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Do bloggers who criticize the press ultimately matter? (Re)defining media accountability in the age of citizen participation

Els bloggers que critiquen la premsa són finalment rellevants? (Re)definint la responsabilitat dels mitjans en l'era de la participació ciutadana

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ABSTRACT:

Bloggers criticizing the traditional media over poor quality journalism are being touted as potentially influential instruments of media accountability. This paper questions whether in retrospect the old order of media accountability still has relevance in an increasingly networked media environment. The aim of the paper is to suggest a framework for understanding how bloggers criticizing the traditional journalism practice can be examined in a study on media accountability in the digital era. The essay interrogates the concept of media accountability and the significance of bloggers' criticism on journalism practice.

KEYWORDS:

Bloggers, journalism practice, media accountability, media criticism, media responsibility, participatory media.



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RESUM:

Els anomenats *bloggers* que critiquen els mitjans tradicionals sobre la mala qualitat del periodisme són considerats instruments potencialment influents de la rendició de comptes i la responsabilitat dels mitjans de comunicació. Aquest article qüestiona si, en retrospectiva, el vell ordre de la rendició de comptes de mitjans encara té rellevància en un entorn cada vegada més interconnectat. L'objectiu és proposar un marc per comprendre com els *bloggers* que fan crítica de la pràctica del periodisme tradicional poden ser examinats en un estudi sobre la responsabilitat dels mitjans en l'era digital. Aquest assaig analitza el concepte de rendició de comptes dels mitjans i la importància de la crítica que actors com els *bloggers* fan de la pràctica del periodisme.

PARAULES CLAU:

***bloggers*, pràctica periodística, rendició de comptes de mitjans, crítica de mitjans, responsabilitat de mitjans, mitjans participatius.**

1. Introduction

Accountability of the media became the global agenda in 2011 and 2012 when a phone hacking scandal by the defunct *News of the World* in the UK was exposed. An inquiry into the scandal by Lord Justice Leveson brought to the limelight the weakening accountability by conventional regulatory institutions. Lord Leveson's inquiry in particular highlighted the changing nature of media accountability systems. Indeed, media accountability seems to be in a state of flux as the traditional media engages with more and more citizens whose access to the work of the fourth estate and participation has been enhanced by new media technologies. The fact that more citizens online are now engaged in monitoring and criticizing the performance of traditional media proves the press is no longer the "sole gatekeeper of public discourse" (Bernier 2013, p. 2). At the same time, institutions that have provided checks on traditional media, such as the press councils, are still assumed to fittingly represent media consumers who have for a long time felt powerless until the advent of new media technologies.

In media studies, the concept of media accountability is often said to be in a "conceptual muddle" (see Dennis and Gillmor, 1989) and, according to Pritchard (2000), it is "often used but seldom defined" (p. 1). Since the landmark Hutchins Commission of inquiry of the 1940s – set up owing to the waning credibility of the US press at the time – various scholars have attempted to approach the subject in different ways, mostly enriching the discourse on freedom of expression and media regulation, but offering little conceptual clarity. Media scholars have suggested that there is a lack of understanding of the concept of media accountability that is compounded by the antagonism over "accountability" on the one hand, and "responsibility" on the other, as approaches to understanding regulation of the media (Von Krogh, 2008). This is the root of the enduring debate on media accountability. Perhaps a better way to evaluate the new dynamics of a networked world as regards media accountability is to study the significance of the rising criticism of the traditional media by audiences online as a potential media accountability mechanism. Indeed, blogs – just like other Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook and Twitter – have attracted broad participation of citizens engaging in scrutiny of the content and operations of the traditional media. As a result, journalists and media organizations are now daily targets of a barrage of criticism over what is perceived by audiences as poor quality journalism. At the same time, traditional accountability instruments like press councils are increasingly losing their influence and credibility as focus shifts to reforms on traditional media regulation as seen in the UK's Leveson inquiry of 2011-2012.

This article explores the implications of media criticism on blogs as a form of participatory media accountability by discussing the discourses found in the nexus of media accountability and bloggers criticism of traditional media. In this paper, I evaluate the interpretation of the concept of media accountability as a basis for

suggesting a framework for understanding citizens' intervention in media accountability. The approach is to assess how the concept of media accountability can be adapted to the changing media environment of the digital era. First I will begin with an examination of how the concept of media accountability has been understood by various scholars.

2. Media accountability – the boundaries of definitions

Accountability – a term that is also often referred to in public administration and governance – has dominated discussions on media performance since its first prominent use as a policy concept by the Hutchins Commission in its 1947 report (Marzolf, 1991, p. 73; McIntyre, 1987; Mulgan, 2000). It is a concept that is rather hard to pin down, although various scholars have attempted to approach it in several ways. There is no coherent way to address the concept of media accountability; therefore, it poses a challenge in research as well as policy-making. Secondly, the concept is “used in a mistaken or too restricted way (for instance as meaning control or greater responsibility)” (McQuail, 2003, p. 19). “Responsibility” is a term mostly taken as a synonym for accountability yet both concepts are volatile and take conflicting meanings at times. Mulgan (2000) suggests that the “chameleon-like” nature of accountability “require(s) constant clarification and increasingly complex categorisation”, even in disciplines such as public administration (p. 555).

The normative principle behind media accountability is that the media takes the step of actively responding to a set of obligations (McQuail, 2003). Obligations here are varied depending on a host of issues including media systems (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In expanding this view, McQuail (2005) defines media accountability as “voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication” (p. 207). This definition implies that there is an expectation that the media would operate and perform its set roles in a manner acceptable to its “constituents” (a term preferred by Pritchard, 2000). Of course, McQuail risks being vague in not defining the society he is referring to and “how the media are supposed to draw public legitimacy” (Heikkilä *et al.*, 2012, p.5-6). Indeed, the fundamental question that scholars seek to address as regards accountability, whether in media studies or public administration, is “to whom” and “for what” one is required to be accountable (see Mulgan, 2000).

Another pragmatic view taken on media accountability is that of David Pritchard (2000). According to Pritchard, media accountability should be understood as a “process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account of their activities to their constituents” (*ibid.*, 2000, p. 2). He seeks to move away from a theoretical approach – or “a set of normative prescriptions” –

which he argues does not really bring an understanding of how media accountability “actually works” (p. 1). With a rather pessimistic view of the effectiveness of media accountability mechanisms such as law and ethics, he sees the “process” as one of naming, blaming and claiming. The “process” starts when a “constituent” pinpoints a journalistic error (naming), then he or she makes the offending media aware of the error (blaming), and eventually the member of the audience demands a form of restitution (claiming), which could be as simple as an explanation of an editorial decision (*ibid.*, p. 3-4). The strength of this definition is the emphasis placed on citizen participation, which both Pritchard and Bertrand (2000) argue is essential in a democracy (p. 192). As we shall see later, citizen participation is increasingly coming into focus in media accountability discourse because of Web 2.0 technologies that provide a platform for audiences to engage with the traditional media. Even with a good analysis of media accountability instruments in operation in organizations, Pritchard’s “practical” evaluation of media accountability has remained a subject of discourse for scholars and policy-makers, and seldom ropes in journalists and media workers, a weakness cited by Bardoel and D’Haenens (2004). Additionally, the process of naming and blaming has its weakness, according to McQuail (2003):

The general rationale for accountability is to achieve some repair, improvement, or return to normality, although in practice this is sometimes lost sight of. Accountability tends rather to focus on the allocation of blame and punishment rather than on encouraging, or contributing to, better performance. (p. 199)

Even so, the understanding that accountability seeks a form of recourse to the conduct of an actor (in this case the media organization and journalists) is an approach used to distinguish it from its other closely related term: responsibility. Whereas responsibility is the expectation that the media would act in a certain way, accountability ensures that it acts exactly that way and if not, certain consequences would follow (see Hodges, 1986, p. 14). But McQuail (2003) reminds us that the relationship between responsibility and accountability is complex, as indeed the relationship between the media and society has been. He uses a model proposed by Christians (1989) in explaining that accountability can take the form of “liability” or “answerability”. Liability refers to the “potential harm that media publication might cause”, while answerability “emphasizes debate and dialogue as the best means to bridge differences that arise between media and their critics or those affected” (McQuail 2005, p. 209).

In essence, liability implies the media is obliged to follow certain laws and regulations. Liability is a form of accountability that is manifested in media systems which take the form of a “polarized pluralist” state as suggested by Hallin and Mancini (2004) because of the strong influence of the government on the operations of the media. The rationale behind liability for the media is that the society

would be protected against the harm the media may cause by, for instance, damaging reputations of individuals or inciting sectarian violence (see McQuail, 2003). Statutory regulation and defamation laws are common methods applied to control the media by imposing penalties and damages or withdrawing licenses and broadcast frequencies, a measure common in totalitarian states. However, statutory laws create antagonism between the state and the media. Heavy penalties imposed on the media for violating the laws stifle press media freedom and fuel self-censorship by journalists. Libel and defamation laws, especially when they are criminal in nature, meet resistance from proponents of freedom of the press (also globally through the Article 19 organization). Even the civil defamation laws – common in “democratic corporatist” countries (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004) – are not seen to have any progressive effect on media organizations but are instead barriers to their growth (McQuail, 2003). The huge sums of money the courts impose as damages for defamation cripple media organizations. Further, the rich and political elite are mostly seen as the direct beneficiaries of libel laws. Inevitably, libel laws that are friendly to claimants put journalists in tricky situations especially when they have to make a choice between publishing a news story in the public interest or protecting private interests (*ibid.*). The implication of liability as a form of accountability is however greater: it is seen as prescribing punishment but not “encouraging, or contributing to better performance” (McQuail, 2003, p. 199). In fact, liability as a more radical measure of enforcing ethical standards on journalists and media organizations is mostly associated with the term “accountability”, while the more liberal and softer measures are associated with “responsibility” (*ibid.*).

Indeed, the softer form of accountability is answerability. This form of accountability is common in states that take the “democratic corporatist” model of media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In the diverse media systems across the world, the answerability model is mostly preferred (McQuail, 2003; Nordenstreng, 2000). Here, the obligations of the media to society take a liberal nature and, subsequently, adherence to ethical standards is based on voluntary agreements such as codes of ethics. When journalists control their conduct as media professionals through bodies such as press councils, then self-regulation is at work. But Nordenstreng notes that minimum government regulation and the market forces – expected to improve efficiency of media and foster pluralism (see Baldi and Hasebrink, 2007) – supplement softer measures to ensure the media are accountable. McQuail (2003) argues that the emphasis in answerability is on journalistic performance rather than the “harm” the media may cause to society. As a means of recourse for biased coverage, errors in reporting or any other unethical conduct, journalists would be expected, for instance, to offer an explanation of an editorial decision or publish a correction or apology (*ibid.*). There are a myriad of challenges posed when accountability takes the form of answerability, including the fact that the code of ethics serves as a weak measure to control journalists’ conduct.

The downside of having a free market media is that in most cases commercial interests supersede those of the public. Concentration of the media – even at the time preceding the Hutchins Commission – has particularly always become a worrying trend. Media concentration has an overall effect of creating powerful corporations and immensely wealthy individuals who keep close links to politicians. As a consequence, the “big media” with political influence and power (see McChesney, 1999) suppress media freedom by subjecting the media to market censorship and diminishing plurality in favor of profit maximization (Schultz, 1998). Owners of the powerful media organizations are not accountable to the public or to their representatives, the politicians. Bertrand (2003) argues that, although the market is a threat to what he calls “quality media”, government intervention is not an option. He proposes a smorgasbord of mechanisms which he refers to as an “arsenal of democracy” because they are “non-state means of making media responsible towards the public” (Bertrand, 2000, p. 108). To this end, public broadcasting (common in Western Europe) is considered the mass medium that is the most accountable (McQuail, 2003). Public service broadcasting – whose foundations are rooted in social responsibility theory (see Siebert, Schramm and Peterson, 1956) – attempts to attain a balance between the effects of the market and the law (McQuail, 2003, p. 55). The assumption for public service media is that it is “democratically accountable to the public” (*ibid.*) while the law ensures it remains independent from the government, whose key role is to support its development in serving the public interest (Baldi and Hasebrink, 2007).

Overall, liability and answerability models focus on mechanisms that support and promote the process of accountability. The trend is towards more liberal institutions, and the states in various media systems are experiencing transformations from liability to answerability, from responsibility to accountability, according to Bardoel and D’Haenens (2004). However, Plaisance (2000) is concerned with the one-sided view of accountability that sees the concept in terms of mechanisms to enforce it. His argument is that any approach in conceptualizing media accountability must take into account its fluidity, defined as “the degree of responsiveness to the values of media users” (p. 258). According to Plaisance, the varied definitions – often blamed for lack of clarity – are valid when the concept is viewed as a means of “compelling” responsibility (as used by Hodges, 1986, p. 14).

The debate on how to have a free and responsible media has been dominant for decades. The old model of media accountability that has proven acceptable to journalists and media workers is however constantly coming under threat as its weaknesses are exposed. When a phone hacking scandal by the defunct *News of the World* in the UK was exposed in 2011, it put the old order of media accountability into question. But as expected, the proposal for government intervention in reforms suggested by an inquiry into the scandal led by Lord Justice Leveson received cold responses from the media (Fengler *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, as we have seen before, since the Hutchins Commission there has been antagonism between

journalists and policy-makers over the interventions proposed to rein in on media excesses. Journalists are often fearful of government intervention as they argue that state control could erode freedom of the press. The question that is changing the thinking of scholars in the media accountability field now is whether traditional accountability mechanisms are still relevant in an increasingly networked media environment where journalism cultures are changing due to the development of media technologies. New studies are providing a new basis for reviewing and understanding media accountability. Under MediaACT research, Eberwein and Porlezza (2014) come to the interesting conclusion that new media technologies offer a possibly more effective approach to media accountability (see also Fengler, 2012). However, according to the authors, a common factor in MediaACT studies in European countries shows there is widespread skepticism and suspicion by journalists about online media accountability, which includes bloggers' criticisms of journalism practice.

3. Bloggers, participation and criticism

Media criticism by the public has a long tradition, especially in the US – see for instance Hayes (2008) and Cooper (2006). Indeed, according to Hayes, blogs, as “watchers of watchdogs”, may not have a direct influence over the traditional media but are emerging as formidable social institutions that may provide alternative accountability mechanisms. According to Cooper, the criticism of traditional media by bloggers is “maturing”, making the platforms “a vehicle for legitimate criticism” (p. 19-20). There are numerous blogs that have drawn the attention of their mass audiences to errors in the traditional media over the past decade. Some examples are Germany's *Bildblog*, the UK's *Tabloid Watch*, Kenya's *Journalism Dry Cleaner*, and Craig Silverman's (US) *Regret the Error*, which was the subject of his 2007 book of the same title. In the opinion of Fengler (2012), blogs “expose malpractice in the media, i.e., they monitor whether journalists are acting according to their professional standards” (p. 177). Current studies on media criticism such as Cooper's have however hyped the growing influence of the blogosphere on traditional news media and paid little attention to how online criticism could be impacting on conventional regulatory frameworks.

The interesting perspective of critical blogs as a form of participation by citizen journalists is that they are often ignored as their analyses are deemed as too informal and, collectively, bloggers never seem to form a unified, structured model for demanding accountability from the fourth estate. According to Cooper (2006), the influence of bloggers is mostly deemed irrelevant because “informal and highly personal writing styles of many bloggers might obscure the quality of their insights” (p. 19). But do these bloggers who spend their time monitoring the tradi-

tional media and analyzing the news media matter? In their analysis of bloggers' influence on journalism practice through field theory, Vos, Craft and Ashley (2011) conclude that bloggers' power should not be hyped because their analyses of bloggers' criticism show they "have accepted the journalistic doxa" in the sense of Bourdieu's field theory (p. 8). What their study implies is that, although bloggers can serve as watchdogs of the traditional media, conventional journalism standards still become their frameworks of reference in their criticism of the practice. Even so, criticism online – even if it is thought to have little or no influence on the news media – is possibly making the connection between media power and the potential of digital media to provide citizens with the platform to challenge unethical practices of media organizations.

However, there has been little empirical research on how bloggers, through their criticism, affect the journalism practice or traditional media regulatory systems. Further, there are currently few studies that attempt to investigate the influence that these bloggers have on media practice. Additionally, the increasing advantages as well as challenges that online media technologies pose in media accountability are still largely unexplored. Perhaps the most notable expansive research so far into online media accountability instruments is the European Union-funded project MediaAcT (Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe). The three-year research project between 2010 and 2014 explored the development of media accountability in twelve European and two Arab countries (Fengler *et al.*, 2014).

The intervention of audiences in media accountability is the subject of a clash that Vos *et al.* (2011) argue pits these media consumers against journalists. Journalists' admittance that media accountability has an impact on their work is seen as an acknowledgement of weaknesses in journalism and accountability mechanisms favored by media workers in general (Fengler *et al.*, 2014). Bloggers who criticize the traditional media over journalists' performance are now seen as new actors in media accountability systems (*ibid.*). Bernier (2013) chooses to see these online critics of traditional media as a new reinforcement to declining self-regulatory frameworks. Vos, Craft and Ashley (2011) argue that the citizens on the blogosphere are contributing to media accountability by "positing their own set of values and expectations for media performance" (p. 1). Current studies on media criticism such as Cooper's (2006) have, however, hyped the growing influence of the blogosphere on traditional news media and paid little attention to how online criticism could be impacting traditional media accountability. Additionally, criticism of traditional media on blogs as a form of participation by citizen journalists is still mostly ignored as it is deemed too informal and bloggers collectively never seem to form a structured model for demanding accountability. Spiller and Degen (2012) criticize bloggers stating that they are "over-rated", and their blogs are mostly "leisure projects" and do not achieve the desired effect for traditional media accountability. But do these bloggers who spend their time monitoring and analyzing

the news media really matter? There are no easy answers. Perhaps a better way to evaluate the new dynamics of a networked world as regards media accountability is to conduct empirical studies into the rising criticism of the traditional media by audiences online as a potential media accountability mechanism.

Indeed, the growth of citizen participation in media accountability is gradually stirring interest in what Fengler *et al.* (2014) refer to as “participatory media regulation”. Even though researchers now identify citizen participation, there is still little effort being made to investigate these groups of citizens involved in media accountability. Research has focused mostly on journalists, obviously because they are the key actors in the media accountability process. Further, what is being overlooked especially by enthusiasts of participatory media accountability such as Bernier (2013) is the political economy of the Internet. The space that is said to be democratized is also subject to control by corporations, which have command over news sites and online platforms such as blogs. Furthermore, Heikkilä *et al.* (2012) show that journalists are still quite ambivalent about the emerging citizenry providing alternative accountability forms. And they could be right in receiving these potential new partners with a cautious approach. Online users – mostly bloggers and users of Facebook or Twitter – have sometimes misused the platforms by occasionally fanning sectarianism (see Eberwein, 2011).

4. Participatory media accountability

The literature review above has provided a basis for understanding the different perspectives of media accountability as well as the growing significance of bloggers criticizing the traditional media. In this section I evaluate the participatory role of bloggers criticizing the media and frame an approach for the study of their impact on journalism practice.

Indeed, scholars acknowledge that alternative forms of media accountability are participatory, roping in new media consumers (Joseph, 2011; Fengler, 2012). In the past decade, research on online media accountability alternatives has grown due to the unparalleled growth of media technologies. According to Fengler *et al.* (2014), there is now a wide range of web-based media accountability processes initiated by actors both within and outside the journalism profession. However, there has been little research on the contribution of the Internet to regulation and on how new platforms online can affect media accountability (Heikkilä *et al.*, 2012). According to Bernier (2013), the “floodgates” of criticism online have proved that the days of the traditional media as the “sole gatekeepers of public discourse” and their monopoly over self-regulatory instruments such as press councils are over (p. 2).

Undeniably, press councils as traditional instruments for media accountability are facing their most difficult period in the history of the media as they are losing

significance and efficacy, and are constantly the subject of calls for reforms as seen in the UK's Leveson inquiry. There is instead a growing body of scholarship on alternative media accountability mechanisms such as blogs, which are touted as possible avenues for participation of the citizenry in media accountability. The conceptual understanding of media accountability is changing as citizens increasingly play a role in journalism. The main challenge now is whether the old order of accountability is still relevant in an increasingly networked media environment. In the view of Plaisance (2000), the cause of the unclear definition of "media accountability" is concerned with the "shape-shifting nature of the concept" (p. 266). The fact that the new media environment presents new dynamics for fresh accountability calls for certain factors to be taken into consideration in any conceptualization endeavor. These are: the nature of citizen participation, media user values and structural trends.

4.1. Citizen participation

What is not often acknowledged is the fact that the Hutchins Commission realized that the best input for an accountable media was the participation of the citizens, an outcome of the commission that has led to a small number of studies on citizens' criticism, a practice often derided by media organizations and journalists. As we have seen before, there is a trend towards "participatory media regulation" (see Fengler *et al.*, 2014), which means that media control mechanisms are being opened up to the involvement of civil society groups and citizens. It remains to be seen, however, what impact citizen participation online may have on media accountability. Again, as we saw previously, what is most important in defining the concept are the principal actors involved in any kind of "accountability relationship" (see Mulgan, 2000), and these include the journalists, the government and the citizens. In fact, the accountability discourse over time has defined and redefined the interactions and relationships between the three.

4.2. Media user values

When it comes to media accountability, an element closely related to citizen participation is media user values. As we saw in the introduction, media accountability will always entail a "healthy tension" between the values of media users and the medium under study, as well as actors in the journalism practice (Plaisance, 2000, p. 266). Plaisance has put forward two very crucial points in understanding media accountability: firstly, that media accountability is hinged on an enduring debate of finding a media that is free and at the same time responsible; secondly, conceptualizing media accountability requires one to distinguish between the most misused concepts by scholars: accountability and responsibility. And befittingly, Plaisance (2000) recognizes the fact that there can never be a "template" definition for media accountability because media user values keep changing; hence, the fluidity. Media user values – for example, how they perceive ethical journalism – are there-

fore vital in establishing the nature of responsibility used to determine journalistic performance.

To further illustrate the significance of media user values, as well as citizen participation as mentioned earlier, I will give a brief illustration here. In the wake of the January 2015 terrorist attack on the Paris headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, an interesting debate online arose over the deadly raid's coverage by the Middle East-based international news outlet, Al Jazeera. The debate was sparked by a story about leaked emails between Al Jazeera journalists over the guidelines issued by their editor on the coverage of the terrorist attack. According to the UK's *The Guardian*, the emails detailed a rift among Al Jazeera journalists over the question of whether the news organization should support a Western media campaign under the banner "Je suis Charlie" – I am Charlie (Jenkins, 2015). The campaign's objective was to show defiance against what was perceived as a threat to freedom of expression after gunmen killed ten employees of *Charlie Hebdo*, including cartoonists who had been instrumental in the newspaper's publication of controversial drawings of the Prophet Muhammad.

What sparked the disagreement among Al Jazeera journalists was the edict by English editor Salah-Aldeen Khadr, whose views on the coverage of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack could be summarized in this assertion: "Defending freedom of expression in the face of oppression is one thing; insisting on the right to be obnoxious and offensive just because you can is infantile". (Jenkins, 2015) Indeed, the emails by Khadr and his colleagues were the subject of discussions on blogs, numerous tweets, Facebook posts, as well as comments on online news pages, some of which featured acerbic criticism of Al Jazeera journalists on their varied standpoints. A comment by a user of *The Jerusalem Post*, which had a version of the story on the leaked Al Jazeera emails, was particularly interesting. The user, Eliyahu Konn, rewrote Khadr's quote above and left this comment below it: "There is no argument against that statement. Unlimited free speech has become *unaccountable* speech." (Konn, 2015, emphasis added) Of course, both Khadr and Konn's comments, or even the debate on Al Jazeera's coverage, raise a host of complex issues in journalism studies as regards freedom of expression, ethics, political ideology or the clash between Western and non-Western values. But the comment made by Konn, a user on *The Jerusalem Post* news page, alludes to the French magazine as being "unaccountable". The reference to accountability might not be a representation of everyday audience discussion on the media but it is certainly a trait that has come to be expected of the media by governments, policy-makers and citizens alike.

4.3. Structural trends

Additionally, the concept of media accountability in the digital age has to take into account the continual changing trends in institutions, structures, journalistic cultures and media systems, as is the case with new communication technologies that

present new challenges to the media (McQuail, 2003, and Mulgan, 2000). The biggest question of media accountability in various media systems (as prescribed by Hallin and Mancini, 2004) is the quest for “the elusive middle ground” – having freedom of the press and a responsible media (Plaisance, 2000, p. 258). The quest to achieve a balance between having a free media and one that is responsible is the essence of media accountability. The conceptualization of media accountability, therefore, will always change depending on the philosophical approach taken in interrogating this balancing act. Indeed, the fundamental question the Hutchins Commission sought to tackle for the challenges in the American neo-liberal media was how to strike a balance between upholding the freedom of the press and, at the same time, providing checks on “runaway” market freedom, which was the cause of poor quality journalism and the so-called irresponsible press (McIntyre, 1987). This is the dilemma even in the digital age.

In a nutshell, new media technologies and the ever-growing focus on media accountability is just a reflection of the broader expectations now on the media. The concept provides a better platform for dialogue on policy and reforms on the ethical culture of the media. There are, however, challenges in media accountability literature that should be acknowledged in conceptualization. The discourse on the concept has been dominated by studies in mostly Europe and North America. It would be important to broaden the understanding of media accountability in environments not necessarily falling within the framework of Western understanding of media systems. Additionally, various scholars suggest that the literature on media accountability has focused less on empirical studies.

5. Conclusion

Citizens are increasingly playing a significant role in journalism, and in the same way, media accountability. In fact, a strong force of scholarship is slowly emerging in support of a new mode of media accountability – participatory media accountability. The widespread use of new media technologies by citizens is thought to be an added input of democratizing traditional mechanisms of media accountability, which have for a long time remained in the hands of media professionals and the state. Yet, the concept of media accountability remains one of the most contentious in journalism studies since it is frequently used but seldom clearly defined. Media accountability discourse has been defined by the quest to find a balance between media responsibility and freedom of the press. By exploring the literature to discover how the concept has been defined over time, this paper sought to investigate how it can be adapted to the changing media environment of the digital era. This paper concludes that the changing media environment as a result of the widespread use of Web 2.0 technologies today defines the fluidity of media ac-

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countability, which is a central component in its conceptualization. Moreover, in defining media accountability one has to take into consideration: citizen participation, which is shaping the nature of responsibility demanded from the media and journalists in the digital age; media user values, which keep changing; and structural trends in the media, such as media systems.

Notes

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