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

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Chapter 7

Serving both the consumer and the public:

A case study of RTL Nieuws
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7.1 Introduction

The content analysis, discussed in Chapter 2, indicated that commercial broadcasters in the Netherlands (RTL Nederland and SBS) played a minor role in the debate on media performance. Only during their pioneer phase in the early 1990s, critique was heard from other media and politicians. As RTL was the first commercial station, it had to deal with a general discontent or resistance for being commercially oriented. When in 1995 SBS started it was blamed for crossing the boundaries of decency in its programs. This was admitted by a former director of RTL and SBS, “In the pioneering phase these programs had limited resources and professionals were ambiguous about what was acceptable and what not” (Interview, 17 Feb. 2009). Commercial broadcasters only played a peripheral role in the media performance debate of the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, but their entry into the television landscape in 1989 and 1995 respectively and subsequent consequence of commercialization and competition did substantiate it.

The fact that commercial broadcasters are less bound to regulatory measures than their public counterparts and that Dutch media policy is mainly focused on the latter might also explain the limited considerations given to the commercial broadcasting sector. Certainly, European Commission legislation can be enforced, but this mostly regards issues of advertising and sponsorship. Being market-oriented, commercial broadcasters are inclined to take more account of the consumers' wishes and be more strategically responsive. But they are not oblivious to the critique of the socio-political elite. Referring to the accountability debate, the editor-in-chief of RTL Nieuws recognized this, “There is pressure from politics, but they prefer to institutionalize everything, and I am against that. Nevertheless, I cannot turn my back on this debate”. This raises the question how commercial broadcasters view and respond to
the performance debate in terms of accountability and responsiveness. Does the market principle dominate or do other forms of accountability and responsiveness also enter the scene? Do they feel pressured and by whom?

Little is known about the Dutch commercial media sector's sense of responsibility and accountability (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2003). To widen the picture beyond public broadcasting, commercial broadcasting’s position in and response to the performance debate needs to be included. RTL Nieuws was chosen as a study case, as it is the largest commercial broadcasting news organisation and the main rival of the public service NOS Nieuws. In this final case study, I will discuss how RTL Nieuws has responded to the debate on media accountability, to what extent this has been translated into concrete accountability and responsiveness instruments and how much these measures have become part and parcel of the organisation’s culture. First, I will give a brief description of the daily journalistic routine and a very concise historical context.

7.2 The daily journalistic routine

In October 1989, the first commercial broadcaster, RTL-Veronique, launched its news service RTL Nieuws. With initially little resources and low budgets, 20 years later RTL Nieuws is currently located in the building of RTL Nederland (the new name of its parent company), at the same Mediapark in Hilversum where the public NOS Nieuws resides. Approximately 120 employees work for RTL Nieuws. All the media outlets, including television, Internet, the economic—financial programme RTL Z and the daily programme Editie NL are located in one open newsroom, separated by ‘desk islands’. Like the other news organisations, it has its political editorial unit in The Hague. The first news bulletin, at 7:00 am, is created by a set group of editors who start at 4:00 am. The preparations for the first afternoon and evening bulletins start at 9:00 am, with a plenary meeting led by the program editor of the prime-time 7:30 pm bulletin. As well as the deputy editor-in-chief, the coordinators and representatives of the different editorial units—national, international and economic news and the Internet — are present. Throughout the day, formal meetings and many more informal moments take place to plan, discuss and coordinate the evening bulletins. Every day at 1:30 pm there is a plenary evaluation where everyone is invited to reflect on the 7:30 pm
bulletin of the night before. In practice, however, no more than 10–15 out of 120 are present. After this plenary meeting, no official meetings take place, but decisions are made informally, primarily at the ‘7:30 pm news island’. Since 2008, the Internet unit has become more prominent in the newsroom with a growing number of employees. The deputy editor-in-chief is first and foremost responsible for guarding the overall daily processes, but the editor-in-chief is also regularly present during meetings and involved in daily issues. The current editor-in-chief has been part of this news organisation since the start and has held his current position since 1999.

7.3 Accountability instruments

In the following section I will describe RTL Nieuws’ political, public and professional accountability instruments. Being a commercial organisation, RTL Nieuws operates in a market of supply and demand, but being accountable to shareholders and advertisers is taken care of at the institutional level of RTL Nederland. As a journalistic news organisation, the objectives of RTL Nieuws are not market-oriented, but based on professional principles. The chief executive officer of RTL Nederland confirmed this, “Formally there is an editorial statute that decides the independence of RTL Nieuws”. At the same time, at RTL Nieuws there is a clear awareness that without a substantial audience the future of the news programme will be at stake. That is reflected in audience-targeted policies and measures of (strategic) responsiveness that will be discussed in 7.4.

7.3.1 Political accountability

Commercial broadcasters in the Netherlands have never been bound by extensive regulatory measures except for the minimal requirements in the EC directive Television Without Frontiers, dating from 1989 and adapted and expanded to become the Audiovisual Media Services Directive in 2007. Nevertheless, it should be noted that before 1989 political accountability prevented commercial broadcasting to even operate in the Dutch market. The European directive has established rules for commercial broadcasters on sponsorship, maximum advertising time, youth protection and programme production (there are quotas for European productions). Being a Luxembourg broadcaster, RTL falls under the rules of that country and of the EU. The other commercial broadcaster SBS has to comply to the Dutch Media Act, which
has stricter local rules than the EU directives (mainly on advertising time 
and sponsorship). Although the Dutch Media Authority has continually (but 
unsuccessfully) tried to change this situation, RTL Nederland is exempted from 
Dutch jurisdiction because the company is formally located in Luxembourg 
(Commissariaat voor de Media, 2006). This means that RTL Nieuws does 
not have any formal political accountability directed towards Dutch political 
institutions.

7.3.2. Public accountability

RTL Nieuws tries to be accountable to the public in various ways, either overt 
or covert. The instruments are presented in chronological order, based on the 
sequence of their introduction.

Responding to complaints

A fundamental way to be accountable to the public is by responding to their 
complaints. Viewers of RTL Nieuws can file a complaint by post, telephone 
or email, with the latter most commonly used. Emails can be sent through 
an online form available on the website. These complaints are received in a 
general email inbox together with tips, information, practical questions. Also 
other source material, such as formal press releases are received in this inbox. 
Viewers can also contact the general public service desk of RTL Nederland. 
Specific email addresses of journalists or of the newsroom cannot be found on 
the website or screen during the broadcast. Because of past contacts, however, in 
practice many organisations do have access to the email addresses of individual 
journalists. The overall email inbox can be viewed by the editorial staff of the 
Internet and the national news unit. It is their responsibility to take account of 
these emails and answer them. In practice, this means journalists filter emails 
based on urgency, factuality and actuality. Complaints are dealt with on an 
individual, informal and personal basis, which makes this instrument a form 
of covert public accountability.

Code of conduct

The primary shareholder of RTL Nederland, Bertelsmann, has a published 
code of conduct for all its companies. Besides the interpersonal conduct 
of employees at work, and financial and technological privacy, the code 
guarantees editorial independence of the news reporting (Bertelsmann AG, 
2008: 39). This code can be found on the website of Bertelsmann, but not
on that of RTL Nieuws. Next to this code of conduct RTL Nieuws also keeps to an editorial statute, set up in 1998. In this statute the independence of the editorial unit is guaranteed. As it is not publicly available, this statute is more a form of professional accountability.

**Council for Journalism**

For a long time, RTL Nederland and RTL Nieuws complied and collaborated with the Council for Journalism, being members of the board, paying financial contributions, going to hearings when summoned and publishing a rectification when a complaint was found to be legitimate. However, in 2000 RTL Nieuws decided to no longer adhere to the Council’s conventions, because it believes that it increasingly takes the role of judge and jury. RTL Nieuws believes the court is a more effective instrument. Nonetheless, RTL Nederland still supports the Council financially.

**Mediadebat**

As we have seen in the previous chapters, in 2005, NOS, the journalists’ union NVJ and the Dutch newspaper publishers’ association NDP introduced a media debate organisation, Mediadebat. Representatives of RTL Nieuws have regularly collaborated by actively joining these debates. RTL Nederland also paid financial contribution to the organisation. As of 2010, Mediadebat has stopped organizing debates (see Chapter 5). This instrument aims at stimulating public and professional debate on journalism issues and as an overt instrument of accountability it can thus be public and professional. Moreover, it can provide transparency to the public on journalistic processes and decision-making issues.

**Nieuwsmonitor**

Also in 2005, the Nieuwsmonitor was introduced to provide independent empirical data to substantiate a qualitative debate on journalism issues. Thus, this instrument can potentially form the basis for public and professional accountability. It is mainly focused on analysing newspaper coverage through quantitative content analysis on particular incidents. Since 2010 television broadcasts have also been analysed when specific ‘hot’ issues arise in which the role of the media is debated. For example, after the elections in May 2010 Nieuwsmonitor analysed items from newspapers and from NOS Nieuws and RTL Nieuws television news to determine to what extent these media
organisations had provided a platform to the right-wing politician Geert Wilders. As this instrument was new during my research period, it is not clear how this instrument is evaluated by the news organisation

**Transparency on source material**

Besides responding to viewer’s complaints, *RTL Nieuws* increasingly indicates its responsibility pro-actively by being transparent on how its news is selected and constructed. Since 2008, one of the strategies used has been to offer greater transparency on source material by publishing the complete material on the website along with the news item. According to the deputy editor-in-chief, this allows the viewer to verify the reliability of the item by tracing back to its source. For example, in December 2009 *RTL Nieuws* published confidential documents online from De Nederlandsche Bank that related to a bankrupt Dutch bank. They believed these documents were important in and for the public interest and it was a way “to be accountable and verifiable” (Klein, 2009). Transparency being a prerequisite for public accountability, this instrument is primarily aimed at showing transparency to the public in an overt manner: it can be used by the public to hold *RTL Nieuws* to account.

**Weblogs**

Since 2009, *RTL Nieuws* has made use of weblogs, intended to provide more transparency or insight into certain topics. The first blog post was written by the correspondent in the Middle-East. Since then, correspondents in Germany and United States have occasionally written blog posts on their experiences. Additionally, the political unit in The Hague has its own weblog under the name ‘monthly diary’. The editor-in-chief and the deputy editors-in-chief do not have a permanent blog space, but use it when they feel the need. For example, when De Nederlandsche Bank (DNB) took them to court over the online publication of the confidential documents relating to the bankrupt bank, *RTL Nieuws*’ deputy explained in a blog post why he had decided to publish. However, weblogs are not written on a regular basis and, in contrast to those of *NOS Nieuws*, do not have a fixed place on the website.

**7.3.3 Professional accountability**

Public accountability can sometimes also have a professional character as is the case with the code of conduct and *Mediadebat*. In addition, similar to the other two news organisations, *RTL Nieuws* focuses on professional accountability
in the form of evaluation meetings. These are covert, as they are directed to colleagues within the organisation. Overt professional accountability was only facilitated when Mediadebat was still active.

**Evaluation moments**

Every day at 1:30 pm the department heads, program editor, deputy editor-in-chief, Internet coordinator, and several individual editors and reporters come together to evaluate the broadcasts of the previous day. Issues discussed often amount to whether the item was understandable to the general public —“Did we get our message across?”— and how RTL Nieuws fared compared with NOS Nieuws. Other formal evaluation moments are organised more infrequently. The heads of the foreign news department and political department indicated that monthly meetings are organised to discuss and evaluate specific news items. On a weekly basis, the coordinators of the Internet department come together. Once a year the whole editorial staff meet at a self-reflective day to discuss a variety of journalistic and organisational topics. In practice, evaluations and self-reflective discussions predominantly occur in an informal setting when an issue arises and people feel the need to get together.

**7.3.4 Accountability policy**

To conclude, RTL Nieuws is a commercial journalistic organisation that is not really bound by political accountability measures. Informally it is accountable to the public and internally to the colleagues. Public accountability predominantly has a covert character as RTL Nieuws responds to individual complaints, when deemed relevant. Rather than feeling the need to be accountable to the public, RTL Nieuws feels the need to be responsive.

**7.4 Instruments of responsiveness**

Being part of a commercial media organisation aimed at as large a public as possible, it is to be expected that RTL Nieuws’ responsiveness—taking the public into consideration and seriously—has a strategic motive.

**7.4.1 Strategic responsiveness**

Since the introduction of commercial television and the start of RTL in 1989 and SBS in 1995, Dutch commercial broadcasting organisations have operated in a highly competitive market (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2006). From the start, commercial broadcasters felt the need to produce news broadcasts, on
the one hand as a way of attracting the news-hungry viewer used to watching NOS Nieuws, on the other as a way to distinguish themselves from the public broadcaster’s news service, their successful competitor. In its pioneer years RTL Nieuws had to struggle with minimal (financial) resources and did not differ much in its policy from the NOS service. As the editor-in-chief put it, “We only distinguished ourselves by budget that we did not have” (De Journalist, 29 July 2009; De Journalist, 23 Sept. 1994). Over the years it developed into a news organisation “with a distinctive news style”, as the editor-in-chief said on the twentieth anniversary of RTL (De Journalist, 29 July 2009).

Public-oriented journalism
Just as de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws, RTL Nieuws has the intention to bring stories with a public-oriented approach. Where the former two news organisations started with this type of journalism from a civic departure point, RTL Nieuws has from the start been taking the public or consumer into account, be it for more strategic reasons. One of the main characteristics of RTL Nieuws is that it makes news for ‘the man in the street’. The selection and angle of news is always approached from a consideration of what might be of interest to the ordinary citizen, rather than from the institutional perspective with which NOS Nieuws has often been associated. In 2005, RTL Nederland decided to develop a clear and targeted profile of the RTL viewer as aged between 20 and 49. This was prompted by increasing commercial competition from SBS, the subsequent decline in audience ratings for RTL 4 (which in previous years had been a leading channel) and the launch of the popular ‘newsy’ talk show De Wereld Draait Door by the public broadcasters. The latter is broadcasted at the same time as the RTL evening news and targets the same young audience. Since then all programmes of RTL Nederland, including RTL Nieuws, have been tailored to the needs and wishes of the target group.

Online interaction
In recent years, RTL Nieuws increasingly uses online instruments to bond with the consumer. The Internet unit builds on the public’s question ‘what’s in it for me?’ by offering the viewer additional practical or close-to-home information on news items. When, for example, an item had been broadcast on the issue of road pricing, the site offered a tool for the viewer to calculate

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1 In 2003 a profile was developed of the RTL viewer: Esther and Peter are end thirties and have a secondary vocational education level. He works full time and she part-time. They have two children and live in a suburb area (Nieman, 2007, Code RTL of RTL Nederland).
what cost implications this had for him or her. This way the news was not only oriented at the viewer but it also generated more viewers/consumers. For RTL Nieuws, relating to the viewer has a strategic purpose in distinguishing itself from NOS Nieuws and other competitors, and also helping it strengthen its link with its target group.

Since November 2009 RTL Nieuws has collaborated with the Dutch social networking site Hyves. Every day RTL Nieuws and Hyves put a poll question online about a current news issue. The results are broadcast in the breakfast news bulletin. The editor-in-chief noted, "We want to understand how the general public experiences the news items with which we occupy ourselves daily" (Mediacourant, 26 Nov. 2009). Apart from the polls, presenters of the breakfast news bulletins actively communicate with the members of the RTL Nieuws Hyves page as a way to better understand their audience, to bond with their (potential) public and to strengthen the RTL Nieuws brand. Within approximately 3 months of the start of this collaboration more than 100,000 people had joined the Hyves RTL Nieuws page and every day 3,000–6,000 people respond to the poll.

Since mid-2009, RTL Nieuws has been on the social networking and microblogging service Twitter. Reporters mainly use this medium to offer the public up-to-date information while a news item is developing. The possibility to respond to so-called ‘followers’ or engage in a dialogue with them has not been used widely.

The economic editorial unit has created its own interactive instruments for its bulletin RTL Z. The Friday afternoon bulletin incorporates viewers’ questions on a specific topic addressed by the unit. In addition, some reporters make use of the ‘Cover-It-Live’ utility, to report instantly from location and at the same time offer the possibility of responding to viewer’s questions on the spot.

### 7.4.2 Civic responsiveness

For RTL Nieuws, relating to the viewer has clear strategic reasoning as it can help the broadcast to distinguish itself from its public broadcaster equivalent and other competitors to relate to its target group. However, being responsive to the public has also civic elements.
To the editor-in-chief a basic assumption of journalism is to provide the citizen with relevant and understandable news, and this can only be done when being responsive to the public. Only then can the media fulfill a democratic role. In other words, bridging the gap with the public is felt to be a social responsibility.

My observations indicate that the phrases ‘why should I care?’ and ‘what’s in it for me?’ are central when deciding on and preparing a news item. According to the interviewees, news is only relevant to the viewer if he or she understands the issue and understands the relevance and the possible effects for him or her in daily life.

Different forms are used to relate to the public. One way is to portray real-life stories to illustrate a large news item (see Box 7.1 for an illustration). *Vox pops* are also used regularly to provide the viewer a possibility of hearing the opinions of others. To get a better understanding of important issues in society, specific groups or contacts are invited to the newsroom to get a better understanding of how television and journalistic processes work. However, for RTL Nieuws being responsive to the public means not so much following or bridging with the public’s agenda, but stems from a more traditional journalistic trustee model (see also Schudson, 1999). It is its journalistic responsibility to provide the public with information that concerns them in an understandable and accessible manner.

**7.4.3 Empathic responsiveness**

In contrast to the cases of de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws there are indications of empathic responsiveness at RTL Nieuws. Over the years RTL Nieuws has
expanded its research unit with since 2008 six full-time research journalists. Besides the task of investigating specific issues and being a watchdog for established power holders, the work of this unit shows elements of bonding and siding with the public against the established institutions. Without being open anti-establishment, there are frequent instances where RTL Nieuws sides with the ordinary citizen in challenging the authorities and the institutions that represent them. At the same time, the autonomy of the journalistic process is still prime. One example is RTL Nieuws’ increasing use of the Wet Openbaarheid van Bestuur (literally ‘Law for transparency in governance’, the equivalent of the Freedom of Information Act) as a tool to expose information regarding the performance of political actors. Many interviewees used the words ‘bold’, ‘rebellious’ and ‘outspoken’ to describe their investigative task and the experience of holding power holders to account.

7.4.4 Policy of responsiveness
In conclusion, being responsive to the public has a definite commercial aim, as RTL Nieuws is part of a commercial media enterprise. Generating a large audience is a precondition for its existence. But, in this commercial context, the independent journalistic news organisation considers being responsive to the public, focusing on their agenda of urgency, to be one of its core journalistic values. The importance of the relationship with the public is demonstrated through a journalistic style that tailors itself to the needs of the viewers, sides with the normal citizens and understands issues of the ordinary person. However, it is less about entering in a dialogue with the public.

7.5 Practicing accountability: an informal tradition
At RTL Nieuws, accountability and responsiveness are primarily arranged informally without many formalized instruments being initiated by the editor-in-chief. This is quite a contrast to the large number of formal instruments that have been introduced at both de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws. Does this informal policy indicate that accountability and responsiveness are barely implemented, let alone incorporated or internalised in the organisation?

In the following section, based primarily on the interviews and observation analyses, I will describe the attitudes to accountability I found at RTL Nieuws and use the four phases of adoption (introduction, implementation, incorporation and internalisation) as defined in Chapter 4 to help assess to
what extent the ideas and related instruments can be considered to have become part of the organisation’s structure and culture. Table 7.1 provides an overview of the accountability instruments including the level of adoption.

The level of adoption of accountability is firstly related to how journalists from RTL Nieuws view the concept of accountability. The majority of the interviewees do not relate much to the issue of accountability and give priority to their journalistic responsibilities of informing and controlling those with power, with an increasing attention for the latter. The deputy editor-in-chief noted, “We do not only have the task to register the news but also to set the agenda.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Type of accountability</th>
<th>Suggested/ Self-initiated</th>
<th>Overt/ Covert (O/C)</th>
<th>Level of adoption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Audiovisual Media Service Directive</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Adhering to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Council for Journalism</td>
<td>Professional / Public</td>
<td>Suggested</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Only collaborating financially</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responding to complaints</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Editorial statute</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Mediadebat</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Collaborating (until 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nieuwsmonitor</td>
<td>Basis for public and professional</td>
<td>Suggested</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Transparency source material</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Weblogs</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation &amp; reflection moments</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the core values of journalism is having the curiosity to investigate and that also means trying to expose or unmask things.” Investing in their performance and responsibility does not only have a journalistic component,
but also a clear strategic component of trying to attract a larger audience than their competitors.

Accountability is believed to be intrinsic within the responsibilities of the journalist. Trust should be maintained by acting according to journalistic principles and can be enhanced by relating to the public and by being open about the journalistic processes. The editor-in-chief saw my research period as a form of accountability, "We let you in to show you how things actually work here, to give full transparency of the processes and to show you that we have nothing to hide."

**7.5.1 Public accountability implemented**

Judging by their perceived definition of accountability, the employees of RTL Nieuws tend to focus on their responsibilities as informer and watchdog. They are also not very keen on collaborating with suggested forms of accountability such as the Council for Journalism. When a complainant remains dissatisfied and no mutual consensus is found, the editor-in-chief, deputy editor-in-chief and the majority of the interviewees at professional level (editors, reporters and presenters) are in favour of bringing the case to court. They prefer the court to the Council for Journalism because the court offers the option for parties to appeal. Moreover, the editor-in-chief does not believe that the Council is sufficiently professional to handle complicated issues.

In terms of self-initiated accountability, preference is given to arranging it in an informal way. The deputy editor-in-chief and editor-in-chief believe that responding to mistakes and making corrections when necessary is fundamental to the journalistic process and self-evident for a commercial organisation. According to the editor-in-chief, "You have to serve the customer."

In practice, however, responding to the viewer is not done regularly. The possibility for the viewer to comment or complain is available, but most interviewees do not perceive that there is a substantial amount of response from the public. Hence, among the employees the urgency to respond seems to be minimal. Even though the editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief believe that the trend of increasing assertiveness among citizens has contributed to a critical approach to the media neither management nor professionals have experienced a rise in discontent regarding their journalistic performance.
Moreover, when complaints are made, editors or unit heads are hesitant to answer because they believe the complaints are frequently based on the self-interest of the complainant or that the comments are inappropriate or too harsh. A presenter said, "I don't receive much feedback from the audience. And the few mails I do receive are often too harsh or not constructive. I would rather listen to the feedback I get from family and friends". A unit head added that, "I always have to first read the mail carefully to distinguish whether the complaint is justifiable or merely based on self-interest, the latter often being the case. If so, I do not feel the urge to answer". A third reason that the journalists are not too keen on responding is that the system of response is not well coordinated among the staff. While the Internet and national news units are responsible for replying to complaints, in practice the division of tasks remains unclear and there is no agreement on how the different types of emails should be dealt with, answered or forwarded to the appropriate person. The editor-in-chief is aware of this problem and admits that the best solution would be to formalize this by having one person responsible for dealing with the incoming emails. However, with tight budgets he would prefer to invest in a journalistic position instead of employing someone like an ombudsman.

Responding to the viewer is primarily done in an informal way, without many formal instruments. This informal policy fits the editor-in-chief’s view of managing an organisation based on an individual’s own responsibility. As he says, "I believe in organisations that have the discipline to understand what needs to be done every day". In line with this, formal instruments such as the ombudsman do not appeal to him. Not only the editor-in-chief, but also several editors, reporters and unit heads prefer not to introduce or adhere to formal instruments, but to act upon journalistic principles and responsibilities. This seems to fit the informal and horizontal organisational culture, with few official policies or written guidelines. When attempts are made to formalize or create guidelines or rules many of the editorial staff draw attention to their journalistic responsibilities, which are practiced best when free and autonomous. Box 7.2 gives an illustration of the conflict between the informal culture and an attempt to centralize or formalize policy. Besides the influence of the editor-in-chief, who would "rather fight against institutions than conform to them", the historical background fits this informal culture. A reporter described the news organisation in the early days as “an underdog and a rebellious club”. This ‘rebellious’ character seems to still be visible today,
fighting against formal institutions and choosing to organise things themselves based upon their own morality and responsibilities and not put upon them. At the same time, it seems to fit the traditional journalistic culture of being autonomous of any external influence.

To conclude, public accountability does not form a central premise in the daily journalistic routine. It is at most implemented in the organisation but not incorporated let alone internalised. It is felt by members of the staff to be embedded within their professional responsibilities. The informal structure of

**Box 7.2: Conflict between informal culture and structure and attempts for formal policy**

Around the middle of 2009 several reporters and editors from RTL Nieuws started to use Twitter for both personal and professional purposes. Some were more active than others and some only mentioned work-related issues while others added more personal anecdotes. At the end of December the editor-in-chief and deputies wrote an email stipulating the specific guidelines for using Twitter. Moreover, they emphasised the importance of clearly distinguishing between private and professional use.

This email created quite some discussion in the newsroom, with a majority of journalists reacting rather defensively and becoming agitated about the manner in which the management approached this issue. One specific discussion amongst reporters characterised the general mood:

“So now I receive all these rules I have to keep to. And what am I supposed to do with that?”

“I think they just want us to be aware of certain issues; that we shouldn’t just give our personal opinions about news issues on Twitter.”

“Yes, but obviously I consider what to put on Twitter. I don’t need such an email to remind me of that.”

“If it has to go this way, I will stop using Twitter.”

Therefore, a few weeks after this email and the commotion at the newsroom, it was decided to organise a meeting to elaborate on the use and objectives of Twitter. During a talk with the deputy editor, he referred to it as “quite an internal struggle. We are used to and prefer to arrange things informally. But on this issue of Twitter we wanted everyone to follow the same lead in the organisation. At this point, many journalists, mainly reporters make extensive use of Twitter to update their followers on how a certain news item is being generated”. A few months later in an article on the use of Twitter in the professional magazine De Journalist a deputy editor of RTL Nieuws said:

“We organised a tweet-meet to reflect on the use of Twitter. We don’t have any policy documents with rules on the use of social media, like NOS does. A lot of their rules are formalised which all amount to our only unwritten rule: use your common knowledge and be aware that you are a public figure” (Nab, 2010).
the organisation has the advantage that the management is open to bottom-up initiatives. In 2009, several journalists expressed support for the setting up new initiatives to provide the public with more transparency including writing weekly columns to give more insight into the journalistic processes, organizing online chats with journalists and inviting guests on a regular basis. However, a downside is that in practice the majority of the journalists are preoccupied with making news programmes and do not feel the urge to invest in accountability to the public.

### 7.5.2 Professional accountability implemented

Besides the daily planning meetings, the use of evaluation and self-reflective moments as covert forms of professional accountability is applauded by everyone in the organisation as they are means of enhancing journalistic quality. As at *de Volkskrant* and *NOS Nieuws*, there are many moments when the journalists come together to discuss and plan items before transmission and there is a fixed time for evaluation and reflection. The editors and reporters added that the atmosphere during evaluation moments, either formal or informal, is usually constructive, evaluating the work and not pointing out faults or blaming a specific person. Moreover, the short communication channels between the different departments and different levels of the organisation allow staff members to get together and discuss matters when the need is felt, without having to wait for a formal meeting. Based on my observations, the editor-in-chief plays a significant role in stimulating a critical and constructive debate. This was confirmed during the interviews. An editor said, “During the 1:15 pm meeting the editor-in-chief is good at provoking a discussion and evoking objections, which helps us to be more critical”. The members of the staff agree that the editor-in-chief can create a critical discussion, which stimulates the members of the staff to take an equally critical approach. An editor said: “We don’t need a formal instrument like an ombudsman to tell us what we do wrong. We are clever and responsible enough to see when we failed. We might not always correct it publicly, but internally we certainly learn from it”. Overall, this informal policy is felt to be a positive aspect of the organisational structure and culture.

Yet, in this time-pressured environment, evaluating and reflecting on one’s work is not given first priority, as it can be a time-consuming matter. The editorial staff are preoccupied with planning and making the next programme.
daily basis there is a formal moment of evaluation, but only a select group of involved people join this meeting. Moments of evaluation and self-reflection are never documented, which means that people absent from the meeting are not informed of the discussions or of any decisions made. Therefore, some professionals expressed their wish to have the proceedings of certain meetings recorded. Paradoxically, all the interviewees agreed that formalizing processes does not fit their organisational culture and would not improve the quality of their internal processes.

To conclude, there is a rather constructive internal feedback culture at RTL Nieuws. This can be ascribed to the relatively small and informal nature of the organisation, which makes it easier to speak to someone. Also the role of the editor-in-chief during the evaluation meetings seems to trigger more debate and self-reflection. However, as in the other two media organisations, journalists of RTL Nieuws are so caught up with bringing out reliable news as fast as possible, that this hinders them from taking the time to build in more constructive moments of evaluations with their peers or to incorporate it in their daily journalistic culture.

7.6 Responsiveness internalised

Being responsive to the public is not new to this news organisation. In fact, from the beginning it has been used as a strategy to distinguish itself from the public competition. Responsiveness at RTL Nieuws is not only a result of an increasing awareness of or uncertainty over the public. It is felt to always have been one of their core principles of journalism. It is part of its editorial philosophy and internalised in the journalistic processes. While one would assume that at RTL Nieuws mainly strategic responsiveness would be visible, the interviews and observation analysis confirm that their journalistic approach is based on a mix of strategic and civic reasoning with elements of empathic responsiveness. Table 7.2 provides an overview of the instruments of responsiveness and level of adoption.
Table 7.2 Instruments of responsiveness at RTL Nieuws

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Type of responsiveness</th>
<th>Level of adoption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Public-oriented journalism</td>
<td>Strategic &amp; Civic</td>
<td>Internalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Guests</td>
<td>Strategic &amp; Civic</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Polls</td>
<td>Strategic &amp; Civic</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Hyves (SNS)</td>
<td>Strategic &amp; Civic</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Strategic &amp; Civic</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Research journalism</td>
<td>Components of empathic</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.6.1 A mix of strategic of civic responsiveness

To the editorial staff being responsive to the public is part of their daily journalistic practice. All the interviewees used the same key terms to describe the style of RTL Nieuws: public-focused, accessible, informal, taking the target group into account and bringing the news from a less institutional news perspective. They also felt that news should be both engaging and relevant, referring to the need to attract as well as inform the audience. Everyone agreed that from the beginning RTL Nieuws wanted to distinguish itself from the public service broadcaster, mainly by bringing the news in a more accessible and understandable manner. There is an overall agreement to convey the news from the perspective of ‘the man in the street’ by explaining what the news is about and how it can affect the viewer. Also since 2002, partly as result of the Fortuyn incident, the interviewees said they have become more sensitive to the discontent within society and have attempted to empathize with the feelings of the public. A reporter said, “That’s when the realization came that we had been working in an ivory tower and there was a genuine motivation to come down from it”. A unit head summarized, “One tries to give news a human character”. Box 7.3 provides an illustration of this public-oriented approach. This shows that coming to terms with the public and serving the public in their understanding of society has both a strategic and a civic motive.

Among the editorial staff the strategic commercial motive is not perceived as something negative, but rather as being essential in an increasingly competitive environment. There is also a general perception that this focus on audience
ratings allows the aspiration of RTL Nieuws to continuously invest in making quality news programmes to manifest itself. There is an overall consensus that the basic journalistic principles of unbiased and objective news-making in the interest of the public still dominate over making news the consumer is interested in. However, according to several journalists this increasing focus on the public should be applied with caution, since it is tempting in an increasingly competitive climate and difficult economic times to give priority to commercial instead of the journalistic objectives. In relation to this issue, one might suspect internal pressure from the commercial media enterprise, RTL Nederland, to which the professional news organisation belongs. However, the interviews with the journalists do not show any signs of this. Many journalists believe it to be a demand that they put on themselves and which is not put on them by the management. One presenter of RTL Nieuws said about this:

In over ten years of working for RTL, no one from management has ever bothered me with news ratings. Despite what many outsiders think, it's not the RTL management that breathes down journalists' necks about audience ratings. Instead it's the news department itself that carefully keeps an eye on ratings (Niemann, 2007: 78).

Box 7.3: Solving the citizen-consumer divide

In December 2009 all children under 4 were called up to receive vaccinations against swine flu (H1N1), an event that was covered extensively on all the major news broadcasts. The large sport complexes and town halls where the vaccinations were being administered were shown with images of crying children being comforted by their parents. During the second round of vaccinations, RTL Nieuws also felt the need to cover this issue, since it was one affecting many citizens that day, including a sizable portion of their target group, as parents of small children were likely to be in the 20–49 age category. However, instead of having an institutional speaker such as a doctor or vaccine expert lead the item, it was decided to give this issue a more “human touch”, as stated by the presenter involved. Since he has a child who also had to be vaccinated, the item revolved around him, following the process from preparing at home, taking his daughter for the injection to consoling the inevitable tears with a gift. “Many of the presenters of RTL Nieuws are part of our target group and in this way we could distinguish ourselves from others and at the same time tell the story from a human perspective that many can relate to. At the newsroom this style of presentation was discussed and even though the opinions diverged, the majority agreed that it is important to bring the news in such a way that it relates to the viewer.”
The independence of the news organisation from the commercial enterprise is guaranteed in the editorial statute and the editorial staff agree that in practice this is also secured. However, many interviewees perceive that there is a general feeling among large segments of public that commercial and sensational elements within the news programme are intrinsic to a commercial organisation which brings into question the credibility of their bulletins. A presenter said, “During an interview with a local radio they asked me if I am sponsored by specific brands. I couldn’t believe they asked me that”. Nevertheless, according to the majority of the editors and reporters they have built up a trustworthy image among their sources and politicians over the years. The editor-in-chief and deputies are very much attentive to the fact that an organisation’s image, in particular that of a commercial enterprises, is very fragile, obliging them to work continuously to maintain and improve the quality of their products and to build trust relations. Increasingly, they have not only used strategies to bridge and bind with the public to gain or retain the public trust, but also empathic forms of responsiveness to bond with the public. By siding with the public and watching over the performance of institutions, RTL Nieuws sometimes takes the role of caretaker of the public against the established elite. However, this is only done implicitly as the RTL’s main objective is the bring news in a neutral and objective manner.

7.6.2 Interactive instruments implemented
Responsiveness is part of the culture of RTL Nieuws and internalised in the daily journalistic processes. The majority of the interviewees do not believe that they need specific instruments to interact with or relate to the citizen/consumer in order to understand the public’s agenda. They are the professionals who should be able to make institutional information understandable to the public. Many also said that the youthful composition of the editorial staff contributes to a better understanding of their rather young target group. Moreover, while there is not much ethnic diversity, an internal poll at the time of the 2006 election showed that their political interests were quite diverse and did not reflect the traditional assumption that news journalists tend to have a left-leaning political orientation (Nieman, 2007). This is viewed in relation to the continuous media debate in the Netherlands, in which the public broadcasters are criticized for being left-oriented and acting as an extension of the established elite, and therefore incapable of addressing a broad public. To many at RTL Nieuws this diversity among the editorial staff is a necessity if they are to provide diverse and broad news coverage.
In recent years, online interactive instruments have been implemented, but among the editorial staff these instruments have not always been received with open arms and sometimes even been contested. This can be attributed to different factors. Firstly, the interactive mechanisms are relatively new and are still at an experimental phase. Secondly, while many see the added value of getting a better understanding of and relating to the public, a majority of the interviewees doubt the actual positive effect of it since the responses they receive do not represent society as a whole. This was particularly mentioned in regard to the daily poll on the social medium Hyves. Thirdly, several interviewees said that one should be aware of not automatically taking these responses into account. An editor provided me with an illustration. She had planned an item on swine flu vaccination and why a large part of the population was against it. Based on the responses on the website she believed that a large number of people thought the vaccination programme was some kind of government conspiracy. It turned out that these opinions and the number of negative remarks on the website did not correspond to the general view of Dutch citizens.

Many fear that overuse of the instruments can lead to a news organisation being overly responsive, conceding to the public and thereby not taking journalistic responsibilities. Whether in relation to the collaboration with the social networking site or the possibility for the public to react to the items featured on the website, a few believed there was a potential tendency to overemphasise the interest and desires of the public with a clear commercial objective. One presenter said, “I think it is very good that we always think in terms ‘what’s in it for me?’ , but at this point the website might be taking this too literally and focusing too much on what the public wants. It is becoming too populist”. A reporter said, “It is important to listen to the public, but there is a difference between listening to the public to understand their issues and accepting their issues as the truth. It is therefore very important to find the right balance.” A more practical problem that employees faced is the amount of time it takes to respond to the input of the public or use it for follow-up stories. The editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief also emphasised this. “This is growing problem because interactivity leads to more interaction and reaction, but we do not have the capacity to reply to or make use of all these responses. I cannot afford to have a journalist work full time to handle all the responses.” In practice, the website is primarily used for informing and less for interacting.
In conclusion, at RTL Nieuws there are several motives for being responsive to the public. However, they do not seem to conflict with each other. Taking the public into consideration is felt to be the organisation’s core value, a fundamental task for a news organisation and an essential part of their attempts to try to relate to their target group. However, when it comes to actually engaging in a dialogue, the editorial staff remain hesitant as it undermines their professional responsibilities.

7.7 Conclusion

By taking a case study of the Dutch news organisation RTL Nieuws, this chapter has described how an organisation of the commercial media sector is responding to structural and performance challenges as well as their attitude to the contemporary media accountability debate. Rising competition, an increasingly fragmented audience, tight budgets and the emergence of new technologies have prompted the commercial broadcaster to gradually re-address its relation with its public. Criticism of their performance and subsequent declining trust are not felt to have increased over time. On the contrary, many believe that over the years, in particular politicians and other relevant sources are perceiving them more and more as a credible journalistic organisation, comparable to the public broadcaster’s news organisation. The issue of trust does not seem to be associated with the discontent over their performance, but is more often linked to their commercial background.

First and foremost, RTL Nieuws focuses on the structural challenges of growing competition, an increasingly fragmented audience and coping with tight budgets. It wants to maintain or improve the trust and loyalty of the public and distinguish itself from others by investing in their social responsibility and being responsive to the public. Taking the public into consideration has always been important to RTL Nieuws, and has increased in importance with rising competition and a less loyal audience. In addition, understanding the viewer’s wishes and concerns to better tailor the news information is felt to be intrinsic to the task of a news organisation and embedded within the principles of journalism.

RTL Nieuws is not greatly bothered about the debate on media performance. It seems as if the limited role it takes in the political debate allows it to
avoid investing in the formalisation of accountability. Moreover, even though implicit, there is an overall attitude that it wants to distinguish itself from the establishment. Introducing formal accountability instruments is considered to be conforming to the desires of the established elite. *RTL Nieuws* staff prefer a looser, more informal policy that is focused on catering to the needs and responding to the complaints of the individual viewer. The overall informal organisational policy has its positive aspects as it leaves much room for the responsibility of the individual journalist, creates possibilities for bottom-up initiatives and contributes to a larger possibility for overall support from the editorial staff. However, in practice this informal policy leads to a counter effect as most journalists are not focused on being accountable to the public. Yet, with regard to professional accountability it is this informal culture, with a relatively small editorial staff that creates opportunities for constructive feedback moments.

This difference in focus has consequences for the adoption of instruments. Where responsiveness is part of daily practice and internalised in the organisation structure and culture, public and professional accountability are only at the implementation phase.

Nevertheless, even though the organisation prefers to maintain and improve trust by investing in its social responsibility and responsiveness, awareness of the issue of accountability has increased as a result of the rise of the issue in the public debate, the technological possibilities and the corresponding wider demand for more openness, transparency and governance. Where the management and majority of professionals opt for McQuail’s liability model, focused on causal responsibility and the “potential harm that media publication might cause” (2005: 209), there is a gradual shift to an answerability model, which includes a “willingness to explain, defend and justify actions of publications or omissions” (McQuail, 2003: 204). There is more interest in engaging in a dialogue with the public and providing transparency on the background and construction of a news story. Tsfati and Cappella assert that trust relates to uncertainty, “given that the media deal with the impersonal world, audiences are always at least somewhat uncertain about news media contents in the sense that it is usually hard for them to verify media reports” (2003: 506). By providing transparency, *RTL Nieuws* wants to take away the public’s uncertainties and show that its performance is grounded in journalistic
rather than commercial values. As such, it offers the public the possibility to hold it to account.

To conclude, in a changing media landscape with structure and performance pressures, RTL Nieuws embraces measures that fit the combination of cultures of a commercial media enterprise and of journalistic professionalism. This commercial news organisation does not feel a strong demand to respond to criticisms of their performance through political accountability instruments or through suggested public accountability instruments. Rather, it prefers to hold on to the traditional journalistic professional values. At the same time, there is an increased awareness both at management and professional level that the structural challenges in combination with the increasing public debate on media performance requires an intensification of the relationship with its target group. However, to take the public into account is deemed more important than being accountable to the public.