

Changing political attitudes towards media accountability in Sweden



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ABSTRACT: Considering the changes in media and in society that have occurred since the heyday of the Democratic Corporatist Model, with its strong emphasis on institutionalized self-regulation of the press (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), this article examines changes in attitudes towards media accountability measures among policymakers. Attitudes prevalent in the peak years of political pressure on the media system in the Democratic Corporatist countries are compared with the attitudes existing today. The data studied are printed minutes of media debates in the Swedish Parliament in the 1960s and similar debates in recent years, Sweden being a typical country for the model. The comparison indicates that both the views on media deficiencies and the views on remedies have changed over the last 40 years. Accountability measures are still in demand, although more through governance than from government.

KEYWORDS: media criticism, media responsibility, media accountability, media regulation



INTRODUCTION

Media influence has developed over time, often accompanied by strained relations to the existing structure of power in society (Ward, 2004; Briggs & Burke, 2005). One way of dealing with what is viewed by power holders as media deficiencies and still maintain a degree of media independence from the political power structure has been to demand a “responsible press” (Leigh, 1947; Marzolf, 1991).

Such demands have varied within different models of relations between media system and politics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Regarding the press, different political systems have tried to give a more concrete meaning to the term “responsibility” by discussing tangible ways of media accountability, a phrase used by the Hutchins Commission in 1947 and interpreted as a compromise between a laissez faire market orientation on the one hand and regulation by law on the other (Leigh, 1947; Marzolf, 1991; von Krogh, 2008). McQuail provisionally defines media accountability as “all the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication” (McQuail, 2003, p. 207).

The distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions is not always precise and the ways that the media answers to society have been modified over time due to changes in the structure of both society and media. Accountability researchers have suggested four frames of media accountability; political, professional, public and market (McQuail, 2003; Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004). The focus of this article is the political frame. The tools at hand for the politicians change when the political arena as well as expressions of public opinion change. Interest in political media regulation seems to decrease while engagement in media governance increases (Wyss & Keel, 2009; Puppis, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to analyze and compare political attitudes towards media accountability measures over time in order to discuss the relative importance of different factors like a model for media/political system, degree of friction between media and society and strength of stakeholders. Theoretically, the study will draw upon media accountability theory and research, while empirically, the study will be based on an analysis of Swedish parliamentary debates on media deficiencies.

Sweden is described (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) as a typical representative of the Democratic Corporatist Model with a strong emphasis on institutionalized self-regulation of the press. The article will analyze and compare parliamentary debates on media deficiencies and media functions in the 1960s, a period with strong political regulatory pressure towards the press, and parliamentary media debates in the 2000s. The study aims to deepen our understanding of changes in the relation of media-politics, especially regarding the importance of factors affecting media accountability processes.

MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY

Media accountability measures can be viewed as ways to handle frictions between power holders in society and the media, predominantly the news media (Plaisance, 2000; McQuail, 2003). The basis for managing these tensions is described by scholars as a societal paradigm, meaning that media organizations independent from government control and censorship accept a social responsibility for their publishing activities (Siebert et al., 1956; Christians et al., 2009).

Media historian Marion Tuttle Marzolf, in a study of American press criticism traces the first use of the term accountability to a 1946 draft of the Hutchins Commission report (Marzolf, 1991, p. 73). According to Marzolf, in the 1940s the concept of "accountability" was perceived as more forceful than appeals to moral and social responsibility; it might, for example, imply a threat of legislation.

MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY IN DIFFERENT MEDIA SYSTEM MODELS

The formula of the Commission was soon presented as one of four "theories of the press" (Siebert et al., 1956). Hallin and Mancini (2004) take their point of departure

in these four theories and on the basis of empirical data and previous media research identify three models of media systems in Europe and North America: the Liberal Model in North America and the UK, the Democratic Corporatist Model in the countries of northern Europe, and the Polarized Pluralist Model, typified by the countries of Mediterranean Europe.

Interesting in the present context is that they show how both the ability and the means to hold the media accountable have developed differently in different parts of the western world. Of main interest for the theme at hand are the US/UK and northern Europe experiences where accountability studies have been made and theories developed, whereas in southern Europe media accountability is less established, almost "an empty word" (von Krogh, 2008, p. 22).

The Liberal (Market) Model is characterized by a high degree of professionalization among editors and journalists and the self-formulated standards of the profession contain elements of a public service ideology. Journalists are seldom organized and there is no centralized national structure for media accountability in the USA. Government guarantees freedom of the press, but otherwise more or less keeps its hands off the media. In the USA, Hallin and Mancini note, professional self-regulation is largely informal and takes place within different media organizations and in the broader peer culture of journalism.

The Democratic Corporatist Model countries are not as antagonistic to the state as the Liberal ones. They "tend to combine strong protection for the press freedom with a significant level of regulation — again reflecting the assumption that media are a social institution and not simply a private business," Hallin and Mancini observe (p. 163). All the countries in this category have press councils; the first was established in Sweden in 1916. Social organizations like unions, employers' interest groups and religious communities are very influential. They play an integral role in the maintenance of social institutions, including tasks and duties that in many other countries are the province of government.

Media researcher Claude-Jean Bertrand identified some 110 various ways to hold the media accountable in practice (Bertrand, 2008). He divided them into internal, external and cooperative measures and considered the latter the potentially most effective. His foremost example is the press council with representation of media owners, journalists and the public.

Sometimes the existing press councils in northern Europe have been set up or reorganized after government pressure on media organizations for better media accountability (Raaum, 2003). Sweden is one such example, political pressure completely altered the function of the Swedish press council in 1969 (Weibull & Börjesson, 1995; von Krogh, 2009). Sweden fits well into the description of Democratic Corporatist Model countries, especially in the 1960s. Today, 40 years later, the situation is more complex due to commercial and technological media developments and the formation of the European Union.

MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY THEORY AND STAKEHOLDERS

Media accountability in the Liberal environment has been studied in practice as relations with different stakeholders in society, and less in relation to government and the parliamentary domain. David Pritchard defines media accountability as “the process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account of their activities to their constituents” (2000, p. 2). Clifford Christians is widening the field when he distinguishes three components: liability, moral sanctions and answerability (Christians, 1989, p. 40). Louis Hodges makes the following distinction between responsibility and accountability:

The issue of responsibility is: To what social needs should we expect journalists to respond ably? The issue of accountability is: How might society call on journalists to explain and justify the ways they perform the responsibilities given them? Responsibility has to do with defining proper conduct, accountability with compelling it. (Hodges, 2004, p. 173)

Denis McQuail has studied the function of media accountability in both Liberal and Democratic Corporatist contexts. He predicted (1992) that demands for media responsibility and accountability would increase when self-regulation replaces government regulation, particularly in broadcasting and telecommunications. Starting with Christians’ distinction between liability and answerability, and adopting Hodges’s reasoning, McQuail has constructed an often-cited model (McQuail, 1997; 2003):

FREE MEDIA
have
RESPONSIBILITIES
in the form of obligations
which can be either
ASSIGNED or **CONTRACTED** or **SELF-CHOSEN**
for which they are held
ACCOUNTABLE
to individuals, organizations, or society
(legally, socially, or morally)
either in the sense of
LIABILITY or **ANSWERABILITY**
for harm caused for quality of performance.

McQuail opts for accountability via social and moral answerability, which, he finds, “meets criteria of voluntariness, normative richness, wide range and participative value” (McQuail, 1997, p. 525).

MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY AND FRICTION

Plaisance reaches back to the balance that the Hutchins Commission struck between media and community. He envisions accountability as “a fluid dynamic of

interaction,” where the fluidity consists of the media’s “degree of responsiveness to the values of media users” and where “the various dimensions of accountability reflect various relations of power among the media and other groups” (Plaisance, 2000, pp. 258, 265). What some researchers consider a failing of various accountability methods, Plaisance perceives to be “a healthy tension created by journalistic autonomy in relation to various community groups” (Ibid., p. 263). This leads up to a working definition of media accountability (von Krogh, 2008, p. 27), slightly adjusted, that incorporates elements from the various scholars — Pritchard, Plaisance, McQuail and Hallin & Mancini — earlier cited:

Media accountability is the interactive process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account (and sometimes a correction, excuse or change of action) of their activities to their constituents and to society. The values and relative strength of the constituents vary over time and are affected by media systems and media technologies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Some researchers (McQuail, 2003; Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004) point out the difficulties of calling ever larger, ever more commercial and increasingly global and powerful media corporations to account. Nord (2008) depicts national and media specific measures to be less effective due to media convergence and globalization.

Discussing the evolution of media governance, various scholars predict further attempts from EU governments to prescribe and demand self-regulation, so called co-regulation, for the media sector (Tambini et al., 2008; Czepek et al., 2009; Puppis, 2010) and show national examples (Wyss & Keel, 2009).

Is this new, formative context affecting politicians’ attitudes towards the media and towards the need for media accountability — accustomed as they have been to use political pressure to find compromises between political ideology, party discipline and sectorial interests (Raaum, 2003; Freedman, 2008; Nord, 2008)?

This article will illuminate these questions by studying the attitudes prevalent in the peak years of political pressure on the media system in the Democratic Corporatist Model and compare these attitudes with the attitudes existing today. The data studied are media debates in the Swedish Parliament.

Research Question 1: Which were the notions about the news media and about media accountability in the Swedish Parliament, as expressed in parliamentary debates, in the period 1967–1970?

Research Question 2: Which were the notions about the news media and about media accountability in the Swedish Parliament, as expressed in parliamentary debates, in the period 2005–2010?

Research Question 3: In what ways have the notions mentioned above changed between the two periods?

METHODS AND DATA

The method applied is a qualitative textual analysis of speeches and oral statements in Parliament in order to structure the ideas and ideologies contained in the attitudes towards news media, as they are presented in parliamentary debates at the end of the 1960s and in our time 40 years later. The period at the end of the 1960s was chosen since in these years the politicians' distrust with the news media peaked, as did their ambitions to influence the working of the media. This period of political activity is studied in comparison to the situation today.

The data are the parliamentary debates as they have been recorded word for word by the parliamentary stenographers. They are not totally verbatim and accurate, since the MPs have certain latitude to edit their utterances directly after the debates and before the records are printed, but nevertheless they show what the MPs wanted to communicate in public at certain known dates.

Debates have been chosen that deal with matters as close to the theme "attitudes towards the news media" as possible. Such debates were manifold in the first time period, since motions to regulate the content of the media were supported by the media critical MPs' descriptions of the shortcomings of the media. The MPs who opposed regulation, on the other hand, often chose to underline the benefits of the news media. During the second period these kind of explicit debates are hard to find. Instead, debates on freedom of speech, public service broadcasting, the Internet, press subsidies and media motions were chosen. This absence of explicit debates in the latter period does represent a systematic difference in the data at hand, but it is also a manifestation of the factual differences between the periods.

The general attitudes towards the media in each period are presented separately, indicating a background to the measures to influence or control the media that are suggested and debated. Those that promote concrete actions are in this context called media critics; those that oppose these actions are called media defenders.

The data from the 1960s consists of six different debates¹ in Parliament from 1967 to 1970 of various lengths. Up to 1971 the Swedish Parliament was organized in two chambers with separate memberships, the First Chamber and the Second Chamber. For the second period 2005–2010, 16 debates² were chosen to compensate for the lesser degree of media attitudes contained.

¹ The debates chosen were held in the First Chamber on March 15, 1967, December 13, 1967 and May 28, 1970 and in the Second Chamber on December 13, 1967, February 28, 1968 and May 28, 1970.

² The debates chosen were held on March 9, 2005; February 23, May 15, May 31, June 13 and November 21, 2006; June 8, June 19 and June 20, 2007; March 12 and April 9, 2008; March 25, November 19 and December 16, 2009; May 27 and June 14, 2010.

RESULTS

After a short background, this presentation starts with an overview of the general attitudes towards journalism and the mass media among the debating politicians and then the attitudes towards measures aiming at influencing or regulating the mass media. The overview deals with the reasoning among media critics in contrast to sentiments among media defenders in the 1960s and in the 2000s. Then a discussion follows of differences and similarities in the two time periods in terms of media accountability concepts.

1967–1970

Background

In the 1960s the Social Democratic Party was in power, as it had been for the last 30 years. Policy signals from influential politicians in the ruling party were carefully registered by media organizations and other interests in this Democratic Corporatist Model country.

There was no commercial radio and television; public service broadcasting had a monopoly. The tabloid single-copy newspapers were rapidly expanding, whilst a good number of newspapers close to the Centre Party (formerly the Farmers' League) and to the Social Democratic Party were folding due to the strong competition from liberal-conservative papers that attracted more advertising.

The self-regulatory system of the press was reformed in 1969 (Weibull & Börjeson, 1995; von Krogh, 2009). After negotiations between the mainly social democratic Parliament and the press organizations, the press council was given more authority with a new ombudsman and the public influence was strengthened. At the beginning of the 1970s a coalition of the Social Democrats and the Centre Party carried a law through Parliament that gave economic support to ailing newspapers, mainly connected to these two parties (Nord, 2008).

General views on the media by media critics

The media-critical members of Parliament (MPs) that debate media matters are mainly critical of newspapers. Many focus on the single-copy tabloids in the capital Stockholm that perform “glamorous keyhole-journalism” (Svensson, SocDem, 1967).

Common traits in the critique are that the press is too powerful, arrogant and on the verge of monopoly. This affects both the impact of ethical errors — it becomes more difficult to obtain a correction — and an anti social-democratic political bias in framing news and views. The press misuses its power by favouring sensational stories that imply manhunt and a rule of the mob. It is accused of being too commercial, driven by “tight-fisted misers.”

News today unfortunately is made to be sensational, sensational at any cost. Sometimes it is evident that the journalists make their reports out of sheer ignorance. Truth and objectivity are of no importance. (Nilsson, SocDem, 1970)

There are other principles beside the freedom of expression that are important.

... we emphasize another principle of equal relevance, the right to personal integrity for the individual. (Wallentheim, SocDem, 1970)

The ordinary man is squeezed by the press. One MP lashes out with allegations against young journalists that are increasingly “ruthless, untrustworthy and equipped with declining professional morals” (Björk, SocDem, 1967). Most of the critical MPs in the debates are Social Democrats.

General views on the media by the media defenders

Many of the MPs that defend the media make a point of saying that they to some extent agree with the critics.

I can wholeheartedly declare that I very much sympathize with some of the lines of thought in this motion. (Hamrin, Lib, 1967)

They also declare that they do not question the right of the critics to raise these issues in the Parliament; media deficiencies are a societal problem.

The next line of reasoning is often to diminish these problems: A) Nobody is perfect; editors are also human beings, no news is good news, the critics exaggerate. B) Sensationalism in the press exists only because the readers demand such articles. C) It is not media monopoly that leads to media malpractices; it is too much media competition. D) Although some problems still exist, the situation today is vastly better than 1) in earlier times 2) in other countries. E) The press is very much aware of the problems and are dealing with them. F) The problems concern only a few newspapers in Stockholm; in smaller towns the relationship between the paper and the reader is closer and not at all anonymous. G) The debate on media deficiencies is in itself a sign of health. H) The significance of the press as a watchdog and as a facilitator of political communication is more important than scattered errors when deadlines are approaching.

Some defenders also make counter attacks: If the ordinary man is squeezed by someone it is by the authorities, not by the press; on the contrary — “the press brings justice to the ordinary man” (Andersson, Lib, 1967).

Most of the media defenders in the debates belong to the liberal or conservative parties.

Specific views on media accountability measures by media critics

The existing press council is not sufficient, according to the critics. It needs much more resources in terms of staff and authority; now it is slow and unwilling to take

action. The self-regulation is “characterized by an extreme inertia” (Palm, SocDem, 1970).

The critical MPs specify new elements that they want the hitherto voluntary council to include: members of the public on the council, a right for the council to take initiatives, a special ombudsman or “prosecutor” for the public against the press, and a possibility for the press council to demand “fines” from newspapers when they have been criticized by the council.

If the demands above are not met, several MPs state that the Parliament must force the press to implement them. The critics are confident that the Parliament has a right, almost an obligation, to intervene.

The press often argues that it is a representative for the public. Even so, there are representatives that naturally outrank the press, I refer to the Members of Parliament, and the Parliament cannot in the long run tolerate matters that have been criticized here without reacting. (Svensson, SocDem, 1967)

The critical MPs emphasize that the public to a large extent share their concerns; they interpret “a broad public opinion” (Wallentheim, SocDem, 1967).

A few MPs favoured new legislation to make corrections compulsory for the press. One MP stated clearly that even if legislation was not imminent, “...threatening with new laws may play a purposeful role and induce sinners in the press to more self-examination and self-discipline” (Björk, SocDem, 1967).

One MP, very critical to the “unbalanced” reporting on an extensive miners’ strike, wanted a system of exclusion of “deceitful” journalists (Nilsson, SocDem, 1970).

Specific views on media accountability measures by media defenders

Many MPs on the defending side state that the critics share a blind faith in state regulation, “a faith I myself cannot share” (Carlshamre, Cons, 1967). They stress that the publishers’ association is aware of problems spanning from factual errors to overt sensationalism and has formed a committee that will look into the matter. The press council will most certainly become more effective over time. Much has already been done and the press is “not as bad as described” (Segerstedt Wiberg, Lib, 1970). Existing laws are sufficient; new laws regulating media content would be unconstitutional and counterproductive.

2005–2010

Background

Society, politics and media have changed considerably over the last 40 years. The Social Democratic Party is no longer the ruling party. Liberal-conservative govern-

ments in 1976–1982, 1994–1996 and 2006-to the present, have broken the social democratic hegemony. Traditional national corporatist problem-solving patterns have lost much of their power, partly because of the membership in the European Union.

The party press system has lost its impact. The public service monopoly is broken; commercial radio and television was introduced about 20 years ago. The single-copy tabloids have lost their momentum and half of their circulation since 1970. The morning papers have consolidated and lost a quarter of their circulation since their peak years in the 1980s.

Media ownership has become more international and the Internet makes information more global as well as changes the old pattern of sender-receiver from the traditional media. The self-regulatory system of the press is also losing momentum as its foundation (a national, corporatist and press-centric system) is eroding.

General views on the media by the media critics

A few MPs question the evolution of bigger media corporations and warn that the increasing concentration of media ownership may be harmful to the editorial content in terms of plurality.

[...] at stake is also the fact that the same owners buy different kinds of media and acquire a vast influence on what news is published or broadcast. (Petersson, SocDem, 2006)

Some conservative MPs criticize the public service broadcasters for competing with commercial corporations in “dumbing down” the public in its hunt for large audiences. Public broadcasting ought to focus on quality and shy away from commercialism, advertising and sponsorships.

One MP is worried that an alleged shallowness on the Internet will affect the traditional media. Another MP worries over effects of defamation and hate speech on the web. One MP, belonging to the Christian Democrats, has a long list of more elaborated critical views on the media — for fragmentation, dramatization, negative framing, lack of depth in explanations — that he has advocated for years in motions and debates:

There is a general tendency to substitute depth and context with surface and horse race coverage in the cacophony of media. (Svensson, ChrDem, 2009)

He suspects that the sense of responsibility earlier shown by editors has faded and he questions the existing system of media self-regulation. But this MP has more often than not become a lone voice in the parliamentary debates. Most of the media critics belong to liberal or conservative parties.

General views on the media by the media defenders

MPs from all parties in the Parliament agree that “free, objective, well informed and scrutinizing mass media” function as “a cornerstone in democracy” (Renström, SocDem, 2006). Especially newspapers are praised for their important role in exerting democratic control over government.

Independent mass media — independent from external economical and political interests — is the foundation for our confidence and trust in what they produce and publish. (Åkesson, Centre, 2009)

A unifying pride over Swedish traditions when it comes to constitutional rights to freedom of expression and information transparency is expressed. Very seldom do the media defenders agree with the critics that there are considerable problems concerning media content.

A praise of media functions and its possibilities to play an important role is often heard. Plurality and a sound competition make “a thorough scrutiny of those in power possible” (Tenje, Cons, 2010).

Public service media are necessary as a counterweight to commercial media in some areas. They enhance culture, knowledge and education, according to the defenders. The last twenty years have seen a dramatic and positive development from monopolistic to pluralistic media. The Internet has a great democratic potential and is a fantastic resource in many aspects.

One MP declares that her aim is for Sweden to become one of the best countries in Europe for media production. For broadcasters, it is a question of “finding the right balance between viewers’ interests and the interests of corporations to secure their competitive strength” states another MP (Tornberg, Centre, 2010). The media defenders are dominated by liberal-conservative MPs.

Specific views on media accountability measures by media critics

Some Social Democrats suggest that a parliamentary committee should be set up in order to study media ownership concentration. They also propose further regulative measures regarding advertisements in commercial broadcasting.

In the 1990s the Parliament added possession of child pornography as an exempt from freedom of expression. Christian Democrats argue that ads for sexual services also should be added.

We shall not hide behind the law. In the debate on press freedom one often forgets that there are other values equally important for democracy as press freedom... (Höij, ChrDem, 2006)

Conservative and liberal MPs wish to narrow the field for public service media, so that broad and popular entertainments as well as major sports events are excluded

from their output. One liberal MP dislikes “adult bullying” in reality shows like *Expedition Robinson (The Survivors)* as a method to attract more viewers. He “takes the liberty to ... propose a parliamentary rule” in this area (Kollmats, Lib, 2006).

One conservative MP wants the government to initiate steps towards a voluntary ombudsman for the Internet.

The earlier mentioned MP from the Christian Democrats follows up on his critique by suggesting new legislation. He wants to forbid economic defamation in the media and he advocates that one of the paragraphs in the media code of ethics should be transformed into law. The media would then be compelled by law to respect the personal integrity of individuals, except when strong societal interests are at stake. He argues that “the risk of a substantial compensation claim would constitute an important preventive factor” (Svensson, ChrDem, 2006).

Specific views on media accountability measures by media defenders

MPs from all the liberal-conservative parties plus the Left (the former Communist Party) salute the possibilities of the public to influence the newsrooms’ publishing decisions as better alternatives than government regulation. This attitude is particularly evident in debates about conditions for radio and television, but has implications for other mass media as well.

[...] we as politicians shall not interfere with the content of the programmes. [...] Instead it is the public via the Swedish Broadcasting Commission that shall keep an eye on their own companies... (Holma, Left, 2009)

Citizens and other media “should watch the watchdogs” (Wallmark, Cons, 2009) and praise is given to “the self-regulatory power of the viewer-interest” (Tornberg, Centre, 2010). The media’s right to decide over content within the boundaries of the law is exemplified in Parliament by the Muhammad Cartoons affair. Even though the pictures are mean and ugly, meant to insult and provoke according to a MP, the media are not to be restricted, it is up to the media to decide:

This must not be an assignment for governments, bureaucrats or self-appointed judges of taste (Bargholtz, Lib, 2006).

The liberal-conservative defenders like to describe the social democratic critics as media regulators, while they themselves “keep away from moral pointers” (Tenje, Cons, 2010). New laws should be avoided unless they originate from EU directives or are meant to enhance media diversity and media strength. Swedish media corporations must be ensured “equal terms of competition in relation to their European and global competitors” (Tornberg, Centre, 2010).

Instead of detailed content regulation, the defenders recommend a variety of accountability measures for the public. The MPs mention users voting with their

feet (avoiding particular TV programmes or newspapers), scrutinizing editorial content and sending complaints to the editors plus to the press council or to the state board for broadcasting complaints, writing on blogs and op-ed pages in order to create a public opinion against media deficiencies and collecting signatures for petitions concerning desirable kinds of content.

The government should not initiate an Internet ombudsman; self-regulation by the industry is much more preferred. Sweden is setting a good international example by refusing to use shutdown of access to the Internet as a governmental sanction, one MP argues.

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE TWO PERIODS

Composition of critics and defenders

In the 1960s most of the general media critics among the MPs that engaged in parliamentary media debates were Social Democrats, and most of the general media defenders belonged to liberal-conservative parties. Forty years later this had changed. Fewer MPs were active in the media debates and the party lines are not so distinct. The critics are now in the minority both among Social Democrats and among liberal-conservatives.

The same development is true for the MPs advocating government media regulation or using threats about such regulation. Social democrats were clearly arguing for regulation in the sixties, liberal-conservatives against, and 40 years later the pattern is muddled. The anti-regulators outnumber the regulators all over the political spectrum.

Another aspect of the composition is that in the sixties a handful of the most eloquent defenders were newspaper editors. Forty years later, with the demise of the party press, only one or two former editors are active in the parliamentary debates.

Areas of conflict between critics and defenders regarding the general view

A fairly typical exchange of arguments in the sixties would include strong allegations from the critics dealing with sensationalism and disrespect of personal integrity. The defenders would agree that there are problems, but disagree with the remedies; government regulation is not an option. Some newspapers are in focus most of the time. If references to other countries are made, they mainly state that journalists are worse in Sweden than elsewhere (critics) or better in Sweden than in other countries (defenders).

More than 40 years later you can hear a faint echo of the old debates, but this time it is a Christian Democrat and not a Social Democrat that laments the lack of substance in the reporting. There is no general critique, as was the case in the sixties.

Absolutely none of the media defenders would agree with that; a praise of media functions is more typical.

More limited areas of conflicting views on the media exist concerning, for instance, media ownership concentration and the scope of the public service broadcaster's activities. The debates no longer focus on newspapers, instead there are numerous references to the expansion of media content in print, radio, television, computers, mobiles and tablets. In positive terms it is called diversity, in negative it is called a cacophony of media. A question sometimes raised is what a fragmented media arena means for democracy. No longer are the discussions limited to only Swedish conditions, the global flow of information and global media opportunities are frequently mentioned.

Attitudes towards media responsibility

Media critics and media defenders most often agreed in the 1960s that news media had a responsibility to uphold standards of ethics and quality in their editorial content. The defenders could state the necessity of "a clear stand against misrepresentation, falsification and incorrect reports — in other words a reinforcement of ethical values" (Nelander, Liberal, 1970). Social Democrats declared that if this responsibility was not taken, then the government would intervene with the help of new laws.

Forty years later the MPs rarely talk about media responsibility in the same manner. The liberal-conservative politicians are more dominating and frame the debates in a different way, stressing liberty under the law more than moral responsibilities. Even disgusting Mohammad cartoons are OK to publish; the media decide themselves within the borders of the law.

Attitudes towards media accountability

Going back to McQuail's accountability model (2003) earlier cited, one finds that the debates in the sixties articulated concerns over many of these different aspects. The press was considered by the critics to have both self-chosen and in a way contracted obligations. Contracted in the sense that if the press did not fulfill them, then the Parliament was obliged to step in and protect individuals whose integrity was damaged as well as political interests which were misrepresented and indeed the functioning of society. The critics socially and morally held the press accountable and they used the possibility of legal liability as a leverage to accomplish a higher degree of answerability.

The defenders agreed upon the moral obligations for the press, but saw them primarily as self-chosen and consequently as a matter for the press itself to address. The defenders however also recognized the right of the Parliament to discuss ques-

tions of media content and media quality, and hence opened a door to the possibility of being held socially accountable.

Forty years later the predominant tendencies in the debates do not emphasize media obligations to society as a concern for politicians. Media organizations are assigned legal obligations for which they are liable; other social or moral obligations are up to organizations or individuals to address. The debates contain many examples of non-legal ways for the public to hold the media accountable.

CONCLUSIONS

The degree of friction between media and society, the perception and activities of stakeholders and the type of model for media/political system — these are three factors that influence media accountability processes. How have these factors developed over time and how are they reflected in the parliamentary debates under study?

Friction

Plaisance (2000) draws attention to the positive aspects of friction or conflict between media organizations and the powers that be; at least when the friction is an outcome of critical media coverage of those in power.³ The tension might be an indication of a job well done where media organizations earn some trust by practicing accountability journalism (holding for instance corporations and governments accountable for their actions). Absence of friction should not be seen as a goal in itself, since absence might be a symptom of media inactivity.

Studying media debates in the Parliament in the 1960s, it is clear that there is no lack of friction/conflict in the relation of media-politics. Choice of words, tone and ample use of concrete examples of media violations make this obvious. Observing parliamentary debates 40 years later, the friction seems to be much less developed.

The historical exposition of the term media accountability indicates that it was framed as a tool for accomplishing a compromise between the need for trustworthy and qualitative news/information in a democracy (not controlled by or dependent upon political or commercial interests) and the wish (by political or commercial interests) to control or influence the definition and content of qualitative news/information. A trial of strength took place in the 1960s, in Parliament as well as in society. In one corner we find the governing Social Democratic Party and the trade

³ The distinction between friction caused by successful investigative journalism and friction caused by journalistic carelessness is worth its own discussion. Those in power sometimes show a tendency to define the first aspect as the second. And editors sometimes try to excuse the second with reference to the first. These labels become parts of the interaction between stakeholders and media in the process of claiming media accountability. This process can be facilitated if a third party, not connected to the disputants, can examine the coverage.

unions, pressured on the media front by their own financially collapsing newspapers in the largest cities and by the expanding hard-hitting opposition tabloid *Expressen*, the biggest newspaper in the country. In the other corner we find media owners and liberal/conservative politicians in Parliament, often top editors themselves, who also distrust the successful and expanding national tabloids and find them too aggressive and too sensational, but who oppose government measures that would affect the whole press.

The Social Democrats had the upper hand in Parliament and the negotiations that followed ended in a compromise where the representatives of the press had to back down from their original positions (von Krogh, 2009).

The situation today is totally different both in politics, with liberal/conservative majorities off and on and a Swedish membership in the European Union, and in the media. The composition of the traditional media outlets have changed, mobile and Internet-based media channels are expanding and the consumption of news/information is creating new patterns. The verbal friction in the Parliament that was so obvious in the 1960s is very much reduced today with mainly some faint echoes heard from remaining critics. Less friction means less fuel for regulatory rhetoric. When the overall friction is subdued, but still alive in media critical environments, it probably takes media scandals of a certain magnitude to raise the friction to former heights (like the phonehacking scandal in the UK in 2011).

Stakeholders

When the relative strengths of the stakeholders shift due to changes in technological, economic, social and political developments, the ways of holding the media accountable also shift. This is inherent in the previously quoted, and slightly adjusted, working definition of media accountability (von Krogh, 2008).

In the 1960s critical MPs referred to “the ordinary man” and spoke on his behalf. They referred to a “broad public opinion” when they demanded regulatory reforms of the Press Council and scolded young and “deceitful” journalists. The Parliament bore the ultimate responsibility for the moral state of the country. Their opponents in Parliament in defence hailed responsible editors, praised the efforts of the Publishers’ Association and blamed the audience for demanding sensational stories.

The debates 40 years later describe and deal with a whole other set of stakeholders. The focus now is a) on pluralistic media corporations that on the one hand shall be able to compete on an international market and on the other be impeded from further ownership concentration and b) on readers/viewers/media users that on the one hand shall bear the responsibility of actively watching the watchdogs and on the other be restrained from hate speech and defamatory remarks on the web.

The perspective of an Olympian Parliament that interprets and acts on behalf of a silent public is gone. The borders of the nation state are open both for media pro-

ducers and media consumers and the silent public itself is gone. It is increasingly difficult for MPs to claim supremacy of public articulation on media matters when media users themselves speak, write and express themselves in public.

Media system

In the 1960s a solid position for government, with social democratic politicians motivated by fear of political consequences from a growing gap between their own shrinking press and the successful opposition press, facilitated a strong stand for regulative threats. Their position was strengthened by reactions against perceived media sensationalism in different parts of society, among them fellow politicians and conservative/liberal editors seated in Parliament. Their counterpart consisted mainly of privately owned commercial newspapers, all of them organized in the publishers association, and with owners who were accustomed to corporative environments and solutions. It was a national system, and the owners of the press were to a high degree able to control the composition of media outlets.

Nowadays the media system is evolving, as society as a whole, away from the old corporatist structure and in the direction of media governance in a more complex global setting. The press is no longer the obvious core of the news/information system and it is furthermore no longer possible to find the leaders of this system in one national association. The Internet on the one hand makes it more difficult for authorities to control the spread of faster and faster information and on the other makes it easier for users/citizens to check and criticize this information. The strength of the national political system versus the media has decreased and it is not supported by the same kind of societal media criticism, as was the case in the 1960s.

Studying the contemporary debates, it seems as though MPs today no longer feel that the quality of the news media is an item on their agenda. Media policy goals today deal more with ensuring Swedish media organizations the same conditions as competing firms, within Sweden and abroad, and with identifying the scope of public service activities. The quality of content, if it is not outright harmful for instance for children, is seen as an issue for users and not for policymakers.

Instead of political leverage versus news media there is presently more focus on compromises between citizens and media and between special interests and media. Furthermore, nowadays there are other means than legislation or threats of legislation to consider. Media accountability has changed its appearances, the arena of compromise has moved. Another set of forces is dominating today, as compared to the situation 40 years ago.

Increased interactivity

The alteration hitherto described does not mean that the need and demand for media accountability measures has disappeared. What has changed is the position

of the political arena when it comes to achieving media accountability on its own. The media debates in Parliament do not resonate with society as they did 40 years ago; the stakeholders do not listen as attentively, nor do they have to. With decreasing external attention, decreasing power and a new set of media-political realities the parliamentary debates change too.

Returning to the four frames of media accountability earlier mentioned; political, professional, public and market (McQuail 2003; Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004). In the 1960s the social democratic MPs feared market forces and used their strong political bargaining power to force the professional actors into obedience. The public frame was hailed in the political rhetoric but not used in practice. Forty years later the MPs develop strategies for media accountability through interaction in various ways with especially the public frame, but also with the market and professional frames. This is exemplified by how issues of public broadcasting, Internet defamation, editorial quality and pluralistic media outlets are handled in the debates. The friction is reduced and managed in other channels, new stakeholders are acknowledged and the erosion of the traditional corporatist model is accounted for. These are steps in the evolution of media governance; "... arrangements that include a proper balance of market, state, profession and last, but not least, the public" (Bardoel 2007, p. 456).

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MP-QUOTES FROM SWEDISH PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

- Anders Åkesson, November 19, 2009.
- Axel Andersson, First Chamber, March 15, 1967.
- Helena Bargholtz, February 23, 2006.
- Kaj Björk, First Chamber, March 15, 1967.
- Nils Carlshamre, Second Chamber, December 13, 1967.
- Yngve Hamrin, Second Chamber, December 13, 1967.
- Helena Höij, May 15, 2006.
- Siv Holma, November 19, 2009.

Changing political attitudes towards media accountability in Sweden

Lennart Kollmats, May 31, 2006.
Sven Nelander, May 28, 1970.
Bernt Nilsson, Second Chamber, May 28, 1970.
Sture Palm, First Chamber, May 28, 1970.
Helene Petersson, June 13, 2006.
Yoomi Renström, February 23, 2006.
Ingrid Segerstedt Wiberg, First Chamber, May 28, 1970.
Evert Svensson, Second Chamber, December 13, 1967.
Ingvar Svensson, February 23, 2006.
Ingvar Svensson, December 16, 2009.
Anna Tenje, June 14, 2010.
Stefan Tornberg, June 14, 2010.
Annie Wallentheim, First Chamber, December 13, 1967.
Annie Wallentheim, First Chamber, May 28, 1970.
Hans Wallmark, November 19, 2009.