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

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Chapter 8

Conclusions
Chapter 8

Conclusions

8.1 Introduction

Over the past decade the role of the media and journalism in the Netherlands seems to have come under increased scrutiny. Political actors blame the media for exaggerating the facts and creating media hypes, for being too focused on strategy and conflict, and for focusing more on entertainment than information. Moreover, politicians feel media are misusing their increasing power in society (Brants, 2000; Brants & Bardoel, 2008; Brants & Van Praag, 2005; Vasterman, 2004). They blame them for the waning public trust in politics. Politicians hold the media responsible for the rising number of indecisive voters and a generally decreasing public trust in politics. The phrase ‘it’s the media that did it’ has often been used to capture this overall discontent with media performance. But not only politicians, also the public seems to be agitated or at least there seems to be a general discontent on the way media perform (Bardoel, 2003). The media have been caught up in a heated debate in the public arena after specific incidents brought their role into question. Particularly, there was criticism on how the media covered the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 and the position they took during the rise and death of politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002. These pressures from politics and the public have created a greater demand for the media to be more accountable.

The growing criticism of media performance and the subsequent pressure for accountability forms the premise of this dissertation. How have the media responded? Traditionally, the state has been a central actor in the formation of media policy through law and regulation in order to safeguard media diversity. However, there has been a shift from a regulatory role of government to a greater responsibility for the involved actors, including the media: from regulation to governance (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a; d’Haenens, Mansell & Sarikakis, 2010; Donges, 2007; McQuail, 2007; Puppis, 2010; Schulz & Held, 2004). Is the state indeed taking a more distant role and what is the role of the media in possible new governance arrangements? This subject
has gained importance with both the public (Broertjes, 2006; Jansen & Drok, 2005; RMO, 2003; ROB, 2003) and in scholarly debate (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a, 2004b; Brants & Bardoel, 2008; McQuail, 2003, 2007). Moreover, there have been previous studies on specific accountability instruments such as the ombudsman, the Council for Journalism and codes of ethics (Evers, Groenhart & Groesen, 2009; Mentink, 2006; Koene, 2008; Van Dalen & Deuze, 2006). This research does not look into one specific instrument of accountability, but at the overall response of various media organisations and journalists to the criticism of their performance, and it also provides an insight into, explanation and evaluation of the measures adopted within the organisation's structure and culture.

In this final chapter the theoretical notions, the longitudinal analysis and the case study findings are combined to give an answer to my overall research question:

How are Dutch news media and journalists responding to criticism of their performance and to what extent have any measures been adopted?

I start with a summary of my research in section 8.2. Section 8.3 compares the three case studies of *de Volkskrant*, NOS Nieuws and RTL Nieuws, looking at how these organisations have responded to pressures for accountability and responsiveness and explaining the differences and similarities in their responses. Section 8.4 provides overall conclusions and answers to the research question. In section 8.5 I will look at the theoretical and conceptual contribution of this research. Finally, section 8.6 concludes with possible implications for media organisations and the journalism profession.

8.2 Summary of this dissertation

This thesis is built up in several parts: a longitudinal analysis, a conceptual analysis and a multiple-case study research of three media organisations. A summary of the different parts is given.

8.2.1 Longitudinal analysis

In order to understand the media’s perspective and responses, it was necessary to elucidate empirically whether the debate on media performance has intensified over recent years, and, if so, what and who generated this increase.
Chapter 2 presents the results of a qualitative content analysis of articles in the journalistic magazine *De Journalist* to focus on the media professional debate. A selection of articles of the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* was analysed to understand the publicized public debate. The following research question was answered:

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

Taking a period of 20 years, between 1987 and 2007, the media debate in the Netherlands has roughly developed in two phases. The first, in the 1990s, was marked by issues that affected the media’s structure. Four large issues dominated the debate: media concentration, the legitimation of public service broadcasting, decreasing circulation figures and the advent of online technologies. In the second phase, from 2000 onwards, the debate shifted to media performance issues, where the role of the media was increasingly questioned. Nevertheless, the structural issues did not fade away, but became less paramount in the discussion. The discontent over media performance amounted to four issues: biased media coverage, increasing infotainment and sensationalist aspects in news coverage, the media having too much power and lastly, the media failing to perceive and address the public’s concerns. While the first three criticisms have been voiced mainly by politicians, the last is increasingly heard from members of the public.

The starting premise of this research was an assumed explosion of discontent over media performance. However, this empirical research showed that the debate on media performance had gradually become manifest by the turn of the century with a later increase in the debate on media accountability and responsiveness. Criticism was mostly voiced by politicians. The public seems to have been less involved. Even though specific events for which the media were criticized functioned as a catalyst for the rise in the debate, the structural issue in the first phase implicitly raised the question of media performance and therefore created a foundation for the variety of media criticism in the second phase.
Subsequently, to understand how the media's response has developed over time an additional research question was formulated in Chapter 2:

*How have the institutions and actors concerned responded to, coped with, and accommodated these pressures?*

This question was answered through a document analysis of 20 years of annual reports and speeches of Dutch media umbrella organisations including the union of journalists NVJ [Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten], the association of editors-in-chief NGH [Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteuren], the public service broadcaster NPO [Nederlandse Publieke Omroep] and the publishers' organisation NDP [Nederlandse Dagbladpers]. In addition, expert interviews with representatives of these organisations were held.

The document analysis of the annual reports and the interview analysis show that together with the shift from a debate about structure to one about performance, increasingly but slowly there has been more acknowledgment for the idea that media organisations are making attempts to being open, accountable and willing to take the public’s issues into consideration. There is a shift from a rather defensive attitude to willingness among journalists to discuss their own performance and initiate measures to come to terms with the public. However, whereas politicians insist that the media take measures to be more accountable to the public, the media rather emphasise measures of responsiveness to improve their relationship with the public or consumer.

This longitudinal analysis has shown that media’s responsible role is increasingly a point of discussion, putting trust in the media into question. Where in the past public’s trust in media performance and loyalty to specific media outlets were more or less self-evident, the combination of structural and performance issues has challenged this trust, putting more emphasis on being accountable and responsive in the hope of regaining this trust.

### 8.2.2 Theoretical exposé

In the debate on media performance originally two concepts formed the starting point of the research: media responsibility and accountability. The longitudinal analysis revealed that two other concepts also played a crucial role: trust and responsiveness. The increasing criticism of media *responsibility* is challenging the *trust* in the media. This is the overriding perception of
politicians, who in turn demand more accountable media. The media, on the other hand, counter with measures intended to foster responsiveness towards the public. Even though these concepts are often used in the daily discourse on media performance, there is no consensus on the precise meaning of these four concepts in relation to each other. Chapter 3 investigated the definitions of these rather ambivalent concepts.

Trust seems the underlying factor in this debate. There are numerous definitions and descriptions of trust, stemming from different academic disciplines such as sociology, economics and communication theory. Without going into detail, this summary operates from the premise that trust is a prerequisite for a well-functioning society (Durkheim, 1964; Luhmann, 1979; Simmel, 1950). In the media context, the presupposition is that if citizens do not trust the media they might turn away from the media and not be able to make an informed judgement about what happens around them and affects them. A subsequent implication is that they will not be able to participate adequately in a democracy.

Trust in the media therefore depends on the responsibility of the media to perform well, i.e. reliably. Media responsibility amounts to three tasks: informing the public, offering the public a space for dialogue and opinion and critically monitoring the performance of political and other actors and institutions in a reliable and independent way (Van Cuiilenburg & McQuail, 1982; Wildenmann & Kaltefleiter, 1965).

The concept of accountability relates to the extent to which the media answer to criticism or justify their performance (Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000; McQuail, 2005). This can be directed towards politics, the public, the journalist themselves or the market (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a; McQuail, 1997, 2003). Under political accountability media are by law accountable to political institutions. Market accountability means that the media are held accountable and judged by (the interest of) the consumer. Public and professional accountability are self-regulatory, as the initiatives are taken on a voluntary basis. The objective of the former is to be accountable to the public by responding to complaints or reactions; the latter is associated with professionalism and is directed towards the journalist. Professional and public accountability mechanisms are preferred by media institutions and
professionals, because they appear to co-exist best with the principle of freedom of the press (McQuail, 1997).

Based on a combination of my theoretical and longitudinal analysis, I perceived that there was a multitude of self-regulatory measures (public and professional accountability). In public accountability, some are covert, directed towards the individual, others are overt, directed to the public at large. Likewise, covert professional accountability is oriented towards the journalist within the media organisation, whereas in its overt form it is oriented towards the media profession as a whole.

Even though public accountability is voluntary, third parties are increasingly involved. Hodges (1986) distinguishes between contracted and self-imposed accountability, but I use the term ‘suggested’ rather than ‘contracted’ since the media are not obliged to join a specific contract with a third party. Also, I use ‘self-initiated’ instead of ‘self-imposed’ as this indicates that such measures are the media’s voluntary initiative without any (informal) pressure from others.

Closely related to accountability, responsiveness is about taking the public and their issues seriously into consideration by engaging and interacting with them (Brants & Bardoel, 2008). This concept seems to have also gained importance in the debate on the public role and performance of the media. Being responsive to the public can have different forms (Brants & De Haan, 2010). It can have a civic motive when trying to understand and learn from the public by taking its agenda into consideration; a strategic motive when trying to attract consumers by listening to their wishes; and it can have an empathic motive when siding with the citizen and their problems against the establishment.

These theoretical concepts form the basis for the case study research.

8.2.3 Three case studies

After the longitudinal and conceptual analysis the question remained as to how media are currently responding to this debate on their performance, to the growing demand for accountability and what measure are taken to come closer to the public.
Three case studies were chosen, each representing a different media sector: the press, public service broadcasting and commercial broadcasting. During a period of three months at each of the three media organisations I was almost full-time present which enabled me to use a triangulation of methods—documents, observation analysis and interviews. This was necessary to verify how the organisations have responded in terms of accountability and responsiveness and to what extent these measures have been adopted in the media structure and the professional culture. Chapter 4 provides an elaboration of the methods used and a description of the phases of adoption (introduction, implementation, incorporation and internalisation).

The case of the newspaper de Volkskrant
In Chapter 5, the first case study, of de Volkskrant, is presented. This is one of the leading quality newspapers in the Netherlands. From the mid-1990s, with the appointment of a new editor-in-chief, de Volkskrant introduced a range of public accountability instruments including an ombudsman, a correction box, a transparency box, adding names to news articles and the publication of a book in which different outsiders reflected on the performance of the newspaper during specific incidents (see Table 8.1).

In particular, the editor-in-chief strongly supported accountability as a way of regaining the waning trust of both political actors and the public. Specific incidents in which the role of the newspaper was questioned, such as the way Dutch journalists had reported the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 and the murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, reinforced this attention for accountability. Over the years, the instruments have gained a prominent place with a focus on overt public accountability, which shows the newspaper’s willingness to admit its mistakes to the public at large. At the same time, the increasing importance that the editorial staff place upon responding to individual complaints shows journalist’s effort to connect with the reader (covert public accountability).

Connecting with or relating to the reader is also manifested through instruments of responsiveness. Issues of concern to readers are increasingly used as a starting point, both with a civic and increasingly a strategic motive. Taking the reader into account (responsiveness) is felt to be essential in times when readers are turning their back on newspapers and youth are generally
Table 8.1: Instruments of accountability at de Volkskrant, NOS Nieuws & RTL Nieuws

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Type of instrument</th>
<th>Overt/ Covert (O/C) de Volkskrant</th>
<th>NOS Nieuws</th>
<th>RTL Nieuws</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Act</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Not obliged</td>
<td>Adhering to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitation Commission</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Not obliged</td>
<td>Adhering to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy plans &amp; performance agreements</td>
<td>Political Market</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Not obliged</td>
<td>Adhering to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council for Journalism</td>
<td>Public Professional</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediadebat (until 2010)</td>
<td>Public Professional</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nieuwsmonitor</td>
<td>Basis for public and professional</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters to editor/responding to complaints</td>
<td>Public O &amp; C</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ombudsman</td>
<td>Public Professional</td>
<td>O &amp; C</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication author’s names</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction box</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency source material</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weblogs</td>
<td>Public Civic &amp; strategic resp.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial guideline</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation meetings</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluations</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
disinclined to subscribe to a newspaper. While responsiveness seems to be incorporated in the organisation, the measures are more aimed at a better-educated and rather left-leaning public and less to the public at large. The newspaper remains at addressing its subscribers and less so at a broader potential (target) group. Moreover, journalists close ranks when it comes to involving the reader or giving too much insight in selecting and constructing the news. Lastly, an underlying defensive attitude, related to their professional authority and autonomy prevents both responsiveness and public accountability from being internalised.

Being professionally accountable to one’s peers is arranged through formal moments of evaluation within the organisation. However, the journalistic mind-set is more focused on reaching tomorrow’s deadline than on debating and evaluating performance. The time pressure that journalists are dealing with and the increasing competition of online media leave little room to evaluate their coverage after publication. Moreover, traditionally newspaper journalists work quite individually and autonomously, so giving feedback on colleagues’ work is a delicate issue. Preference is given to doing this informally on a one-to-one basis. This rather closed debate culture prevents journalists from giving their peers feedback on the newspaper’s performance. These factors prevent professional accountability from being incorporated, let alone internalised.

In all, de Volkskrant has been an early-adopter of a range of instruments to improve both the trust and loyalty of the public. However, the culture of journalistic autonomy still dominates in daily practice which does not sit well with accountability and responsiveness. With the departure of the editor-in-chief in July 2010, a fervent advocate of accountability and responsiveness, it remains to be seen whether this policy will be continued.

The case of the public news organisation NOS Nieuws

Chapter 6 describes the second case study, of Dutch public service broadcasting news organisation, NOS Nieuws. The year 2002 was significant following the murder of politician Pim Fortuyn. After the media were accused of having contributed to a climate which led to his death, the editor-in-chief came out strongly in favour of “stepping out of the ivory tower” and he tried to stimulate a journalistic culture of openness, accountability and public dialogue.
Public service broadcasting has historically been bound to forms of political accountability. While at the institutional level (Netherlands Public Service Broadcasting NPO) this is still the case, at the professional level the management of NOS Nieuws has attempted to be more directly accountable to the public. The rise and death of Fortuyn was a period that opened the eyes of the news organisation. In subsequent years it introduced a range of instruments for the public to hold NOS Nieuws to account, like a public complaints desk, an ombudsman and a correction box. Moreover, weblogs and the Chat on Friday, a weekly interactive instrument on a topical issue between the public and an invited speaker, are used pro-actively to explain journalistic choices and errors (see Table 8.1). Public accountability is mainly arranged in an overt manner, with the ombudsman and the public complaints desk playing an intermediary role. Where the editorial staff are proponents of opening up and showing accountability to the public, in practice journalists do not see the added value of these instruments as they feel that accountability is embedded in their responsibility and that many of the complaints are motivated by self-interest or blatantly discriminatory. Moreover, the time-pressured environment in which they work supposedly leaves them little time to invest in accountability.

Performance and structural challenges obliged NOS Nieuws not only to show more openness, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to take the concerns of ‘the ordinary man’ into consideration (see Table 8.2). While responsiveness started off with a civic reasoning, increasingly there is acknowledgement that taking the public into account is essential to deal with its fading viewer’s loyalty, particularly with the younger audience. Yet, while there is a strong intention to connect the ‘state with the street’, in daily practice this is still a linkage that is difficult to achieve. Besides logistical reasons, journalists find it difficult to find a balance between informing and listening.

Planning, discussing and coming together internally with colleagues are part of the daily routine at NOS Nieuws. However, being professionally accountable to one’s peers and evaluating one’s performance or reflecting on journalistic issues seems to be difficult. Besides time-pressure and scheduling problems, the rather soft debate culture restrains journalists from giving each other critical feedback. While the editor-in-chief is aware of this and new attempts have been made for organizing moments of self-reflection, it seems hard to change the autonomous professional culture and structure.
Concluding, the year 2002 marked a turning point at NOS Nieuws. Since then, public accountability and responsiveness have become a central premise in the organisational policy through a top-down approach. However, this policy has not landed in the newsroom where the editorial staff struggle to fit it into their daily practice. It is to be seen whether the new editor-in-chief, who started in July 2011 will continue and be more successful in the incorporation of their policy.

The case of the commercial news organisation RTL Nieuws

Chapter 7 describes the final case study, of RTL Nieuws. This was the first commercial broadcasting news organisation in the Netherlands and remains the largest rival of the public news organisation NOS Nieuws. As a commercial journalistic organisation with its corporate headquarters in Luxembourg, RTL Nieuws is not bound by Dutch instruments of political accountability, but it has to conform to European media regulation. Accountability is mainly arranged informally (see Table 8.1). Viewers have the possibility to complain and there is an unwritten rule that these complaints should be responded to as one should serve the customer. It is the responsibility of the individual journalist to take account of the public responses in a covert manner. There is an overall consensus that accountability does not need formal instruments, as it should be part of journalist’s professional responsibility. In practice this informal policy leads to journalists not spending much time on responding to complaints. Many are felt to be merely in the self-interest of the complainant or so inconsiderate and insulting that the journalists hardly feel responsible to answer to them. Moreover, the limited number of the complaints and felt pressure from the political arena have not encouraged RTL Nieuws to change its policy. Showing more transparency in the journalistic processes and providing details of sources on the website are nevertheless strategies that are increasingly being used to gain the trust of the audience. Using a somewhat anti-establishment approach there is also a strong focus on investigating social abuses in society and challenging the authorities.

The informal character is also visible in the way professional accountability is organised. There are fixed moments when journalists come together to discuss, plan and evaluate their news programmes. Besides these formal moments there is an informal and rather open feedback culture, with the editor-in-chief stimulating the discussion. However, as with deVolkskrant and NOS Nieuws,
the time-pressured working environment prevents the journalists from taking time to reflect on each others work. Instead they prefer moving on to the following production.

Being responsive to the public has never been an issue at RTL Nieuws. Relating to and taking the public seriously is something that is part and parcel of the organisation’s identity and as such internalised within the structure and culture, both civic and strategic reasons. Since its start RTL Nieuws has aimed at presenting the news in an accessible and comprehensive manner. It clearly wanted to distinguish itself from the established NOS. However, it is not so much about bridging or learning from the public’s agenda, but responsiveness is more about bringing the necessary information in an understandable and accessible manner. More recently, RTL Nieuws has introduced online instruments such as weblogs and Twitter to engage with the public. These online activities are still in an experimental phase as journalists are seeking a balance between engaging with the public and maintaining their autonomy and professionalism authority.

To conclude, where RTL Nieuws hardly has any formal accountability instruments and at most responds to emails and telephone calls, responsiveness is one of its core business values.
Table 8.2 Instruments of responsiveness at de Volkskrant, NOS Nieuws & RTL Nieuws

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Type of instrument</th>
<th>De Volkskrant</th>
<th>NOS Nieuws</th>
<th>RTL Nieuws</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social network sites</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public debates/guests</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience research</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public-oriented journalism</td>
<td>Civic &amp; Strategic</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>Implemented</td>
<td>Internalised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.3 Comparing the three organisations

The three cases show differences and similarities in the introduced instruments and the level of adoption. Table 8.1 and 8.2 give an overview of that. Even though the cases differ in that they represent different media sectors, comparative analysis can be carried out with caution, taking the difference in organisational structure and background into account. More notably, these can explain the differences and similarities in how three Dutch news organisations have responded to the increasing debate on media performance and the subsequent alleged waning trust in the media.

Similarities

This multiple-case study research has shown that there are many similarities in how the three media organisations have responded to performance and structural issues. All three show an increasing focus on the public. They now view their role as not only informing but also responding, interacting and reflecting. The organisations each provide the reader/listener/viewer the possibility to hold them to account by filing a complaint or giving comments on the news coverage either through email or by telephone. Moreover, de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws both provide more formal instruments of public accountability such as an ombudsman and a correction box. These two organisations also collaborate with the Council for Journalism, where individuals can file their complaints when they feel harmed by media coverage. RTL Nieuws only supports the Council financially.
Besides possibilities for the public to hold the media to account, they increasingly offer insight and transparency on how news stories are constructed. Being transparent does not equate to being accountable, but transparency can potentially form the basis for accountability. NOS Nieuws does this by having the editor-in-chief and several editors and reporters describe their experiences on a weblog as to how a news story develops. RTL Nieuws prefers to give the public more insight by providing the source material of the story on the website. Even though all three organisations have a weblog, RTL Nieuws and de Volkskrant are rather indecisive as to how these should be used; the subjective or opinionated character of weblogs often stands in contrast to the journalistic principles of objectivity. When looking at the level of adoption in organisation structure and culture, most of the instruments of public accountability remain in the implementation phase. Only at de Volkskrant have a few been incorporated, but none internalised.

Looking within the organisations, professional dialogue and discussion are a daily routine in all the media organisations. Also all three have a fixed daily evaluation moment. Nevertheless, being accountable to one’s peers or reflecting on one’s work is a delicate issue. The constant time pressure on editorial boards forms an obstacle. But also the ‘soft debate culture’, particularly at de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws, whereby critical confrontation and debate among peers is more or less evaded, prevents professional accountability from being incorporated within the three organisations. Another form of covert professional accountability is an editorial guideline or statute. All three organisations have formulated such procedures. At the same time, these organisations do not show any overt forms of professional accountability as all the instruments are used within the organisation and not open to the whole journalism profession.

There are also similarities in measures of responsiveness. The three media organisations have initiated a new type of journalism that is more focused on the concerns and wishes of the public. This involves letting go of a formal-institutionalized approach in favour of adopting the perspective of the ‘ordinary man in the street’. New online instruments such as weblogs, Twitter and social networking sites have provided the opportunity for journalists to engage with the public more directly. However, responsiveness is not guided solely by a journalistic and civic motive of relating to the general public.
Rather, at the three organisations the integration of the public’s demands also serves a commercial interest to foster consumer loyalty. At the same time, all three are still struggling how to incorporate online interactive measures in an effective and efficient way.

Differences

Even though the three media organisations show a number of significant similarities in how they respond to both structural and performance issues there are also salient differences. The attempts of De Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws to be responsive and accountable to the public have been much influenced by the Fortuyn incident of 2002 and its related criticism of media performance. In contrast, RTL Nieuws, has, since its start in 1989, always taken measures to be responsive to the public. This was instigated for both competitive and commercial reasons. RTL Nieuws was aspired to conduct a different type of journalism compared with the other two more established news organisations.

While RTL Nieuws focuses on how to be responsive to the public, it has fewer instruments that would allow the public to hold it to account. At most, public accountability is arranged informally by answering individual complainants in a covert way. At de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws there are numerous formal instruments for public accountability, mostly overt in nature. But, the platform of publication differs. Most of the instruments of De Volkskrant are visible in the printed newspaper, while NOS Nieuws prefers to use the website as a platform instead of their news broadcasts. The adoption of the instrument also differs. While at de Volkskrant these instruments are recognized and used by the editorial staff (incorporated), at NOS Nieuws these are implemented by the editor-in-chief with little acknowledgement from the editorial staff. Political accountability is only found at NOS Nieuws and then indirectly via the NPO (Netherlands Public Broadcasting).

At the professional accountability level all three media organisations arrange daily evaluation meetings, which are attended by a varying number of people of the editorial staff. The role of the editor-in-chief seems to be crucial during these meetings. At de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws journalists are hesitant to give feedback or voice their opinion during formal meetings where the editor-in-chief is present. At RTL Nieuws this is not the case. On the contrary, many journalists believe he stimulates a critical debate when present. Next to
evaluation and self-reflection, professional accountability is present through an editorial code or guideline. RTL Nieuws and de Volkskrant have an editorial statute in which they underline their editorial independence. NOS Nieuws only specifies its journalistic tasks in a guideline, but does not need to explicate its editorial independence from commercial parties.

In all three media organisations civic and strategic elements of responsiveness are visible, but the emphasis differs. Whereas RTL Nieuws has had an initial strategic argumentation, NOS Nieuws has felt the pressure of the public opinion to take the public’s issues more seriously and be more responsive. The instruments of responsiveness at de Volkskrant show an initial civic reasoning to relate to and come closer to the public, but the organisation is increasingly focused on strategic motives in response to the difficult financial situation and declining readership.

The level of adoption of responsiveness also differs. Only at RTL Nieuws is responsiveness part of daily practice and internalised within the organisational structure and culture. NOS Nieuws has only in recent years made these attempts, but is still struggling to incorporate them in their organisational process. De Volkskrant has successfully implemented and incorporated specific measures to relate to the public. However, these are mainly aimed at a higher-educated reader and less at the ‘ordinary man in the street’.

Explanations for the differences and similarities

The differences and similarities among the organisations can be explained by distinctive features of the different cases, including the media system, media type, the historical background, a changing society and the role of the editor-in-chief.

Firstly, differences in accountability policy can result from different media systems. Where the public broadcaster is bound by legal measures laid down in the Media Act, the commercial broadcaster RTL Nieuws does not have to follow Dutch legislation. Historically, the press has a light regulatory regime. It has to adhere to the law, but under the principle of freedom of expression it knows fewer restrictions than public service broadcasters and they also have no formal political accountability.
The media system can also serve as an explanation for the way the public is addressed. Where the public broadcaster is obliged by law to address the public at large, the commercial broadcaster and the newspaper can define their own target group. This explains why the public service broadcaster feels the obligation to choose more overt forms of public accountability, while the commercial broadcaster favours covert forms. The newspaper seems to be somewhat undecided as to how it must profile itself. Over the years it has attempted to address more than a higher educated, rather left-leaning public and to target a more varied group. Yet, in practice the instruments of responsiveness continue to be directed towards a rather elite group of readers.

Secondly, the difference between covert and overt accountability can be explained by the nature of the type of media. Newspaper journalists are more directly accountable to their reader as they are often individually responsible for the output. A television news item is usually the result of collaboration between a number of people with both a journalistic and technical background, which makes it more difficult to address a specific person responsible for the output. Moreover, as newspapers allow more space compared with a news broadcast, it is more likely that forms of overt accountability are visible in the newspaper. The broadcasting organisations tend to use the website as a platform to explain their mistakes or provide transparency on the journalistic processes.

Thirdly, the historical context can provide an explanation for a difference in response between, on the one hand, de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws, and on the other, RTL Nieuws. De Volkskrant and, up to a point, NOS Nieuws have a pillarized origin, in which media served as a platform for the political elite of a specific denomination or movement within society or, as in the case of NOS, were forced to be neutral. Following depillarization in the 1960s, media became more independent of politics and built a more critical stance, but this was also the start of them being criticized for a left-wing bias in their coverage. The rise and murder of populist politician Fortuyn led to a more critical position towards the media. RTL Nieuws was only established in 1989, with no historical connections to the pillarization period and subsequent depillarization. Its preoccupation with the audience is more instigated by strategic reasoning and competition. These differences might partly explain why NOS Nieuws and de Volkskrant perceive a higher level of discontent about
their performance and are taking measures to regain both the trust and loyalty of the public through instruments of accountability and responsiveness, while the RTL Nieuws is more focused on the commercial position in the market and on responsiveness.

The accountability policy is not only related to criticism of the performance, but also a reaction to a changing society in which openness, transparency and dialogue are increasingly becoming key principles. In the past, accountability in Dutch public broadcasting was organised at an institutional level, predominantly through political measures of accountability and its membership structure. In the 1990s, the issue of public accountability became more prominent with commercial competition and a more fragmented audience, but at the institutional level forms of public accountability never caught on. Only in recent years, has the journalistic organisation NOS Nieuws made substantial attempts to relate to the public. What we witness is a shift from institutional to professional policy and from political to public accountability.

De Volkskrant also has responded to changes in society. However, coming from a predominantly journalistic background with a traditionally public service mission, the newspaper organisation is feeling more and more the tension between its nature as a private, commercial enterprise and its journalistic public role. In an increasingly commercial and competitive climate de Volkskrant is shifting from a purely journalistic to a more commercial policy and from public to market accountability and strategic responsiveness. RTL Nieuws is another example of a combined commercial and journalistic enterprise. However, its policy does not seem to have changed drastically and it still practices a journalistic approach embedded in a commercial setting. From the beginning RTL Nieuws has had to ensure its journalistic autonomy in a commercial setting. RTL Nieuws (and de Volkskrant to an increasing extent) are struggling with the apparent discrepancy of simultaneously having the public interest at heart and securing its commercial-business objectives.

Finally, the role of the editors-in-chief is significant for the chosen policy and the level of adoption. The editors-in-chief of the three organisations have been high profile figures in Dutch journalism. From the start of their appointment, the editors-in-chief of de Volkskrant and NOS Nieuws responded to societal changes and were advocates of coming closer to the public. Moreover, they
made their policy explicit to the outside world with the publication of policy documents. Both responded to a changing society by setting up measures of accountability and responsiveness. The editor-in-chief of RTL Nieuws has positioned and marketed his broadcasting organisation as one that distinguishes itself from the established NOS Nieuws. This somewhat rebellious and anti-establishment character is still visible within the organisation today. The editor-in-chief is against any form of government interference through co-regulation or policy suggestions. RTL Nieuws has a stated mission of trying to fight institutions by exposing social abuses in a rather bold and daring manner. This type of informal and rather anti-establishment culture might explain the minimal number of formalized accountability instruments, as these are perceived to be government impositions.

8.4 Accountability and responsiveness in Dutch media organisations: overall conclusions

What, now, are the overall conclusions of this dissertation? The point of departure of this research was the focus on media responsibility and the demand for accountability from a rather institutional media policy perspective. Both the longitudinal analysis and case study research indicate that the criticism of media performance has, however, mainly been answered at media professional level through different forms of accountability and responsiveness. Only the umbrella public broadcasting organisation NPO shows its accountability to politics from a media institutional perspective.

Taking a closer look at the professional level, media organisations are not only answering to criticism voiced by political actors and the public by implementing various accountability instruments. In fact, they are more preoccupied with structural problems such as an increasingly fragmented public, a difficult financial situation and a general trend towards commercialization. Being both accountable and responsive to the public are seen as possible solutions to these structural issues and as ways of regaining and retaining the loyalty of the consumer to not only generate social, but also economical capital.

Yet, within media organisations accountability instruments have not been easily adopted. Where the editors-in-chief have initiated new instruments and stimulated a new type of policy directed towards the public, the journalists are more hesitant and at most take a reactive approach. Thus, while the instruments
have been introduced and implemented by the editors-in-chief, the majority are not incorporated and far from internalised in the organisation. This then raises questions as to what extent the aimed objectives can be achieved. The instruments have a place in the structure of the organisations but within the professional attitude they seem to be a bridge too far. Even though journalists participate in these innovations, if it were up to them, investing in and improving public trust and loyalty would be achieved by allowing them to work on their performance and elaborate on their responsibilities. Their perception is that creating a quality product for public consumption already compels them to display accountability and, thus formalized tools are redundant. This attitude has been commonplace in media organisations and embedded in the structure and culture. In this implementation phase, the accountability instruments seem to be more a form of window dressing than a true attempt to restore trust in their performance.

The three public accountability instruments (Mediadebat, Council for Journalism, Mediamonitor) that were suggested by the advisory commission RMO, stimulated by the Minister responsible for the media and organised by the media umbrella organisations have not been enthusiastically welcomed by the media organisations. They do not feel the urge to provide financial assistance and have doubts about the effects and effectiveness of these instruments. Also, the possible involvement of or interference from government restrains them from embracing these suggested public accountability measures. Thus, governance in its fullest sense of a shared responsibility of all the involved actors (political institutions, umbrella media organisations, media and the public) is still not valid. Media organisations prefer to arrange it themselves without involvement or collaboration of other actors —so, we might better speak of self-governance.

Since responsiveness is not so much a formal policy, there appears to be a preference for responsiveness over accountability as an attempt to regain both the trust and loyalty of the public. Responsiveness is more of an attitude towards new forms of journalism, which fits better the traditional journalistic principles of autonomy and freedom than accountability, which is often formalised in concrete instruments.
Yet, responsiveness also has its difficulties. Journalists have shown a willingness to reach out to the public and obtain a better understanding of the issues that concern them. This is not to say that the public is actively involved in either selecting or determining the content of news stories. On the contrary, this would be perceived as undermining journalists’ professional reliability and expertise. “…Without the involvement of professionals, content lacks meaning” (Bakker, 2008: 9).

An additional problem of responsiveness is the quantity and quality of public responses. Journalists generally see a limited response and this is often a small group of ‘usual suspects’ providing minimal input and public representation for journalists (see Bakker et. al (2011) for similar results based on audience-focused research). Moreover, connecting with the public—whether responding, justifying or bridging—is difficult when they are not a clearly defined group. This is especially difficult for NOS Nieuws that needs to address the whole society. These difficulties have shown that even though new technologies have provided possibilities for relating and interacting with the public, at this point the public predominantly continues to assume the role of receiver.

These conclusions reveal that the culture of the journalistic profession form an overarching factor as to why most instruments and measures are implemented and some incorporated but hardly any internalised. Journalism is characterised as an open profession in which its practitioners work relatively autonomous. In this research autonomy of the journalist is a recurring theme. There is acknowledgement of the need for more openness to and connection with the public, and for many journalists this is now even considered a necessity. However, when it comes to applying it in daily routine, there is a general resistance. Journalists are used to being independent and free from external pressures and to them this is one of the most important values of journalism. Those who work in the news media believe they should be free to initiate and arrange instruments by themselves, and not have them imposed by third parties. This autonomy is desired because in this way journalists believe they can best serve the public’s interest (Singer, 2003).

Not only in relation to the public, but also among colleagues, autonomy is an issue. In the daily work, journalists of different levels of the organisation come together several times a day to brainstorm, discuss and plan the news stories.
Yet, in all three organisations journalists have difficulty in openly providing constructive feedback in an organised setting, be it less so at RTL Nieuws. This attitude can be ascribed to a traditional journalistic culture in which journalists work quite independently of each other.

Nevertheless, this research also shows that journalism is in transition. While the older generation still takes a rather paternalistic perspective with little attention for the voice of the public and a strong focus on journalist’s autonomy, being responsive to the public, both for civic and strategic reasons, and providing more transparency on journalistic processes and choices is becoming more commonplace among the younger generation. They are aware that as a result of the online technologies, commercialization and societal changes such as individualisation, the media’s relationship with the public is changing permanently, which obliges them to find a new way to relate to and engage with the public. It seems as if this period was needed to distance themselves from old ideological principles. But, for everyone, whether young or old, the basic journalistic responsibilities remain and are not expected to change fundamentally.

Looking at a period of the past 20 years, there has been a gradual increase in the attention paid to openness, transparency, accountability and interaction. Before this, the media were not so susceptible to the voice of the public. Both structural developments and specific incidents have triggered the media to take action. It seems as if this combination of circumstances was needed for media organisations and journalists to make a switch in their mind-set and attitude towards the public. In the past, Dutch journalism fitted the advocacy model (Schudson, 1999) in which the media serve the public by being the voice of political parties or specific ideologies. Depillarization and professionalisation of journalism created a more independent and educational journalism, which reported from a sense what was best for the public in order to make rational decisions in a democracy, fitting more the trustee model (Schudson, 1999). But, the consequence of this increasing autonomy is not only a more distant relationship with politics and interest groups, but also towards the public (Broersma, 2009). Therefore, this trustee model seems now given way to a greater focus on what the public is concerned about. It is not only about the media’s role in the public’s interest, but also about how the media can contribute to the interests of the public. This however creates a
new dilemma of how finding a balance between the media’s responsible role of informing and listening to the public without buckling under the wishes of the consumer or moving too far towards the market model of Schudson (1999), providing only what the consumer is interested in.

8.5 Theoretical contribution of this research

What are the implications of these conclusions for the theoretical concepts? This dissertation not only had the aim of researching the theoretical concepts in the empirical reality, but also of further conceptualizing the rather ambivalent notions of trust, responsibility, accountability and responsiveness. The four concepts, particularly in relation to each other, have been subject to limited empirical research. This research shows that there are four interrelated and maybe even mutually reinforcing shifts with and in between the four concepts. As a result, these shifts have led to new conceptual tensions or difficulties.

Firstly, this research started off with the idea that there is a problem with media responsibility, with consequently lowering media trust and a greater demand for accountability. Due to developments towards a more open discussion and dialogue between the media and the public there has been a shift to a more active approach of responsibility in terms of both accountability and responsiveness, which aim at strengthening the relationship with the public.

Looking at accountability, a second shift is the increasing focus on public and professional accountability compared with political accountability. However, this research has shown that in practice the distinction between public and professional accountability is difficult as many instruments include components of both. A more narrow subdivision of these two types of accountability provides a better conceptualization. Public accountability can be classified into being accountable to an individual complainant (covert) or the public at large (overt). Similarly, professional accountability can be directed at the journalists within the media organisation (covert) or the whole journalism profession (overt).

Thirdly, even though this research has shown a growing attention for accountability through self-regulatory instruments, media show a preference for responding to both performance and structural issues through measures of responsiveness. Therefore a more specific classification of the concept is
needed. Responsiveness or taking the public seriously and taking its issues into consideration can have different reasonings: civic, strategic and empathic. However, while this division initially helped to clarify the complex reality, it is more of a normative distinction since in practice the three types of responsiveness overlap with empathy being virtually absent.

A last, but maybe the most significant shift is a greater emphasis on strategic ways to relate to the public that is inclined to exchange loyalty for exit as a result of media competition and commercialization. At a conceptual level this means that there is a growing attention for strategic instead of civic responsiveness. In addition, strategic components can also be found in the concepts responsibility and accountability. The watchdog function of responsibility does not only have a journalistic motive, but revealing social abuses and investing in research journalism also is a way to distinguish from other media and attract a larger or new target group. Similarly, being (overtly) accountable to the public can be perceived and used as a unique selling position compared with other media.

These four shifts in focus have also created tensions in the interrelationship between the concepts. Firstly, the shift from responsibility to more emphasis on the concept of accountability has created a tension with the limits of media freedom. While traditional liberal thinking on media responsibility supported a free press, independent of power holders, accountability measures are viewed by the media as a constraint to their freedom and thus to providing accurate, balanced information. Secondly, being accountable to the public and being too open about one’s mistakes can lead to a counter reaction where the public might loose the trust in media taking a responsible role. Thirdly, being too responsive can run the risk of loosing the journalistic authority and autonomy, one of the preconditions for media responsibility.

A fourth tension is that civic responsiveness and public accountability are similar as they aim to relate and come closer to the public. But with a different meaning and purpose, these two concepts are a precondition for each other. One cannot exist without the other and both can even strengthen each other. Being accountable to the public can only work successfully if media are willing to relate to and engage with the public. And the same goes for having a dialogue with the public: the public will only participate if the media are willing to show their vulnerability and open up to the public.
A fifth tension is that strategic responsiveness is related to market accountability. In fact, responding to the market is more being responsive to the consumer or audience and less being accountable to the market. It is taking the wishes and concerns of the audience into account and not—a small but important nuance—being held to account by the audience. At best, market accountability means being held to account by the shareholders and advertisers.

Lastly, empathic responsiveness is related to the watchdog function, one of media’s responsibilities. Both try to control and fight power holder when necessary. However, empathic responsiveness takes the public as starting point and even takes sides with the public. The watchdog function takes a more neutral position.

Concluding, this research has presented four conceptual shifts with a growing emphasis on the active role of the media in terms of responsiveness and accountability which in turn have led to six new conceptual tensions.

8.6 Implications for media organisations and the journalism profession

This research has shed light on the current position of media and journalism in an increasingly pressured environment. My aim was to provide more transparency on how media organisations are coping with these challenges and to untangle not always clear theoretical concepts commonly used in the professional, public and academic debate. I want to end with possible implications for new media governance structures with the hope of providing the media organisations and the journalistic profession with a few careful suggestions or at least some food for thought for a more structural policy and strategy.

This research has shown that specific incidents in which the role of the media was questioned boosted the Dutch debate on media performance. But, the combination with the structural changes in the media landscape and in society shows that it was not purely an incidental upheaval, which will fade away. Media organisations have created a permanent awareness and acknowledgment of the importance of accountability and responsiveness. The opportunities new online technologies can offer have also played an important role. However, awareness alone is not enough to successfully counter the lack
of trust or cynicism of the public and the politicians and boost the loyalty of the consumer. Does this mean the media need continuous external pressure to consider a permanent policy? Or is the current policy primarily technology-driven? Or does the role of a particular editor-in-chief play a significant role for a specific type of policy? After my research period several instruments have stopped to exist while others have been introduced. There have been recent management changes at two out of the three media organisations. Will the new top continue in the line of current policy or will they take a new direction? In the following paragraphs I provide a number of suggestions for a more stable, permanent and coherent policy in terms of accountability and responsiveness.

Firstly, up until now accountability has mainly been introduced through a top-down policy. To create a more permanent acknowledgment and have the instruments internalised in the organisation more support for it needs to be created among the editorial staff. This starts with how people define and perceive accountability. Bovens, Schillemans and ’t Hart (2008: 225), academics of public administration, claim that accountability “is one of those golden concepts that no one can be against”. However, to those who have to be accountable, such as journalists, it is also felt to be threatening, related to mistakes made and with a controlling function. A more positive view of accountability can be established if it is made to encompass not only reactive elements, but also pro-active ones in the form of transparency or dialogue. Although not equal to accountability, they can provide a basis for it.

Secondly, the investigated organisations appear to have implemented a range of instruments to relate to the public, but many instruments have overlapping objectives and features, without an overall policy. If the instruments are more linked to each other in an overall policy and with a main goal, there is a greater chance of more overall support from the editorial staff. In other words, it is not so much about the quantity, but the quality and economy of the instruments.

Thirdly, for a permanent and successful policy, the media system, the organisational structure and the culture should all be taken into account. There is not one single policy or ‘one size that fits all’. Where one organisation might need a more formal policy, another might suit a more informal bottom-up
approach. However, a certain level of formalisation in standards provides the journalism professionals with basic support for quality improvement. While the older journalists are not too keen on formalized standards, in this transition to more openness and dialogue with the public, it is important that internally the journalists are on the same page.

Fourthly, media need to be aware that new, interactive, technologies create both expectation and pressure. This research has shown that new online technologies have offered opportunities for responsiveness and accountability. They invite the public to participate but at this point they put a constraint on the social system of the organisation with unforeseen activities and costs. I witnessed that the problem with the interactive instruments is that, in the words of Hermida and Thurman, “the burden increases as the participation of the user rises” (2008: 351). Media organisations should be aware of this burden and take this into account when setting up new strategies. This means that media organisations should organise their structures and processes to allow for more flexibility which can provide room for the introduction and adoption of new technological instruments. This can start with creating small project units to experiment and assess new opportunities. More concretely, creating new possibilities for dialogue should also mean that journalists get more time to look into public reactions, to respond and potentially to use the public’s contributions. However, online public engagement should not replace the ‘old-fashioned’ way of getting the story out on the street. This demands a flexible organisation that judges which and how new technologies should be used.

Fifthly, while the investigated media organisations are almost all fixated on how to relate to the public, less is invested in internal forms of accountability. The instruments that serve both a professional and public purpose tend to emphasise the latter. Chris Argyris rightly commented that organisational change should come from the development of an “internal capacity for self-examination and self-renewal” (in Nemeth, 2003: 148). From this perspective, only when an organisation dares to look critically at its own performance internally, can it take a critical stance externally. A greater investment in the quality of the internal feedback culture is therefore necessary. Often the interviewees told me how they enjoyed an hour of internal reflection when being interviewed by me. There might be signs of willingness among the
journalists, but the organisational structure should also allow the possibility for more self-reflection opportunities.

For further effective governance structures I would advocate more shared responsibility and debate across journalistic profession and not only at the organisational level. In the past 20 years there has been a gradual development from government to governance. But, can we rely on the initiatives of the media themselves without any form of control? While co-regulation is said to be a possible alternative for self-regulation, I argue that this will only lead to more resistance from the media as it implies some kind of collaboration with the state. Collaboration between media organisations is a delicate issue as news organisations are now competing with each other more than ever. Over the years many attempts have been made to organise professional debates, also open to the public. A solution may lie in organizing smaller get-togethers with journalists of different media organisations (overt professional accountability) in the form of working groups to discuss ethical issues which concern the journalistic profession as a whole. The umbrella media organisations could play a facilitating role in this to create more overall support and a better basis for new and effective horizontal governance structures.

A last suggestion is related to the autonomy of journalism. This is one of the cornerstones of journalism and should also be protected. At the same time, emphasizing autonomy prevents instruments of accountability and responsiveness from being adopted in the organisation. Küng (2011: 54) describes this dilemma, "A media organisation needs to master the paradoxical demands of being able to reap the benefits of economies of scale and scope and cross-platform synergies and also provide small-scale autonomy to those tasked with creative projects". The difficulty of operating in both a journalistic and commercial market is an issue that should be discussed internally. Providing transparency should not only be done towards the public, but also internally in order to connect the individual with the organisation.

The starting premise of this research was a quite negative perception of media performance in society. There was supposedly a crisis in trust in established institutions and the media were to blame. While journalists have been known for closing ranks, this research has shown that in recent years they have actually made significant steps towards creating more open, transparent, accountable
and responsive media. It is now the challenge to hold on to this progress and move on from plans and instruments to practice and internalisation.