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# Introduction Media accountability

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**T**HE SOLE aim of media is to make as much money as they can. Or again, the media are to serve only the people in power, political or economic. If you agree to that, you might as well stop reading this. This issue of *Pacific Journalism Review* is predicated on the principle that media should serve the public. Journalists can only achieve that if they enjoy independence from financial and political pressures. It is not often enough underlined that they cannot enjoy that independence without the support of the public, the masses of voters and consumers. There is no way the profession can obtain public support unless it listens to readers/listeners/viewers—unless it is accountable to them.

Media accountability is sometimes confused with self-regulation. It does include it but is a far wider concept. Self-regulation implies that media impose rules upon themselves. Most often, media owners initiate auto-discipline for fear that a government will legislate restrictions to their freedom of enterprise, taking public hostility towards media as a pretext. Sometimes journalists initiate rules to ensure good service and to protect their profession.

Accountability implies being accountable, accountable to whom? To the public, obviously. While regulation involves only political rulers and while self-regulation involves only the media industry, media accountability involves press, profession and public.

There is one institution, invented in mid-20th century,<sup>1</sup> which normally gathers representatives of those three groups in order to adjudicate complaints by users against the media, the ‘press council’ (PC). Most Western European nations have one. New ones are appearing in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia—and Oceania.

Press councils come in various shapes: some do not accept publishers as in Switzerland, or do not accept journalists as in the UK, or do not accept the public as in Germany. But the norm is the tripartite PC as in Australia and New Zealand. Because it is a permanent joint commission of the main protagonists in social communication, a PC is potentially the best ‘media accountability system’. But it is difficult to put together and expensive to run.

This makes it all the more intriguing that small nations like South Pacific island states, where democracy is emerging, where journalists, quite a few under-trained, have not formed unions—should have, or consider having, PCs, even though they are not (yet) of the now-standard type. Especially as some rich nations, with a long tradition of democracy, like France, do not have one.

As one who has observed PCs for almost 30 years, I believe they are a great kind of NGO—and could become the ultimate ‘media accountability system’ (M\*A\*S) because a tripartite PC is a permanent, democratic, independent, flexible, multifunctional body that brings together and represents the people who own the power to inform, those who possess the talent to inform and those who have the right to be informed.

At present, there are relatively few of them, even with many more democracies than before and many more media: as of late 2004, between 54 (active, genuine press councils), 65 if you include African ‘media observatories’—and 80, if you include similar accountability systems and PCs which may not yet or no longer be operational. There are fewer than 40 true nationwide PCs in 174 countries, none in the Arab world, only two in Latin America, only three state-wide PCs for 50 United States, and over 20 nations belonging to the Council of Europe are without a PC—including France, Poland and Portugal.

The problem is not, as some in this part of the world seem to fear, that government can turn them into statutory control machines. That has never happened: when media and journalists are aware and organised to the point of setting up a PC, they are strong enough to keep it independent. An interesting development took place in India in 1975: as Indira Gandhi seized dictatorial powers, one of the first things she did to the media was to dissolve the PC. Even though it was statutory, it was independent—as is the one in Denmark. Autocratic governments have tried to disguise their media control commissions, like the ‘Supreme Press Council’ of Egypt, but they don’t need a voluntary PC as a stepping stone. On the contrary the creation of voluntary PCs is a sign of democracy; witness black Africa’s ‘media observatories’ or Eastern Europe’s press councils.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that they have rarely acquired much influence. Do newspapers serve the public better in Sweden (which has had a PC for almost a century) than in Spain (which does not have a national one)? A few years ago, I asked the councils themselves what their greatest achievement was. Their

replies were dismal: no council felt it had clearly contributed to the improvement of media.

The few books and articles devoted to PCs normally shovel criticism upon them: a common criticism is that a council is a PR operation by media owners to persuade Parliament not to pass restrictive laws and to persuade the citizens that they care about delivering good public service.

Everywhere, critics note that the public is not aware of the PC's existence, even after many years of operation or, if they know it exists, they do not know what it's for and, if they do know, they don't believe it can improve the media, largely because the council has 'no teeth', lacks the power to punish. So it seems useless. The good media don't need it and the bad ones pay no attention to it.

Better informed observers consider that the typical PC rarely has enough money to assume its functions well. Partly because of that lack of funds, mainly as a matter of policy, the PC does not handle the most serious cases, simply because complaints are not made about them and the PC does not monitor the media.

The problem is that PCs, mainly under pressure from owners, tend to consider themselves as 'complaints commissions'—and even then, some (like the British PCC) insist on mediating, on not adjudicating against the media if they can avoid it. In my view, a PC's role is not just to satisfy a few individuals who have been hurt by the media, not just to avoid lawsuits, not just to discourage the state from limiting the freedom to make money. A PC is meant to improve the news media. Existing councils keep a very low profile. A true PC should not shy from seeking publicity, taking stands, establishing case law, taking initiatives when no complaint comes in. It should also assume all the missions found in the constitution of the original British PC, like reporting on the state and evolution of the media, like speaking out on threats to freedom. I believe a PC should also take an interest in the training of journalists, basic to an improvement of their services, and in research on how the news media actually function, what influence they have, what citizens need from them etc. Most importantly, a PC should be monitoring the press because what the press does worst is what it does not do. That is indispensable for taking initiatives on issues which the ordinary citizen most often cannot spot.

All that work cannot be done by press councils alone. Here we come to the most important point I wish to make. A press council should encourage

the creation of other 'media accountability systems' (M\*A\*S). More than 80 of them exist (See list, pp. 11-16) and more can be invented. M\*A\*S possess many qualities. Like PCs, they are harmless, which is fundamental. They are not a threat to journalistic freedom (which the market and legislation can be) insofar as they restore the trust and esteem of the public for the profession, they protect it, they are its best bulwark to defend its freedom.

M\*A\*S are extremely diverse. They can be either documents: texts or broadcasts, or people: individuals or groups, or processes, fast or slow. They can be internal to media or external to them, i.e. created and operated by people outside the media, or they involve co-operation of media people and non-media people. Besides, some M\*A\*S function at local or regional or national or international level. They produce an effect that is immediate, or short term or long term.

They are flexible. They can easily be adapted to circumstances. Compare a code of ethics and a law for instance. They complement each other. While none is sufficient, all are useful. And they can all function with one another. They are democratic: with a few exceptions, they are all initiated by the profession or by the public (not the State). Many require the co-operation of professionals and media users.

That makes you wonder why some M\*A\*S are so little accepted, why others are so little used. For one thing, many are not known. And if known, they are disliked simply because they are new. Generally speaking, what is said against them?

M\*A\*S are said to be purely cosmetic, by left-wingers; dangerously radical, by right-wingers, a plot against freedom of speech and free enterprise. Realists find them unrealistic: codes are senseless catalogues; can a reporter afford to lose his job for the sake of ethics? Good media do not need quality control. The bad ones will never accept it unless the law forces it upon them. They also find them costly, if they are to do their job well, meaning fast and visibly.

Experience shows that journalists express far more hostility towards M\*A\*S than management: righteous journalists find them time-consuming, restrictive and insulting, incompetent or dishonest journalists feel threatened, and, mainly, quite a few journalists find it unacceptable because professionals are not independent, so they cannot be held responsible. That is a crucial criticism: media ethics should not turn journalists into scapegoats. They seem to imply that journalists cause all that is wrong with the news media, since a

media company cannot be expected to have a conscience, a sense of ethics.

Self-regulation or media accountability, whatever you call it, is undoubtedly slow. Its effects are rarely spectacular. Many M\*A\*S are unknown to the public and the profession—hence are not used. Some of them do seem to be little more than a PR operation, or than a legislation-avoiding operation. They do seem incapable of eliminating the most serious media sins, like omission or infotainment. And then, some are quite expensive.

It is easy to be critical, cynical, or merely realistic, about ‘ethics and M\*A\*S’. The problem is that there is no alternative. The Soviet Union showed what media become when the government takes over. The US has demonstrated, over the last ten years, that a deregulated market causes a terrible decline of the press, print and electronic.<sup>3</sup> In other words, freedom and regulation are indispensable but are not enough. A third force should come into play. Call it ‘quality control’ or call it ‘the public service ideal’ if you wish. It consists in an alliance of profession and people to provide proper information to be gathered and distributed so that democracy can operate. And democracy is not just a luxury of the wealthy: it conditions our survival.

Fortunately, ethics and M\*A\*S are more and more of a concern in all parts of the planet that are not under dictatorial rule.<sup>4</sup> Now the press council seems no longer perceived as a threat to press freedom, but rather as a weapon to protect it. There are more and more PCs. It has taken at least half a century for the concept to take off: over half the existing PCs have been created since 1990; one third since 2000. ‘Media observatories’ continue their expansion in sub-Saharan francophone Africa (in Gabon, Cameroon, Burundi), wherever press freedom and democracy (slowly) increase. The absence of a press council has become a bad symptom, a sign that the press is not free (as in Belarus) or that media do not give a damn about ethics (as in Greece), or that publishers and journalists are not willing to be accountable (as in France).

Even more striking, in my view, is the flowering of M\*A\*S, easier and cheaper to set up, less threatening, better accepted. They are less open than PCs to the charge of being a publisher’s ploy or an underhand government manoeuvre. All have the same purpose but they offer a wide gamut of instruments. Created as they are by different groups, they operate differently, in different time periods. The media landscape is not the ethical wasteland it is sometimes painted as being. Many M\*A\*S have become such a normal part of the environment that they are not noticed anymore: the less spectacular,

the less controversial M\*A\*S, like codes of ethics, letters to the editor, correction boxes, regular pages or programmes devoted to media, university level training for journalists, required courses on media ethics, readership surveys, citizens' watchdog associations, etc. As a whole, media are far more concerned with the public than they used to be. And many media understand the need to forge closer links with the readers/listeners/viewers.

Let us not yield to the very regrettable journalistic urge, which is always to look at the half-empty glass. The news media may not be good, not good enough, but they are certainly better than they used to be and, on the whole, getting better. Progress is slow, however. The duty of professionals, academics, media-oriented NGOs, enlightened citizens is to help accelerate the movement towards quality news media, for the sake of civilisation, if not even the human race.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The first press council was established in Sweden in 1916, but tripartite PCs only appeared from 1960, in Turkey, Korea and, mainly (far more lastingly) in the UK (1963).

<sup>2</sup> See the 'News & Views' section on [www.presscouncils.org](http://www.presscouncils.org)

<sup>3</sup> That decline has prompted the Knight Foundation to fund a competition for the creation of press councils at State level—the process being supervised by the two existing councils in Minnesota and Washington State.

<sup>4</sup> The number of translations made, or being made, of *Media Ethics and Accountability Systems*, the author's book on the topic, is a sign. Originally published in French in 2000, it was translated into English in 2003, and in Armenia, Brazil, Greece, Italy, Japan, Korea, Portugal, Romania and Turkey. Albanian, Chinese, Georgian and Polish translations are in progress. *Media Ethics and Accountability Systems* and *An Arsenal for Democracy* (2003) are reviewed on pages 245-249.

## **Media Accountability Systems (M\*A\*S)**

Non-governmental means of inducing media and journalists to respect the ethical rules set by the profession. They are extremely diverse but all aim at improving news media, using evaluation, monitoring, education or feedback. Here is a list of more than 80, but more can, and will, be invented. The most obvious classification of the M\*A\*S is into three groups according to their intrinsic nature: *documents* (printed or broadcast); *people* (individuals or groups) and *processes* (long or short).

### ***Documents (text, broadcast or website):***

- A written code of ethics, or an ‘ethics handbook’, listing rules which media professionals have discussed and/or agreed upon with, preferably, input by the public. And which should be made known to the public.
- An internal memo reminding the staff of ethical principles (maybe the ‘tradition’ of the paper) and providing them with guidelines on behavior in particular circumstances.
- A daily internal self-criticism report circulated in the newsroom.
- A correction box, published very visibly. Or time taken to correct an error on the air.
- A regular ‘Letters to the Editor’ column/programme, including messages critical of the newspaper/magazine/station.
- Other means of public access, like an on-line message board or a forum for immediate feedback.
- An accuracy-and-fairness questionnaire, mailed to persons mentioned in the news or published for any reader to fill out.
- A public statement about media by some eminent decision-maker, abundantly quoted in the news.
- A space or time slot purchased by an individual, a group or a company to publish an ‘open letter’ about some media issue.
- An occasional ‘Letter *from* the editor’, expounding values and rules or explaining how media function.
- A sidebar explaining some difficult editorial decision to publish or not to publish.
- A newsletter to readers, inserted or mailed, to keep them informed of what goes on at the newspaper or station.

## MEDIA ETHICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- A regular media column, page, section in a newspaper, news magazine, trade review—or a programme on radio or television, that does more than just mention new appointments and ownership changes.

- A regular ethics column in a trade magazine.

- Regular reports by media-oriented citizens' associations that are published by newspapers.

- A website systematically posting corrections of media errors—or the grievances of working journalists, or abuses by advertisers.

- A website offering journalists information and advice on 'promoting accountability'.

- A website devoted to debate on media issues (e.g. media and children).

- A website teaching the public how to evaluate media.

- An alternative periodical (esp. published by a minority), non-profit station or website, that publishes facts and gives viewpoints which regular media ignore, including criticism of the said media.

- A 'journalism review', on paper or the air or the web, devoted principally to media criticism, exposing what media have distorted or omitted, and whatever other sins reporters or media companies have committed .

- 'Darts and Laurels', a page or website consisting of short stories in criticism or praise of some media action, such as most journalism reviews have had.

- A yearbook of journalism criticism, written by reporters and media users, edited by academics.

- A weblog run by a journalist, or by an amateur, giving a serious critique of media performance.

- An article, report, book, film, TV series about media, informative about media and, to some extent at least, critical.

- Newsletters emailed to subscribers by media-watch organisations.

- The review of a consumer group (regional or national) which occasionally deals with media.

- A television network or weekly news magazine entirely made up of material borrowed from foreign media, enabling users to evaluate their own media.

- A petition signed by hundreds or thousands to put pressure on media directly or via advertisers or via some regulatory agency.



- (Very exceptional). A newspaper given by its publisher to a journalism school to serve as a ‘teaching hospital’.

***People (individuals or groups):***

- An in-house critic, or a ‘contents evaluation commission’, to scrutinise the newspaper, or monitor the station, for breaches of the code - without making their findings public.
- An ethics committee or a ‘staff review group’ (a rotating panel of journalists) set up to discuss and/or decide ethical issues, preferably before they occur.
- An ethics coach operating in the newsroom, occasionally, to raise the reporters’ ethical awareness, to encourage debate and advise on specific problems.
- A media reporter assigned to keep watch on the media industry and give the public full, unprejudiced reports.
- An outside critic paid by a newspaper to write a regular column about the paper.
- A whistleblower who dares to denounce some abuse within the media company.
- A consumer reporter who warns readers/viewers against misleading advertising—and intervenes on their behalf.
- An ombudsman, ‘editor in charge of reader relations’, or a team of reporters, employed by a newspaper or station, to listen to suggestions and complaints from customers, investigate, obtain redress if need be and (usually) report on his activities.
- A complaints bureau or customer service unit to listen to grievances and requests.
- A disciplinary committee set up by a union or other professional association to ensure that its code is respected—under pain of expulsion.
- A liaison committee set up jointly by media and a social group with which they may occasionally clash.
- A citizen appointed to the editorial board; or several (often chosen from users who have complained) invited to attend the daily news meeting.
- A panel (or several specialised panels) of readers/listeners/viewers regularly (e.g. daily or twice a month) consulted.

- A club (of readers/listeners/viewers) that uses perks to attract members and leads them into a dialogue about the medium (most often a magazine).

- A local press council, i.e. regular meetings of some professionals from the local media and representative members of the community.

- A national (or regional) press council set up by the professional associations of media owners and of journalists, and normally including representatives of the public—to speak up for press freedom and to field complaints from media users.

- A national ombudsman appointed by the press to deal with complaints, either in association with a press council (Sweden) or independent (South Africa).

- ‘Media observatories’ set up by journalists to monitor attacks on press freedom and adherence to a code, receive complaints, debate ethical issues with publishers.

- A watchdog agency set up by a media-related industry (like advertising) to filter contents—and ask that some not be made public, for ethical reasons.

- A militant association dedicated to media reform or to helping persons with grievances against media.

- A foundation that funds projects or institutions aiming at the improvement of media.

- A media-related institution, national or international, that has a direct or indirect interest in promoting media quality through conferences, seminars, publications etc.

- An NGO that trains personnel, and provides free services to media, in emerging democracies (Eastern Europe) and under-developed nations.

- A citizen group (like a labour union or a parents’ association) which, for partisan and/or public interest reasons (e.g. the welfare of children), monitors the media—or attacks a special target, like advertising.

- A consumers’ association, especially one of media users, using awareness sessions, monitoring, opinion polls, evaluations, lobbying, mail campaigns, even boycotts to obtain better service.

- A representative group of journalists in the newsroom, endowed with some rights, as allowed by law in Germany or required in Portugal.

- A '*société de rédacteurs*', an association of all newsroom staff, that demands a voice in editorial policy—and preferably owns shares in the company so as to make itself heard.

- A '*société de lecteurs*', an association of readers which buys, or is given, shares in the capital of a media company and demands to have a say.

I am inclined also to place in this category three types of institutions that some experts would leave out of the M\*A\*S concept. To the extent that they do not take orders from government, to the extent that their purpose is to improve media service, it does not seem possible to leave them out completely. They might be called *associate M\*A\*S* or *para-M\*A\*S*:

- The regulatory agency, set up by law, provided it is truly independent, especially if it takes complaints from media users.

- The international broadcasting company, public or private, using short wave radio or satellites, that makes it difficult for national media to hide or distort the news.

- The autonomous non-commercial broadcasting company, whose sole purpose is to serve the public and which constitutes implicit criticism of commercial media. That category might be widened to include all high quality media whose primary aim is good journalism and can serve as models.

***Processes:***

- A higher education, a crucial M\*A\*S. Quality media should only hire people with a university degree, preferably (though this is controversial) one in mass communications.

- A separate course on media ethics required for all students in journalism.

- Further education for working journalists: one-day workshops, one-week seminars, six-month or one-year fellowships at universities. Such programmes, quite common in the US, are very rare elsewhere.

- An in-house awareness programme to increase the attention paid by media workers to the needs of citizens, especially women and cultural, ethnic, sexual or other minorities;

- or to teach journalists how to respond appropriately to readers/listeners/viewers on the phone.

- Building a data-base of all errors (type, cause, person involved) so as to discern patterns and take measures.

## MEDIA ETHICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- An internal study of some issue involving the public (like a newspaper's relations with its customers).
- An ethical audit: external experts come and evaluate the ethical awareness, guidelines, conduct within the newspaper or station.
- Giving the email addresses and/or telephone numbers of editors and of journalists (whenever a story of theirs is published).
- The (controversial) 'readback' of quotes to sources to avoid errors.
- A 'media at school' programme to train children from an early age in the understanding and proper use of media.
- A 'media literacy' campaign to educate and mobilise the general public.
- A listening session: once a week or irregularly, editors man the phones to answer calls from readers.
- The regular encounter of news people with ordinary citizens in a press club, on the occasion of neighborhood meetings - or even on a cruise.
- A regular (e.g. quarterly) opinion survey (polls, public meetings, internet forum), commissioned by the media, to get feedback from the person-in-the-street; also a questionnaire on a newspaper or station website.
- A nation-wide survey of public attitudes towards all or some media (e.g. towards public broadcasting).
- Non-commercial research, done mainly by academics in the universities, but also in think-tanks or scientific observatories, studies of the contents of media (or the absence of them), of the perception of media messages by the public, of the impact of those messages.
- An annual seminar on journalism criticism organised by a journalism school.
- An annual conference bringing together media decision-makers, political leaders and representatives of citizens' groups of all kinds.
- International cooperation to promote media quality and accountability.
- A prize, and other tokens of satisfaction, to reward quality media and quality journalists—or an 'anti-prize'.

*Full details of the M\*A\*S on the Independent Press Councils website: [www.presscouncils.org](http://www.presscouncils.org)*

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