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Media self-regulation in contemporary Europe

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Jacek Mikucki: How do you evaluate the state of media self-regulation in contemporary Europe?

Susanne Fengler and Marcus Kreutler: The landscape is very imbalanced. We find well-established (and well-funded) media accountability systems in many Northern European countries, while in several Southern European countries, media self-regulation functions only at the regional level, if at all. Even France does not have a press council yet. Established instruments of media self-regulation across countries are challenged by digitalization – of content creation and media use patterns – and of course mis- and dis-information.

Jacek Mikucki: How does Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) compare to the rest of Europe in terms of media transparency and media self-regulation?

Susanne Fengler and Marcus Kreutler: In CEE, the Baltic states were the first to introduce media accountability systems. Estonia was strongly influenced by Finland; but even here two competing press councils exist. Hungary is an example how the label of media ‘council’ can be abused too easily. We strongly hope for the development of promising initiatives in Poland.

Jacek Mikucki: How do national media self-regulation and accountability standards reflect freedom of expression and human rights policies? What role do international standards play?

Susanne Fengler and Marcus Kreutler: Media self-regulation can only flourish in a context of press freedom, and a minimum of mutual trust and respect between media professionals and policy-makers. Our “Global Handbook of Media Accountability” clearly shows this, drawing upon a comparative study of 44 countries worldwide.

International organizations can be very relevant actors pushing for media accountability. The press council in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a good example for this. However, we can also observe many countries where – well-intentioned – international donors have established “parallel structures” of media accountability which are only partially accepted by local journalists – also due to the restrictions they work in.

Jacek Mikucki: What role do journalistic associations play in modern times? Do you see specific solutions or good practices here?

Susanne Fengler and Marcus Kreutler: Let’s take it the other way round: In countries where the profession of journalists is disunited, and several competing journalists’ associations exist, there is little room for effective – and non-partisan – media self-regulation. Also, well-established professional communities are better able to cooperate with other stakeholders – publishers, researchers, active members of the public – enabling more complex media-accountability instruments such as multilateral press or media councils.

Jacek Mikucki: How can journalists, specifically using which journalistic tools or methods, improve media accountability and the quality of media self-regulation?

Susanne Fengler and Marcus Kreutler: This highly depends on the local context. Accountability instruments on a company level such as ombudspersons can be a powerful tool, but they depend on economic factors as well as the owners’ willingness to enter a dialogue on questions of journalistic conduct and quality. When media companies lack openness for such activities, and there is no well-organized journalistic profession, journalists may rely on outside actors for support: In Latin America, journalism observatories run by universities have emerged as relevant institutions pushing for media accountability. In other, very fragile and restricted contexts, like Russia before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, even a discussion about candidates for a journalism award

can become a relevant instrument of media accountability, because it opens a platform for debate about standards.

Jacek Mikucki: How can media organizations take care of media self-regulation standards? Do you think they are effective in their actions?

Susanne Fengler and Marcus Kreutler: Anglo-Saxon countries have a strong tradition of organizational self-regulation. News outlets in the US have ethic codes and ombudspersons, but don't support a press council. In the UK, after the collapse of the press council system, several respected media have withdrawn from the discredited council system, and address accountability issues on an organizational level. The MediaACT survey we conducted some years ago shows that journalists across countries consider organizational standards to be among the most effective accountability tools. But again – there might be different contexts, where this model is even rather dangerous. In several CEE countries, media oligarchs have established their own rules of professional conduct, which deviate from the profession's standards.

Jacek Mikucki: How do you see the future of media accountability and media self-regulation? What actions or what aspects could improve their quality?

Susanne Fengler and Marcus Kreutler: The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) has put media accountability and media self-regulation high on the agenda. Even countries with dysfunctional media accountability systems have to react – in one way or the other. Furthermore, EMFA might encourage local media initiatives striving for media self-regulation. Many transnational initiatives have been created in the recent years to promote accountability in EU member countries. Building cross-border networks, and sharing best practices across international borders, might be the most effective way to promote media accountability at least in the short run. And mass communication and journalism scholars play a very relevant role here!