such as the ombudsman, the online correction box and weblogs are felt to be a way for "the NOS to open up to the public". While the majority of the editorial staff is a proponent of accountability, the actual use of the implemented instruments seems to be a step too far. When it comes to responding to com- plaints, journalists are not too eager to respond as they question the quality of complaints. Moreover, for many journalists, instruments such as the ombudsman and the public complaints desk are not are not very visible in the newsroom and therefore do not feel the need to use them. Also, many wonder about the public effect of these instruments, especially given the amount of time invested in them. Weblogs are used on a regular basis by many journalists, unlike the other measures that have been introduced, which are frequently ignored. This might be related to the pro-active character; journalists are the ones initiating a discussion on a weblog. Instruments such as the ombudsman and the correction box are reactive, since they are based on reactions from the public.

The respondents value the professional accountability measures – the formal and informal evaluation meetings – as moments of self-reflection and quality control. However, these also seem to have their pitfalls. Evaluating a news broadcast seems to often boil down to discussing technical or logistical errors. Moreover, the daily evaluation meeting is dominated by people who work in television and/or are of

higher rank. A radio program editor admit- ted, "Radio items are hardly discussed at the plenary meeting so we do not have the urge to be present. But we should also initiate a more active role". Practical drawbacks such as time constraints and questions of scheduling hinder the incorporation of organized moments of evaluation. Moreover, in the newsroom, at both the formal meetings and informal gatherings, there is a focus on planning and organizing the next production instead of looking back and taking time to evaluate.

The analysis of the adoption of accountability shows that while people feel the need to show more openness and to reflect on one's performance, in practice this seems to be a difficult task. Just like the idea of accountability, there is agreement that being responsive to the public is important. Many said, "It is old-fashioned to present institutional news." Besides a response to the Fortuyn period that the editor-in-chief addressed in his memorandum (NOS, 2002), a majority of the interviewees attributed the increasing inter- action with the public due to a rise in technological interactive instruments such as weblogs and social networking websites and the subsequent increasing possibilities for the public to give its opinion. The interviews revealed that within all of the civic responsive measures, there are also strategic elements to bind and bond with the public in an increasingly competitive and commercial environment. Even though public service broadcasting is funded by the government in order to maintain an established news orga- nization, strategies to increase viewing figures are becoming more salient as a result of increasing competition and a large number of government budget cuts. The interactive instruments and bringing news from a public oriented approach are attempts to attract a large viewing audience, especially among youth, which is a difficult audience to attract.

Practical reasons such as time constraints and scheduling problems can hinder the journalists from having time to really take into account of the issues within society, collect personal accounts and search beyond statements of institutional speakers. Moreover, many agree that it is not always possible to make the item less insti- tutionalized and more personal since it is usually the institutions themselves that have the facts first. There is also no agreement on the actual effectiveness of trying to reach out to the public. For example, many interviewees at different levels of the organization were not satisfied with the input they received from the public and reported an imbalance between the investment and energy they put into contacting the public, and the responses they received. An economy editor said, "We put a call through a weblog to ask people what they thought of the financial and economic crisis. But we did not receive any suitable responses to be used as material for a radio or news item". Finally, at all levels of the organization there was also some resistance to being responsive to the public, since this can conflict with the journalistic responsibility of providing factual and trustworthy news items. Concluding, the year 2002 marked a turning point at NOS Nieuws. Since then, public accountability and responsiveness have become a central premise in the organizational policy through a top-down approach. However, this policy has not yet reached the newsroom where the editorial staff struggles to fit it into their daily practice.

4.2. The case of the commercial broadcaster RTL Nieuws

RTL Nieuws was the first commercial broadcast news organization in the Netherlands and remains the largest rival of the public news organization NOS Nieuws. As a commercial journalistic organization with its corporate headquarters in Luxembourg, RTL Nieuws is not bound by Dutch instruments of political account-ability, but it has to conform to European media regulation. Public accountability is mainly arranged informally. Viewers have the opportunity to complain and there is an unwritten rule that these complaints should be responded to as one should 'serve the customer'. It is the responsibility of the individual journalist to take public responses into account. Besides responding to viewer complaints, RTL Nieuws increasingly indicates its responsibility pro-actively by being transparent on how news is selected and constructed. Since 2008, one of the strategies used has been to offer greater transparency on source material by publishing the complete material on the website along with the news item. According to the deputy editor-in-chief, this allows the viewer to verify the reliability of the item by tracing it back to its source.

The informal character is also visible in the way professional accountability is organized. There are fixed moments when journalists come together to discuss, plan and evaluate their news programs. Besides these formal moments there is an informal and open feedback culture, with the editor-in-chief stimulating the dis-cussion.

Being responsive to the public has a definite commercial aim, as RTL Nieuws is part of a commercial media enterprise. Generating a large audience is a precondition for its existence. But in this commercial context, the independent journalistic news organization considers being responsive to the public, focusing on their agenda of urgency, to be one of its core journalistic values. The importance of the relationship with the public is demonstrated through a jour- nalistic style that tailors itself to the needs of the viewers, sides with ordinary citizens and understands their issues.

4.2.1.Practicing accountability and responsiveness

Accountability at RTL Nieuws is mainly arranged in an informal way. The editor-in-chief believes that responding to mistakes and making corrections when necessary is fundamental to the journalistic process and self-evident for a commercial organization. This informal policy fits the editor-in-chief's view of managing an orga-nization based on an individual's own responsibility. As he says, "I believe in organizations that have the discipline to understand what needs to be done every day". In line with this, formal instruments such as the ombudsman do not appeal to him.

In practice, however, responding to the viewer is not done regularly. The possibility for the viewer to comment or complain is available, but most interviewees do not perceive that there is a substantial amount of response from the public. Hence, among the employees the urgency to respond seems to be minimal. Even though the editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief believe that the trend of increasing assertiveness among citizens has contributed to a critical approach to the media,

neither management nor professionals have experienced a rise in discontent regarding their journalistic performance. Moreover, when complaints are made, editors or unit heads are hesitant to answer because they believe the complaints are frequently based on the self-interest of the complainant or that the comments are inappropriate or too harsh.

As at NOS Nieuws, there are many moments when the journalists come together to discuss and plan items before transmission and there is a fixed time for evaluation and reflection. The editors and reporters added that the atmosphere during evaluation moments, either formal or informal, is usually constructive, evaluating the work and not pointing out faults or blaming a specific person. Many interviewees said that the editor-in-chief is a strong contributor to creating a constructive internal debate. Yet, in this time-pressured environment, evaluating and reflecting on one's work is not given first priority, as it can be a time-consuming matter.

Being responsive to the public is not new for this news organization. In fact, from the beginning it has been used as a strategy to distinguish itself from the public broadcaster, NOS Nieuws. The editorial staff being responsive to the public is part of their daily journalistic practice. However, the majority of the interviewees do not believe that they need specific instruments to interact with or relate to the citizen/consumer in order to understand the public's agenda. They are the professionals who should be able to make institutional information understandable to the public. In recent years, online interactive instruments have been implemented, but among the editorial staff these instruments have not always been received with open arms and sometimes are even contested. Firstly, the interactive mechanisms are relatively new and are still at an experimental phase. Secondly, while many see the added value of getting a better understanding of the public, a majority of the interviewees doubt the actual positive effect of it since the responses they receive do not represent society as a whole. Many fear that overuse of the instruments can lead to a news organization being overly responsive, conceding to the public and thereby not taking journalistic responsibilities.

To conclude, where RTL Nieuws hardly has any formal account- ability instruments and at most responds to emails and telephone calls, responsiveness is one of its core business values. However, it is more about understanding the public and less about entering in a dialogue with the public.

5. Comparing public and commercial broadcasters

The results of the two case studies show many similarities in how they are responding both to the criticism of their performance as well as coping with structural changes. There is an increasing focus on the public. They now view their role as not only informing but also responding and interacting. The organizations each provide viewer/listener with the possibility to hold them to accountable. Internally, professional accountability is organized through fixed moments of evaluation. Nevertheless, being accountable to one's peers or reflecting one's work is a delicate issue. There are also similarities in measures of responsiveness. Media organizations have initiated a new type of journalism that is more focused on the con- cerns and wishes of the public. New online instruments such as weblogs, Twitter and social networking sites have provided the opportunity for journalists to

engage with the public more directly. However, responsiveness is not guided solely by a journalistic and civic motive of relating to the general public. Rather, at the two organizations the integration of the public's demands also serves a commercial interest to foster consumer loyalty. Nevertheless, whether trying to gain trust or loyalty, true interaction with the public is a difficult task in both sectors.

Even though the two media organizations show a number of significant similarities in how they respond to both structural and performance issues there are also salient differences. Regarding accountability, political accountability is only applicable to the public broadcaster. In terms of public accountability, in the past years NOS Nieuws has introduced several formal instruments. However, RTL Nieuws prefers to arrange accountability in a more informal way by responding to the complaints when necessary. This formal versus informal approach is also visible in professional accountability. Where at NOS Nieuws there are many formal meetings a day, at RTL Nieuws, besides the formal moments, there is a dominant informal culture of debate.

Regarding responsiveness, to NOS Nieuws letting go of the institutional approach and taking a more public oriented view is something that was clearly triggered by the criticisms during the Fortuyn period. Also the increasingly competitive climate and decreasing viewer loyalty has obliged the public broadcaster to take the public into account. This public oriented approach is not something new for the commercial broadcaster. Since its start, RTL Nieuws has taken a more responsive approach in order to distinguish themselves from the public broadcasting equivalent. It started predominantly as a commercial strategy, but over the years it has become part of daily journalistic routine to make news for 'the ordinary man' and less from an institutional perspective. In other words, the time period and reason for introducing instruments of responsiveness explains the difference in levels of adoption.

These results show that news broadcasters in the Netherlands are increasingly taking the public seriously as a result of drastic changes in the media environment and a growing critical pub- lic arena. Differences between the public and commercial news organization can be explained by the media system, the historical context, and a changing society. The differences in media system explains why the public broadcaster is bound to political accountability instruments in terms of law and regulation while the commercial broadcaster is free from any of this. Also, it explains an initial commercial reasoning behind RTL Nieuws comparing to NOS Nieuws. Secondly, the public broadcaster has its roots in a Dutch pillarized system in which broadcasters were closely connected to the established political elite. Even after the depillarization and the disconnection with politics the institutional approach of informing the public remained. Commercial broadcasters are relatively young and from their start took a different, informal and less institutional approach. Even though currently the two broadcasters are more similar than ever before, this difference in journalistic approach is still visible. Finally, both news organizations have responded in past years to a changing society and are both struggling with how to relate to the public through the use of new online technologies. However, mainly public broadcasters have made a significant shift in their policy, making the public more central. To the commercial broadcaster this has not changed fundamentally.

Concluding, both news broadcasters are responding explicitly to structural changes in the media landscape, however each with a different approach. These differences can be explained by the different media sectors and historical backgrounds.

6. Conclusion

This double case study offered insight into the perception and use of instruments of accountability and responsiveness within the Dutch broadcasting sector. Currently, as a result of both specific incidents and larger structural changes, two leading broadcast news organizations have made the public central to their policy more than ever before. However, the results of this study show that the traditional journalistic culture characterized by minimal public involvement and large journalistic authority does not sit well with being accountable and responsive to the public. The fear of losing professional authority seems to be larger than the will to be accountable and responsive to the public. Often introduced and stimulated by editors-in-chief, journalists acknowledge instruments designed to relate to the public. Yet, when applying them in daily practice, there's a general resistance.

New online instruments have been shown to create both expectation and pressure. They have offered opportunities for responsiveness and accountability. They invite the public to participate and the public has become more assertive in voicing opinions. At this point, the online instruments have placed a constraint on the social system of the organization with unforeseen activities and costs. In the words of Hermida and Thurman with regard to the use of interactive instruments, "the burden increases as the participation of the user rises" (2008, p. 351). Moreover, as the usual suspects are often the ones responding, to what extent can the response be used for journalistic production?

The fact that most instruments of accountability and responsiveness are (still) not part of daily journalistic routine coupled with a general hesitance to use the instruments or measures might indicate that this new type of policy is merely a form of window dressing to answer external criticisms. Even though specific inci- dents in the Netherlands functioned as a catalyst for the debate on media performance, structural changes such as online technologies, commercialization and societal changes like individualization have substantiated a climate in which the media's relationship with the public is changing permanently. It is now the media's challenge to find new ways to relate to and engage with the public without losing their journalistic autonomy and authority.

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