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

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Chapter 3

In media we trust?

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3.1 Introduction

Previous chapters showed that media’s role as responsible informer is being challenged and a demand for accountability is heard. Initially, the central premise of this research comprised of two concepts: media responsibility and accountability. Taking a closer look at the debate the previous chapter showed that two other concepts are brought to light: trust and responsiveness. Criticism on the media has put doubts on the trust in media performance. In response, media are not only discussing self-regulating accountability measures, but also looking into ways to engaging in dialogue with the public, understanding their view of society and taking these into consideration.

Thus, the media performance debate appears to be centred around four concepts: trust, responsibility, accountability and responsiveness. Although regularly used in everyday parlance, their actual meaning is often ambiguous and their conceptualization puzzling. The aim of this chapter is to pinpoint the meaning of these four, not-easily defined and rather abstract concepts and discuss the challenges and changes to these meanings.

It should be noted that this chapter is the result of a theoretical and conceptual expedition. This process took a cyclic character, meaning that it was not based on a linear process in which the longitudinal analysis preceded the theoretical literature review. The exploration of these concepts is based on theoretical literature and the empirical results of Chapter 2. The case studies (in Chapters 5, 6, and 7) offered me the possibility to redefine or specify the somewhat vague theoretical notions.


3.2 Trust

The debate around the role of the media in society often alludes to trust or, more specifically, to its disappearance. However, the picture that emerges is confusing. On the one hand, trust in media and their performance has become a pressing issue, indicated by both media scholars (Bakir & Barlow, 2007; Jansen & Drok, 2005; Kiousis, 2001) and the public (Eurobarometer, 2006, 2010; SCP, 2009). Entrusted with the power and responsibility of meaning construction and sense making, the media particularly lose the trust of the political elite, who blame them not only for a distorted portrayal of their trade but also for the public’s mistrust of it. On the other hand, the public is still using the media as a reliable source of information (Trouw, 3 Feb. 2005). Also, while overall trust in institutions in the Netherlands is decreasing, media, police and army still rank relatively high in trust, compared to political parties (SCP, 2009).

The term trust in this context is linked to the relationships between the public, media and power-holders (Jones, 2004; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). More generally, trust is the basis for social order and social cohesion in society (Durkheim, 1964; Luhmann, 1979; Simmel, 1950). Some form of trust is needed for collective behaviour.

A closer look at several academic disciplines, such as sociology, economy, organisational behaviour, communication theory, gives a better understanding of the nature of this concept. In sociological theories trust is seen as a relational term, where the trustor places trust in the trustee (the person being trusted). The former can, of course, often not be certain that the latter will indeed act in his interest. Trust can be based on past experience but, in the absence of that, on expectations or as Baier puts it, “trust is the reliance on others’ competence and willingness to look after, rather than harm, things one cares about which are entrusted to their care” (1986: 259).

Putnam (1995) and Uslaner (2002) state that trust is a prerequisite for social capital, which is based on networks, community membership, and norms and values, enabling participants to act more effectively to reach shared goals. Putnam’s theory of social capital presumes that the more we connect with other people the more we trust them and vice versa (1995: 665). To this
Fukuyama (1996) added that this in turn leads to better performance and higher economic capital in organisations. Giddens (1990), describing the transition from traditional to modern societies, sees a shift from personal trust secured by face-to-face contact with family and community to faceless commitment and to trust in the working of types of knowledge of which the lay-person is largely ignorant.

In theories derived from economics and organisational behaviour, the focus is on risk factors and opportunistic behaviour (Arrow, 1974). Sabel (1993) considers trust to be:

…the mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit another’s vulnerabilities. When parties to an exchange trust each other, they share a mutual confidence that others will not exploit any adverse selection, moral hazard, hold-up, or any other vulnerabilities that might exist in a particular exchange (1993: 1133).

Economic transactions are often characterised in principal—agent relationships, where two parties have contractual obligations based on hierarchical relations (Bovens, 2005; Gray et al., 1987; Nooteboom, 2002). The principal takes a risk in trusting the agent to act not only out of self-interest, but also in the interest of the principal as part of a contractual commitment. In this relationship cooperation and trust between the parties are essential for an effective result. This cooperation leads to more trust in others, whether they are familiar or strangers. With the latter, however, more cooperation is needed since there are no past experiences to refer to (La Porta et al., 1997).

In media theory, trust is also based on a relationship between two actors: the media and their public, whether these are information receiving citizens or information providing politicians.

The psychological root of media power stems from the relations of credibility and trust that different media organisations have succeeded in developing with members of their audience. This bond is based on the fulfilment of audience expectations and the validation of past trust relationships, which in turn are dependent on legitimized and institutional routines of information presentation evolved over time by the media (Blumler & Cananwich, 1995: 13).
The assumption is that if media are not trusted, the public might turn away from the media, which can have consequences for the democratic performance and thus social order of society. Whereas economic and sociological scholars emphasise the macro level of trust in society and the micro level of the individual, the role of the media adds another layer because of their mediating role between politics and the public (Bakir & Barlow, 2007). But theirs is not only a mediating role, but also a dominant and steering one, referred to as mediatization. This is the increasing importance of media in the political process and the dependent way politics comes to term with that (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999).

In political communication theory trust, or the lack of it, is discussed in the relationship between media and political actors, and between media and the public. The consumption of specific media content can mobilize public opinion, attitudes towards politics and politicians, and voter choice (e.g. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2007; De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Patterson, 2002). Several US scholars claim that the critical portrayal of politics has a negative effect on media consumers, resulting in increasing political cynicism among the public (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckman & Buhr, 2001). Robinson (1976) speaks of a ‘media malaise’ and Cappella & Jamieson (1997) of a ‘spiral of cynicism’. They claim that news media primarily report strategic news, focused on candidate style and language, on winning and losing, and with an emphasis on opinion polls, which not only leads to public distrust of politics and politicians, but also to civic disengagement.

However, in Europe little evidence has been found for this claim (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000 – see also Bennett et al., 1999, for a dissenting voice in the US). Norris (2000) argues for a virtuous circle in which people exposed to news media have more political knowledge and have more trust in government and the political system and are more likely to participate in election campaigns.

Thus, the effect of the mediatization of politics on trust remains ambiguous. This is not only due to conflicting empirical findings and contextual differences, but might also be related to a conceptual confusion. Often the concepts mistrust, scepticism, cynicism and even negativism are used interchangeably.
Tsfati tries to untangle the differences, describing media scepticism as “the subjective feeling of alienation or mistrust toward the mainstream news media” (2003:67). Media cynicism has a negative valence compared with the more neutral media scepticism.

What makes trust, cynicism or scepticism in the media even more difficult to define are the ambiguous consequences for media use. While one would expect distrust in media to put people off, Tsfati and Cappella (2003, 2005) found that people watch news they do not trust. “Seeing is not necessarily believing and believing and trusting are only moderately correlated with seeing” (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003: 518). The British philosopher O’Neill (2002) referred to this and concludes that since people do still consume media, whether they trust them or not, there is no real crisis in trust, but more a “culture of suspicion”.

To conclude, in all its abstraction, trust is of crucial importance in contemporary society because of its role as social glue between different actors. With regard to the media in the Netherlands, in the past trust has been more or less self-evident or taken for granted, out of loyalty, experience or expectation: the implicit assumption is that they do serve the public interest. But in these days of individualisation media organisations can no longer automatically rely on the loyalty of their publics; they have to (re-)establish a trust relationship with the individual members of an audience no longer organised in collective groups. The increasing complexity in society, less tangible trust relations in general and the assumed power of the media in particular has put trust in the media as to their role and their performance into question and perhaps even intensified the issue of media trust. Where it is a precondition for order in society, investing in trust might also function as a remedy when social cohesion is at stake. At the same time, the supposedly waning trust in the media should also be seen in a positive light. In a more individualized and de-pillarized society, people have shown themselves to be more critical of how the media perform and take their responsibility. A certain amount of wariness and scepticism might well be needed for media to perform in the interest of the public and thus be good for democracy (Weintraub & Pinkleton, 1999).
3.3 Media responsibility

Where trust is a precondition for a well-functioning society, responsibility of the media is a prerequisite for trust (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004b; Brants & Bardoel, 2008). At an institutional level, however, the media are accused of not adequately serving their democratic functions of informing the public, providing a platform for debate and critically investigating power holders in the public interest. At a professional level journalists are criticized for keeping less to the fundamental journalistic norms of providing reliable, complete and balanced information and appearing to be more interested in scandal, sensation and the personal (RMO, 2003).

The idea of media responsibility has its roots in the liberal thinking about the media. Firstly, the media are responsible for providing citizens with information about political and social life, their information or gatekeeper function. Information should be accurate and objective, and provide the cognitive basis for democratic decision-making. Secondly, they should provide citizens with a platform for dialogue to be able to express their wishes and opinions, their expression or platform function. And finally, the media should serve as a watchdog for the public regarding the conduct of political and other actors and institutions, their critical or watchdog function (Van Cuilenburg & McQuail, 1982; Wildenmann & Kaltefleiter, 1965).

Liberal thinkers such as John Milton in the seventeenth century already believed that freedom of the press implies an obligation to provide reliable information and a platform for dialogue and to be a critical watchdog and does not mean answering to any external claims or being held accountable by other power holders (Bardoel & Van Cuilenburg, 2003; McQuail, 2005). In the nineteenth century John Stuart Mill held that these roles are best guaranteed in a free market, creating a free marketplace of ideas (Bardoel & Van Cuilenburg, 2003; McQuail, 2005). The tradition of freedom of the press was always closely linked to the idea of freedom of the individual, and that of countering censorship and suppression of opinion (McQuail, 2005).

The notion of media responsibility saw a revival just after the Second World War, although less inspired by Mill and more by a concern of commercial media in a free market. The idea that information is not just a commodity,
but also a merit good to which people are entitled as members of society (Musgrave, 1998), also played an important role. In its report *A Free and Responsible Press*, the American Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) advocated the media’s duty to serve society. As the greatest dangers to a responsible press they saw its economic structures, the industrial organisation of modern society and the failures of the press to recognize its responsibility towards the needs of society (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004; Wieten, 1998). The social responsibility theory the report formulated was not only popular in the United States but also in Europe, where, after the Second World War in which the press had often played such a dubious role, it helped to stimulate a new beginning (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004b). The Hutchins Commission made clear that the duty of the press was to provide “a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning” (1947: 21).

Since then, the term social responsibility has been used by politicians, policy makers, journalists and academics alike, albeit with different meanings. In a longitudinal research of media policy papers of the Dutch government, Bardoel and Brants (2003) found three different interpretations. First, it refers to media content, which should be accurate, objective and of high quality. Second, it refers to the media’s democratic function for society in providing information and allowing for discussion and debate. Lastly, social responsibility refers to organisational status. Content producers should be independent of governmental and business pressures, and fulfil an obligation to society.

Both in the press and the public service broadcasting sector social responsibility has historically been closely connected with press freedom. However, where the press is usually independent of any regulation, the public service broadcasting sector has historically been assigned a number of tasks that are related to their responsibility. The reasons were twofold: regulation was needed to distribute the scarce number of radio frequencies and to come to terms with the socio-cultural needs neglected by the media market. Moreover, with the introduction of television many were afraid of its intrusive nature and the social impact it might have (Bardoel & Van Cuilenburg, 2003; Hoffmann-Riem, 1996).
In conclusion, traditionally a free press in a free market was seen as a prerequisite for media to perform responsibly, but nowadays most believe that media responsibility and press freedom can go hand in hand (Bertrand, 2003; Hodges, 1986; McQuail, 2003). Hodges states that “it is possible to have a press that is both free and responsible but it is impossible to have a press that is both totally free and completely accountable” (Hodges, 1986, in Plaisance, 2000: 257). Bertrand (2003) holds that freedom is not a goal in itself but an instrument to serve society. It is important that the rights and freedoms of the media are embedded in the acknowledgement of social responsibility as an integral part of a modern social system.

3.4 Media accountability

As with the other concepts, accountability is often referred to in policy and political documents, but equally lacks a precise definition. Concepts such as transparency, involvement, responsibility, responsiveness and governance are often used interchangeably. Moreover, there is little agreement among academics, policy makers, government officials and media professionals themselves as to what this accountability should comprise and how it should be organised (Bovens, 2005; McQuail, 2003; Mulgan, 2000).

Accountability is used here to describe the obligations media have to their stakeholders, and is seen as a dynamic interaction between the parties involved (McQuail, 2005; Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000). Accountability is a broad concept, not only limited to formal regulation, but also embracing the wider obligations media have to their stakeholders and the way in which they render account for their performance in a dynamic interaction between parties involved (McQuail, 2005; Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000). The key difference between the main concepts of responsibility and accountability is, as Hodges states, “responsibility has to do with defining proper conduct; accountability with compelling it” (Hodges, 1986:14). Compared with governance, accountability holds media to act on behalf of their stakeholders and does not include the broad range of actors and the dynamic structure of rules between the actors (Donges, 2007). It is part of a wider governance system.

Media accountability is defined by “all the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the
quality and/or consequences of publication” (McQuail, 2005: 207). It consists of the interaction between two parties where one is required to account for one’s action to another. This resembles the economic agency theory, which presupposes that relations are asymmetrical, where an accountable party explains or justifies actions to the party to whom the account is owed (Bovens, 2005; Swift, 2001). Swift (2001) and McCandless (2001) make the assumption that due to the perceived lack of trust in public institutions there is a greater need for explicit accountability relations.

Often conveyed as a synonym for accountability, transparency is an element of accountability (Bovens, 2007). It is a prerequisite for an actor to hold the agent to account. When institutions are not willing to be transparent in their performance, they will not likely show their accountability and it will be difficult for agents to hold the actor or institution to account.

In this context, there is a clear shift from general and abstract thinking about media responsibility - defined as the media’s obligations to society (McQuail, 2003) - to more practical and concrete mechanisms through which media are held accountable as to the quality of their performance. In line with this, the emphasis has shifted from a negative to a positive approach, from liability to answerability (Christians, 1989; McQuail, 1997, 2005). Liability refers to the “potential harm that media publication might cause”, while answerability implies “non-confrontational and emphasises debate and dialogue as the best means to bridge differences that arise between media and their critics or those affected” (McQuail 2005: 209).

**Media accountability types**

Several scholars (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a; Christians, 1989; Hodges, 1986; McQuail, 1997, 2003) have translated the concept of media accountability into more practical terms and distinguish different, not always mutually exclusive, types or models of accountability. McQuail (1997, 2003) and Bardoel and d’Haenens (2004a) differentiate four conceptual types of accountability: political, market, public and professional. Political accountability comprises of responsibilities through binding rules and laws in order to guarantee a free communication within society as part of a public good. Moreover it has the purpose to protect the rights of others and the general society against any harm caused by media. These include legal and enforceable regulatory
measures. The public broadcasting model fits this type, as laws and regulations exist to secure interference-free transmission, to safeguard public access and to provide quality, not determined by the market. However, in an increasingly turbulent and moving media landscape many academics believe merely political accountability is not sufficient (Blumler & Hoffman-Riem, 1992; McQuail, 1997; Mitchell & Blumler, 1994). Bertrand (2003) adds that law is slow, expensive and not adaptable to continuous change.

The second type, market accountability, spurs media to react to changing consumption patterns and new media technologies. It is based on the notion of a free market and the principle of supply and demand (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). Media are held to account and are judged by (the interest of) the consumer. Consumers can cease to use the media or show their loyalty by watching the programme or keeping the newspaper subscription. In terms of Hirschman (1970), one can either exit from the relationship or demonstrate loyalty. McQuail (2003) considers this type of accountability to be quite intangible and not related to specific instruments but more to its own logic. However, specific instruments such as conducting audience and market research can help media organisations understand their market. In addition, when taking a more narrow definition of the market, media organisations and conglomerations can be held accountable by their shareholders and advertisers.

While it is not surprising that commercial media carry out market research, public service broadcasters are also increasingly using tools to understand their consumer market (Brants & Slaa, 1994). Yet, one can question if the motive behind it is to improve the quality of media service and to show accountability to the public or to enhance its saleability and perform in order to please and be responsive to the consumer and thus to be essentially accountable to their shareholders and advertisers. Chapter 2 showed that a point of criticism regarding media performance is that media have become too commercialised and focused on sensation and this increasing commercialization has substantiated the debate on media performance. If this is the case, the market alone and the related instruments are not sufficient to hold the media to account.

The third type, public accountability, refers to media serving the public interest to provide information in a self-regulatory manner. When citizens
or the public believe media are falling short in doing so they can hold the media to account. Public accountability takes the form of media’s voluntary obligation to find ways to strengthen the relationship with citizens. The objective behind it is to ensure orientation towards the public and to show social responsibility. The instruments for reaching this objective can vary, but all relate to responding to public criticism and debate with a self-regulatory structure (McQuail, 2003).

Professional accountability, lastly, also has a self-regulatory character. It has the objective for media professionals to be accountable to one’s peers with the final goal of enhancing the quality of performance, raising the status of the profession. It is about the media profession itself setting its own standards of good practice. It is related to the professionalisation of journalism to counter the political and market systems (Bardoe & d’Haenens, 2004a). However, it is not only about professionalisation of the media occupation, but also about being horizontally accountable to the media profession. This can take the form of organisational codes of ethics to set journalistic standards, written guidelines often used within media organisations as a form of internal self-regulation. It serves to ameliorate media’s corporate responsibility and more importantly, it serves the purpose to protect media independence from government interference (Christians, 1989). However, this instrument of accountability is not unproblematic, since it is difficult to capture journalists’ work in one single code (Christians, 1989; Gordon & Kitross, 1999).

Professional accountability also takes the form of evaluation and self-reflection meetings and informal get-togethers for discussion and evaluation purposes and for the journalists to potentially hold each other to account. These instruments are internally managed and directed towards the media professional, while public accountability is directed towards external actors.

Examples of self-regulatory accountability instruments of which much has been written are the council for journalism and the ombudsman. In many countries across the world, some form of council for journalism is used to ensure public accountability. Councils for journalism range in member composition, financing, scope and procedures (Bertrand, 2003), but in general their objective is to handle complaints made by citizens and sometimes to make general judgments about media ethical issues. Yet, many media believe
councils to be implicit political accountability instruments and not accessible to the public (Bertrand, 2003; Koene, 2009; Mentink, 2006). The Council for Journalism in the Netherlands was established in 1960 and has the task of evaluating the journalistic behaviour of both organised and non-organised journalists and, if possible, mediating in pending complaints (Mentink, 2006). The judgments do not have an enforceable character, but the Council highly recommends media organisations to publish a rectification when the verdict is grounded. The role of the Council in the Netherlands has been a recurring subject of debate, since the media themselves do not (always) seem to take it seriously (Koene, 2009; Mentink, 1960). The Council is often referred to as a ‘paperless tiger’. Since 2000, several established media organisations have ceased to collaborate with the Council, following complaints about the level of sanctioning, the minimal effect it achieves and the limited opportunities to file complaints. In 2003, the Council for Social Development (RMO [Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling]) proposed to strengthen its position, resulting in several initiatives such as looking into judgments concerning Internet publications, elaborating its mediating tasks, and speeding up its complaints procedures and making them more efficient. Council for Journalism also set up a covenant in which a number of editors-in-chief agreed to collaborate with the procedures and publish the final judgment¹ (Koene, 2009).

The media ombudsman is another instrument of self-regulatory accountability. This is usually someone employed by the newspaper or broadcaster to deal with complaints from the public and thus functions as an intermediary between the medium and its public (Ettema & Glasser, 1987; Nemeth & Sanders, 1999; Van Dalen & Deuze, 2006). However, in different countries the media ombudsman has never really caught on (Newton, Hodges & Keith, 2004) or are under pressure due to financial cutbacks (Evers, Groenhart & Groesen, 2009).

To complicate things, several accountability instruments can have characteristics of both public and professional accountability. The ombudsman is exhibiting public accountability when dealing with public complaints and being

¹ The covenant states that media will publish or broadcast the verdicts of the council. However, since the audio-visual sector complained, the Council for Journalism has adapted the covenant and also accepts a publication on the website instead of the concerned program. Moreover, since March 1, 2010 the Council for Journalism only asks to publish when the case is (partly) grounded. Before all verdicts were asked to be published. (www.rvdj.nl)
transparent to the public through a column in the newspaper or website. However, when the ombudsman deals with a public complaint by addressing the issue only within the organisation this is professional accountability. Once he or she answers the complainant or publishes something about the issue it becomes public accountability. Similarly, the council for journalism has the objective to serve the public’s interest by looking into public complaints and stimulating a public debate on media ethical issues. However, when media do not publish the verdict for public purposes and the debate centres primarily among media professionals, it takes more the form of professional accountability.

Professional and public accountability mechanisms are considered ‘soft’ measures and are most preferred by media institutions and professionals, because they supposedly fit the principle of freedom of the press. McQuail believes that ‘harder’ political accountability measures might have “a chilling effect on media, fearful of economic and political penalties” (1997: 517). Reliance on voluntary cooperation is more likely to have a positive effect on the media professional. Journalists, especially in the press, have functioned relatively independently (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a). Just like in other corporations the need for dialogue with stakeholders is preferred over penalties or implementing tough restrictions. Moreover, to hold the media to account through legal mechanisms is especially difficult because it is often hard to prove liability for consequences of publication. Solid criteria of good media performance are lacking and the costs of private harm and public benefit from publication are difficult to balance (McQuail, 1997). But, the difficulty of showing accountability to the public is that the public is more of an abstract category (Ang, 1991).

Other distinctions of accountability have been made by Hodges (1986) and Bertrand (2003). Hodges makes a distinction between assigned, contracted and self-imposed accountability. Assigned is associated with liability in that it is not voluntary, but obliged by law. Contracted and self-imposed relate to the public and are not enforceable, but the former implies some kind of agreement or voluntary contract between media and a third party. The latter is a voluntary action of the media to show its moral obligation to society. Bertrand (2003) developed media accountability systems (MAS), embracing more than 60 instruments to improve media service to the public, like evaluation, monitoring, education, feedback and communication.
A refined subdivision of self-regulatory accountability

Chapter 2 showed that due to a shift from government to governance there has been greater claims of public and professional accountability and less of political accountability. Self-regulatory accountability types are not only discussed more frequently, but also put forward more by the media themselves. However, there is potentially a large and, I would argue, conceptually rather confusing set of self-regulatory options. I would opt for a more closely defined subdivision of professional and public accountability. Professional accountability can be subdivided in two types: covert and overt. The first is directed towards the professional journalist within the organisation, the second to the profession as a whole, even outside the actual media organisation. A code of conduct only intended for internal organisational purposes is covert; ethical standards that apply to the whole journalist profession are overt. Similarly, public accountability is overt when the media show their accountability to the public at large, while it is covert when it aims at responding to an individual complaint. When the ombudsman responds to a reader’s complaint by personal communication it is covert; when he publishes a column it is overt.

In addition, I prefer a more specified conceptualization of self-regulatory accountability (public and professional). Whereas self-regulatory accountability is essentially voluntary and initiated by the media themselves, there is an increasing involvement of third parties to facilitate it through voluntary covenants or contracts, similar to what Hodges (1986) calls contracted public accountability. However, contracted accountability is a confusing term, as media are not forced to agree (then it would be political or assigned accountability), but are encouraged (in a friendly but serious manner) to collaborate with or adhere to the suggestions. I therefore prefer the term ‘suggested’ to ‘contracted’ accountability and ‘self-initiated’ to ‘self-imposed’ accountability. The latter shows that they are proposed and initiated by media themselves and not imposed upon them.

In conclusion, media accountability is more practical than media responsibility. As part of a larger governance framework, accountability emphasises the processes of the media’s obligations towards a diverse number of actors including politics, the public, the market and the media profession. Governance, however, does not only relate to accountability, but also to negotiation, accommodation and dialogue, which brings in the concept responsiveness.
3.5 Media responsiveness

The debate on media performance and responsibility, and the perceived decrease in trust have not only created greater demands for accountability, but also a need for the media to be more responsive to the public and society. In addition, the continuous structural challenges the media had been coping with, were also a reason for them to be responsive to the wishes and demands of the citizen and consumer. These attempts are mainly brought about by a growing concern for the widening gap between media organisations and their public. Responsiveness is often used in a political and policy context. Politicians are expected to listen and be receptive and capable of feeling the needs and concerns of the electorate (Page & Shapiro, 1983). Especially in times of decreasing voter loyalty and trust, and in response to state bureaucracy, government and public administration should listen to and answer the needs of the citizen (Vigoda, 2002).

Taking this idea to the media context, responsiveness means taking the public’s interests and needs into account. Media should “...listen to and provide a platform for the expression of anxieties, wants and opinions, or (...) focus on needs defined more in market terms” (Brants & Bardoel, 2008: 475). Where responsibility is more descriptive and implies proper conduct prior to actual behaviour, responsiveness has a more active and anticipatory character. The difference between responsiveness and public accountability is that the former relates to taking the issues of the public into account by engaging, participating and showing involvement, while the latter means justifying one’s performance to the public.

Partly based on the longitudinal analysis (see Chapter 2) Brants and De Haan (2010) see a picture emerging of three types of responsiveness: civic, strategic and empathic. The idea of civic responsiveness is based on taking the public into account, listening to and connecting with them. The starting point is the public’s agenda in order to be socially responsible and to bridge the gap with the public. Members of the public are addressed as citizens and the way to connect with the public is through an open, iterative and interactive approach. Civic responsiveness coincides with Schudson’s trustee model of media responsibility, where professional journalists provide news that they think is necessary for citizens to participate in a democracy, i.e. show responsibility.
(Schudson, 1999). However, while having a similar objective, responsiveness is more active and interactive and starts from a less paternalistic point of view. Instead, the media and the public learn from each other.

The public or civic journalism movement is an example of this civic responsiveness. In the early 1990s, regional newspapers in the US started experimenting with involving the public in the news process (Glasser, 1999; Rosen, 1991). While this movement has been much criticized and the practical impact has been questioned both in the US and in Europe (Brants & Siune, 1998; McDevitt, 2003; Schudson, 1998), there are currently various examples of civic responsiveness including newspapers collaborating with readers for input of stories.

The media also connect with the public as a way of binding them as consumers, taking the form of more commercial or strategic responsiveness. This implies a market-driven instead of a social motive: persuasive communication instead of interactive communication with the public. In this sense, strategic responsiveness is closely connected to market accountability in that both are based on supply and demand, and taking account of the interest of the public to guarantee their loyalty. Essentially, market accountability only differs in its narrow definition of being accountable to advertisers and shareholders. Strategic responsiveness is not only characteristic of commercial media organizations, but in a competitive environment, public service broadcasting is increasingly obliged to find ways to engage with and relate to the public. For example, public media organizations invest in audience research to find out what interests readers, listeners, and viewers to increase audience reach and profit revenue (Brants, 2007; Mitchell & Blumler, 1994; Stanyer, 2007).

In the last type, empathic responsiveness, journalists side with the public as losers of modernity or victims of public and state authorities. Journalists function as a caretaker and bond with the public or victim and speak on behalf of this person or group and actively try to solve their problem. Traditionally, this type of responsiveness was visible in public service broadcasting where consumer and service programmes had the objective of helping the victims of bureaucracy. More recently, in an often excited and angry tone, empathic responsiveness takes a ‘louder’ form in that it addresses issues against the political, economical and cultural elites that relate to an uprising trend of
populist movements. Journalists combine empathy with participatory styles of action journalism. For example, in the Dutch program *PremTime* the objective is to locate problems within society and to possibly solve them. Journalists take sides with the victims of these problems.

Concluding, responsiveness is a way to bridge the gap with the public, bind or bond with them on a voluntary and less institutionalized basis. It is a way to focus more on citizens’ interests, taking them into consideration by listening to, involving and engaging with the public.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the current debate about trust in and social responsibility of the media at a conceptual level. Blaming them for no longer behaving and performing in a socially responsible way, trust in media is put into question, at least by political actors. Requiring measures of accountability and responsiveness seems to be an attempt to reclaim the responsible behaviour of the media and restore the trust. Figure 3.1 illustrates the four concepts and sub-concepts in relation to each other. Where trust and responsibility are the problem of media performance, responsiveness and accountability are possible solutions to improve the responsibility and ultimately trust in the media. The concepts responsiveness and accountability can be subdivided in different forms. Types of accountability are ranged according to whom one should be accountable to, while responsiveness relates to why media are taking the public into consideration.

Along with societal changes the relationship between media, government and the public has shifted which in turn has led to shifts in meaning of the four central concepts related to media performance. There is a change to a more active approach of responsibility in terms of accountability and responsiveness. The focus is not only on taking their responsibility but also showing openness, being transparent and engaging in a dialogue with the public.

Responsibility is a prerequisite of trust but since trust is a subjective feeling that one cannot force upon someone, accountability and responsiveness are seen to serve as the medicine to ameliorate this crisis of media responsibility. Where in the past mutual trust guaranteed social cohesion, horizontal governance structures and soft accountability measures might make up for this loss of
trust. Similarly, McQuail (2003, 2005) sees a shift from regulatory focus on the liability of the media, to more attention on self-regulatory governance mechanisms, in line with the idea of answerability. But, accountability is not a substitute for trust, since any type of accountability depends on some level of trust in the actors concerned. However, in spite of these shifts there is as yet no consensus on how the unique democratic characteristics of the media - freedom of press and autonomy of the profession - can live together with more responsive and accountability mechanisms.

The conceptual analysis now leaves us with an important question. Is this shift in emphasis visible in media practice? Are media aware of the self-assertive citizen and the cynically retreating consumer? Are they responding in terms of accountability and responsiveness to regain the trust of the public? How are they coping with the tension between this response and their responsibility? In the following chapters I will analyse how media organisations are currently responding to the demands for accountability and responsiveness and to what extent the introduced instruments are adopted. Are they merely an issue of public debate or have they actually received a place in the organisation’s structure and culture, influencing daily practice?
Figure 3.1: A conceptual model

New demands on media responsibility, accountability and responsiveness

- **Trust**
- **Responsibility**
  - Informer
  - Platform
  - Watchdog
- **Responsiveness**
  - Civic
  - Strategic
  - Empathic
- **Accountability**
  1. Political
  2. Market
  3. Public
     - Overt
     - Covert
  4. Professional
     - Overt
     - Covert

- Solutions: suggested
- Self-initiated