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Media and public accountability: typology and exploration

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The role of the media in public accountability has often been discussed. This is especially the case for public sector organisations, whose accountability relations have changed in the shift from government to governance. In this paper, we develop a typology of the ways mass media are involved in public accountability processes. Media can stimulate actors to reflect on their behaviour, trigger formal accountability by reporting on the behaviour of actors, amplify formal accountability as they report on it or act as an independent and informal accountability forum. To explore the presence of these roles in practice, we focus on public sector organisations in the Netherlands. Our quantitative and qualitative analysis in the Netherlands suggests that the media primarily serve an indirect role in public accountability, either by invoking pre-emptive self-criticism in public organisations in anticipation of potential media scrutiny or by triggering formal accountability demands from MPs

key words public accountability • media • public sector organisations

Introduction

We are living in ‘monitory democracy’ (Keane, 2009). On the one hand, many executive functions have moved away from central governments in what Rhodes (1994) coined the ‘hollowing out of the state’. On the other hand, monitoring functions have partially moved away from parliaments to a host of non-parliamentary institutions, ranging from independent regulators to societal organisations and the news media. The media play a key role in these networks, as they are the prime ‘connecting mechanism’ between the different entities monitoring governments. Critical mass media are increasingly important in the life of public sector organisations in democracies (Deacon and Monk, 2001; Peters, 2015, this issue).

The theoretical connection between news media on the one hand and public accountability on the other has not been investigated systematically. This paper therefore theorises and explores the roles of media in public accountability (Jacobs, 2014). The paper develops a theoretical model for understanding the roles of media in public accountability. The key assumption is that the media are an important trigger that ‘activates’ formal accountability institutions, that is, parliaments and regulators, and can also be an instrument of accountability in itself.

This paper has two aims. First of all, the discussion on the role of the media in accountability is currently somewhat opaque. Many public administration scholars (including ourselves) have suggested that the media are highly important for accountability, yet they (and we) have failed to theorise this role in sufficiently clear terms (Flinders, 2012; Maggetti, 2012). In a different outpost of the academic landscape, political communication scholars have also looked at the role of media in accountability. These studies have generated interesting results (Arnold, 2005; Djerf-Pierre et al, 2013; Norris, 2014), yet the relevance of their studies for *public* accountability in systems of governance is underexplored. Therefore, our first aim is to develop a theoretical model that describes the different roles of media in public accountability.

Second, discussions on the role of the media in governance often land in the trenches, where some authors come to negative value judgements (Flinders, 2012) while others defend the media (Norris, 2014). Empirical claims and normative assessments go hand in hand. In this paper, we try hard *not* to provide normative assessments of the role of the media. Rather, we aim to shift the focus to the more specific question: which roles of the media are of most empirical importance in public accountability?

The paper starts with a review of existing studies of public accountability and media. We will then develop four roles of the media in public accountability: sparks, triggers, amplifiers and forums. We will subsequently explore which of these roles is empirically of most importance. We limit ourselves to the media coverage of public sector organisations in the Netherlands.

Public accountability

In the last decade, research on public accountability has grown almost exponentially (Bovens et al, 2014). This paper stands in a research tradition where authors employ a definition of accountability that focuses on the mechanisms with which actors in public administration are held accountable. In this tradition, many authors agree on a minimal definition: accountability is understood to refer to a communicative interaction between an actor (person or organisation) and an accountability forum, in which the former's behaviour (in the broadest sense of the word) is evaluated and judged by the latter, in light of possible consequences (see also Romzek and Dubnick, 1998, 6; Mulgan, 2003, 9). Accountability processes start with an *information phase* in which information on an actor's conduct in the broadest sense of the word is disclosed. The process ends with a *consequences phase*, in which the accountability forum passes consequential judgement on the actor and may support this judgement with formal sanctions (Bovens et al, 2014). Sanctions range from public disapproval on the one extreme to dismissal or termination on the other.

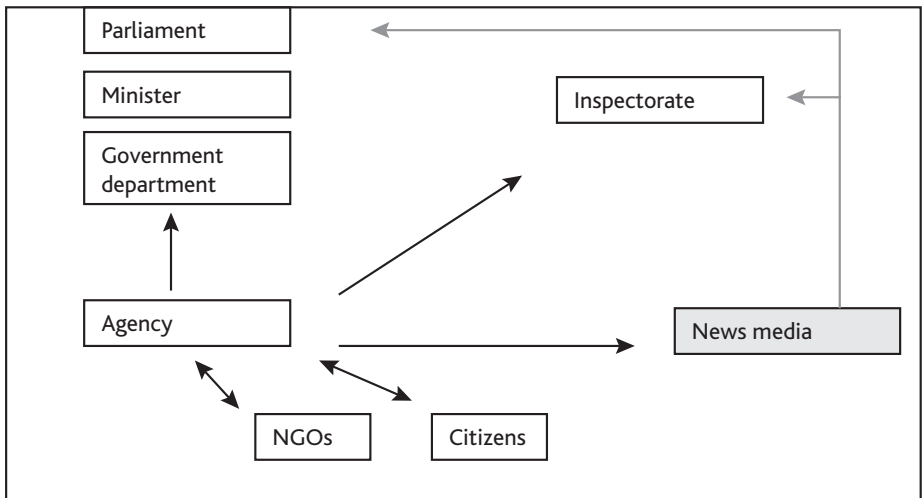
Accountability forums have several opportunities to establish their oversight. McCubbins and Schwartz distinguish between *police-patrol oversight*, which entails a forum that examines some organisations at its own initiative, 'with the aim of detecting and remedying any violations of legislative goals and, by its surveillance, discouraging such violations' (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984, 166). *Fire-alarm oversight* in contrast involves 'less active and direct intervention', as a 'system of rules, procedures, and informal practices that enable individual citizens and organised interest groups to examine administrative decisions [etc]' (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984, 166). The forum's role is 'limited' to ensuring the operation of this system.

Bovens (2010, 953–4) distinguishes various types of accountability by the nature of the relationship between actor and forum. Vertical, ‘traditional’, accountability refers to processes in which a superior demands accountability from a subordinate. Horizontal accountability in contrast refers to forms of accountability where the forum is not hierarchically superior to the actor. It may alternatively be understood as a form of accountability to third parties. For semi-autonomous agencies, independent evaluators, boards of stakeholders or commissioners, interest groups and clients – and the media – can all act as horizontal accountability forums (Mulgan, 2003; Schillemans, 2008).

The distinction between different *types* of accountability implies that public organisations are faced by a number of formal and (potential) informal forums. The news media can be seen as one of the informal forums demanding accountability from public organisations. The distinction also implies that different forums may influence each other and that distinctive accountability processes are linked sequentially: the media sometimes publish critical articles about organisations in response to critical questions in parliament or after recommendations from inspectorates. The converse relationship, parliamentary scrutiny or inspections triggered by media reports, is also possible.

Figure 1 summarises the ideal-typical accountability regime of public organisations. The arrows pointing vertically (to government department, minister and parliament), diagonally (to the inspectorate) and horizontally (to the news media) represent direct lines of accountability. The red arrow connecting the news media with parliament and inspectorates represents how news media coverage as a form of informal accountability may alert vertical accountability to parliament and diagonal accountability to inspectorates.

Figure 1: Media, public accountability and public agencies



Media and accountability: some characteristics

Traditionally, news media have played a dual role in public accountability in democracies. On the one hand, the media *report* on public accountability processes,

for instance by broadcasting question time in parliament or by writing stories about formal accountability processes. On the other hand, journalism has traditionally conceived of itself as a form of accountability in its own right (Entman, 2005, 48): ‘The ideal goal of traditional journalism has been to make power accountable: to keep ordinary citizens apprised of what government is doing, and how it affects them both individually and with respect to the groups and values that they care about.’

Accountability to and in media contrasts with formal accountability in two respects. The first one is the logic by which accountability processes are guided. In formal accountability arrangements, public organisations work on their task fulfilment and are held accountable by official bodies, using formal norms and rules on a regular basis. Formal accountability is goal-directed: accountability is deliberately used by the forum to prevent corruption, induce organisational learning or improve democratic control (Bovens et al, 2014). The process is institutionalised and is designed as a means to reach stipulated goals. Formal accountability is predictable and is guided by an institutional logic.

When media are involved, the process between actor and forum is not oriented towards the same accountability goals. Media ask public organisations to render account not (primarily) because of the public good or the general public (Klijn, 2015, this issue). Journalists are driven by a media logic that teaches them to search for ‘news’ that is interesting to their perceived public. By the way they gather their news an accountability process can arise: journalists ask public organisations for information and criticise their behaviour. Of course, journalists (‘ought to’ subscribe to) the democratic goal to hold those in power to account (Entman, 2005), but this democratic goal has a broader orientation than a specific organisation. Holding a specific organisation to account contributes to this general goal and can, as a by-product, improve organisational operations or prevent corruption. Therefore the ‘standard’ democratic, constitutional and learning goals of accountability (Bovens et al, 2008) can be fulfilled as (unintended) by-products of journalistic enquiries, yet they cannot be considered as the main goals of accountability to media.

A second difference between formal accountability and accountability to media is related to the phases in the accountability process. During the information phase of the process, the forum – journalists – depend on FOI-legislation, the willingness of the organisation to provide information or their ability to lay their hands on classified information. The information phase thus largely depends on organisations that *feel* bound to render an account but are often not formally obliged to do so. Organisations can also strategically disclose information to start an ‘accountability process’, thus trying to render social accountability (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2014, 246). The information and discussion phases can mix up in practice, as journalists gather their information and write it down or broadcast it at the same time. Contrary to formal forums, media do not have formal means to pass sanctions in the consequences phase. However, as organisations are heavily dependent on their reputation, negative coverage can have serious consequences for the ways they are viewed by stakeholders. Horizontal accountability to media can thus be effective through ‘published voice’ – that is, critical coverage and published disapproval (Schillemans, 2008, 179) – because it will reach important policy networks whose members are strongly media-oriented and media-influenced (McCombs, 2005).

Media and accountability: towards a typology

The role of the media in public accountability has been analysed by a number of authors in recent years. The analyses are somewhat disparate and unconnected, and, also, tend to focus on the *direct* role of media as forums of accountability (Maggetti, 2012). However, when we accept that the news media can both act as accountability forums on their own *and* may play an important role in formal accountability processes, a wider number of possible roles emerge (Hasler et al, 2015, this issue).

We have identified four different roles of the media in public accountability. We will describe them shortly below and then elucidate and illustrate them in the subsequent sections of this paper. With this typology, we aim at disentangling the interplay between media and accountability in an analytical sense.

A first role follows directly from the natural task of news media: by simply covering organisations, the media already act as potential sparks for accountability, as organisations and their accountability forums may pre-emptively evaluate their policies and may – or may not – initiate an accountability process as a response to a media story. Accountability in response to mere media coverage is not guaranteed and will certainly not evolve in all cases. Nevertheless, it is well-known that public sector decision-makers are highly media-sensitive (McCombs, 2005) and that media coverage triggers anticipatory reactions within organisations (Schillemans, 2012). Media coverage of an organisation *potentially* leads to public accountability by formal accountability forums acting as *accountability entrepreneurs*. We therefore use the metaphor of the spark: a spark *may* lead to a fire but needs additional fuel from an external source. Many sparks will simply extinguish, yet, when sparks fly through your living room, you are well advised to treat them all as potential instances of the former.

A second role is that the media operate as an accountability forum in their own right (Besley and Burgess, 2001; Maggetti, 2012). News media can ask critical questions on the basis of their own agenda, possibly supported by investigative journalism, and may aim to uncover untoward behaviour within public organisations through their publications. This role is in line with the classical role of watchdog journalism (Entman, 2005; Norris, 2014).

The third role of the media is that of an amplifier of accountability: the media report on formal accountability processes, they will for instance write about or broadcast Question Time in Parliament or the publication of reports by Inspectorates. Media then magnify and potentially amplify the effects of formal accountability. It matters a great deal for accountability forums whether or not their critical comments and opinions ‘hit’ the media or not (Kepplinger, 2002) and lead to a prolonged news-cycle with subsequent accountability demands.

The fourth and final role of the media extends from the above: the media may also trigger formal accountability processes. Media then function as a trigger for formal public accountability processes such as parliamentary questions. This function is comparable to fire-alarm oversight, as explained by McCubbins and Schwartz (1984). This role is analytically related to the previous role; one could say that the trigger role is similar to effectuated sparks (leading to real fires or, here, accountability). For research purposes, however, it is important to make this distinction, as will be discussed in the next sections.

The four roles are analytically distinctive but not mutually exhaustive (from the perspective of a single media report). Some roles might be a prerequisite for other

Table 1: Typology of the roles of media in accountability

Role	Description	Phase	Accountability Forum
Spark	(Potential) media coverage may activate accountability forums	Information phase	Dependent on 'accountability entrepreneurs'
Forum	Media report critically on an organisation. Reports are based on either their own research or on information given by others (not being formal accountability forums)	Consequences phase	Media
Amplifier	Media depict formal accountability processes and potentially amplify their effects	Consequences phase	Formal accountability forums such as Parliament or Inspectorates
Trigger	Media coverage induces formal accountability processes	Information phase	Formal accountability forums such as Parliament or Inspectorates

roles (for example, the spark or forum role for the trigger role) or media reports can fulfil two roles in one single report. From the perspective of an organisation, an issue might proceed from one role to another (for example, if media criticise the behaviour of an organisation in their forum role and the parliament, subsequently, asks questions as a consequence of this media attention; the trigger role).

Table 1 above summarises the four potential roles of media in public accountability. The different types will be described with more detail below and their empirical relevance will be explored. Before going there, however, we will first provide necessary details of our research.

Methods

The aim of the empirical exploration is to demonstrate how the typology can be used in research and to explore the empirical relevance of the four roles of the media in public accountability. To this end, a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the media reporting on Dutch public organisations has been conducted as well as an analysis of questions in parliament. The media analysis focused on four newspapers and a very large set of organisations. We focus here on our selections of newspaper sources and types of organisations. The specific operationalisations of the four roles and our analysis will be provided in the subsequent sections.

Newspaper selection

The choice to analyse print media has been made because of the scope of this article. The focal point is namely the occurrence of accountability processes in or as a consequence of media attention and not to indicate very precisely in which news media (other options would be television or internet news) organisations are subjects of coverage. This approach is consistent with similar studies that analyse media and

public sector organisations (Deacon and Monk, 2001; Schillemans, 2012). Previous research indicates that media agendas run quite parallel and therefore exclusion of television news or social media is not necessarily problematic (McCombs, 2005, 544).

The choice was made to analyse the four (out of a total of eight) daily Dutch newspapers with the highest circulation rates: *Telegraaf*, *Volkskrant*, *Algemeen Dagblad* (*AD*) and *NRC Handelsblad*. Two of these are characterised as ‘quality’ newspapers (*Volkskrant*, *NRC*) while the other two are regarded as ‘popular’ newspapers (*Telegraaf* and *AD*) (Bakker and Scholten, 2009, 19).

The front page and domestic pages have been browsed and manually checked. If there is important news about a public organisation, it is most likely that it appears on these pages. The total number of news stories (thus concerning all topics) on the front pages and domestic pages of four national newspapers in the investigated period is 802. Therefore, 802 messages have been coded.

Selection of organisations

The Dutch public sector is a hubris of many different types of quasi-autonomous organisations (Van Thiel, 2012). We excluded ministries as well as political institutions from our analysis. We focused on the full spectrum of more or less autonomous public sector organisations. The ones closest to central government are included as well as the three most important types of organisations: line agencies (operating quasi-autonomously within government departments), independent administrative bodies (operating outside of government departments but not in the market) and public service providers in social housing, education and healthcare, as well as the police. We focus on the major types of public organisations in the Netherlands with some autonomy versus central government.

Typology explored

Sparks

The idea

Media can be sparks for accountability because the perceived risk of negative publicity invokes anticipatory reactions in public organisations and their accountability forums. Studies (Schillemans, 2012) describe how media stories spark off a series of sequences in public organisations; even the anticipation of media stories can have profound effects within organisations. Some of the activities will be strategic, even Machiavellian, where officials seek to exploit the news. Other activities, however, will be introspective, aimed at the question: are we doing the right thing and are we doing it properly? People will gather data on the issue that has been reported on, just to be on the safe side and in order to review one’s policies. Experimental accountability research also suggests that accountability under uncertainty will trigger ‘pre-emptive self-criticism’ (Lerner and Tetlock, 1999). Furthermore, if one organisation is publicly rebuked in the press for a line of policy – for instance excessive executive wages – most comparable organisations will critically look at their executive wages as well. In consequence, when media report on public organisations they spark off a string of pre-emptive and reflective activities in these and similar organisations and formal

accountability forums. In that sense, the media are *sparks* for public accountability, although, of course, these sparks will not always be effective and many will simply fade.

A number of scholars from communication studies have adopted largely similar approaches. In his book on the role of the media in accountability, Arnold (2005) analyses the extent to which local American newspapers reported on the activities of ‘their’ local representatives in Congress in order to establish whether citizens were sufficiently informed about their representatives and, thus, were in a position to hold them accountable for their actions or lack thereof. Arnold focused on the *content* of media reports. Whereas Arnold focused on the ‘old’ power centres in democracy, others have done similar research where they have chased the effects of media accountability in the sense of ‘sparks’ in other organisations. Davis et al (2003) for instance zoom in on the consequences for accountability of the privatisation of police work – one of the core tasks of governments – in three countries. They claim that privatisation of tasks creates an accountability deficit that may be dampened by the media. In a similar vein, Deacon and Monk (2001) investigated the role of the media in relation to quango’s. In a more recent study, Maggetti (2012) looked at the role of the media in holding independent regulators accountable. He concluded that the media *can* be an accountability forum for these independent regulators when they report about them. In a quite different study, Besley and Burgess (2001) analysed the macro-effects of media coverage in different Indian states. Their conclusion was that increased media coverage was positively correlated to government responsiveness to the needs of the people.

Empirical exploration

Besley and Burgess’ work underlines the fact that the media can only be effective as sparks when accountable agents anticipate potential media coverage and this, again, presupposes that the media are actually interested in their behaviours. It is common knowledge that political affairs are critically followed by the news media; but how about the relatively ‘pastoral world’ (Pollitt et al, 2004) of public organisations?

The media may act as sparks for accountability when they just mention organisations. Even non-critical media-coverage in which an organisation is not the main actor can be perceived as a credible ‘threat’ from the perspective of the organisation when it points at (perceived) irregularities. Thus, every report that mentions an organisation can potentially spark off accountability.

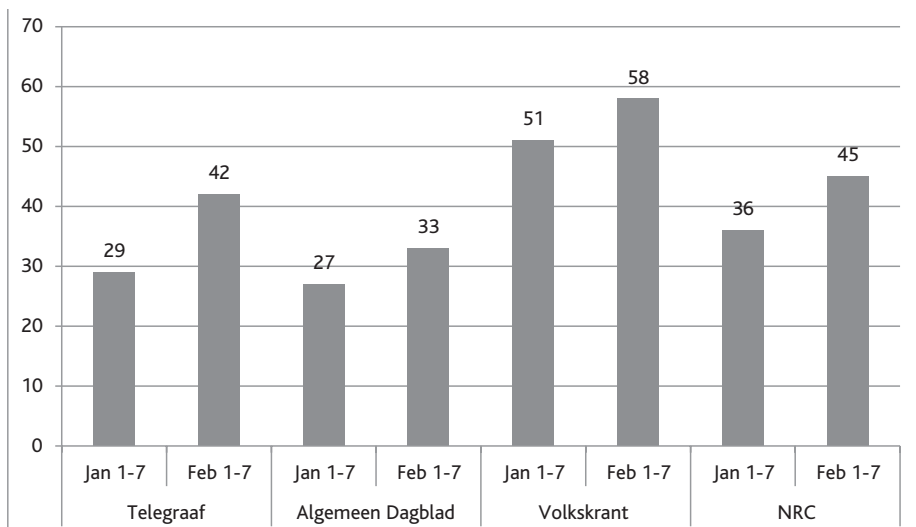
In order to establish this role of the media, it is essential to establish the number of news stories on public organisations. To this end, we have manually coded all messages in our 802-story sample of media stories for the presence of public organisations. This method is relatively time-consuming but is very reliable.

With this method, we have investigated the amount of media-attention for public organisations in the Netherlands. The total number of news stories (thus concerning all topics) on the front pages and domestic pages of four national newspapers in the investigated period is 802. Of those news stories, 321 mention public organisations. This amounts to approximately 40 per cent of all the news stories. Figure 2 provides an overview for each week and each newspaper.

Those 40 per cent of all the stories means that there is a lot of media attention for public organisations. In a related project analysing a somewhat larger part of less newspapers, Schillemans (2012) came to the slightly lower number of a third of all

the stories in the papers covering public organisations. Furthermore, the amount of attention for public organisations is comparable to that for politicians. In the same period, 209 stories mentioned national politicians and 128 stories mentioned local politicians. All in all slightly – but not more than slightly – more than for public organisations.

Figure 2: Media coverage of public organisations (media as sparks for accountability)



The amount of media attention for public organisations may seem counter-intuitively high. It is however important to take into account that there are many thousands of public organisations in the Netherlands so most of them have not been exposed to media coverage during the investigated period. The few organisations in the spotlight of media attention seem to have a common characteristic: they operate in relatively close contact with citizens. Examples are the train companies, police, hospitals and social housing corporations: organisations fulfilling public tasks that touch on the daily lives of citizens. Our exploration suggests that the media may be salient sparks for public accountability for these types of public organisations.

Forums

The idea

The second, and in theoretical terms most important, role of media in public accountability involves the journalist in the role of accountability forum on her own (Maggetti, 2012). In this capacity, the journalist may question a public organisation, as the accountable actor, about its function, policies or performance. Investigative journalism leading to the discovery of malpractice or irregularities is the clearest example of direct accountability to media. This role can also be performed by a third party whom the media ‘switches’ to, such an activist or whistleblower who can ‘trigger a chain of unplanned events through media attention, political debate and

action so that many audiences and criteria are mobilized in uncoordinated ways' (Olsen, 2013, 452).

Some scholars have zoomed in specifically on this process of critical questioning by media. In a very interesting study, Clayman and Heritage (2002) (see also Djerf-Pierre et al, 2013) focused their attention on the type of questions posed by journalists in the press conferences of Eisenhower and Reagan. They semantically analysed the questions that were posed; and one of the types of questions posed was the 'accountability-question', in which the presidents were specifically requested to answer for malfeasance. Such studies implicitly assume that governments (and others powerful actors) are at least in part secretive organisations, and this allows journalists, in lieu of the public interest, to pursue issues and to uncover problems.

Other studies have adopted a similar perspective on media and accountability but they have zoomed in on the macro-level of the changing architecture of governance. In a series of case-studies, political scientists have analysed how the media help to uncover and expose untoward behaviour. Smulovitz and Peruzotti (2003) for instance analysed the role of the media in holding overtly centralised new democracies accountable in South America and Yankova (2006) explored how the media disclosed governmental misconduct in middle and eastern Europe.

Empirical exploration

The media serve as accountability forums of their own, when they act as critical commentators on their own capacity. In order to establish the empirical relevance of this role, the stories in the database of news stories on Dutch public organisations were searched and coded for this role in messages (Krippendorff, 2004, 59).

For this and the next two categories, the total number of messages about public organisations is divided into two parts. For this category, it is relevant that the public organisation is the main or most important actor in the news story. The organisation does not necessarily have to act itself; 'Actors can also be objects or targets of actions – they can be attacked or criticized, for instance' (ASCoR, 2000, 11). It is not relevant to code for accountability if an organisation only serves as an accidental example or décor (for example, if a fire occurs near a hospital, but the hospital is not on fire itself). Thus, within the database of messages on public organisations, a selection is made of articles that treat public organisations as the 'main actor' in that message (as opposed to just being mentioned without being central). Three indicators of importance are used: duration, space of information about the actor and the frequency of being mentioned (ASCoR, 2000, 11).

In order to be considered 'critical', the story of an article or somebody in the story should explicitly evaluate the public organisation or mention dissatisfaction ('regardless of the source of such an evaluation'). Shortly stated: 'does the story or somebody in the story comment on it [a public organisation] negatively?' (ASCoR, 2000, 14). If a story or an actor in the story reproaches, blames or criticises the organisation, it is also coded as critical. The code 'critical' thus entails the depiction of the *journalist's* or *third party's negative evaluation* of the *behaviour* of a *public organisation*. The addition of *third party's negative evaluation* is relevant since this includes the opportunity for whistle-blowers and others to use the media as a platform. Also, journalists often prefer to quote other's negative appraisals above making the negative judgement themselves. Criticism by MPs and inspectorates were not included in the analysis here as they

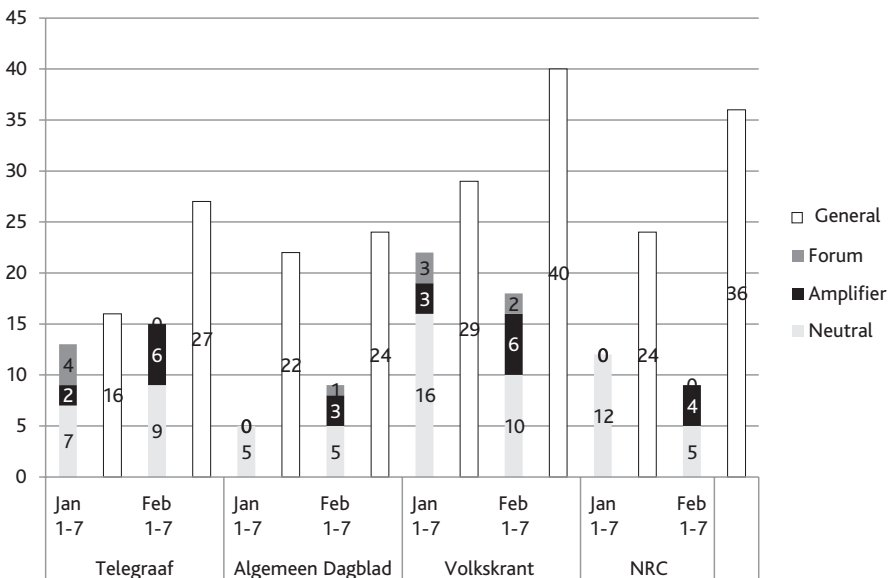
are formal accountability forums themselves; which is our third role (described in the next section).

With the above procedure, we have analysed all news stories on public organisations in order to assess whether the media were taking this role as critical accountability forums, that is, were actively questioning and criticising these organisations. Our manual content analysis of the 321 stories on public organisations led to 103 messages in which public organisations are the main actor. These articles were coded for the forum role. This results in the deflatingly low finding of only ten stories in which the news media operated as critical accountability forums. This result might be partially explained by the coding procedure: ‘critical’ in a literal sense (the story or somebody on the story gives a negative comment on the organisation) is a rather strict and rigorous criterion. In a less literal sense, we might expect that messages that are not critical according to this operationalisation might however be experienced as such, due to other message factors. This paper however employs a content analysis on the text level, not on the experience level, and therefore uses this explicit evaluation as an indicator of the forum role.

The low finding is visualised in Figure 3. The dark grey parts of the bars relate to these critical stories where media act as forums of their own. The white parts (general) refer to messages in which the public organisation is not the main actor (see methods section) and in which messages are not coded for accountability. The light grey bar (neutral) refers to articles in which no criticism is expressed.

In our sample, most cases of media as accountability forums related to the police. This was caused by a particular incident in the period under investigation: a police chief in the important district of Rotterdam-Rijnmond resigned. There was also a fairly high share of accountability articles on the role of the Dutch Central Bank, due to the ongoing inquiries by a parliamentary investigation committee into the financial system. Beyond these specific findings, a more general conclusion that can

Figure 3: Media as accountability forums (look at the dark grey parts of the columns!) and amplifiers (the black columns!)



be drawn, however, is that contrary to general impressions, only a small share of the news stories is actually really critical. This suggests that the normatively perhaps most powerful and important role of news media as accountability forums is *de facto*, in relation to public organisations at least, a fairly modest affair.

Amplifiers

The idea

The third category is that of ‘amplifier’ or ‘mirror’ of accountability. The media then play no part in the accountability process as such but *display* the formal accountability process by mirroring and broadcasting the activities of formal accountability forums, such as Parliament or the Inspectorate. Media coverage, then, is a reflection of accountability processes between two parties, a public organisation and a (formal) forum. The journalists have no active critical role; they are merely reporting, mirroring, accountability. However, by mirroring the exchange, the media may amplify and magnify the effects of accountability. The negative story can be seen as a form of additional punishment and as an informal sanction.

Furthermore, this mirroring-process is important, as it connects formal democratic accountability processes to the general public, which is ultimately the key principal in democracies. As almost all citizens know almost everything they know about public affairs via the media (McCombs, 2005), this role of the media is hugely important. Authorities who know that they are in the spotlights of the media can be expected to adapt their behaviour. Kepplinger (2002) has for instance shown how German MPs increasingly define their role as ‘issuing statements’ about current affairs. And Arnold (2005, 12) aptly summarises: ‘If legislators observe that journalists convey little information about legislative activity beyond what legislators reveal in their press releases, they may focus their creative talents on writing press releases rather than making laws.’

Empirical exploration

In our analysis we have tried to gauge the extent to which Dutch media served as amplifiers of accountability in the weeks under investigation.

The media ‘mirror’ (Jacobs, 2014) and ‘amplify’ formal accountability in media reports on actions or sanctions by parliament or an inspectorates. Only messages in which public organisations are the main actor (see previous section) have coded to this effect.

In total, as shown in the black parts of the columns in Figure 3 there were 24 news stories in which public organisations are the main actor and where they are criticised by a formal accountability forum, such as a regulatory authority or a member of parliament. This is almost 7.5 per cent of the total number of stories about public organisations. The figure provides an overview, where the black columns refer to instances of media ‘mirroring’ accountability and amplifying its effects.

Triggers

The idea

A last role for the media in public accountability is that of *triggers* of formal accountability, extending from the spark role. Media are triggers of formal accountability, when their reporting is the cause of subsequent demands for accountability by formal accountability forums, such as parliament or inspectorates. This is in line with existing studies analysing the extent to which questions in parliament are based on media reporting (Wille, 2005; Van Aelst and Vliegenthart, 2013).

Empirical exploration

In order to investigate this empirical role of the media in public accountability, we have searched for ‘traces’ of follow-up accountability on media stories in the parliamentary database. We have looked at the Dutch House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer*, as one of the two Dutch Chambers in parliament). We made a content analysis of all parliamentary questions that were asked during the same period as was used for the media reports, with some extra days added since questions could be submitted some days after the media reports. In these questions, we searched for references to messages on public organisations that were included in our database. In addition, we categorised other sources that were mentioned. This gives an overview of given sources for parliamentary questions and enables us to link these to our reports on public organisations.

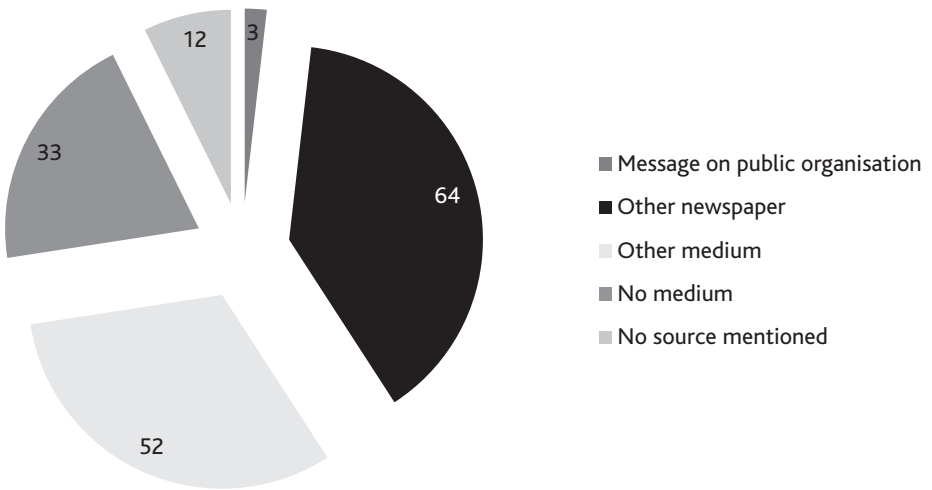
This paper tries to relate newspaper coverage to parliamentary actions. However, social and political realities are complex and unidirectional forms of causation are difficult to come by. Despite these notions, it is interesting to investigate whether we can (more or less) for sure state that accountability processes that are found are ‘caused’ by media coverage. By ‘cause’ therefore is meant that in the parliamentary or inspectorate action a specific reference is made to media reports on the incident. For example, questions that are asked by MPs often start with a reference to a media report. In that case, we conclude that the media report ‘caused’ that parliamentary accountability action. Only messages in which public organisations are the main actor are coded (for explanation, see *media as an accountability forum*).

Figure 4 gives an overview of parliamentary accountability questions in response to ‘our’ media stories. Thus, it is not based on media reports but on the database of parliamentary questions.

Figure 4 tells two stories. The first story is this: individual cases of accountability to the media does generally *not* lead to follow-up accountability demands in parliament. We have looked at how often the cases of accountability to the media, described earlier, lead to follow-up questioning in parliament. The answer is: ‘very rarely’. In only three of our cases, parliamentary accountability was triggered by the critical media stories. This is represented in the little dark blue slice in the pie above (‘message on public organisation’). This means that accountability to the media may actually have much less follow-up accountability than could be expected.

The second story, however, is that most parliamentary questions nevertheless emanate from media stories. Only 20 per cent (33 out of 164 questions from MPs; purple slice) were not triggered by media, while it was unclear for five of the stories

Figure 4: The triggers (including media) of parliamentary questioning, 1–12 January 2010 and 1–9 February 2010



what it was that triggered them. For the other stories, 41 per cent were triggered by stories in newspapers (64+3) and 32 per cent (52) were triggered by television and radio. More than two-thirds of the questions in parliament were, thus, triggered by the news media!

Taken together, the two stories would tell us that most reports in the press, including critical stories where media serve as accountability forums, do *seldom* trigger formal accountability. Nevertheless, formal accountability in parliament is generally triggered by news reports.

The apparent paradox between the stories is easily explained by differences in numbers: there are only a couple of hundred questions in parliament during one month; a figure easily dwarfed by the thousands and thousands of stories in the media across all outlets in the same period. In addition to that, parliament has a broader range of interests than strictly public organisations, of course. Media coverage about all other kinds of issues can account for the number of questions in parliament. It is, against this background, only logical that most media stories are the end rather than the start of an ongoing episode.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper has developed, explained and empirically demonstrated a typology with which we can make sense of the role of the media in public accountability. We have made an effort to integrate existing views on the role of the media in society with existing models of public accountability. This has evolved into a typology in fours. The fact that media (potentially) cover acts of public organisations can stimulate self-reflection on behaviour and policies in public organisations. Next to that, media can function as an accountability forum and hold organisations to account. This is classical watchdog journalism (Entman, 2005; Norris, 2014), combined with the public accountability model (Bovens et al, 2008). A third role considers the amplification of formal accountability processes by simply reporting on them. This role is comparable

to the role of the media as depicted by Keane (2009): media facilitate contacts between several monitoring institutions in ‘monitory democracy’. Keane mentions a long list of highly disparate post-representative mechanisms of accountability. He writes about the rise of audit, independent regulators, participation mechanisms, social media, the blogosphere, integrity commissions and – the theme of this paper – the news media. Ostensibly, these mechanisms do not have much to do with each other, they are nevertheless comparable in the sense that they represent and inform the public, limit powers and control and establish public standards which they monitor. Lastly, media coverage can trigger formal accountability and thus serve as a fire-alarm for formal accountability forums (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984). Thus, media can act as a spark, forum, amplifier and trigger. It is an analytical typology: roles can overlap or interconnect in practice.

The empirical analysis has explored which of these roles seems to be most important. Our first conclusion is that individual public sector organisations are often mentioned in media coverage, but that only a smaller share of these messages treats them extensively. Thus, public organisations ‘know’ that they are relevant for coverage, which can stimulate self-reflection. (Potential) critical attention by media can spark off a large range of activities and introspective, reflective actions in public organisations (Schillemans, 2012; Jacobs, 2014). The critical role as forum is theoretically important but carries relatively little empirical weight. Of more importance is the role of the media as amplifiers of accountability: by making clear to the general public how formal accountability processes evolve. Finally, there is the potentially most vital role as triggers of accountability: accountability forums base their questioning on news reports.

Our empirical exploration is based on extensive document analysis yet obviously only covers a selection of organisations during a relatively short span of time in just one country. The findings nevertheless demonstrate the usefulness of the typology and also lead to interesting preliminary conclusions. It would be worthwhile to pursue this research in the future, across longer time-frames and in more countries. This would also be necessary to tap into underlying differences within the four categories.

At least four issues stand out for further research. To begin with, it would be worthwhile to analyse whether our findings are typical of our types of public sector organisations or whether the specific Dutch context – the Dutch media system and governance system – influences the outcomes. It is reasonable, for example, to assume that in a thoroughly commercialised media system (say, the US), the amount of media coverage on public agencies would be considerably lower and that the spark-function would then be less prominent. Whether or not this assumption is correct is an empirical question.

A second issue relates to explanations of our findings. Are there organisational features that attract different types of media roles? For example, it seems that organisations operating closely to citizens (such as the police) attract most media attention. Would this be a recurring pattern or is it just a by-product of our selection choices? And, more broadly, do different types of organisations attract specific roles of the media?

A third issue for further research would relate to the effects of different roles of media in public accountability. What *happens* with organisations that are held accountable by the media as accountability forums? And what does this mean for future accountability to media; do organisations who frequently figure in the news

also attract more critical media attention in future reports? A longitudinal analysis could shed light on this issue.

A last question to address is: how can we relate these roles to broader issues pertaining to the role of the media in contemporary governance? The role of the media in democratic processes is subject to permanent discussion (De Haan and Bardoel, 2012) or is even seen as being simply disruptive (Flinders, 2012). Sparrow has indicated that media are often compared with ‘attack dogs’ that are relentlessly critical of politics (Sparrow, 1999, 25) and ‘t Hart suggests that we now live in an ‘inquisition democracy’ (‘t Hart, 2002). After a disaster or crisis, journalists and politicians both search for the institution which, or person who, is guilty and aim to hold it publicly accountable. This kind of ‘inquisition democracy’ prospers in a societal climate of ‘guilty until proven innocent’ (‘t Hart, 2002). This observation ties in with Keane’s (2009) claim that in modern democracies many other actors than parliament – and especially mass media – fulfil monitoring functions. It may even be stated that mediatisation processes take place: politics and public sector organisations adapt themselves to their mediated environment (Mazzoleni and Schultz, 1999; Schillemans, 2012). The operational procedures and selection mechanisms of journalists – such as their focus on events and incidents, production logics and methods of framing – do make mass media in fact an informal forum for public sector organisations. Aggressive holding to account strategies may cause excessive caution.

Our analyses, however, sketch a much less gloomy picture of the role of the media. The news media seem to be mostly important in public accountability as potential critical commentators (sparks) and as triggers for formal accountability. Their main role lies in connecting critical external scrutiny with organisations on the one hand and formal institutions of accountability to citizens on the other. In this sense, the media are hubs in ‘monitory democracies’ in which ‘power monitoring and power controlling devices have been shifting sideways and downwards through the whole political order’ (Keane, 2009, xxvi). Our analysis suggests that the news media are indeed adjustment mechanisms in monitory democracies. News media are not only a monitoring tool in itself, they are also a tool used by many of the other accountability forums and they thus provide information exchange and communication between all those other accountability forums. The media, thus, play an integrative role in fragmented processes of accountability in fragmented systems of public services.

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