

# Research With(out) Values: Institutionalization and Impact of Media Accountability as an Academic Field

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**Abstract:** Research on media accountability regularly stresses the importance of free and responsible media for democratic societies. But how far can research itself contribute to holding the media accountable? The paper discusses the relevance of media accountability as an academic field and its impact on journalism practice, media self-regulation, and society. The analysis is based on a comparative evaluation of research infrastructures for media accountability in 14 European countries and a discussion of cases of bi-directional interplay between journalism and academia. The study enables a reflection of success factors for relevant media accountability research and develops perspectives for future studies.

**Keywords:** journalism; media accountability; media self-regulation; monitoring capabilities; research infrastructures.

## INTRODUCTION

Post-pandemic societies in Europe must contend with numerous challenges, such as political extremism, economic disparities, societal polarization, and the pervasive influence of disinformation, which impedes cohesive decision-making and nurtures mistrust in scientific and institutional sources (Carraro et al., 2022). In the face of such challenges, the media and professional journalism continue to play a central role in shaping social coexistence. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has put newsroom practice to the test in many ways (e.g., Perrault & Perrault, 2021; Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), journalistic actors can claim to be an important source of information for all members of society as well as drivers of socially relevant dialog processes (Eberwein et al., 2023).

For decades, research on media accountability has been stressing the importance of free and responsible media for democratic societies (see, e.g., Fengler et al., 2014; McQuail, 2003). But how far can research itself contribute to holding the media accountable? So far, we only have a relatively sparse knowledge of the development of media accountability as an academic field and its monitoring capability (Harro-Loit & Eberwein, 2024). Our article aims to address this research gap with the help of an international baseline study.

What influence does research on media accountability have on journalistic practice, media self-regulation, and society? What scientific impulses are instrumental or necessary to support successful media self-regulation? The recently completed Horizon 2020 project “Critical Exploration of Media-Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape” (Mediadelcom), which was implemented in 14 EU member states between 2021 and 2024, provides initial answers to such questions. Two compilations of national case studies in the participating countries are particularly helpful in this regard, as they enable an analysis from a comparative perspective (Mediadelcom, 2022a; 2022b).

The study presented here summarizes selected findings from the compiled case studies based on a secondary analysis. On the one hand, this includes an investigation of the diffusion and impact of various media accountability instruments (MAIs) by way of systematic literature reviews and expert interviews in the countries studied. On the other hand, we also examine in detail the research infrastructures and monitoring capabilities in the field of media accountability. The analysis is followed up by a discussion of selected cases of bi-directional interplay between journalism and academia. In summary, the study makes it possible to reflect on success factors for relevant media accountability research and develop perspectives for future studies. Before the results are presented in detail, however, it is necessary to explain our conceptual

understanding of media accountability and to clarify some methodological considerations.

## CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY

Media accountability has been defined as “any non-state means of making media responsible towards the public” (Bertrand, 2000, p. 107). While journalism or media ethics are often discussed from a normative point of view, media accountability also looks at the implementation of ethical rules and the roles played by assorted stakeholders from within and beyond the journalistic profession. Initially developed in a Western context of established journalistic professionalism, the study of media accountability first focused on media accountability instruments that built heavily on this context, such as journalistic codes of ethics (Bertrand, 2000; Laitila, 1995) or press councils (Bertrand, 1978; 2000; Fielden, 2012; Pöttker & Starck, 2003; Puppis, 2009; Wiedemann, 1992), as well as journalists’ perceptions of such instruments, again in mostly Western countries (Fengler et al., 2014). Applying the concept to contexts beyond a few Western democracies showed the need to enlarge its scope and include actors and instruments outside the journalistic profession. Building on a framework originally developed by Bardoel and d’Haenens (2004), Fengler et al. (2022b) developed, arguably, the broadest conceptualization, with a special focus on the actor groups that may be relevant in national contexts.

This framework was first applied in the *Global Handbook of Media Accountability* (see Fengler et al., 2022a, also for a systematic review of previous research) and more recently adapted for the analysis of media accountability activities within the Mediadelcom project (Kreutler et al., 2024; Kreutler & Fengler, 2024), as it allows for a holistic view of media accountability that is open to all known instruments and actors. The approach suggests a total of five frames of media accountability (Fengler et al., 2022b, pp. 36–45), distinguishing professional, organizational, societal, political, and international contexts – each shaped by the actors involved in holding the media to account, and each using specific media accountability instruments that fit their individual goals:

- The ‘professional accountability’ frame is linked to instruments such as ethical codes and performance standards that are used within the media and should help in counterbalancing every excessive dependence upon politics and the market. In this frame, the key stakeholders are media professionals and professional associations like journalists’ trade unions and media owners’ associations. Richards (2011, p. 257) underlines the relevance of the professional frame when he argues that “[s]elf-regulation of ethical standards could not be defended for a moment if most

journalists could not be trusted to apply common standards to themselves and their colleagues.”

- The ‘market accountability’ frame refers to the system of supply and demand, with free audience choice (at least in theory, see for example the dominance of media oligarchs in CEE media markets). Considerations of efficiency and competition (accountability as a ‘signal of trustworthiness’, see Fengler & Speck, 2019) also play a role. The key stakeholders in this frame are media companies.
- The ‘public accountability’ frame describes the relationship of media and citizens forming a general public. Beyond the general public, organized stakeholders may be media-related NGOs representing certain groups’ (e.g., children, women, minorities) interests in media content, or organizations that defend the interests of media in restrictive regimes. Also, part of this frame, institutes and individual researchers of journalism and mass communication can be relevant for driving and shaping the media accountability discourse.
- The ‘political accountability’ frame includes all types of formal regulation, with political stakeholders playing the dominant role. Instruments may reach from government commissions without direct regulatory competencies to statutory instruments with quasi-legislative functions or the outright goal of censorship. Common examples between these extremes include all statutory forms of media accountability (e.g., councils or ombudspersons stipulated by law, and often found in broadcasting).
- The fifth frame of media accountability is the ‘international accountability’ frame, which highlights media accountability initiatives that are driven by international actors from the political, economic, professional, or public sphere. Consequently, this frame includes transnational actors as stakeholders, such as foreign donor organizations, international foundations, and NGOs implementing MAIs in transformation countries, but also meta-coverage of media systems and journalistic practices abroad.

The five-frame approach developed in the *Global Handbook of Media Accountability* promotes an inclusive notion that integrates “*all kinds of actors, contexts, and processes of media accountability*” as long “*as they uphold a notion of media freedom and pluralism in their intent to monitor, comment on, and criticize journalism and seek to expose and debate problems of journalism*” (Fengler et al., 2022b, p. 40; emphasis in the original text). This approach was used as the basis for Mediadelcom’s studies into media accountability.

## METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

The analysis presented here draws on the concept of media accountability outlined above and applies it in a comparative study of 14 European countries – namely: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden. This country selection is based on the fundamental methodological decisions of the Mediadecom project (Mediadecom, 2020), intending to represent dissimilar types of European media systems with regards to geographical location, size, and historical background (see, e.g., Dobek-Ostrowska et al., 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; 2012; Peruško et al., 2021).

The aim of our study is to find out how relevant academic research on media accountability is for media practice and civil society in the countries mentioned. To this end, we follow a three-stage analytical procedure:

For step 1, we aim to provide a compact review of previous research on media accountability to assess the diffusion and impact of assorted MAIs in the media systems examined. Useful starting points are found in previous comparative studies in this field as well as a collection of country reports that were compiled as part of Mediadecom (Mediadecom, 2022b). The *14 Country case studies on critical junctures in the media transformation process* aimed to identify concrete risks and opportunities across domains such as legal and ethical regulation, journalism, media usage, and media-related competencies on the basis of systematic literature studies and guided expert interviews. For our summarizing and structuring analysis (Mayring, 2014) of the country reports, we focus exclusively on the results of the media accountability sub-domain.

Step 2 follows up on this analysis with an examination of the research infrastructures and their monitoring capabilities of media accountability – with a particular focus on developments since the turn of the century. The Mediadecom project has also gathered a collection of country reports on this aspect (Mediadecom, 2022a), which we use as the data basis for our evaluation. The *Studies on national media research capability* were realized in the form of a comparative mapping of previous research and a variety of additional documents facilitating the goal of a structural analysis in the domains of media and journalism research covered by the project. In our evaluation, we concentrate once more on the findings relevant to the topic of media accountability.

Step 3 of our study brings together the two previous analytical stages by addressing a possible influence of research infrastructures on the effectiveness of media accountability processes in the countries under investigation. In the absence of a reliable measuring instrument, we limit ourselves to discussing selected cases of bi-directional interplay between journalism and academia, which proved to be particularly meaningful in the course of the analysis. It goes without saying

that the strategy of singling out a few best practices from the wealth of compiled studies – in total, the Mediadecom partners evaluated more than 5,600 publications and other data sources for their country reports (Mediadecom, 2023) – cannot claim to be representative. However, the cases do make it possible to identify specific settings and processes, in which media accountability research not only delivers fruitful insights for the academic discourse, but also for media practice and society in general. On this basis, we also hope to show, which academic impulses are necessary to support successful media accountability – and thus responsible communication practices in democratic societies.

## **DIFFUSION AND IMPACT OF MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY**

The review of previous research on media accountability paints an ambivalent picture of the diffusion and impact of various MAIs in the countries of the Mediadecom sample. This can already be seen by looking at the few international comparative studies on the topic that were carried out prior to our project. The FP7 study “Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe” (MediaAct), for example, used a mapping study (Eberwein et al., 2011) and a survey of journalists (Fengler et al., 2014) to point to considerable differences in the spread and perception of institutionalized and non-institutionalized MAIs in selected European media systems. The *European Handbook of Media Accountability* (Eberwein et al., 2018a) provides an even more comprehensive insight with its pan-European research approach. Based on a Delphi survey, the book’s European Media Accountability Index (Eberwein et al., 2018b, pp. 296–298) provides a ranking of all European countries, which differentiates the structures of media accountability in Europe according to the categories “highly developed”, “developed”, and “partly developed”. The “highly developed” countries exclusively include media systems in Northern and Western Europe (from our sample: Sweden, Germany, Austria) with a long tradition of institutionalized media self-regulation and a lively discourse on questions of media responsibility, which ultimately covers all accountability frames. The large middle block of countries with “developed” structures of media accountability is populated by countries from all parts of Europe – predominantly small states, in which at least one accountability frame is described as influential (from the Mediadecom sample, for example: Estonia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic). There are also some countries from the Mediadecom project among the media systems that are just “partly developed” (e.g., Latvia and Croatia, but also Italy and Greece). This points to an unsatisfactory situation in all accountability frames – albeit for various reasons.

The European Media Accountability Index allows a first – necessarily superficial – approach to our object of investigation. Based on the country case studies

conducted for Medielcom, these findings can be deepened by identifying specific risks and opportunities for the development of various MAIs. In the following, we summarize key results for each of the media accountability frames examined (see also Kreutler et al., 2024):

Within the ‘professional frame’, the Northern and Western European countries in our sample have the strongest track record. Sweden and Germany stand out with their generally well accepted press councils, and they can point to a long history of media self-regulation (Berglez et al., 2022b; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022b). The Austrian Press Council is also considered a functioning example of a professional MAI, even if this long-lived institution was in a decade-long hiatus after the turn of the millennium and was re-established only in 2010 (Eberwein et al., 2022b). In contrast, comparable institutions in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe have a much shorter tradition and are usually described as less influential (e.g., Gálik et al., 2022b; Lauk et al., 2022; Raycheva et al., 2022b). In some countries – such as Greece, the Czech Republic and Romania (Avădani, 2022b; Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022b; Waschková Císařová et al., 2022b) – there is no press council. We can also discern clear differences across countries with regards to other MAIs that are considered typical of the professional frame: Indeed, all of our study countries have professional codes of ethics. However, only in a few countries are they judged as an influential instrument of journalistic self-regulation. Doubts about their effectiveness are raised, for example, when they are not regularly updated (e.g., Lauk et al., 2022) or when different codes exist in parallel, making it difficult to identify ethical standards that are applicable to the profession as a whole (e.g., Avădani, 2022b; Głowacki et al., 2022b; Urbán et al., 2022). A lively meta-discourse on journalistic conduct – for example, in trade journals – is only emphasized in a few Medielcom countries. Here too, Sweden and Germany are clearly ahead of most other European countries, showcasing the potential of this MAI (Berglez et al., 2022b; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022b).

Typical instruments of ‘market accountability’ include company codes and editorial guidelines, company-based ombudspersons, and meta-reporting on media and journalism in the mass media. Compared to the professional MAIs, the market frame is significantly less developed in our sample. However, there are also recognizable differences between the analyzed countries. In Sweden, for instance, there are numerous examples of all the instruments mentioned (Berglez et al., 2022b). In contrast, even the country reports from Germany and Austria note that MAIs such as company codes and ombudspersons do occur in some media houses but are by no means the rule (Eberwein et al., 2022b; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022b). If we assess our entire sample from a comparative perspective, company codes are still the most widespread MAI in the market frame (e.g., Gálik et al., 2022b; Lauk et al., 2022; Piacentini et al., 2022; Rožukalne et al.,



2022b). Other examples are discussed sporadically but are described as being of little significance for newsroom practice. Possible reasons for a weak state of market accountability are an underdeveloped tradition of media self-regulation (e.g., Peruško et al., 2022; Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022b), deficits of media transparency (e.g., Raycheva et al., 2022b; Rožukalne et al., 2022b), and the strong influence of oligarchs in some media systems (e.g., Głowacki et al., 2022b; Urbán et al., 2022; Waschková Císařová et al., 2022b).

Exemplary instruments of ‘political accountability’ are statutory media councils, codes of conduct, or ombudspersons which are prescribed by law. They do not automatically enable direct political influence on journalistic actors but require a special risk analysis to ensure media freedom. Our country sample contains a wide variety of examples of such statutory MAIs. In democratic-corporatist media systems such as Sweden or Germany, for example, the supervisory bodies of public broadcasters are regulated by law. In Germany, undue influence of political actors on journalistic practice is meant to be countered by detailed regulations on the representation of assorted social groups (Kreutler & Fengler, 2022b). In the polarized-pluralist media systems of Southern and Eastern Europe, with their tendency towards high political parallelism, the risk of political influence is usually more pronounced. The Italian *Ordine dei Giornalisti* is often seen as an institution like a press council – however, it was established by law to regulate access to the profession (Piacentini et al., 2022). Among the Mediadelcom countries, Poland and Hungary can illustrate the risks of high-level political parallelism as both countries have recently been challenged by threats to media freedom due to illiberal turns in media regulation or the governmental capture of media ownership and control (Głowacki et al., 2022b; Urbán et al., 2022).

Compared to the other frames analyzed, instruments to promote ‘public accountability’ play the least important role in our sample. In almost all countries of the Mediadelcom study, there are isolated examples of media watchblogs, instances of public media criticism via social media, or even a few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society groups that are committed to issues of media responsibility. However, they are generally considered to have little influence on journalistic activities.

A noticeable impact of the ‘international frame’ is perceived above all in various EU initiatives (liberalization of the media market, protection of personal data, support of professional journalism and media literacy, etc.), as they also influence the development of national media markets. The work of international NGOs such as Reporters Without Borders or Article 19 also provide examples of how MAIs can have a cross-border effect. However, their relevance also remains marginal in comparison.

In sum, the country studies from the Mediadelcom project confirm the findings of previous comparative research by illustrating clear differences in the



development of media accountability structures across Europe. At the same time, they raise the question of possible reasons for the discrepancies within our sample. Fengler (2022, pp. 575–592) refers to a set of various factors that can influence the spread and effectiveness of MAIs. These include: the quality of democracy and the credibility of institutions; journalistic professionalism and autonomy; media pluralism and the sustainability of media outlets; as well as audience participation and the involvement of civil society actors. In addition to media activists and NGOs, the latter group also includes academic observers. However, the question of how great the actual impact is of these academic actors, seems largely unresolved. Can the analyses by the Mediadelcom consortium provide concrete indications? To find out, we need to take a closer look at the research infrastructures and their monitoring capabilities of media accountability.

## **RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURES AND MONITORING CAPABILITIES FOR MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY**

The Mediadelcom project has applied the broad definition of media accountability described above for its analysis of research and monitoring capabilities. It must be noted that this framework delineates a wide range of possible MAIs, of which any given national media accountability landscape will only apply a certain part; logically, MAIs that are not present or relevant in a country will also attract very little or no monitoring activities. The (rare) exception is academic and professional discourse on the chances of establishing a hitherto lacking instrument, mostly relevant with regards to press or media councils: Such a discourse can be found in the case of Croatia (Vilović, 2009) without a council actually being installed (Peruško & Vozab, 2022), and in Austria (Gottwald et al., 2006; Zimmermann & Kraus, 2007) before the currently existing council was founded in 2010 (Eberwein et al., 2022a).

Within the context of the Mediadelcom research, media accountability was analyzed alongside legal regulation as part of a broader regulation domain, allowing for comparisons between the two fields as a first approximation on the intensity of monitoring efforts in the two sub-domains. A predominance of media accountability as compared to legal regulation can only be found in the monitoring capabilities of Slovakia, where more academic literature is available on media accountability than legal regulation (Gálik et al., 2022a), and in Estonia, where the quantity in both fields is comparable, but monitoring of media accountability is described as more systematized (Harro-Loit et al., 2022). A bias towards legal problem-solving is diagnosed for Italy and the Czech Republic, but monitoring is equally established (Italy: Splendore et al., 2022) or equally lacking (Czechia: Waschková Císařová et al., 2022a) in both domains. For the other countries,

the monitoring focus is on legal regulation, with Austria, Bulgaria, and Greece as particularly clear examples (Eberwein et al., 2022a; Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022a; Raycheva et al., 2022a).

For media accountability alone, our analysis shows a focus of monitoring activities on MAIs commonly associated with the professional and sometimes (in the case of statutory implementation) the political frame: codes of ethics and press/media councils or, when such a council is lacking, less institutionalized bodies such as ethics boards of journalists' unions. These instruments play a certain role in all country reports. Moreover, press or media councils are sometimes not only the subject of external monitoring, but also monitoring actors in their own right. This is the case when they publish data or even statistical overviews or interpretations of their own case work. Such documentations can be found by the well-established councils in Austria, Germany, and Sweden (Berglez et al., 2022a; Eberwein et al., 2022a; Kreutler & Fengler, 2022a), where the respective bodies publish regular reports on their rulings. The Latvian council, founded in 2018, also offers online access to its decisions, allowing for further analysis (Rožukalne et al., 2022a). However, extensive case databases are the exception rather than the norm: In Estonia, the situation is more complicated since there are two competing councils (*Pressinõukogu* and *Avaliku Sõna Nõukogu/ASN*) each with their own competencies and proceedings – a situation that has inspired specific research on these differences (Harro-Loit et al., 2022), but also makes it more complicated to come to a comprehensive view of processed cases. Case data is also not comprehensive in Czechia, where the ethics board of the journalists' syndicate only accepts certain complaints (excluding, most importantly, tabloid journalism) and only publishes basic data (Waschková Císařová et al., 2022a). In some countries, the respective bodies do not publish any data on their cases, as is the case for Hungary (Polyák et al., 2022) and most of Greece, where journalists' unions are organized regionally and only one makes its ethics boards' decisions available to the public (Psychogiopoulou & Kandyla, 2022a).

Other MAIs, such as media ombudspersons or media journalism as a means of critical self-evaluation, receive rather marginal monitoring attention. Overall, deficits in monitoring of the media accountability situation often go in line with limited interest in the application of media accountability by media companies and the profession. In countries with little institutionalization of research on media accountability, internationally comparative research programs have a particularly strong impact: The Estonian, Latvian, Romanian and Polish case studies highlight a particular increase of institutionalization and monitoring know-how resulting from participation of researchers in international projects, with some effects lasting longer than the duration of the actual projects (Avādani, 2022a; Głowacki et al., 2022a; Harro-Loit et al., 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2022a).

## CASES OF INTERPLAY BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND ACADEMIA

In order to describe the actual influence of academic media accountability research on the practice of media self-regulation more precisely, we have attempted to identify meaningful cases of interplay between journalism and academia on the basis of the Mediadelcom country studies. The hope is that these will provide an understanding of which settings are particularly promising for future exchange processes between research and (media) practice. It needs to be noted that such success stories are rather rare in our sample. They seem to occur more frequently in countries with a strongly developed media accountability structure – i.e. predominantly in the democratic-corporatist media systems of Northern and Western Europe – than in other parts of the continent. However, as the following overview shows, this is not always the case.

Media accountability research and press or media councils often seem to interact with one another: Functioning councils produce case data and sometimes their own summaries or interpretations of this data, allowing academic actors to use this data for further analysis. The Austrian case is particularly instructive: While academic and professional discourse has accompanied the way towards the re-foundation of the council in 2010, there is also an overall increase of monitoring activity after that date – it will be interesting to observe if the foundation of the Latvian council is going to have similar effects. Also in line with this relation of monitoring and implementation of a council, the current efforts to establish a press council in Poland are driven to a considerable extent by academic actors: The working group tasked with developing such a body consists of media representatives, journalism associations, journalism trainers and researchers, with several academic institutions involved in the process and delivering a perspective of internationally accepted best practices and examples (Kurkowski, 2023). Academic agents have previously been involved in similar discussions in the United Kingdom (Bettels-Schwabbauer, 2012).

Students appear to be another relevant agent in establishing an advanced discourse on media accountability: In Czechia, empirical research of media accountability has been conducted to a significant degree in case studies for Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral theses, even when the topic was not yet established in large-scale academic research. This interest on the students' part seems to slowly impact on structures: The first study program with a focus on media ethics was established in 2020, and the first dedicated research team was established one year later (Waschková Císařová et al., 2022a). The Czech example is not unique: In Estonia, students' theses are an important source for qualitative case studies into journalists' perceptions of media accountability (Harro-Loit et al., 2022), and in Austria, ombudspersons and media journalism have mostly been explored in students' final theses (Eberwein et al., 2022a). Given

the range of career opportunities in academia and journalistic practice, this widespread interest in media accountability on part of the younger generation has a good chance of impacting in the long term both journalism research and media practice.

A large part of the research on media accountability is either or both country-centered and focused on individual MAIs. In the past decade, however, interest in comparative research in this field has increased considerably – and this has not been without consequences. The aforementioned MediaAcT project (Eberwein et al., 2011; Fengler et al., 2014) has not only motivated various follow-up studies; some suggestions from the project have also been taken up in the policy discourse at the EU level (Viķe-Freiberga et al., 2013). This is another reason why questions of media self-regulation have recently been a recurring theme in European research funding. For example, the EU-funded study “Media Councils in the Digital Age” (<https://www.presscouncils.eu>) is being carried out in close cooperation with several European press and media councils. Horizon projects such as Mediadelcom or the recently launched DIACOMET study (“Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability”; <https://diacomet.eu>) are also seeking data exchange with media partners and NGOs. All these examples show that large collaborative projects have a good chance of generating an echo outside the scientific system. In any case, their inventories and risk analyses strengthen a critical awareness of issues of media responsibility that is also important for society as a whole.

In addition to the research initiatives described above, communication about research on media accountability is also an important instrument for increasing public awareness. Several country reports contain references to initiatives aiming to make relevant research findings accessible to journalists, policy-makers, and the general public (e.g., Kreutler & Fengler, 2022a). One example of a transnational initiative with this objective is the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) – a network of independent media research institutes in 11 countries (including Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, and Poland).<sup>1</sup> Together, the creators behind the project strive not only to translate current media research and debates into concise and accessible texts, but also to contribute to the observation and criticism of media and journalism through their own monitoring initiatives. In doing so, they are building on a tradition of academic journalism observatories, which have become an important driver of media accountability processes, particularly in Latin America (Bastian, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: Susanne Fengler is the director of the German EJO website; Marcus Kreutler works as an editor for the project.

## **DISCUSSION: DEFICITS AND SUCCESS FACTORS OF MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY AS AN ACADEMIC FIELD**

The aim of the study presented here was to scrutinize the influence of media accountability research on journalistic practice, media self-regulation, and society at large. To this end, country studies from the Mediadelcom project were used to trace the spread and impact of assorted MAIs; it was then examined whether a connection could be established between the research and monitoring capabilities of individual countries and the development of national media accountability structures. Of particular interest were concrete cases of bi-directional interplay between journalism and academia, from which possible success factors for the development of future initiatives in the field of media accountability in research and practice can be derived.

The overall result of our comparative country analysis is rather sobering: Just as the practice of media accountability is underdeveloped in large parts of Europe, research on this topic currently leaves much to be desired. Our findings on the diffusion of MAIs in an international comparison confirm earlier studies, according to which there is a considerable gap between the countries of Northern and Western Europe on the one hand and those of Southern and Eastern Europe on the other (Eberwein et al., 2011; 2018a; Fengler et al., 2014). Only in countries with democratic-corporatist media systems (in our sample: Sweden, Germany, Austria) can a wider range of effective media accountability practices be detected. For all other countries, our analysis illustrates that underdevelopment of single media accountability frames can lead to risks for media freedom and responsibility. We find a similar discrepancy between the countries analyzed for the prevalence of effective monitoring initiatives, as generally only those MAIs that are active can stimulate research. Only rarely do academic actors take the opportunity to provide a notable impetus for the development of new media accountability initiatives. This applies to most of the countries in our sample: Where media accountability structures are only weakly developed, there is also little interest in research on media accountability. This insight also confirms the findings of the MediaAcT study, according to which media criticism by academic observers is hardly able to compensate for deficits in traditional media self-regulation (Fengler et al., 2014). Among the various context factors that can help stimulating more effective media accountability practices around the globe, media research is obviously just a minor and weak one at present.

However, a look at other journalism cultures shows that this does not necessarily need to be the case anywhere and always. In Latin America, for example, practices of academic journalism observation have a long tradition and are an integral part of the social discourse on the norms and values of journalism. At least a few successful examples of cross-fertilization between academic and

media actors can also be found in our European study. Several settings have proven to be promising:

- Long tradition of professional self-regulation: In countries with a long history of institutionalized media self-regulation, exchange processes between media research and media practice are more likely to be successful.
- The case of press and media councils: In particular, press and media councils often provide a fruitful example of research in which journalism and academia can benefit from each other.
- International collaboration as a catalyst: Successful comparative research projects can help to put the topic of media accountability on the agenda across countries and motivate dialog processes between the actor groups.
- The value of student research: Where research on media accountability is not institutionalized (yet), student theses on selected topics can set the discourse in motion.
- Communication about media accountability: To enable a dialog at eye level, publication formats are needed that appeal to a broad public – and thus raise awareness of the topic.

As our analyses show, success factors such as these can be used in a targeted manner to increase the impact of media accountability research – along with further measures involving other stakeholders from the various media accountability frames discussed in this analysis. Academic actors who wish to contribute to holding the media accountable can use them as inspiration for the development of future studies.

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