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

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Citation for published version (APA):
de Haan, Y. M. (2012). Between professional autonomy and public responsibility: accountability and responsiveness in Dutch media and journalism.
Chapter 5

“In times of insecurity we have to cherish our readers”:
A case study of de Volkskrant
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5.1 Introduction

This chapter will look into the Dutch newspaper sector by taking de Volkskrant as the unit of analysis. Both structure and performance issues have challenged Dutch newspapers of today. Historically, newspapers in the Netherlands were affiliated with and served as the mouthpiece of political and social movements. Readers were loyal to their newspapers as they belonged to the same ideology or ‘pillar’. The depillarization process, which began in the 1960s, has changed the relationship between newspapers and their loyal readers into a more commercial relationship, where the newspaper sees the reader more as a consumer and the reader no longer chooses based on tradition (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004b). In addition, the increasing number of press mergers in the 1970s and 1990s and the subsequent decreasing number of circulation figures created large media conglomerates that are competing with each other now more than ever (Bakker & Scholten, 2009). There is a focus on getting the attention of large parts of the public. These rather commercial motivations have brought into question the public role of the press and its social responsibility. At the same time, the depillarization process created a climate in which journalism could professionalize and emancipate from its partisan role. This led to the elaboration of professional standards and the introduction of a formal editorial statute. In addition to these structural changes, since the turn of the century political actors and the public have begun to scrutinize the media following several incidents where their performance was at stake (see Chapter 1 and 2).

1 A shorter version of this chapter will be published in: M. Broersma & C. Peters (Eds.) Retelling journalism: conveying stories in a digital age. Leuven/Paris: Peeters Academic Press
As a result of these challenges to structure and performance the relation between citizens and the press has become more distant; Bardoel and d’Haenens even claim that the position of the citizen “has become weaker” (2004b: 166). Being accountable and responsive are ways to re-address the media’s public role and to invest in the relationship with the public. Yet, in this liberal system freedom of the press does not sit well with accountability (McQuail, 2003).

In the Netherlands there has always been quite a defensive attitude towards accountability. Dutch journalists are not too fond of codes of conduct (Evers, 2002) and several media organisations have turned their backs on the Council for Journalism, refusing to go to the hearings or to publish the council’s verdict. However, the increasing criticism of media performance and demand for more accountability in combination with a number of structural media changes has resulted in some changes that indicate that media organisations and journalists have begun to invest in the relationship with the public in terms of accountability and responsiveness.

This chapter describes which measures de Volkskrant has taken and to what extent these are adopted in the organisational structure and culture. Founded in 1919, de Volkskrant is one of the leading quality newspapers in the Netherlands and has undergone the gradual development from a pillarised to a more depillarised and commercial media environment. De Volkskrant was also selected because in the past ten years its role and news coverage had been questioned several times during specific incidents, such as the Balkan war in the 1990s and the Iraq war in 2003. At the same time, the editor-in-chief at the time of research, who was also chair of the Netherlands Association of Editors-in-Chief (NGH [Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteuren]) until 2006, has been closely involved in the debate on media performance and accountability.

The results of this case study will be presented, starting with a short outline of the daily journalistic routine to provide the context in which this research took place. Based primarily on document and observation analysis, I will give an overview of the different types of instruments of accountability and responsiveness that the newspaper adheres to or has initiated. Finally, based on a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the observations and interviews, I will evaluate how the instruments have been adopted and used in daily journalistic practice.
5.2 The daily journalistic routine

In contrast to its previous seven-storey concrete home, since 2007 de Volkskrant has been situated in a new transparent glass building. The editorial and marketing departments are both located on the same floor, merely separated by glass walls, which was unthinkable in the past, as it was a taboo for journalists and marketeers to even talk to each other. The composition of the board of the directors of the newspaper has also changed since 2008. Currently the editor-in-chief and the publisher director together form the board; where the former is responsible for the content, the latter is responsible for the financial aspects of the newspaper. In the past, these were two separate departments in no way linked to each other. The management of the editorial department consists of an editor-in-chief and three deputy editors-in-chief. Every day one of the deputies or the editor-in-chief coordinates the news production of the day. There are five news units: national, international, economy, reporting and the political unit, with the latter located in The Hague, the country’s political centre. There is a separate opinion editorial unit responsible for the opinion and discussion pages in the newspaper. In addition, de Volkskrant has a number of weekly sections: Sport, Art and Books, Travel, a section with larger essays [Vervolg], Science, including academic news, [Wetenschap], and Heart & Soul, including lifestyle and psychology [Hart & Ziel]. On Saturday a weekly full-colour magazine is published with the newspaper.

The different news departments usually start the day at 10:00 am with a half-hour editorial meeting to discuss or reflect on the newspaper of the day and to brainstorm and plan articles collectively for the next day, or, as the majority of the heads and journalists said, “to bring us all together on the same page”. There is no fixed format for these meetings as it is left to the responsibility of the head of the editorial unit.

After the separate editorial meetings, the so-called ‘ten-thirty’ meeting starts, intended for the heads of the editorial units and management, yet any of the staff members is welcome to join the meeting. The purpose of this daily meeting is to reflect on the newspaper of the day and discuss the newspaper for the next, with a clear focus on the front page. In the 10:30 am meeting, the first plans or ideas are set for the front page. Each unit is responsible for its contribution to the newspaper with some editorial units having fixed pages to fill.
Throughout the day many informal discussions take place, fine-tuning the different activities. At 5:30 pm the same heads and deputies on duty come together with several editors of the night shift and the night head on duty. This meeting fits the purpose to make the final decisions for the front page, or as one of the heads stated “we are able to offer our pearls for page one”. In general, at around 6:30 pm, when the heads and deputies leave, the content and format of the newspaper is decided upon, unless breaking news comes in.

The editor-in-chief at the time of research held his position from 1995 till July 2010, after which his successor, a former correspondent of the newspaper, took the lead.

5.3 Accountability instruments

During my observation period the initial task was to detect the formal and informal mechanisms of accountability and responsiveness, after which I analysed how these instruments are evaluated and to what extent they are used in daily practice. Taking the theoretical definitions of accountability and responsiveness introduced in Chapter 3 as a starting point, I will first take a closer look at the existence of two types of accountability: professional and public. The newspaper does not adhere to political accountability instruments, since the press in the Netherlands has been free from any form of government intervention. Market accountability is visible through the fact that the newspaper operates in a free market. This means that by definition it is held accountable by the principle of supply and demand. It is probably better, however, to describe this as the newspaper being responsive to the consumer or its audience, as strategic responsiveness. As far as there is accountability, de Volkskrant at most adheres to or initiates self-regulatory instruments, being either public or professional. I will describe these instruments in the sequence in which they were introduced within the organisation. After that the issue of responsiveness will be dealt with.

5.3.1 Public accountability

To recapitulate from Chapter 3, public accountability means that media are held accountable by the public or show their accountability pro-actively to them. This can take an overt form, when addressing the public at large and covert, when responding to an individual reader.
Letters to the editor
A long established mechanism to be accountable to the readers is the letters to the editor. Since 1948, de Volkskrant has had a special readers’ letters section, originally based on letters and phone calls, nowadays more on emails. Out of the 400 letters received on a weekly basis, only a few are selected and published in the daily newspaper and on the website. The letters range from readers giving an opinion on a current theme, offering a compliment, providing more information for the journalist, and pointing out factual mistakes, to complaining about the news angle of the story. A separate letters’ editor is responsible for answering or forwarding them to the journalist concerned, indicating that this accountability instrument is both public and covert: individuals receive a personal reply and these responses are not published. Although no sanctions are imposed when journalists do not respond to readers’ complaints, the readers’ editor strongly encourages a response to the reader. Since the beginning of 2009, he has sent a weekly update of readers’ complaints to the editorial staff, informing and keeping them up to date on the readers’ concerns and thus implicitly stimulating to take the complaints seriously and respond to them (see Box 5.1 for an example of a weekly email).

Council for Journalism
Another ‘old’ mechanism of public accountability is the Council for Journalism [Raad voor de Journalistiek]. De Volkskrant acknowledges the Council for Journalism, which means that it pays a financial contribution, goes to a hearing when summoned, and publishes a rectification when the Council decides the complaint is legitimate. In its paper version, the newspaper mentions the collaboration with the Council. It uses the Council as an overt public accountability tool by publishing its verdicts. Not all media organisations publish the Council’s verdict; some instead come to an agreement with the individual, using the Council in a covert way.
Box 5.1. Example of the weekly email on readers’ responses (8-6-2009)

Dear colleagues,

We have a loyal group of followers that express their opinions daily. Their critique of the newspaper is generally not light, but they continue to follow us. Of the 400 letters we receive weekly only a percentage makes it into the newspaper. How our readers experience the paper is not something I will withhold from you. Starting today, every week I will send a message as to what issue is at the forefront.

When Wilders (a Dutch right-wing populist politician-YdH) is in the news it’s immediately ‘Wilders week’ at the letters editorial. With last Thursday’s news and the opening headline “Moroccan scores high in Rotterdam crime rate”, 35 angry or disappointed readers responded. The gist of these reactions was that we were playing into the hands of Wilders by publishing such a headline on election day. Moreover, the article on page 2 was a lot more nuanced, according to three readers. Was the headline written to attract as many readers as possible? X from Leiden wrote, “There must be a way to make clear to those who make the headlines that the commercial interest of attracting the maximum amount of readers should never come at the expense of a vulnerable sector within our society. They also have a civil responsibility for the political climate in the Netherlands. Such a headline demonstrates irresponsible behaviour. If they are unaware of this, the editorial and/or management should point this out to them.”

Journalist X wrote a reply wherein he explains the situation, which was appreciated as shown by the following reaction: “Thanks for the letter, I am very happy with this. I do not agree but that is a different matter. Kind regards, ...” But there was more this week. X wrote the last ‘In the Spirit of...’ last week Saturday. Twelve readers who were moved reacted, including X from Utrecht. “My comment does not have to be placed in the newspaper but I would like to compliment de Volkskrant with how ‘In the Spirit of...’ by Martin Bril has been enriched in recent weeks with such diverse contributions by different writers. It was indeed a tribute with which we sometimes got to know Martin Bril even better and realized how unique his manner of telling is. But the closure by X was the most moving and dignified and certainly written in the spirit of her father. No other conclusion would have been more fitting and it made me speechless.”

Regarding Thom Meens’ (ombudsman de Volkskrant- YdH) reconstruction of the coverage of the death of the wrong Jan Pen, three writers reacted cynically: “The editor-in-chief of the economics editorial unit of de Volkskrant calls the reporter on duty about the economist Jan Pen who may have passed away. The reporter does not know who Jan Pen is. I would gladly like to offer myself (college degree, 8 for economics and 9 for accounting) for the position of economics reporter for de Volkskrant because I am sure the position must be vacant. Kind regards, X from Almelo.

It is said that our readers must all be fools. Sometimes this does seem to be the case. X has already spent weeks writing about his passionate nights with Princess Maxima. In full detail. Not that he has actually experienced his descriptions but at is something he hopes for. “I will always wait for you, although it may take a long time before I can actually meet you. I NEVER WANT ANOTHER AGAIN.”

With kind regards, The letters editor
Ombudsman

In 1997, the editor-in-chief of *de Volkskrant* introduced a new accountability instrument. Inspired by American newspapers and media debate (e.g. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*), he appointed an ombudsman with the tasks "to give more room for complaints about our coverage. Often journalists do not have time, patience and enough distance to answer the emails and phone calls. The ombudsman should prevent this drawback”, as stated in the statute of the ombudsman (De Volkskrant, 2002). The formal tasks of the ombudsman consist of improving the journalistic quality and internal self-reflection. He writes a weekly column in the Saturday newspaper, based on a matter either pointed out by a reader or that he encountered himself. Recurring themes include the mores of online journalism, verification of sources, privacy issues and biased news (Evers, 2009). The columns do not seek to rebuke the involved journalists, but rather to raise awareness internally and to provide transparency and explanation externally. Thus, the ombudsman shifts between being overt and covert and being professionally and publicly accountable, depending on to whom he directs his communication and what the objectives of his actions are. For example, an issue that the ombudsman raises internally does not always have implications for his column and is not always visible to the reader, which means it then functions as a professional accountability instrument. When individually answering a complaint from a reader this is covert public accountability, but when he elaborates on the issue in his weekly column, this is overt. Although appointed by the editor-in-chief, the ombudsman has an independent status within the organisation. While officially the appointment is for two years, the ombudsman at the time of research was active from 2004 till January 2011. Three other ombudsmen preceded him. In May 2011, a new ombudsman was installed. The current editor-in-chief, in function since July 2010, wanted *de Volkskrant* to be the first newspaper to install a female ombudsman.

Author’s names

From the end of the 1990s the newspaper has made itself overtly accountable to the reader by publishing the author’s name with each article so that the journalists can be tracked and addressed personally. Even though e-mail addresses of journalists are not available to the reader and all the e-mails come to the inbox of the opinion editorial unit and the ombudsman, increasingly letters and e-mails contain the name of the journalist concerned, which
allows the ombudsman and readers’ editor to forward the email quickly to the journalist for response.

**Correction box**

In 2004, the newspaper initiated another instrument to make it more overtly accountable to the public: a correction box called ‘Supplements & Improvements’ [Aanvullingen & Verbeteringen], for which the ombudsman is responsible. This box lists and improves factual mistakes. Besides mistakes that the ombudsman has encountered himself or has been pointed out by a reader, increasingly journalists provide him with errors that they have noticed themselves. Larger mistakes that need more explanation are corrected through a rectification in the newspaper (see Box 5.2 for an example).

**Mediadebat**

A suggested public accountability instrument the newspaper collaborates with is the media debate organisation, Mediadebat. This organisation was founded in 2005 in collaboration with the Netherlands Union of Journalists (NVJ [Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten]), the Netherlands Newspaper Publishers Association (NDP [Nederlandse Dagbladpers]) and the public broadcaster news organisation NOS on the recommendation of the Council for Social Development (RMO [Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling]) and with financial help from government. Other financial contributors were the commercial broadcasters, RTL Nederland and SBS Broadcasting. Its goal is to stimulate public and media professional debate on the quality, reliability and diversity of journalism. As such the instrument functions both as public and professional accountability. De Volkskrant participates in these debates when invited, and representatives of the newspaper attend the debates regularly. Since 2010, however, the organisation stopped organizing debates while looking for collaboration with the Council for Journalism. Financial

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**Box 5.2. Rectification Jan Pen (well-known Dutch economist)**

Rectification
26/05/09

AMI/ER In de Volkskrant of Monday May 25th a notice was wrongly published that Jan Pen had passed away. This item was also placed on vk.nl on Sunday evening. The editorial of de Volkskrant was misled by two obituaries in Het Parool (a Dutch newspaper-YdH) announcing the death of Jan Pen. It turned out the notification concerned another Jan Pen. De Volkskrant has apologized to the economist Jan Pen and hereby does the same to its readers.
reasons seemed to be the major stumbling block. Since government funding had stopped the organisation was uncertain whether the media sector alone was willing to provide the necessary contribution.

**Nieuwsmonitor**

In 2005, the *Nieuwsmonitor* was set up to provide empirical data on media coverage. Even though it is not an instrument of accountability the idea was that it would form the basis for public debate and media self-reflection and thus as forms of public and professional accountability. It has an independent, academic status and through content analysis of media coverage on political issues and other specific incidents the Monitor aims to give the public an insight into how different media cover a specific topic. Not specifically being an accountability instrument, it can serve as a starting point to generate ideas for public and professional debate. In 2003, as part of a ‘triptych’ of accountability instruments including the media debate organisation and to strengthen the position of the Council for Journalism, the RMO also advised the news monitor should be created. Since then, it has received financial contribution from the Netherlands Press Fund [Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers], the journalists’ union NVJ and the publishers’ organisation NDP. From 2005 till 2009 it also received government funding. However, as of 2012 the Netherlands Press Fund will stop its funding. Even though this instrument does not need the cooperation of the media to monitor their coverage, it is based on media’s financial support. Thus its existence faces uncertainties if the media themselves are not willing to contribute financially in coming years. It is not clear what position *de Volkskrant* takes. News articles from *de Volkskrant* are evaluated on a regular basis, but the editor-in-chief, like many other media practitioners, is not fond of making assessments of journalistic performance based only on quantitative data.

**Transparency box**

Over the past few years, specific editorial units, mainly the weekly sections, have started to demonstrate public accountability in an overt way by including a special section within the article (a transparency box), explaining to the reader that the article is based on objective information without commercial or any other type of influence. As this was initiated informally among separate editorial units, it is not clear exactly when this was first introduced. A transparency box is particularly provided when commercial organisations
occupy a key role in the story, which might give the impression that such articles are sponsored. Providing transparency gives the reader the possibility to judge the liability of the story.

**Publication for self-reflection**

The last accountability mechanism to show more transparency was the publication of the book *Between the Lines* [Tussen de regels] in 2006, in which the newspaper evaluated a “turbulent period of Dutch society and the newspaper” with the objective of being transparent and creating more internal self-reflection (de Volkskrant, 2006: 7). A number of outsiders, including journalists and academics were asked to reflect on how the newspaper covered specific incidents and issues including the rise and murder of Pim Fortuyn, the changing relationship between politics and the newspaper and how the newspaper covered the controversial debate on climate change. This instrument is another example of overt public accountability with a professional undertone.

**5.3.2 Professional accountability**

Besides showing accountability to the public, in either an overt or covert way, *de Volkskrant* has professional accountability instruments to set the standards of performance and to be held accountable by peers. These instruments are arranged within the journalistic profession. This can have a covert character when addressing the journalists within the media organisation or overt, when addressing the whole journalistic profession. Professional accountability can be seen as an aspect of professionalism. However, where the latter concerns a wide range of formal and informal activities to improve the performance of the profession, the latter has a more narrow definition: to hold one’s colleagues to account when felt necessary.

In the daily routine journalists often come together to discuss and plan news issues, either during formal meetings or in an informal setting. Besides these instruments that illustrate the professionalisation of journalism, *de Volkskrant* there are also instruments that serve the purpose to hold one’s peers to account.

**Journalistic guideline**

Like many media organisations, *de Volkskrant* has a journalistic guideline [Redactie ABC]. Since 1975, this guideline has described how journalists should act and to what journalistic principles and conduct they should keep.
For example, the guideline explains how journalists should protect their sources, the role of the unit head and the goal of the daily meetings. Over the years it has been adapted several times due to changes in the organisation structure. This instrument only serves covert purposes.

**Editorial statute**

The autonomy of the editorial staff is secured in the editorial statute, also dating from 1975 [Redactiestatuut]. In this statute the identity of the newspaper, the independent role of the editor-in-chief and management board and the tasks of the editorial board are secured. As instruments, the journalistic guideline and the editorial statute are primarily focused on the journalistic quality within the organisation rather than on giving explanations or showing transparency to external actors. The journalistic guideline and editorial statute are not available publicly and are thus only used for covert purposes with the possibility for colleagues to hold each other to account when the guidelines are not followed.

**Evaluation moments**

The daily plenary meeting at 10:30 am includes a formal moment of evaluation. The meeting starts with planning the newspaper for the next day, after which the newspaper of the day is evaluated. Also, each editorial unit comes together daily at 10:00 am to plan and discuss news stories. However, based on my observations, reflecting and evaluating is only done incidentally. Throughout the day, informal discussions take place, but these often amount to brainstorming and planning for next day’s newspaper. Commenting on and providing feedback after publication is done with caution and mainly on a one-to-one basis. In other words, while there are numerous instruments that are part of the professionalisation of journalism, professional accountability in its narrow sense, as being accountable to one’s peers, is less visible.

**Casual discussion meetings**

Professional accountability is often characterised by its informal nature. When a major issue arises and the opinions across the editorial staff are too divergent or simple solutions are not achievable, the editor-in-chief can decide to organise an informal meeting [hangende receptie], discussing, reflecting and evaluating on news coverage, journalism or the newspaper organisation. This gathering is not organised on a regular basis, but only when the editor-in-
chief or editorial staff feel the need to come together to discuss a certain matter. In the past it had a more frequent character.

**Self-evaluations**

Over the years the editor-in-chief has not only been an advocate of accountability to the public, but has also initiated formal forms of professional accountability. In 2002, the newspaper organised a self-evaluation on how *de Volkskrant* covered the Srebrenica dossier between 1993 and 1995 during the Balkan war. It followed an official research from the Dutch Institute for War Documentation (NIOD [Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie]), that concluded not only that political and military mistakes had been made, but also that the performance of the media had to be questioned (Klaassen & Klein, 2002). The media, including *de Volkskrant*, were accused of biased and emotion-driven reporting of the role of Dutchbat (the Dutch battalion of the United Nation forces) during the Srebrenica massacre. It was decided to commission a self-reflective research from two people from within the organisation, the former ombudsman and the ombudsman who had been in service at that time. To ensure neutrality the draft report was assessed by an external commission. The internal research was concluded with five recommendations for the editorial department: to emphasise facts instead of opinion in news coverage, to improve the expertise in war reporting, to invest in internal debate on the position of the newspaper in important issues, to set up a special team of journalists during long-term and complicated issues and to invest in independent research to prevent from being almost only dependent of government information (Klaassen & Klein, 2002).

Five years later, in 2007, the newspaper again initiated a self-evaluation process, reflecting on its reporting regarding the maltreatment of Iraqis by the Dutch military. On 17 November 2006 the front page opened with the headline “Dutch torture Iraqis”. Government and officials objected to this formulation, claiming that it had not been torture but maltreatment. In the following weeks the newspaper reacted several times. The ombudsman devoted a column to the issue, the journalist who had written the original story provided a full-page reconstruction of the case and the editor-in-chief explained but also apologized in a column, when it became clear that the facts were not as reported. In June of that same year the official governmental investigation of the behaviour of the Dutch military was finalized, also concluding that the
newspaper had failed in certain aspects in its report about the so-called ‘torture scoop’ [martelprimeur]. The editor-in-chief then decided the newspaper should set up its own self-evaluation, conducted by an external journalist and a lawyer. This inquiry, concluding that the newspaper had already rectified and thus already held to account by the readers, was primarily meant for internal self-reflection and “to have lessons learned for the future” (De Volkskrant, 2007). The editor-in-chief did inform his readers about it with a column in the newspaper, ending with the words, “Self-reflection leads to a better newspaper. Also de Volkskrant is aware of this responsibility. It has to keep the strong tradition of transparency and self-reflective research” (De Volkskrant, 5 Dec. 2007). The research resulted in a protocol for scoops, written by a specially set-up internal working group.

First and foremost, these two self-evaluations were initiated to reflect internally on the mistakes made and therefore they are a form of covert professional accountability. However, both cases also illustrate how the newspaper gave insight in these self-evaluations to the reader and admitted its mistakes publicly. This then shows that the instruments also have a public accountability component.

5.3.3 Accountability policy

To conclude, in this newspaper public accountability has become more prominent over the years, with the use of a combination of suggested (Council for Journalism, media debate organisation, nieuwsmonitor) and self-initiated public accountability instruments (letters to the editor, ombudsman, author’s names, correction box, transparency box, publication of self-evaluations). Moreover, this list of instruments shows that public accountability instruments can be either overt or covert depending on whether they address an individual or the public at large—although, the emphasis is on overt public accountability. Public accountability can also overlap with forms of professional accountability and vice versa as is the case with the ombudsman and the self-evaluations. The professional accountability instruments have both an informal and formal character and are all directed towards the journalists within the newspaper organisation. Overt professional accountability or improving the journalistic debate outside the organisational borders is only visible through the media debate organisation, which currently is not active anymore.
5.4 Instruments of responsiveness

The described accountability instruments differ from each other, depending on the objective at which they are aimed and the stakeholder concerned. The majority are externally oriented, showing accountability to the reader with the purpose of responding to criticism, giving explanation or showing transparency. This attention to the reader is also visible through an increasing number of instruments that aim to understand the concerns and desires of the public and society, to interact with the reader and create a dialogue, and hence show responsiveness to the public. Whether based on journalistic or commercial grounds, several instruments or projects were initiated to (re) connect with the public; some of them also have an accountability function, but here the emphasis is on their function of binding with the reader. In this section, based primarily on observation and document analysis, I describe these initiatives, which I will first attempt to classify into the two different forms of responsiveness detailed in Chapter 3: civic and strategic. Signs of the third type, empathic responsiveness, were not identified. Coming closer to the public does not take any form of siding with the citizens or acting as a moral entrepreneur. The analysis of the interviews and observations in section 5.6 will provide a deeper analysis of the reasons behind these initiatives.

5.4.1 Civic responsiveness

Letters to the editor

Over the past years, de Volkskrant has started a number of initiatives to connect with its public and to take the public’s agenda into account. However, the idea of putting the reader’s concerns at centre stage has a longer history, with letters to the editor and opinion pages providing space for comments by the public since 1948. The opinion editorial unit is responsible for the opinion and discussion pages in the newspaper. Besides complaints, the letters can also address salient issues of concern to the readers, of which a selection is published in the newspaper and online. This shows the newspaper’s attempt to be responsive to the reader’s agenda. Three formats of contributions are possible: letters sent in by readers, opinion articles on request of the newspaper, and articles sent in by readers or others. As mentioned before, there is a separate editor answering readers’ letters, which predominantly takes the form of public accountability. Thus this instrument can take both the form of accountability and responsiveness depending on the objective the newspaper aims to reach.
Public-oriented journalism

The idea of putting the reader more at centre stage followed the appointment of a new editor-in-chief in 1995. He propagated a shift from institutional news to news that affects society, approaching the interest of the reader and the general public, “The newspaper should free itself from institutional journalism, in search for the non-registered reality” (Ybema, 2003: 146). This issue reappeared during and shortly after the Fortuyn period, when media were being criticized for having missed or ignored popular sentiments in society. “De Volkskrant was completely unaware of the rising discontent in the country”, said an editor when reflecting back on this period (de Volkskrant, 2006: 19). To obtain a better understanding of the problems Fortuyn was addressing correspondents were placed in neighbourhoods deemed problematic and journalists were asked to write articles from inside society. The editor-in-chief stimulated a new style of journalistic practice that aimed to be more responsive to the general public.

Online interactive project

In 2005, de Volkskrant has started specific projects to connect with the public and address issues of public concern. It began an online interactive ‘social agenda’ that focused on pressing issues of and in collaboration with its readers, who could allot priority to specific issues. The focus would not only be on describing the problems and ills of society, but also on the possible range and solutions. The project, initiated by a former deputy editor-in-chief, used several methods to interact with the public. On the website readers were able to rank the subjects they deemed best to be discussed and elaborated on. Public debates were organised across the country and news articles on debate topics were published in the newspaper and on the website. This year-long project was repeated in following years, focusing on spatial and urban planning, and on economic issues. In November 2009 the last agenda was presented: that of the education. Two days after the first announcement, more than 7250 people had ranked the subjects of the agenda (internal minutes of the 10:30 am meeting, 23-11-2009). Currently, with the new editor-in-chief as of July 2010 the ‘agenda project’ has stopped, although the reason for this is not entirely clear.
Weblogs

De Volkskrant started a weblog in 2005 with the intention to “strengthen the relationship between the reader/website visitor and the editorial staff” (Bogaerts, 2005). Not only were journalists asked and stimulated to write blog posts, but there was also a special section for readers to start their own weblog under the auspices of de Volkskrant. One of the intentions behind this is the possible use of such contributions to provide material for new news stories. However, as of January 2011, the new editor-in-chief decided to cease the reader weblog as he felt it required too much technical support. Moreover, since March 2011 the publisher of the newspaper, de Persgroep, decided to disconnect the website from the print newspaper. Consequently, it is unlikely that citizen contributions generated from the weblogs will be used or shown in the print newspaper.

Public debates

While the Internet has made interactivity with the reader easier, more traditional forms of interaction, through public debates, are also used. Since 2005, the newspaper has organised ten debates per year on a topical issue under the heading The newspaper on Sunday [De Krant op Zondag]. The editorial department for the science section [Kennis] regularly organises public debates, discussing science-related subjects with a panel of invited experts. In addition, since 2009, the newspaper has been collaborating with the Free University of Amsterdam, organizing debates that question prevailing opinions.

‘Reader, tell us’

Prompted by interactive possibilities on the Internet, the project Reader, Tell us [Lezer, Zeg het maar] was initiated in 2008 by a head of one of the editorial units. The idea was to anticipate issues of interest or concern to the reader. A notice was put out in the newspaper asking the readers to send in ideas for news articles:

Dear reader, every day we decide what we publish in the newspaper and put on the site. We are not bad at doing that. We understand our profession; we combine knowledge and experience and can build on a long tradition. But you, the reader, also has a lot of knowledge and sometimes we overlook things (Nicolasen, 2008).

Since 2009 there is no newspaper published on Sunday in the Netherlands. The title indicates the newspaper’s effort to organise something for the readers on the day that there is no newspaper published.
The ten best ideas were to be published in the newspaper. However, a small number of visitors took over the discussion on the website with harsh discriminative comments and the newspaper felt it had to end this project.

5.4.2 Strategic responsiveness

Besides these instruments that have the aim to take the public’s agenda into account, and make connections and bridge the gap with the public, the newspaper has taken initiatives to bind with the (potential) reader for more strategic and commercial reasons. While this is not made explicit, the description and the use of the instruments seem to point to a more commercial reasoning.

Weblogs

Besides a civic component, the weblogs show to have a clear commercial motive to try to relate to the (potential) reader to increase their loyalty for the newspaper. From the beginning, the initiator confirmed there is commercial interest for this experiment, “We are not a philanthropic organisation” (Bogaerts, 2005). When the newspaper decided to stop the citizen blogs, Bogaerts, the initiator, who is no longer working for the newspaper, asserted that now the newspaper has to “find alternative ways to relate to its consumer” (own italics, Pleijter, 2011).

Social network sites

In June 2010, after my research period at the newspaper, a social networking editor was appointed with the main objective of improving contacts with relevant news sources, enhancing the reach of their journalistic productions and creating new journalistic products through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Whereas social networking sites provide the opportunity for interacting and engaging with the (potential) reader and public to be able to understand issues of their concern, no specific reference to this aspect was made when the appointment was announced (Van Lier, 2010). The focus is on presenting de Volkskrant on social networking sites and to introduce new forms of media production rather than using these sites for public interaction and engagement.

5.4.3. Policy of responsiveness

In conclusion, historically de Volkskrant has not only emphasised its responsibility by informing, but also by providing a platform for expression. In recent years,
the newspaper has made several new attempts to engage with the public—whether readers, citizens or consumers—and to understand their wishes and concerns. An initial look at the instruments of responsiveness shows that most instruments are prompted by civic reasons with the intention of bridging the gap with the public. Moreover, two online instruments seem to also have a commercial component.

5.5 Practicing accountability: from introduction to incorporation

The overview of the introduced instruments of accountability and responsiveness suggests that the newspaper is investing in the relationship with its reader, with the final goal of improving the quality and appreciation of its performance. While instruments, such as the self-evaluations, are clearly driven by specific incidents, others have gradually been introduced over a longer period of time. However, instruments only accomplish the aimed effect if they are actually acknowledged and supported among the editorial staff and used in the daily journalistic routine. In this section, I will evaluate how the instruments are used and adopted by analysing to what extent they have been implemented, incorporated or internalised at the newspaper (see Chapter 4 for an elaboration of these phases of adoption).

The level of adoption of instruments depends on many factors, such as the acknowledgment of the instrument among the staff, the visibility of the instrument, the number of years since the instrument was introduced and the continuity of the instrument. The appreciation and support for such instruments is also highly dependent on how the staff define and relate to accountability. Among the whole editorial staff of *de Volkskrant* there is a general consensus on the importance of being accountable to the reader and this has increased in recent years. However, the majority of the respondents define accountability, different from the theoretical concept, as a mechanism to explain and being responsible and not to justify its actions to readers or other external actors. Moreover, accountability is seen as something that is done after publication, when asked. Accountability is therefore external, *post factum* and reactive. Accountability is thought of by *de Volkskrant* journalists as a process directed at the public rather than the media professional. More importantly, at all levels of the organisation being responsible is felt to be more salient than being accountable. Their main tasks consist of informing and
serving as “a guardian and provider of critical information on venal practices in society”, in the words of one of the deputy editors-in-chief. He emphasised the important tasks of the six research journalists who are exempted from the daily production obligations to invest in in-depth stories and expose critical issues.

Nonetheless, the issue of accountability is something the majority feel they cannot ignore as a result of many changes in both society and the media sector. Many believe that specific incidents where the role of the newspaper was questioned contributed to an increasing demand for accountability. However, the majority consider that other factors —such as individualisation, depillarization and an increasingly assertive and demanding citizen —have had a greater impact. The letters editor said, “We are currently in a culture where people want to give their opinion directly, pour their hearts out. It is a trend visible throughout society”. At the same time, many admitted that the Fortuyn incident “was definitely rock bottom in press history”. Nonetheless, the journalists who were directly involved reacted in a rather irritated manner, with a defensive attitude. The parliamentary journalists who had been working in The Hague at that time strongly stated that these accusations were demonstrably incorrect. One interviewee protested, “It is not true that we did not write about the working-class issues. We just didn’t do it in the same way Pim Fortuyn did. We took a different perspective and afterwards we were called upon to be accountable. That was ridiculous”.

While the reasoning behind the instruments might not be clear to everyone, the concept of accountability, in its different facets, and the various instruments are known to everyone in the organisation. However, the level of adoption differs. The following analysis shows that none of the instruments have become internalised as part of the journalists’ norms and values, but range between the phases of implementation and incorporation. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the instruments of accountability and their level of adoption.
Table 5.1: Instruments of accountability at de Volkskrant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Type of accountability</th>
<th>Suggested/ Self-initiated</th>
<th>Covert/ Overt (O/C)</th>
<th>Level of adoption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Letters to the editor</td>
<td>Public Civic resp.</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O &amp; C</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Council for Journalism</td>
<td>Public Professional</td>
<td>Suggested</td>
<td>O &amp; C</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End 1990s</td>
<td>Ombudsman</td>
<td>Public Professional</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O &amp; C</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Publication author’s names</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Correction box</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Mediadebat</td>
<td>Public Professional</td>
<td>Suggested</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Collaborating (until 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Nieuwmonitor</td>
<td>Basis for public and professional</td>
<td>Suggested</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>±2006</td>
<td>Transparency box</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Publication for self-reflection</td>
<td>Public Professional</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Editorial guideline</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Editorial statute</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Evaluation meetings</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Casual discussion meetings</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002 &amp; 2007</td>
<td>Self-evaluations</td>
<td>Professional Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>C O</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5.1 Public accountability incorporated

There is an overall consensus on the importance of demonstrating accountability by responding to the reader. The editor-in-chief is a strong proponent of public accountability and over the years has introduced numerous instruments and stimulated the use of them. When asked what de Volkskrant journalists think of the ombudsman as a mechanism of accountability, the great majority started similarly stating that as “an institution” the ombudsman is a very good thing to have. They see it fulfils a role for the reader and enhances the relationship between reader and newspaper. The importance of answering readers’ letters was also seen as essential at the present time when readers are volatile and easily distrustful or discontent. Respondents feel it is not compulsory to
answer and no sanctions exist, but “it is just something that is decent and important to do”, said one journalist. They feel that taking the public into consideration is something that has to be done these days. Yet, the majority of the interviewees do not feel they have an obligation to respond to the public in general, but more specifically they are committed to those who are a subscriber of the newspaper. This indicates that responding to readers’ complaints could be a way for them to safeguard subscribers’ loyalty; it is thus also a commercial motive.

Besides, or maybe because of, the importance of responding to readers, the editorial staff actively cooperate in applying the various instruments. For example, even though the journalists and heads of editorial units dread the ombudsman coming to their department, they take him seriously and find his function unassailable for the reader. The ombudsman himself also notices that colleagues collaborate and provide him with information when asked.

The same goes for answering to readers’ letter, the majority answer them; not as a matter of agreeing with the reader, but listening to their complaints and taking them seriously. By explaining to the reader how the article came about, much of the initial anger or dissatisfaction the reader might have is expected to diffuse. Box 5.1 shows a weekly email from the readers’ editor with the responses of the public and a reader being pleased at receiving a response (see pg. 102).

The correction box has attained a permanent place in the organisation. The corrections are not only based on complaints of readers, but increasingly journalists themselves point out mistakes to be added to the correction box. All these are indications of the need felt to respond to criticisms, not only when forced but also when self-motivated.

The interviews showed that journalists increasingly respond to the reader and cooperate in using the public accountability instruments, which indicates that the instruments are incorporated in the organisational structure and culture. However, there is still quite a defensive attitude underlying their actions. Most journalists believe it is important to answer reader’s letters, but they are not always happy about it, “The relation with the reader has become more intense, but not always more pleasant”. Some do not want to answer when
the complainant is not a subscriber or when the complaints are not relevant, harsh or discriminatory. Others plainly stated, "If you don’t like it, just go to the next page or don’t buy the newspaper". This defensive undertone can be explained by the majority feeling that the complaints or requests are often on self-interested issues of the reader, which the journalists cannot take into account. Several journalists told me how they received pages of information material that readers expected them to look into or how they had to engage in an unpleasant e-mail conversation when the reader was not satisfied.

Journalists are also quite hesitant and not always very willing to respond or to engage with the reader when the issue raised touches upon their professional responsibility and autonomy. This is particularly the case with older journalists, who have been practicing the profession quite some time. With much freedom and independence, they are used to working in a certain way, see their role as informers and do not feel the need to engage with the reader. They feel strongly that accountability is embedded in responsibility and should not be explicated in these formal instruments. Most respondents recognize their defensive attitude when forced to admit their mistakes, particularly to outsiders. One of the deputies made the following analogy, "When journalists receive criticism they close their shells like an oyster". This mix of recognizing the need to take the public seriously and defending their autonomy also creates ambivalence: on the one hand they feel the necessity to be open in a competitive media market, on the other they want to retain their professional authority.

To conclude, since the late 1990s many public accountability instruments have been implemented and they appear to have been incorporated in the organisation. Being accountable to the reader is felt to be important and has received a prominent place within the organisation’s structure. The fact that public accountability has been incorporated is particularly the result of years of investment and stimulus by the editor-in-chief, but also of the number of years these instruments have been implemented and the external pressure of public opinion. Moreover, journalists see the importance of being accountable to the reader also as a commercial strategy, as a way to maintain or improve the relationship. Yet, even though the need to invest in that relationship is considered important, the instruments of public accountability are not internalised, part of the self-evident journalistic culture, as they are felt to conflict with professional values and responsibilities.
5.5.2 Professional accountability implemented

The self-evaluations, internal evaluation meetings and the casual discussion meetings have been implemented as forms of covert professional accountability through a top-down strategy. Self-evaluations are felt necessary when important issues are at stake and the protocol written during the self-evaluation in 2007 was seen as a step forward in the professionalisation process. Internal evaluation moments occur at fixed times where everyone can air their criticism or discuss mistakes made, when felt necessary. However, in practice being accountable to one’s colleagues is primarily done informally on a one-to-one basis. Throughout the day the journalists brainstorm, discuss and collectively make decisions for the newspaper. Even though informal structures do not necessarily prevent instruments or attitudes from being adopted in the organisation, both practical and cultural issues prevent professional accountability from being incorporated. There is an overall hesitant attitude among journalists to provide each other feedback.

There is disagreement between the editor-in-chief and professionals on the objective of the internal evaluation meetings. Where the editor-in-chief believes evaluation is important, the journalists are more focused on planning and making stories for the newspaper of the next day. Officially, the daily plenary meeting and the sub-editorial meetings have both a planning and an evaluation function, but in practice planning exceeds evaluation. The majority of the editorial units prefer to get together to brainstorm collaboratively and make plans for the next day instead of giving feedback since this can be done informally. A unit head said, “By the time everyone is in, everyone has already aired his or her opinion informally on the newspaper of the day”. In practice this informal character leads to less investment in taking the time to evaluate one’s work. Journalists are quite hesitant to provide colleagues with feedback, whether in a formal or informal setting. While officially there is a place and time at the 10:30 am plenary meeting, where any member of the staff can voice their dissatisfaction, in practice journalists believe that their voices do not matter. A journalist said, “I do not have the impression that my opinion counts at the 10:30 am meeting”. The majority of the journalists feel that this is not a real forum for discussion, evaluation or self-reflection. As many said, “It takes courage to dare to say something”. In the smaller setting of the 10:00 am editorial meetings the professionals feel more at ease and are able to give their feedback and opinions. A journalist stated, “At our own
daily meeting you can express your viewpoints and everyone listens to your comments. But, at the plenary meeting not much is left of that.” However, the unit heads, deputy editors-in-chief and editor-in-chief believe that the possibilities for feedback exist and are of utmost importance for the quality of the newspaper. One deputy and two unit heads even said that, de Volkskrant is known for having a critical culture, even “a kind of masochistic culture”. The editor-in-chief felt that it was peculiar that journalists did not feel they had the possibility to voice their opinion, stating, “This management is very accessible and approachable. When one is not satisfied about something, one can always enter my room and talk to me about it”.

Taking a look at the more formal instruments, there are also several reasons why journalists are hesitant to use them. Firstly, it is not clear when and how the instruments of self-evaluation should be deployed, as there are no clear guidelines. Paradoxically, when specific formal guidelines are written, such as the protocol for scoops, many doubt the use and effect of them in daily practice. A unit head said, “Such a protocol is quite stylish to the outside world, but I really have my doubts on the internal effect. A good journalist knows which principles to keep to and won’t consult a protocol.” A journalist added, “You can’t solve issues by writing on a piece of paper how things should be done”. This shows an ambivalent attitude to formalisation of procedures. On the one hand, they need more clarity on how to use the instruments. On the other hand, they do not believe formal procedures will do their performance any good.

A second problem is that the self-evaluations and casual discussion meetings are only organised incidentally, which makes it difficult for journalists to fit it in their daily routine. The incidental character of the self-evaluation and the protocol linked to the last self-evaluation was described by a journalist, “When an incident just happened it is at the top of our minds, but after a few weeks something like a protocol fades away”.

A third reason for the journalists’ hesitance is that there is no consensus between the editor-in-chief and journalists on the actual purpose of the evaluative instruments. While the management believes the self-evaluations serve the purpose of both public and professional accountability, the journalists believe they merely feed an external purpose. The journalists regard them as
a tool to explain and be accountable to the reader and many believe they merely serve as a damage-control mechanism, as a way to restore the image of the newspaper, which is felt essential in times of financial insecurity and decreasing circulation figures. To them, the instruments do not lead to internal self-reflection or debate.

This hesitance to provide feedback or reflect on one’s performance and what one journalist described as a rather “closed debate culture” are due to several factors. One is related to the nature of a newspaper. Once it is published, things cannot be changed. Therefore, many find it futile to make remarks on a daily basis about the newspaper. Another factor is related to the people participating. Mostly, higher-ranking journalists are involved with the evaluations and self-evaluations, which makes it difficult for journalists to speak out. Moreover, while there are several formal instruments, there is preference for informal moments of evaluation. And, in practice evaluation is overshadowed by planning and working on the next day. These issues have not been left unnoticed and, over the years, de Volkskrant has experimented with different forms of evaluation, either in formal or informal setting. However, there still remains a hesitance to speak out and provide colleagues with constructive feedback. This might then be related to the conflict between the increasing need of the management for control and professionalisation and the traditional journalistic culture of freedom and autonomy. Newspapers have become big organisations connected to large publishing firms. Over the years, editors-in-chief have taken the position of managing rather than making the newspaper. While more and more the journalistic profession is obliged to adhere to standardized procedures set out by the organisation, journalists prefer to keep to their autonomy. They believe it is first and foremost the responsibility of the individual journalist to perform well and provide output of high quality, which should not be constrained by formal organisational procedures. A unit head said indignantly, “The result is a journalism pleasing organisational demand”.

Concluding, there are formal moments when members of the staff can get together to evaluate, provide feedback and reflect on each other’s performance. While formally implemented, in practice there is a rather closed debate culture, in which the professional accountability instruments, whether of a formal or informal character, are not incorporated in the organisation. The daily
processes have a dominant focus on the following day and less on looking back, evaluating and providing the opportunity for peers to hold each other to account.

5.6 Responsiveness: a conflicting issue

The structural and performance challenges have given priority not only to accountability, but also to the need to engage with and to be responsive to the public. Everyone agrees that the idea of taking the reader into account and relating to issues within society is necessary these days. Particularly, the ‘older’ journalists see a shift in attitude, where the reader is put in a more central position. One unit head formulated this shift from a media supply to demand market as follows, “In the past, we would write what we thought was interesting, now we think more about what the reader might find interesting”. While there is a visible shift and being responsive to the public has become more notable, questions remain as to why this shift has taken place and to what extent this idea has been adopted in the organisation.

5.6.1 A combination of civic and strategic responsiveness

Initiatives to obtain a better understanding of the reader and to increase the dialogue are seen by most interviewees as a positive shift and a less arrogant attitude towards the reader. It offers the possibility of generating more creative ideas, interacting more directly with the reader, learning more about what the reader is interested in and potentially contributing to a feeling of community. These motives fulfil the characteristics of civic responsiveness. Yet, instruments such as the public debates and the online agenda projects seem to be more based on pressing issues of a higher-educated and a rather left-leaning subscribers group than the actual issues of the general public. The involved citizens and the people present during the debates do not represent the average citizen, but characterize a higher-class public. When the average citizen was asked to contribute in the project ‘Reader, tell us’, the newspaper was forced to end it as a result of a group of people trying to take over the discussion. Although in the past years the editor-in-chief has been a strong proponent of addressing a wider group of (potential) readers, in practice de Volkskrant is not so much focused on addressing the perceived demands and wishes of the general public, but has instead focused on its traditional subscribers, which represent a more left-leaning and intellectual sector of society.
While formally most instruments of responsiveness have a clear civic motive, the interview and observation analysis shows that all instruments also have strategic motives to try to bind the (potential) reader to the newspaper. The specific distinction between strategic and civic responsiveness does not apply here. Taking the reader into consideration is something the journalists feel they cannot turn their back on since the circulation figures are decreasing, the subscribers are ageing, the younger public is hard to attract and the media market is now more competitive than ever. In the past years, the newspaper has made various attempts to retain its readers, attract new ones and safeguard the economic situation by introducing new formats such as expanding the Saturday edition in 2007 and introducing a tabloid format in 2010. A unit head stated, “We, and all newspapers, are desperately seeking the right recipe to stop decreasing circulation figures”. Many found it obvious that these initiatives of responsiveness were commercially motivated, trying to retain or attract new readers. A journalist told me they often make jokes about this situation: “Guys, this is one of our last readers, we have to cherish him”. In this context, the majority of the journalists believe their task is also a commercial one: to serve the reader or subscriber and not the general public. Box 5.3 provides an illustration of how a unit head explains that strategic motives determine their intention to be responsive. Beyond its democratic task of providing information in order for the public to make

Box 5.3. Engaging with the public: civic or strategic responsiveness?

A unit head commented:

Do you believe those things were introduced from the conviction that we must get closer to our readers? Yes! But why do we want this? Because we are afraid of losing our readers. And why exactly do we fear this? Well, this would mean a loss of income. These are clearly the motivating factors, although no one will confirm this to you. But it really is so. At a certain moment you see that readers walk away. Jesus, guys. I once saw a publisher, 10 years ago. Actually, also the current publisher. The worse the newspaper is doing, the more the man seems to enjoy his job. Incomprehensible but true. In the meantime it [the attention for the reader] has become the policy of the editor-in-chief…. It turns out that people or readers have a need for this and that it’s actually very gratifying to see 200–300 people having an in-depth discussion on a certain matter in De Rode Hoed [a discussion centre for current events- YdH]. But the question is: is this your role as a newspaper? Do you believe it should be the paper’s role? And what added value does it have for the newspaper? Well, according to the editor-in-chief, it leads to loyalty and commitment from our readers. But I wonder, is this our primary task as a journalist?
sense of the world around them, the newspaper is a commercial organisation, which needs to adhere to mechanisms of the market. The recent structural issues have challenged the “delicate combination between private enterprise and public responsibility” (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a: 15). The publisher director believed a more intense collaboration between the editorial and business department of the newspaper was necessary in times with declining circulation figures and advertising revenues. However, both he and the editor-in-chief assured me that this alliance is only at managerial level and not related to the content.

5.6.2 Responsiveness incorporated

Whether as a result of civic or strategic reasoning, journalists increasingly see the importance of engaging with the public and are familiar with and make use of the instruments of responsiveness. This shows that they are incorporated in the organisation. Table 5.2 provides an overview of the instruments of responsiveness and level of adoption. However, there is still quite some resistance to involving the reader in the journalistic process. They would prefer readers to take the role of end user. If involved, citizens are allowed to contribute to the last stage of the journalistic process: to provide interpretation and comments on the news coverage. While in a few projects such as the reader weblogs, Reader, tell us, and the agenda project readers were able to contribute to the primary stage of the journalistic process by generating possible ideas, journalists believe it is their professional task to generate ideas, select, filter and write the story. Among the unit heads and the journalists there is an overall fear of crossing the borders of professional journalism, believing that listening too much to the public devalues the profession. In this context, many journalists sense that the editor-in-chief is too preoccupied with relating to the reader, which causes the newspaper to bend too much under the wishes of the reader. But this internal discussion is not new. When in 1995 the editor-in-chief stimulated this more public oriented approach, the staff were quite sceptical towards this new policy, believing that it “would decrease the quality, comparable to popular newspapers” (Ybema, 2003: 155).

Besides the conflicting relationship between responsibility and responsiveness, the gradual shift to putting the reader more centre stage is a difficult issue. There is a general perception that issues of ‘the common man’ should be addressed, but it is not clear how this should be done. The management does
not appear to put across any clear overall policy and strategy in this area. In this context, many interviewees said that the newspaper will lose its identity and become too popular if it does not take a clear direction. One of the unit heads was very harsh in tone and believes the newspaper is making the wrong choices: “I am not a proponent of the journalist in an ivory tower but at this point the journalist has sunk low”. He was positive about listening to the public and signalling trends, but sees a negative shift to consulting with the reader and not using professional knowledge and experience. Particularly, the rank-and-file journalists were negative and not only feared this development but also thought the newspaper had already gone too far in the direction of populism, with negative consequences for its identity and credibility.

In all, the relationship with the reader has altered substantially over the past 20 years. The newspaper has made a shift from a supply to demand approach, putting the reader more at the forefront. The mechanisms of responsiveness appear to be prompted by strategic and performance concerns. They are not only a response to the accusations that the media failed to report on the issues within society, but perhaps more importantly, they have become essential to the newspaper’s survival in today’s fiercely competitive market.

Table 5.2: Instruments of responsiveness at de Volkskrant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Type of responsiveness</th>
<th>Level of adoption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Letters to the editor</td>
<td>Civic</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid 1990s</td>
<td>Public-oriented journalism</td>
<td>Civic</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Online interactive project</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Incorporated (until 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Weblogs</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Implemented (reader weblogs until 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Public debates</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>‘Reader, tell us’</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Stopped in 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Social networking sites</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Not to be determined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...
5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of how *de Volkskrant* is responding to structural and performance challenges in terms of accountability and responsiveness. In 1999 the editor-in-chief perceived a crisis in trust between the media and public and the media and politics. The editor-in-chief at the time of my research believes "the media are still under fire" and trust relationships are waning. By being publicly accountable and responsive this newspaper aims at (re)establishing the trust and loyalty of the public. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that the media performance debate increased from 2000 onwards, with a peak in 2002. *De Volkskrant* had already perceived or suspected a growing gap with the public in the 1990s as a result of the structural changes. With the appointment of the former editor-in-chief in 1995, the management had determined that in order to cope with changes in the media landscape the newspaper needed to address a broader public. Accountability, openness and being responsive to the general public appear to be part of this shift. Currently, the need to pay attention to the public has gained a prominent place in the organisation. The structural problems of decreasing circulation, an insecure financial situation and growing competition from other media are the most significant factors in this increasing appetite for bridging and binding with the reader. Whereas the responsive measures could be an answer to the criticisms the newspaper and the media in general received during the Fortuyn period, it is more likely that they are strategic, responding to these structural problems. In any case, this attempt to make connections with the public at best succeeds in addressing specific involved higher-educated subscribers of the newspaper. Understanding and covering the life issues of the common man is considered difficult and not favoured, as it might make the newspaper too 'popular'. In addition, journalists in particular believe an undue focus on the interest of the reader can potentially endanger their trustworthy status as gatekeeper and watchdog. Back in 1996 a newspaper journalist revealed this fear that the profession and the industry might buckle under the wishes of the public, while management was increasingly emphasizing the need to focus on a broader public agenda (Van Westerloo, 1996). It seems as if the relationship with the reader is a persistent debate in response to the continuing societal and media changes. With the new editor-in-chief several instruments of responsiveness have stopped including the weblogs and the agenda projects. It is to be seen which focus he will take to cope with the continuous structural challenges.
While journalists are not as preoccupied with the criticism on their performance, the editor-in-chief puts a great emphasis on this criticism and hopes that accountability instruments will provide a solution to restoring and retaining the trust relations with the (potential) reader. At the same time, it is also a way for de Volkskrant to distinguish itself from its competitors and profile itself as a quality newspaper, and thus serves a strategic reasoning. The journalists in particular believe strongly that the accountability instruments have an important strategic objective. Responding to criticism and admitting mistakes in an overt manner serves as a damage-control mechanism which they hope will retain or enhance their high-quality image. There is a focus on overt public accountability, but answering directly to the reader in the form of covert accountability might be as important to close the growing gap between journalist and reader. Whether responding to performance or structural problems, in the end journalists prefer to invest in their performance and responsibility instead of showing their accountability and being responsive, as this does not sit so easily with their ideas of autonomy and professional values.

Where public accountability is translated in specific instruments, professional accountability is more informal. The voluntary and unofficial character prevents journalists from investing in evaluating and reflecting on their performance as a group. Most journalists, particularly at newspapers, are used to working independently on their own story in their field of expertise. Moreover, as their work becomes increasingly time-pressured they are less inclined to do so. The editor-in-chief has regularly voiced the need for more self-reflection and initiated instruments such as the self-evaluations and the informal gatherings. He also believes the ombudsman does not only form a bridge between reader and editorial staff, but also helps to promote internal reflection on one’s performance. Nevertheless, in practice the editor-in-chief seems to be more preoccupied with responding to external pressures than with the internal debate.

This difference in priority has consequences for the extent to which the instruments are adopted in the organisation. Due to the increasing focus on the public since the mid-1990s, as a result of both performance and structural challenges, the newspaper has continued its aspiration to be more accountable, transparent and responsive to the public, with numerous instruments of public accountability and responsiveness now incorporated in the organisation.
structure and culture. However, professional accountability in terms of evaluation is only in the implementation phase, not incorporated, let alone internalised. The greater emphasis for public over professional accountability also coincides with the way the editorial staff defines the concept of accountability: focused on the public. Professional accountability is more associated with professionalism. The professionalisation of journalism is a trend that in the Netherlands has been visible since the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, newspapers started investing in (academically) educated journalists, also offering more internal education and improving the writing skills (Bardoel, 1997; Wijfjes, 2004; Yhema, 2003). This has developed over the years, focusing on improving journalistic performance and media organisations. However, the structural challenges in combination with increasing criticisms and incidents where the newspaper’s responsibility was questioned, have emphasised the need to invest in the relationship with the public and the reader rather than to invest in improving a critical analysis within the profession.

In Chapter 3, I argued that accountability is a response to performance problems, while responsiveness has both a strategic and journalistic reasoning. This case study indeed illustrates that accountability instruments such as the ombudsman, the letter to the editor and the self-evaluations are used to respond to external criticism of the media’s performance. At the same time, both being accountable and responsive are strategies to cope with structural problems. Showing accountability and being responsive are ways to invest in the newspaper’s quality of journalism in order to regain the trust and loyalty of the reader and to distinguish the newspaper from its competitors.