

Media accountability and transparency



Interview with Prof. Dr. Stephan Russ-Mohl, Professor of Journalism and Media Management at the Università della Svizzera italiana and Director of the European Journalism Observatory on the state of media accountability and perspectives for the future

Traditional media accountability institutions face different problems nowadays: lack of interest presented by media practitioners and low social visibility are probably the most important ones. Possibilities offered by new media platforms, especially Internet, seem to be — at least potentially — remedium for some of these problems. Do innovative, online based, media accountability instruments — related to the development of the blogosphere, phenomena of crowdsourcing and flourishing social media — represent real alternatives for traditional media accountability instruments? What is the role of media practitioners and other stakeholders (especially citizens and media researchers) in the process of media accountability? (ed.)

What problems do media accountability institutions currently face?

Stephan Russ-Mohl: The answer may differ from country to country, from journalism culture to journalism culture. However, for most media accountability institutions, a lack of visibility in media is a severe problem. These institutions are ignored amongst media practitioners, who like to call them “toothless tigers” without further reflection. And as media practitioners tend to neglect them, they are unknown by the general public. Media accountability institutions would be more effective if the media paid more attention to them. If those media, which strive for a high level of journalistic quality, increased their awareness, they would gain credibility by making the public more readily aware of accountability problems and of differences in journalistic quality.

To what extent has the Internet and the development of new media platforms changed the system of media accountability in your country?

In Switzerland — and I guess in most advanced Western societies — there is a surprising variety of online platforms and blogs dealing with media and journalism.

Some of them, like www.medienspiegel.ch, or until recently www.pendlerblog.ch, are devoted exclusively to journalism. Others — like www.journal21.ch or www.infosperber.ch are online news sites that focus on media and journalism more than traditional news media. Our own multilingual platform www.ejo.ch is also contributing to the improvement of media accountability in a narrower scope, by emphasizing postings on journalism and media research.

There is no doubt that for “insiders” — media experts, researchers, and students of communication — more information on media accountability is accessible than ever before. On the other hand, we should be aware that most traditional media outlets (which are still reaching the largest audience share) have significantly reduced their coverage of media and journalism. They are reporting on accountability only in cases of scandal, like the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal in Britain.

The most successful newcomer among Swiss media, the free newspaper *20 Minutes* (published in German, French and Italian), avoids coverage of media accountability.

Which practices have been developed to maintain online media accountability in Switzerland?

Several media-related blogs share a platform called *Newsnetz* (newsnet), these include the *Tages-Anzeiger*, the *Basler Zeitung*, the *Berner Zeitung*, *Der Bund* and the *Thurgauer Zeitung* to name a few. However, none of them deal directly and exclusively with the media or media accountability. Recently, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* created a media blog on its web page called *betablog*, specializing in phenomena concerning Web 2.0 (http://www.nzz.ch/blogs/aktuell/betablog_19.83313.html). Blogs are certainly a promising and innovative alternative to traditional media journalism, in particular as media companies have downsized their media sections.

Another innovation is the “crowdsourcing” effort of www.tagesanzeiger.ch, which is designed to address reporting errors by inviting users to correct both formal and factual errors at the end of each article.

Are there any external efforts by citizens to hold Swiss media accountable in cyberspace?

The website www.medienspiegel.ch is the most effective and visible platform currently available which discusses accountability in media and journalism. It is run by veteran journalist Martin Hitz who helped to create and develop such quality websites as www.nzz.ch (the website of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*) and <http://tagesschau.sf.tv> (online site of the powerful public TV broadcaster SRG). For years, Hitz has “exploited” himself in an admirable way with his *Medienspiegel* project. His and other media blogs like *Journalistenschredder*, and PR blog www.bernetblog.ch are linked and commented on frequently. These blogs focus on issues relating to mass

media, and create their agendas by commenting on news related to the media industry. However, these bloggers primarily stick to their own “philosophy of publishing” by writing on an irregular basis and only about topics that interest them.

What is the role and impact of media watchblogs and media criticism raised by Internet users today?

Due to the small amount of media journalism and media criticism occurring in mainstream media, blogs and other online sources play an increasingly important role in holding the media accountable. Internet users can obtain more knowledge about media and journalism than ever before — particularly if they command the English language. The positive aspect of this development is that large media conglomerates cannot control this stream of information or the ongoing online discourse. On the other hand, only a very small group of users take advantage of these sources, and even with RSS feeds and newsletters, it remains time-consuming and difficult to check and filter through all available channels.

Therefore, the European Journalism Observatory attempts to bundle relevant information concerning trends and developments in media and journalism, by focusing mainly on research results and on bridging the gap between a diverse group of European journalism cultures.

EJO, which offers information in ten different European languages, serves as a network of research institutions encompassing a wide variety of European countries. The English website serves as a central platform for all other partners. Each partner strives to provide interesting, in-depth news and background for media practitioners as well as for students and academics in their respective language area. In addition, each partner chooses articles from other EJO-partners and translates them — thus widening the article’s audience and increasing awareness about diversity in journalism cultures across the European media landscape. Most of the information pertaining to Switzerland’s media and journalism developments can be found on the German and on the Swiss-Italian websites www.ejo-online.eu and www.ejo.ch, while occasionally the Polish version will also cover developments in Switzerland.

What still needs to be done to improve Media Accountability Systems (MAS) in Europe and what are the perspectives for the future?

Media Accountability Systems need to become more visible. As researchers we should investigate their effectiveness and efficiency. However, investigations should be conducted cautiously due to the tendencies of journalists to react quickly and negatively when evaluating press councils or ombudsmen.

Even if a press council decision does not receive much public attention via mainstream media, news of the ruling may circulate in professional journals and may be discussed on websites and inside schools of journalism. Claude Jean Bertrand and

I have — independently from each other, as he did not speak German and I did not speak French — pointed out in the early 1990s that we should not look at accountability institutions individually, rather that we should conceive them as a system or a network of infrastructures serving to support efforts to improve journalistic quality. This was true long before the Internet changed the rules of the game, but thanks to the Internet this “network effect” has become even stronger.

To improve media accountability in Europe, we also should strive to be more open to learning from each other across language and cultural barriers.

On the other hand, most mainstream media have increasingly come under financial pressure and may therefore reduce “investments” in accountability. For example, there are fewer ombudsmen in the U.S. today than there were ten years ago, and there is definitely much less coverage of media and of journalism by the mainstream media in Europe due to newsroom staff reductions.

The overall picture is not at all rosy — we need to continuously fight for press freedom as well as for media accountability, and we should also see that both are different sides of the same coin.



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Prof. Dr. Stephan Russ-Mohl was interviewed by Michał Głowacki in February 2012.

¹ Dr. Stephan Russ-Mohl. Retrieved May 15, 2012, from <http://en.ejo.ch/about/staff/universita-della-svizzera-italiana-usi/dr-stephan-russ-mohl>.