Between professional autonomy and public responsibility: accountability and responsiveness in Dutch media and journalism

dehaan, Y.M.

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Chapter 2

From government to governance:

a longitudinal analysis of the
media performance debate
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2.1 Introduction

The introductory chapter showed that the relationship between media, politics and the public is a tensed one. Politicians seem to increasingly voice their discontent on the performance of the media and they blame them for the distancing relationship between politics and the public. The public debate on media performance is fuelled by specific incidents in which their role was questioned. But are these political outcries and general discontent on media performance an incidental upheaval or has this gradually increased over the years or has the relationship always been a difficult one? This chapter aims to answer these questions by analysing how the media performance debate has developed over the years, to what extent media criticism has indeed increased and by what it was triggered. The following research question is addressed:

Which issues have been prominent in the debate on media performance and what criticism of media and journalism has been voiced over the last 20 years?

The period between 1987 and 2007 was selected to cover a period in which the Dutch media landscape underwent significant changes. As mentioned in Chapter 1, changes were primarily brought about by the introduction of commercial broadcasting, press concentration and the advent of new technologies. To analyse how the media’s response to this debate has developed over time, a second research question is addressed:

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How have the institutions and actors concerned responded to, coped with, and accommodated to these pressures over the period of 20 years?

A multi-method approach was used, including content analysis, document analysis and expert interviews. Before presenting the results, I will elaborate on the used methods.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Content analysis

A descriptive content analysis was conducted to explore the salient issues in the media debate. This method makes it possible to find trends and developments in communication content, while remaining unobtrusive and nonreactive (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2004) and without the researcher influencing the material (Wester, 2006; Krippendorff, 2004).

Over the period of 20 years, the biweekly professional trade magazine De Journalist (since September 2009 called Villamedia magazine) was analysed. It is a publication of the Netherlands Union of Journalists (NVJ) [Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten] and was chosen as its content reflects the internal professional discussion of journalists and media professionals. To capture the debate over time I used the print version of the magazine and did not include the posts on the website, which has existed in its full form only since 2009. I chose all articles of more than 1 page of editorial text that discussed journalistic issues in the newspaper, broadcasting and online sector, excluding agenda items, short news pieces and articles that covered issues in other countries, as this research focuses on the Dutch case. In total 823 articles were selected for analysis.

To understand the media performance debate more precisely a second content analysis was carried out, focusing on the specific issues raised in the public domain about the performance and the nature of the criticism. For this, the Dutch quality newspaper NRC Handelsblad was analysed, as it is known to designate ample space to public debate in forums and columns, allowing various actors to voice their opinions. The paper is comparable to other high quality dailies in Western democracies such as The New York Times, Le Monde, and The Guardian. Articles in NRC Handelsblad were selected from

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2 In Appendix 2 a list of abbreviations is provided.
the digital newspaper database, Lexis-Nexis, using the key words, criticism, problem, responsibility and accountability in combination with journalism, media, press and (public) broadcasting. For this content analysis the year 1990 was used as starting point as preceding years were not available digitally. The used key words correspond to the theoretical concepts and terms used in policy documents. This specific selection was especially important to capture the debate over time as many terms are bound to specific time periods or contexts. By conducting a pilot with articles from 1990 and 2005 I could confirm that these key terms cover the issues in the Dutch media debate over time. A total of 862 articles was selected for analysis.

To verify that I did not only capture the ‘elite debate’ of one quality newspaper, an issue check using the same key words was performed in the two other national newspapers with the highest national circulation: de Volkskrant, a left-leaning quality national newspaper, and de Telegraaf, right-leaning and the most popular national newspaper. The search of de Telegraaf articles showed that the debate on media performance was not prominent on that newspaper’s agenda. An interview with the then editor-in-chief, Johan Olde Kalter, confirms this, “In my time there were hardly any journalistic debates [in de Telegraaf]. I can only remember a debate on Fortuyn, but that was between two columnists” (Van Zijl, 2006). The articles located from de Volkskrant indicate its coverage to have been very similar to that of NRC Handelsblad. This issue check, demonstrated that the publicized media performance debate was primarily an elite debate rather than one among the general public.

The content analyses of the professional and public debate used a similar approach of analysis following several phases (Pleijter, 2006; Wester, 2006), beginning with a description of the issues. These were not predefined, but rather emerged or were deducted from the main topic of the article. The primary aim of this first descriptive phase was to gain an understanding of the wide range of issues in the media professional and the public debate. Each article was coded on the following items: date, title, author, issue, discussed problem/situation and solution/conclusion. If the article dealt with criticism of the media the criticizing and the criticized actors were also coded. The code ‘issue’ corresponds to the main subject of the article. The different aspects of the subject were described under ‘problem/situation’. In this way the subject or problem was not simplified in one word. Through the process of coding
a list of issues emerged. These were defined more precisely throughout the process of coding and recoding. I kept a code book with the definitions of the issues and adapted or modified them throughout the process. Examples of issues were press mergers, declining circulation figures and the advent of civic journalism.

To not merely name and list the different issues of debate, but also to understand their nature, in the following phase I carried out a qualitative analysis of the same articles (Mayring, 2000, Wester, 2006). The aim was to obtain more knowledge of the content and discussion of the salient, recurring issues and how they developed over time. To conduct this interpretative analysis, it was important to re-read the complete article and not merely use the article fragments and codes (Wester, 2006). The codes ascribed to the issues had an open character, but were gradually (re)defined more specifically throughout the coding process by repeatedly comparing the codes. For example, articles dealing with new media and communication technologies were labelled with the code ‘new technologies’. Throughout the coding process I made more specific sub-divisions such as ‘policy new technologies’, ‘privacy issues with Internet’ and ‘negative/ positive view of new technologies’. The software program Microsoft ACCESS was used to code, structure and analyse the data, since this program offers extensive possibilities to create, manage and make relations in large databases.

For internal reliability, the coding process was marked with set moments of reflection after every 5 years of coding material, at which point issues were added, changed, bundled or eliminated. Moreover for the descriptive part of the content analysis, the inter-coder reliability was measured by having an external coder recode a representative sample of 10 percent. For De Journalist the Cohen’s Kappa was 0.92 and for NRC Handelsblad it was 0.93 which shows that the data are highly reliable (Cohen, 1960; Landis & Koch, 1977). The issue check in de Volkskrant and De Telegraaf enhanced the validity of this research (see pg. 29). These reliability and validity tests were conducted for the descriptive part of the research. The interpretative nature of the second part required the coding to be performed exclusively by myself as the researcher.

Document analysis of annual reports and of official speeches, and expert interviews with representatives of the main stakeholders complemented the
triangulation of methods and further enhanced the validity of the research (Gerring, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### 2.2.2 Document analysis
Document analysis is a suitable method when the goal of the research has an explorative character to discover possible trends (Wester & Pleijter, 2006). This fits the purpose of this research phase: to obtain an overall understanding of how the media have responded to issues within the media debate over a longer period. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 the case studies of three specific media organisations will yield a more thorough and detailed analysis of the media’s response at the present time. However, to understand the current situation comprehensive historical knowledge is essential. Document analysis is often used to gain information for further stages of the research (Wester & Pleijter, 2006). For this reason, I conducted document analysis myself without the help of other coders.

Taking the same period as the content analysis, a total of 80 annual reports or speeches were analysed. The annual reports of the Dutch public service broadcaster, Netherlands Public Broadcasting (NPO [Nederlandse Publicke Omroep], previously NOS, see Appendix 2) and of the Netherlands Newspaper Publishers Organisation (NDP [Nederlandse Dagbladpers]) were used to locate the issues raised at the level of the media institutions. For the issues at the professional level, the annual speeches of the chair of the Netherlands Association of Editors-in-chief (NGH [Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteuren]) and the annual reports of the Netherlands Union of Journalists (NVJ [Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten]) were used. In this phase the commercial media sector could not be included in the analysis since commercial media operating in the Netherlands (RTL Nederland and SBS Broadcasting) do not produce public annual reports except for the financial results. The international media groups they are part of publish annual reports, but no specific details are given about their organisations in the Netherlands. RTL Nederland is part of RTL Group, the largest media group in Europe, of which 91 percent is owned by the media conglomerate Bertelsmann (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2011). SBS Broadcasting belongs to the German media group ProSiebenSat.1. Due to the lack of documents the interviews were of paramount importance for this particular media sector. These will be elaborated in following section.
The analysis of the documents was carried out according to the principles of the grounded theory. This approach is based on the idea that the empirical data are systematically classified in order to not only describe but also interpret the constructed reality in a comprehensive way (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I did not follow the classical approach since this obliges the researcher to look into the material with an open mind, allowing the data to speak for themselves. Within qualitative research it is generally accepted that this pure form of induction is almost impossible as the researcher always enters the research with some kind of knowledge and ideas of the subject (Miles & Huberman, 1994; O’Reilly, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Ten Have, 2004). As Miles and Huberman note, “Any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas” (1994: 17).

Before the actual analysis could start, I made a selection of the relevant material. While the entire transcript of the speeches of the chair of NGH was used, the annual reports of the other organisations included information not relevant to this research, like human resource related issues, financial planning and detailed information on organisation units. In coding the selected material the qualitative software program MAXQDA was used. This program allows the researcher to code the documents inductively, amounting to a combination of different levels of codes, and for the analysis to easily retrieve specific selections and codes (Hijmans & Wester, 2006; Wester & Peters, 2004). It should be noted that the software merely facilitated ordering the data over time: the analysis and process of coding and re-coding was left to me. Each document was coded inductively by reading the material several times and coding specific fragments. A so-called ‘coding tree’, a list of codes and sub-codes, was built, expanded and altered along the process of analysis, amounting to more than 30 codes or sub-codes.

Just as in the content analysis, fixed moments of reflection were built in after coding 5 years of annual reports and speeches. After all the material was coded, I entered the phase of constant comparison, comparing the material on different levels (Boeije, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). First the annual reports of one particular organisation were analysed for each year, after which comparisons were made across periods of time, followed by comparisons between the different organisations.
2.2.3 Expert interviews

Taking into account that both media institutions and media professionals are traditionally quite defensive with respect to criticism, especially from external stakeholders, formal documents can be expected to have a positive bias. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were held with high-ranking representatives of the different organisations, serving as a reality-check to the formal written responses. The selected interviewees were representatives of the organisations for which the documents were analysed, who held (or had held) various positions during the period in question.

On the media institutional level the chair of the publishers’ organisation NDP, two former chairs of the Board of Governors of the public service broadcaster NPO and a former Chief Executive Officer of both RTL Nederland and SBS Broadcasting were interviewed. The chair of NDP held this position from 1999 till 2010, the first chair of NPO between 1998 and 2003, and the second chair between 2003 and 2008. The former executive of the commercial broadcasting organisations entered the commercial media sector in the early 1990s and has been active in this sector until 2008. The media professional level was represented by the chair of the editors-in-chief’s association NGH, who held his position from 2006 till 2010, the chair and a member of the journalists’ union NVJ and an active member of the Council for Journalism. Interviews were also held with the clerk of the Council for Journalism and two ombudsmen, one for de Volkskrant and the other for the public broadcasting news organisation NOS Nieuws. The interviews were held in the homes or offices of the respondents between December 2008 and January 2009.

The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were semi-structured, which means that there was no fixed questionnaire but a checklist of topics to be discussed. The interview began with factual questions such as the interviewee’s background and current position, followed by questions related to their experience and opinions on specific issues. Topics discussed included: background of interviewee, issues of media performance and criticism, type of criticism voiced by which actors, their definition and applied instruments of accountability, the possible role of government in accountability policy and their vision on future governance structures. The interviews had more of a conversational, be it guided, character, which I very much stimulated so that the interviewees would mention issues spontaneously (Gubrium & Holstein,
When issues were not spontaneously addressed, I used probes to help the interviewees. These extra questions serve the purpose of deepening the response to a question, giving cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired and verifying whether answers have been correctly understood (Bergman & Coxon, 2005; Lofland, 1971; Patton, 1990).

Although I made notes during the interviews, all were recorded and fully transcribed by three students. Just as with the documents, the transcriptions were analysed through an inductive approach, starting with open coding and gradually building up a coding tree. After coding five interviews I compared them and, if necessary, rearranged the codes, adding, eliminating and bundling them. The final coding tree amounted to more than 35 different codes, including changes in the media landscape (sub-codes such as press mergers, commercialization, changing media consumption and new technologies), different types of accountability measures (ombudsman, Council for Journalism, codes of conduct, and governmental regulation) and different types of measures to relate to the public (dialogue with the public, public debates, civic journalism).

2.2.4 Ethical considerations

Before presenting the results, I have to mention two ethical issues. Informed consent was one of the first issues that I had to consider when approaching the interviewees. This means that the researcher provides the respondents with the relevant information for them to make the decision whether or not to participate (Silverman, 2001). All interviewees were approached through a comprehensive email that explained the purpose of the research and the reason they had been chosen specifically (Hertz & Imber, 1995). Before the actual interview I allowed for questions or for the interviewee and I to come to specific agreements. The second issue is anonymity. The interviewees are all public figures, representing media organisations, so it was not possible to keep them anonymous. Therefore, it was agreed to get their approval of the text before any form of publication (Hertz & Imber, 1995). Yet I chose not to use any names throughout the dissertation and only to mention the function of a quoted interviewee person, as people’s opinions and experiences were important and not their personal point of view.
2.3 Results

Triangulation of methods provided me with a thorough understanding of the issues, characteristics and underlying discourse in the critique of media performance and the media’s response to this debate over time. The results are first presented of how the media performance debate developed and then of how the media responded to the discussed issues.

2.3.1 The media debate 1987-2007

The two content analyses reveal that from the 1685 articles (823 in De Journalist and 862 in NRC Handelsblad) a number of specific issues emerge. In all 37 issues were found in De Journalist and 22 in NRC Handelsblad, with 13 issues overlapping. These ranged from press mergers, decreasing newspaper circulation, changing newspaper formats, the introduction of new commercial television programs, the issue of media hypes, dilemmas around research and war journalism, to criticisms voiced by politicians on the media’s performance. Overall, the professional media and publicized public (elite) debates developed in quite similar ways, with minor differences in the salient issues. De Journalist devoted much attention to the press sector, which is not surprising since this magazine is linked to the journalists union NVJ, which originally represented print journalists. NRC Handelsblad paid relatively more attention to public service broadcasting.

Taking a closer look at the range of issues discussed over a 20 year period, the most prominent issues raised in the 1990s were related to the structure of media organisations and institutions. Criticism voiced either by the public or politics on how media perform became significant from 2000 onwards. The two content analyses show two debates developing in two, somewhat overlapping phases. While the first phase mainly dealt with problems affecting the structure of media institutions, from the end of the 1990s these issues were gradually overtaken by debates regarding media performance. In other words, the issues can be roughly bundled into two overarching themes: structure and performance.

Issues affecting media structure

Out of the 823 articles in De Journalist 53 percent covered media structural topics. Four structural issues dominated the debate in the 1990s: press concentration, the legitimization of public service broadcasting, decreasing
newspaper circulation, and the advent of technological innovations. In the period of 20 years 218 articles were labelled with one of these four issues in *De Journalist* of which more than 67 percent in the 1990s. Figure 2.1 illustrates how the saliency of these four structural issues (aggregated in one line) developed.

**Figure 2.1: The development of media structure and performance issues in *De Journalist* 1987–2007**

My aim was to not only look at which issues stood out in the debate, but also to understand what these issues were about and how the debate developed. Therefore, looking more closely at the most prominent issues, in the 1990s the debate focused primarily on the structural changes, but this was often linked to the effect on performance. The first period was marked particularly by press mergers, with much attention paid to the need for regional newspapers to merge into larger media entities due to financial problems. The discussion dealt primarily with the concern about the decreasing numbers of newspapers and the presumed loss of media diversity and quality of content. Related to media diversity, there was also fear of the loss of identity of the different newspaper titles. This was a particular concern for regional newspapers, whose identity has always been focused on the demands of a specific region. Particularly, *De Journalist*, as part of the journalists’ union, devoted much space to the voice of the journalist during several mergers. Many journalists did not only fear decreasing diversity, but also directed their anger towards management
for having neglected the editorial staff in times of organisational change with large number of compulsory redundancies.

By the mid 1990s, the tone surrounding the debate on press mergers became milder with more acknowledgment among newspapers and editorial staff of the need to take action in order to survive. But before that, at the end of the 1980s, concern grew about decreasing newspaper circulation, which in itself had caused the rise of press mergers. This was especially the case for local and regional newspapers, some of which had been obliged to merge to continue to exist. Compared with the problematic situation of regional and local newspapers, the overall circulation of national newspapers was still increasing in the 1990s. Only around the turn of the century, partly due to competition, additionally from online media and free daily newspapers, the circulation of national newspapers started to decrease.

Aside from these two issues in the press sector, the re-organisation of public service broadcasting into a dual system and its further legitimation was a recurring issue. Discussion focused mainly on the ways public service broadcasting tried to redefine its position and remit in the newly emerging commercial and competitive broadcasting market since 1989. Especially in the first few years of the 1990s both De Journalist and NRC Handelsblad devoted much attention to the introduction of a dual broadcasting system and the related increasing commercial competition. There was much resistance from public service broadcasters, journalists and the journalists’ union NVJ to this duality, as they feared a loss of quality content and media diversity and an overload of popular entertainment programmes. In 1988, when the discussions already took place for a new dual broadcasting system, three public broadcasters VARA, KRO and NRCV pleaded against commerciality. “A dual broadcasting system will only lead to financial problems and poor programmes. We have to stop this absurd and redundant discussion of a dual system” (De Journalist, 29 Feb. 1988a).

Not only these performance issues but also the pressure for more collaboration among public service broadcasters to counter the commercial competition, was an issue for the public broadcasters. Partnering with other public broadcasters was felt as a loss of autonomy and their identity. Looking over 20 years of debate regarding public service broadcasting, in some years the subject was
The use of the Internet was increasingly discussed from the end of the 1990s. Most articles were rather negative, with journalists displaying a fair amount of scepticism towards online journalism. In *De Journalist* the articles’ titles already reveal this negative tone: ‘Falling Down and Getting Back Up with New Media’ [Vallen en opstaan met nieuwe media] (29 Feb. 1988b), ‘Toiling on the Internet’ [Zwoegen op het internet] (2 Nov. 1995), ‘Anxious Times on the Net’ [Spannende tijden op het net] (16 Dec. 1994), ‘Stumbling over the Digital Highway’ [Strompelend over de digitale snelweg] (2 June 1995) and ‘The Threat of the New Media’ [De dreiging van de nieuwe media] (31 Oct. 1997). Journalists complained about the difficulties of using the Internet, finding the right information and, perhaps most importantly, finding reliable information. Nevertheless, newspapers were forerunners in introducing online websites, with *NRC Handelsblad* being the first national newspaper online in 1995. Even though in the mid-1990s several consultants and researchers had already advised public service broadcasters to start introducing new media, the public broadcasting umbrella organisation NOS only took its first initiative in 2000 with an Internet portal. By the turn of the century, there was a gradual shift towards a more positive attitude and a growing recognition of the potential advantages of the Internet, primarily for gathering information and checking sources. At the same time, the public debate on regulatory measures intensified. Especially, in the mid-1990s there was growing concern over pornography on the net and the problem of copyright infringement, with policy discussions on how to regulate the web. In 1996, the Minister of Justice pleaded for self-regulation, acknowledging that the Internet cannot be regulated like traditional media.

By the end of the 1990s some issues, such as press mergers, featured less prominently in the debate, while others such as the legitimacy of public service broadcasting and the vulnerable position of print newspapers remained on the agenda. Besides the challenges of media structure, issues such as press mergers, the introduction of commercial broadcasting and the advent of the Internet also seemed to raise questions about the quality and reliability of media content, which created an atmosphere where the performance of the media
was gradually put into question. The content analyses show that even though some structural issues remained an issue of concern, there was a gradual but apparent shift in focus from structural media problems to issues related to the media’s performance and growing criticism of their role in society. The media performance debate intensified with politicians publicly voicing their discontent.

**Criticism of media performance**

Throughout the past 20 years politicians have regularly voiced their dissatisfaction with media performance. Whereas in the 1990s issues related to this were far and few between, by the turn of the century it emerged as a hot topic (72% of articles in *NRC Handelsblad* labelled with the issue ‘criticism from politics’ were published from 1998 onwards). Figure 2.1 illustrates the aggregated line of media performance issues within the professional media debate (*De Journalist*). These include the codes ‘criticism from politics’, ‘criticism from public’, ‘legal criticism’, ‘general criticism on media coverage’ and ‘media hypes’.

The interpretative analysis provided a more thorough insight into these criticisms. Both content analyses give an event-driven picture. It appears as if it was Queen Beatrix who signalled the start of a more heated debate. In an informal and confidential discussion in 1999, with a group of editors-in-chief, she complained about the press’ coverage of royal affairs, stating that increasingly “the lie rules” in media reporting. In spite of assumed confidentiality this was later published in a national newspaper. Since then several events have further heated the debate on media performance, reaching a climax in 2002, the year of the rise to prominence and subsequent death of Pim Fortuyn. At the beginning of that year, a government-commissioned report (NIOD, 2002) had already concluded that the Dutch media had displayed a significant bias in their coverage of the Balkan war in the 1990s. It revealed that the media had exaggerated events, were driven by sensation and ‘drama journalism’, and had displayed bias and subjective reporting, urging the Dutch government to take part in the military intervention in the former-Yugoslavia that eventually led to the Srebrenica massacre.

Then Pim Fortuyn was murdered and, next to the elite criticism of journalistic performance, others with a publicized opinion started to blame not only the
established political parties and politicians, but also the media for demonizing the populist politician. Not only the murder, six days prior to the parliamentary elections, but also the remarkable success of his new right-wing party – achieving the second largest amount of votes even though the embodiment of the party had ceased to be – triggered a debate on whether the media had contributed to a climate in which Fortuyn could be killed. Moreover, the question was raised as to how the media could have failed to see and grasp the populist sentiments and the insecurity within society of which Fortuyn had been such an outspoken crusader.

When in 2003, two independent government advisory commissions, the Council for Social Development (RMO [Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling]) and the Council for Public Administration (ROB [Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur]), proposed specific (self-)regulatory measures for the media, after concluding that over the years they had gained more and more power without being accountable (RMO, 2003; ROB, 2003), the debate concerning the media’s performance came even more prominent to the fore. The suggestions of RMO were: to strengthen the position of the Council for Journalism, to introduce a public debate platform for media issues and to create a ‘media watch monitor’, that would evaluate media coverage of controversial and other political themes (RMO, 2003). With two elections in the same period (2002 and 2003), both politically and journalistically critical events, the professional and public debate increasingly focused on the complex relationship between politics and media. Politicians complained about journalists’ need to ‘score’ and ‘scoop’, as a consequence of a more and more competitive media market. From the mid-1990s, the content analyses indicate that they increasingly began to criticize the media for creating more hypes rather than covering the substance of politics, for not verifying the facts, for acting like parrots copying each other, for taking incidents out of their context, for emphasizing the dramatic, and for turning factual reporting into infotainment. Demanding the media to be more accountable, their criticism was echoed by members of the judiciary and the police.

The debate about media performance was primarily driven by the political elite, with the general public more or less absent (3 % of the articles in De Journalist and 4 % of the articles in NRC Handelsblad). When the public was involved, the debate also had a different content. Whereas the criticism from
the political elite towards the media dealt with how they themselves were portrayed and how that might affect public opinion, members of the public mainly objected to their voice, complaints and plights being ignored. They seemed most bothered that their issues and concerns were not reflected in the media and that in civic matters they were not sufficiently listened to.

All these events and related criticism show that the discontent on media performance boils down to four issues: biased media coverage, increasing infotainment and sensationalist aspects in news coverage, the media having too much power, and failing to recognize and address the public’s concerns. Where the first three concerns are mainly voiced by politicians, the last comes from members of the public.

**Summarizing 20 years of media debate**

Overlooking the debate, issues regarding the responsibility of the media appear to have been discussed only partly in the 1990s. The structural media organisational problems that dominated the debate in this period were primarily about competition and survival, and more indirectly related to their possible effects on the diversity and quality of media content, and almost never to the consequences for the public. Taking the public into account – beyond considering them as a market category affecting the media’s existence – was hardly an issue.

By the turn of the century, the debate about media performance appears to proliferate, partly due to a string of critical events. Mainly politicians displayed mistrust in the media for failing to adhere to their social responsibility, and not serving the public interest vital for a democratic society. Growing criticisms of the media for being biased, too powerful and focused on infotainment and sensationalism have led to an increasing demand from politicians for a wider range of accountability measures. However, accountability was not discussed in terms of regulation; rather the media were asked or suggested by politicians and commissions to initiate self-regulatory measures directed towards the public. The criticism surrounding journalism’s role in the rise and murder of Fortuyn implicitly illustrated a public demanding that the media listen more to what issues and popular sentiments are at stake in society and to take them seriously.
2.3.2 The media’s response

The content analyses did not only raise a wide range of media issues but also gave a preliminary indication of how the media responded to these matters. In addition, the document analysis and interviews provided a more thorough insight into the media’s view of both structure and performance issues, their view on the solutions and their own clarification and possible contributions.

Problems of media structure

Of the four structural issues that dominated the 1990s, the most salient issues documented in the annual reports were the legitimation of public service broadcasting and the increasing concentration of press ownership. Besides the public service broadcaster NPO, the publishers’ organisation NDP and the journalists’ union NVJ also voiced their concern about the role of public service broadcasting in a changing media landscape. The NDP mainly focused on competition between the newspaper market and the large broadcasting market. The NVJ’s attention was on how to safeguard the public service function.

The problem of press concentration and the assumed subsequent decline in media diversity was a recurring issue addressed in the documents of the journalist’s union NVJ, the editors-in-chief’s organisation NGH and the publisher’s organisation NDP. While the NVJ rather sharply emphasised the need to stop this trend, the NGH recognized the difficulties that newspapers were facing and acknowledged that in times of financial problems the discussion of newspaper mergers was understandable. Nonetheless, merely merging for the commercial reason to gain maximum profits was not acceptable to them. “A strong opposition is justified when large profitable concerns want to merge newspapers solely to gain a maximum profit” (NGH, 1990: 2). Throughout the 1990s the chair of the NGH drew attention to what he saw as increasing commercial thinking around mergers. “Our profession has moved too much in the wrong direction, namely a more fierce and brutal attitude in thinking only of cents and guilders” (NGH, 1996: 2).

The interviewees drew attention to two related issues: competition and declining circulation figures. The majority of them believe that the increasing competition is a focal point, affecting the media market structure as well as their performance. Moreover, the growing number of outlets, such as online
media and free newspapers, has led to a fiercer competition for audience ratings as well as news (particularly scoops). Several interviewees indicated that the gradual de-pillarization process had partly created this competitive climate. With the media no longer tied to religious or ideological pillars in society, nor to political parties or social movements, they are compelled to compete for the same public. As the ombudsman of the public service broadcaster NOS asserted, “In the past we had several newspapers per city, but these were bound to their own pillar and therefore not in competition with each other. Now we are all competing for the same general public”.

The former director of SBS Broadcasting and RTL Nederland is convinced that the increasing and fiercer media competition has also led to fading boundaries between media and politics.

In the past the gap between politics and the media was large, the media as a neutral outsider. This is no longer the case, partly as a result of increasing competition. Broadcasters often exceed their journalistic boundaries in order to ensure that some minister appears in their program and not in that of the competition (Interview 17 Feb. 2009)

Closely related to press concentration, the introduction of a dual broadcasting system and the subsequent media competition, both representatives of public service broadcasting and the newspaper sector showed concern for the decreasing readership and declining audiences of the public service broadcasters. The interviewees related this to larger societal trends of de-pillarization and individualisation. Moreover, they added that the increasing worry of not being able to reach the fragmented and less loyal public has grown due to the financial insecurities of many media organisations.

Regulatory measures
In the documents, the umbrella media organisations specifically addressed the role of the government as a facilitator for measures solving the structural problems of media concentration and the legitimation of public service broadcasting. Regarding the latter, the public service broadcasting NOS, the publishers’ organisation NDP and the journalists’ union NVJ advocated compensation from government to ensure a financial stability against the increasing commercial competition.
Regarding press concentration, the annual reports of the NVJ pleaded for regulatory measures that would counter press monopolization and guarantee a minimum level of media diversity. Where the NVJ supported political measures, they felt the government was leaving this issue to market forces; a critique that led to a tense relationship between the NVJ and government. “We unfortunately have to observe how government is replacing its active press policy with a more laissez-faire attitude. Newspapers are completely submitted to the dynamics of the market” (NVJ, 1991: 7). The editors-in-chief’s association NGH was equally discontent but, being each other’s competitors too, they were less active towards the government. The newspaper publishers’ organisation NDP more plainly stated that government intervention would not solve this problem, as it is “politically a delicate subject, which can lead to a degrading of the principle of freedom of speech” (NDP, 1988: 8). Not only the disagreement between government and the media sector, but also the suspicion among the organisations representing the press sector may also have stimulated an impasse for a solution.

Problems of media performance

Looking at the performance debate, the document analysis of the annual media reports and speeches of key individuals corroborate an increase in the debate of media performance issues, with a peak in 2002, the year in which the media were accused of demonizing Pim Fortuyn. Particularly, the professional organisations (NVJ and NGH) devoted attention to performance issues. The media institutional organisations (NPO and NDP) seem to be more focused on structural issues affecting their sector. Neither the publishers’ organisation NDP nor the public broadcasting organisation NPO devoted any real space in their annual reports to media performance or the accusations made against the media. Only at the turn of the century did they mention the implementation of several accountability instruments, without any reference to the underlying reason for initiating them.

With an initial defensive attitude, the documents of the professional media organisations devoted ample space to the complaints on media performance. The editors-in-chief’s association NGH intervened in the media performance debate. This was particularly prompted by the then chairman (1999—2006) and editor-in-chief of the national newspaper <i>de Volkskrant</i>. After he resigned his annual speeches were bundled in a book with the title <i>Media under Attack</i>
[Media onder vuur] (Broertjes, 2006). Criticisms of media performance and the alleged decreasing trust were a primary concern, as he pointed out in 1999, “Maybe the most important theme of our profession over the last few years is the crisis in trust. I see a double crisis, namely between newspapers and readers and between media and authorities” (Broertjes, 2006: 139). In that same year the NGH reacted quite defensively to the criticisms of politicians and the judiciary, asserting that they and their press officers were increasingly making it difficult for the media to perform their watchdog role by not providing them with the necessary information. “It is the task of the media to reveal facts, especially when they should have remained secret. Whoever fumbles with this principle touches upon the basic principles of press freedom” (Broertjes, 2006: 141).

The interviewees were ambivalent on whether the debate on media performance has increased. However, the majority did agree that the increasing number of media players and the advent of the Internet (with the possibility of each individual citizen to voice its opinion) have led to increasing opportunities for more media criticism. The chair of the NDP said, “There are many more actors active in the process, voicing their criticism” (Interview 16 Dec. 2008). At the same time, a few interviewees downplayed the increase in criticism and remarked that the debate about the media’s performance and the criticisms voiced by politicians are part of an age-old discussion, intrinsic to the journalistic professional role as critical watchdogs. Nevertheless, the two ombudsmen and the chair of NVJ remarked that the performance debate is increasingly being driven by politicians.

In contrast to the press and public broadcasting sector, the interviewee from the commercial broadcasters believes that criticisms regarding performance of commercial stations has ceased to be an issue. It was only prominent when these stations began operating in the 1990s. Having been accused, mainly by politicians and public broadcasters, of crossing boundaries of decency and not adhering to basic journalistic principles, the interviewee also emphasised that these criticisms had a purifying effect, forcing them to rethink their position and their role in the media market.
Suggested accountability measures

While it appeared that the media gradually became aware of the debate on their performance, they were not as happy with the suggested solutions. When in 2003 two government advisory commissions (RMO and ROB) proposed specific (self-) regulatory measures to make the media more accountable and the Minister responsible for the media followed some of these suggestions, the professional media organisations were critical as it was perceived as government interference. The chair of the journalists’ union (NVJ) said, “The concept of self-regulation should be read in the literal sense: measures proposed and implemented by ourselves” (Interview 11 Dec. 2008). This more or less defensive attitude can be traced back to the debate about and fight for autonomy and independence, rooted in the historical development of press freedom and media’s traditional role as watchdog. Media professionals are not used to dealing with external criticism: according to the interviewees, they often use press freedom as a defence mechanism. The NVJ chair saw nothing new in this attitude, as “This defensive response of the media is a genetic factor, intrinsic to the journalistic profession” (Interview 11 Dec. 2008).

Gradually, in the documents this self-protective and more cynical attitude seemed to leave room for some acknowledgement, or at least a less defensive attitude. The chair of the NGH in his annual speeches from 1999 onwards, mentioned the need for more self-regulatory measures in the form of an ombudsman, internal self-evaluations and internal debates on the media’s performance. While he was aware of journalists’ defensive and protective attitude, often being reluctant to self-critique, the chair continued to stimulate public accountability and self-reflection in his annual speeches. The ideas of RMO and ROB were not ignored. On the contrary, NVJ, NOS and NDP collaborated in establishing a media debate organisation, one of the suggestions of RMO. They seemed to realize that something had to be done before they were compelled by others -i.e. the government- to take action. This illustrates the pressure media organisations were feeling to take action, instead of waiting for the government to impose regulatory measures. The content analyses confirm an increased discussion on self-regulatory accountability instruments and measures to take the public into account (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). A wide range of public accountability instruments were discussed, including an ombudsman, a stronger Council for Journalism and the publication of readers’ letters to the editor. Measures to take the public into account include...
discussion fora, weblogs and public debates. Nevertheless, a rather critical position to these measures remains according to the interviewees. A former chair of NPO complained, “I believe this whole idea of accountability is overdone. Where is the trust in the media professional?” (Interview 20 Dec. 2008).

**Figure 2.2:** Debate on measures initiated by the media in *De Journalist* 1987-2007

<table>
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**Figure 2.3:** Debate on media performance issues and measures initiated by the media in *NRC Handelsblad* 1990-2007

<table>
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<td>2007</td>
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Self-initiated measures

While not able to pinpoint the precise reasons, the interviewees believe accountability and taking the public into account fit the current Zeitgeist, also visible in other sectors. According to the NOS-ombudsman “This is a trend we cannot turn our backs on” (Interview 4 Dec. 2008). Most interviewees see the assassination of Fortuyn and the media’s alleged demonization of him as a catalyst for intensifying the debate on media responsibility and accountability. However, this should not be seen as a cause on its own. More and larger structural and societal trends are felt to have created an atmosphere in which criticism and a demand for transparency has become the norm. The majority of the interviewees believe, for example, that the introduction of the Internet has created a structure and opportunity for people to voice their discontent.

Over time, however, an attitudinal shift can be noticed from a tendency to blame outside parties to appeals by media professionals for internal discussion of their own mistakes and a plea for self-regulatory measures not proposed or imposed by third parties. There is a shift visible to a less defensive attitude, and a more solution-oriented debate. These solutions appear to be an answer to both structural and performance issues. By the end of the 1990s, the chair of the NGH stressed the importance of initiating their own measures to improve the relationship with the public. In 2003 he pointed out the importance of journalist’s tasks, “It is our task to retain and enhance the trust relationship with our readers, viewers and listeners. To them we should be accountable and not to outsiders such as the government” (Broertjes, 2006: 72). This focus on the public was not only a way to deal with the accusations on media performance, but also a way of establishing new relationships with the lost reader, listener and viewer. In his speech of 2003 the chair of NGH said, “In the past, the newspaper was a gentleman at a distance. Now readers prefer more interaction with their newspaper and this might restore trust between the press and the citizen” (Broertjes, 2006: 80). To the interviewees the need to act more in the public’s interest and take the public into consideration are seen as an important step. However, they questioned whether accountability measures would bridge the divide between media and public. The chair of NGH, active between 2006 and 2010, said, “While I am not a strong proponent of accountability, I do believe we should improve the journalistic and public discussion” (Interview 24 Dec. 2008).
2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a varied picture of the debate on media performance and its shift in theme, saliency and tone over the last two decades. In the 1990s, the debate was mainly focused on structural issues affecting media organisations and not so much on the profession or performance of journalists. The role and function of the media in and for society was hardly questioned, trust in media performance seemed more or less self-evident. From the turn of the century, particularly in response to a number of critical events, the debate shifted towards a focus on media performance and accountability. Structural trends such as the growing competition between old and new media, increasing commercialisation and the interactive possibilities of the Internet, appear to have created a basis for the debate on media performance and increasing demands for ways to take the public into account, of being responsive to the public, and also to regain the trust of the public. The research showed that the debate on media performance was not only instigated by intensifying media criticism and specific critical events, but appears to also have its foundations in the structural media developments dominant in the first period. The effects media concentration and commercialisation might have on diversity and quality provided a basis for an intensifying debate on media performance and demands for accountability in the second period. Where initially my starting point in the media performance debate was based on the concepts media responsibility and accountability, this longitudinal analysis shows that two other concepts play and equal important role: trust and responsiveness.

This shift in the media debate from an emphasis on structure towards a focus on performance coincides with a change in policy orientation from ‘government’ to ‘governance’. Issues such as press concentration and the position of public broadcasting were discussed in terms of government regulation. The performance debate from the turn of the century puts a greater emphasis on the responsibility of the different media institutions and organisations through self-regulatory measures. Also, pro-active initiatives to be more responsive to the public show an attempt for a shared responsibility, where media organisations are encouraged, stimulated and directed not only to be held to account but also to be responsible in their public task for a democratic society.
This research supports the supposition that the debate on media performance has increased. However, this was a gradual process not only triggered by specific incidents but substantiated by long-term structural problems. This shift in debate has led to more attention for accountability, openness, responsiveness and dialogue. Behind these shifts seems to lie the overarching problem of a supposedly declining trust in the media, as voiced by the political elite. There seems to be a trend from the ‘old’ situation where a culture of public service dominated, to a ‘new’, commercialised, media landscape where trust does not seem to be as self-evident anymore. Both government and media have responded by introducing new instruments of accountability and measures to take the public’s voice more into consideration. Generally speaking, this trend might indicate a gradual shift from a trust society towards an accountability society. Even though only voiced in one interview, a careful assumption can be made that the commercial broadcasting sector appears less bothered by the increase in criticisms and the growing demand for accountability. Yet, it might have the unintended consequence of stimulating the debate on media performance.

The debate has changed its tone from predominantly defensive to much more solution oriented. It remains to be seen whether taking the public into consideration and listening to and connecting with the public (being responsive) is a response to the structural problems of competition and audience decline or an answer to public’s discontent on media performance. The content analysis and the interviews suggest that this vulnerable position of newspapers and public service broadcasters might be the main reason that the media have taken responsive measures, being increasingly occupied with accommodating the wishes of the audience.

This chapter has provided an analysis of the media performance debate over a period of 20 years. The results confirm a shift in attitude and in policy, from a defensive to a more pro-active attitude of the media and from a more regulatory culture to greater focus on self-initiated measures to regain the trust of the public. The media performance debate suggests that a correction of the market is required, and with government at a distance reliance on self-regulation seems a good alternative solution. However, the unease between media and politics regarding the arrangement of media governance structures (striking a balance between regulatory and self-regulatory measures) raises
the question of the feasibility, effectiveness and professional internalization of many of the discussed and implemented measures. That is an empirical question, though, that will be addressed in chapter 5, 6 and 7. First, however, in the following chapter I will elaborate on four theoretical notions that appear to be central in the debate on media performance: trust, responsibility, accountability and responsiveness.