HOW MUCH MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY IN BULGARIA, POLAND AND SERBIA? A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO ONLINE INNOVATIONS

Michał GŁOWACKI
michal.glowacki@id.uw.edu.pl
Associate Professor, Ph.D.
Institute of Journalism
University of Warsaw
Warsaw, Poland

Michał KUŚ
michal.kus@uni.wroc.pl
Associate Professor, Ph.D.
Institute of Political Science
University of Wrocław
Wrocław, Poland

ABSTRACT: Significant changes that occur in the new social and media environment create real opportunities for renewing some traditional approaches to media, including the concept of media accountability. This study emphasises the main tendencies and current discussions on self-regulation and media ethics in an era of social change and technological development in selected countries in Central and Eastern Europe. On the basis of available literature as well as in-depth interviews carried out with Bulgarian, Polish and Serbian policy-makers, media managers, journalists and media researchers in November 2010 and December 2010 several trends with respect to the emergence and development of innovations online have been observed. Firstly, the paper aims at defining the notion of media accountability as well as legitimacy of existing practices and institutions. Secondly, an in-depth analysis of the development of new media platforms and Internet users’ culture further helps to define some of most significant examples of external and internal practices, strategies and cases in a sense of response for the quality of publication in the online space. Finally, research on the usage of social networks and blogs, as well as on practices fostering actor transparency, production transparency and the level of media responsiveness help to define the current stage and future directions for media accountability development. What are the political, professional and public “frames” of media accountability and transparency? What instruments supporting media accountability have emerged and how can they make media organizations more accountable and transparent to the publics? How can online media respond for the quality of publication? What are the challenges and opportunities created by new media and technologies in Central and Eastern Europe?

KEYWORDS: media accountability, actor transparency, production transparency, responsiveness, citizen journalism, social networks
INTRODUCTION

Media systems in Central and Eastern Europe have experienced a lengthy process of development over the last years. The introduction of press freedom and independent media organizations generated a significant number of changes, followed by a plethora of new problems, which are typical for young democracies. Thus, insufficient levels of journalistic professionalization, relatively high level of media commercialization and tabloidization, together with the process of public service media politicization, have for a while, been used to describe features of Central and Eastern European media systems (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003; Jakubowicz, 2008; Lauk, 2008; Balčytienė and Harro-Loit, 2010; Brikše, 2010; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011; Školkay, 2011; Trampota and Končelík, 2011). Historical legacies inherited from the past continue to play an important role when discussing top-down governance approaches, the small impact of self-regulatory mechanisms on the media, the lack of independence in the newsroom or insufficient relations between traditional media and their public in many Central and Eastern European media systems today. In line with this, the development of online media and new technologies which started in the 1990s caused additional sets of changes, forcing the media systems of Central and Eastern Europe to jump from one transformation to another. In addition to problems related to unfinished social and political transformation, which started in 1989, all the countries from the post-Soviet bloc had to confront the impact of convergence as well as the development of new media platforms and players in the online space nearly at the same time. Hence, practices observed at the level of policy-making and management have proved that in many cases, challenges and opportunities created by new technologies have been misunderstood or neglected. Yet, precious few attempts have been made to analyze the impact of new technologies on the development of news media in post-communist countries. Moreover, debate on media accountability in many cases is still mostly related to traditional media structures and thus only a few studies have introduced new approaches that may contribute to the development of responsible and independent media organizations in this part of the world.

This study aims at exploring the issue of media accountability with respect to opportunities and challenges imposed by the Internet in selected online news media in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia. One of the main goals is to identify the level of adaptation of online innovations (understood as all mechanisms and practices fostering media accountability at different stages of publication) and their impact on media accountability with respect to feedback, comments and criticism on the quality of media performance. Hence, as a part of a broader study of media accountability practices on the Internet conducted within the
EU funded project “Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaAcT)”, this paper attempts to understand Internet users’ culture as well as instruments supporting actor transparency, production transparency and sufficient levels of responsiveness in different journalistic cultures. What are the new ways of holding media organizations accountable and transparent? To what extent have instruments supporting feedback on the quality of media performance been adopted in the online space? What are the main challenges and obstacles for the development of media accountability in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia? What is the role of the public?

(RE)DEFINING MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY

The notion of media accountability and its contribution to democracy has been discussed by media managers, scholars and policy makers for years. For instance, a significant number of approaches have been emphasized by Bertrandt, who defined media accountability as “any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public” (2000: 108). McQuail described media accountability with a reference to “all the voluntary or in-voluntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication” (2010: 206), and further emphasized different types of accounting processes. According to McQuail, media organizations are held to account to individuals, organizations and society either in a sense of legal-based liability and/or in the sense of answerability. The latter might be further defined in connection to moral and social basis, non-material penalties as well as ongoing debates and criticism on the quality of media performance (McQuail, 2010: 208).

Accountability understood in a sense of answerability has so far been analyzed with respect to different types of relations between media organizations and their stakeholders (public opinion, clients, social institutions, audiences, pressure and interest groups, media owners, etc.) as well as practices and mechanisms through which media organization can be held to account. In line with this, the list of traditional instruments has been mostly connected to the existence of press councils, self-regulation, ombudsmen-like institutions or internal practices (media criticism in mass media, correction boxes, letters to the editor, complaint policies etc.) adapted by the newsrooms. Most recently, due to the growing importance of citizen journalism, social networks, non-professional content creators or, in some cases, the development of online ombudsman-like institutions, the list of media accountability instruments has been extended.

For instance, Fengler, Eberwein and Leppik-Bork (2011) have recently identified a set of additional media accountability instruments with a reference to
both internal and external practices as well as different levels of institutionalization (see Figure 1). In addition to this, the authors further redefined media accountability as “any informal institution, both offline and online, performed by both media professionals and media users, which intends to monitor, comment on and criticize journalism and seeks to expose and debate problems of journalism” (Fengler, Eberwein & Leppik-Bork, 2011: 20). In the era of new technologies and changing patterns of users’ behavior, the analysis of media accountability should be connected to newsrooms’ practices for fostering interaction, users’ creativity and innovation. New relationships between media organizations and the public should be further defined with a reference to all the processes and decision-making arrangements opening up media organizations to audiences and thus supporting formal approaches to accountability. To this end, from the perspective of news organizations, media accountability in the online space can be operationalized into two normative objectives, namely transparency and responsiveness.

Media accountability cannot be understood outside the social and political structures or media ownership as well as regulatory framework defined at the national level (including self- and co-regulation). Thus, one may find a large number of different attempts towards an understanding of accounting pro-
cesses in different parts of the world. For instance, a list of important differences might be found between mature democracies in Western Europe and the young democracies in Central and Eastern Europe that started to develop systems supporting media accountability only two decades ago – The debate on media self-regulation and mechanisms supporting the response on the quality of publication started there in the early 1990s. It was launched by representatives of academia and further developed by media professionals, most notably journalistic associations. At that time, the notion of media accountability was mainly understood with a reference to media responsibility and as an important indicator for the development of a democratic society. However, over the last couple of years, a large number of media organizations in Central and Eastern Europe have started to develop in accordance to the logic of the market and political power rather than to media responsiveness, transparency and professional standards of journalism.

For instance, the lack of clear and stable regulations in Bulgaria has resulted in a “complex relationship between the media and politicians and has opened the doors for frequent political interferences into media organisations” (Dobreva et al., 2011: 179). Similarly to this, previous research attempts on the performance of traditional media accountability and transparency of institutions in Poland emphasised that only a few basic instruments supporting media self-regulation have been successfully implemented. Poland has failed to introduce either a press council or the ombudsman-like institutions relevant for the sector of media. In addition, general codes of journalistic conduct are not always effective and activities undertaken by the main journalistic associations have so far been divided (Szot, 2010; Głowacki and Urbaniak, 2011). Finally, Serbia is still in the process of directing media strategy, supporting independent media organizations and improving the level of journalistic professionalization. However, the Press Council created in 2010 has become inaccessible and there have not been many substantial activities undertaken by the members of the Council so far (Głowacki and Kuś, 2011).

The most current approaches to online innovations, underlining new mechanisms, strategies and practices in which media organizations may respond to the quality of publications, looks for the challenges and opportunities for media accountability systems beyond the functioning of traditional media structures. All of this while taking into account social, political, economical context as well as practices observed in the newsrooms, Internet users’ culture and the level of new media development.
METHODOLOGY

The study on online innovations supporting the development of online media accountability was conducted as a part of a broader research initiative undertaken by members of the international consortium of the project “Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaAcT)” in 2010. At the first stage of qualitative and quantitative study, an initial exploration dedicated to media ethics and online journalism development was carried out in 20 selected countries. National media experts and practitioners in all of them were asked to determine and clarify the object of the study and to further grasp a variety of online media accountability practices initiated either by media organizations or the audience. At the same time, the MediaAcT team gathered necessary information on contextual factors shaping conditions for media accountability practices in the respective countries. This included surveys measuring media legitimacy, performance of existing media accountability institutions, and statistics on the usage of Internet as well as different studies on the development of online journalism. All the initial data was gathered via collaborative documents accessible online, which enabled researchers and experts to share and update the information. The next part of the study, aimed at investigating the existing practices and contextual factors, was further devoted to more detailed interviews with journalists, media ombudsmen, members of press councils, bloggers and civic activists in selected countries. As a result of data gathering in the first phase, thirteen countries - Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, France, Jordan, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Syria, Tunisia, and the United States - were selected for in-depth analysis. The main part of empirical study took place in the period of October-December 2010. At this stage, members of the MediaAcT consortium carried out detailed interviews with 98 experts (journalists, ombudsmen, representatives of press councils, bloggers and civic activists) in different journalistic cultures. Interviewees were chosen on the basis of different experience and professional background in order to reflect the specific features at the level of national media systems.

To emphasise their current stage and challenges related to media accountability development in Central and Eastern Europe, the cases of Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia – each representing different paths to democracy and different levels of integration with European institutions - were chosen for a broad comparative approach. Among the 20 experts taking part in the Central and Eastern European part of the MediaAcT research were bloggers, media scholars, journalists, government advisors and heads of online editions of selected media organizations as well as representatives of international organizations – including the Organiza-
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...for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (See Table 1). During in-depth interviews carried out in Sofia, Warsaw, Wrocław and Belgrade, questions related to the role of existing media accountability institutions, innovations in the newsroom, the role of the audience as well as attitudes of journalists towards new partnership between media and the public were discussed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Journalists</th>
<th>MA institutions</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Interviewees from Central-Eastern Europe (Heikkilä et al., 2012).

THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN BULGARIA, POLAND AND SERBIA. TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING OF INTERNET USERS’ CULTURE AND JOURNALISTIC PROFESSIONALIZATION

Although television remains the most popular medium in Central and Eastern Europe, the importance of Internet services has grown rapidly in the last years with the emergence of more professional websites, social networks and the increased usage of mobile web. According to the Internet World Stats, the Internet penetration rate in 2010 in Serbia had increased to 55.9 percent of users, while the number of online media users in Bulgaria and Poland was estimated at the level of 47.5 percent and 57 percent of penetration rate respectively (Internet World Stats, 2010; Eurobarometer, 2010).

News agencies, broadcasting media organizations and main newspapers in all the cases have maintained their online editions but one business model for the development of online media services has not yet been defined. For instance, a lot of online news platforms developed by radio and television in Bulgaria are usually reproducing media content that has already been published by means of broadcasting (Głowacki, 2011). Additionally, traditional media in Serbia continue to re-transmit or re-print information originating from other websites and social networks without making an effort to check the sources of information or authenticity of the stories. As a result, around 90 percent of news published in Serbia is “copy-pasted” and there is a lack of awareness of copyrights and legal consequences of publishing media content in the online space. Hence, the low level of journalistic professionalization is still among the main problems of media organizations in all three countries. Interestingly, technological development has not helped to change this situation and might have made things even worse. For
instance, the older generation of journalists in Serbia feel themselves threatened by the development of online platforms and news (Głowacki and Kuś, 2011). This also applies to traditional media journalists in Poland, who started to test new technologies at a relatively late stage. Still, Polish journalists have not yet defined ways of interacting with the public and the top-down governance approaches do not support the development of a real dialogue online (Kuś, 2011).

The Internet remains most popular among young people, as is the case in Bulgaria, where the predominant users are people in the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34 years (Gemius, 2010), and in Serbia, where online services are the most popular among the group of 15-29 year olds (Irex Serbia, 2008). There are approximately 1.89 million Bulgarian profiles on Facebook and around 2.5 million and 6 million of registered Facebook accounts in Serbia and Poland accordingly (Głowacki, 2011; Głowacki and Kuś, 2011; Kuś, 2011).

The main purposes of using the Internet in all studied cases included usage of search engines and directories together with e-mail services, entertainment, news/information and community/social networks. However, as noted in the case of Poland, the number of Internet users performing as active content producers is rather limited (7 percent) (Eurostat, 2009). In addition, online media users are more active in terms of publishing comments on entertainment rather than getting involved in public debate or providing feedback on the performance of media organizations (Kuś, 2011). The reasons for this are underdevelopment of instruments supporting media literacy as well as the lack of a role for media accountability to play.

COMPARING ONLINE INNOVATIONS IN BULGARIA, POLAND AND SERBIA. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE NEWSROOMS

Practices that aim at maintaining media accountability and transparency in the online space in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia have been widely analyzed in connection to the model of different stages of news production proposed by Groenhart and Evers (2010). In line with this, the analysis of challenges for internal media management has been based on three phases in the process of media accountability, namely:

1. *Actor transparency* – taking place before the act of publication,
2. *Production transparency* – emphasising practices during the news production,
3. *The level of media responsiveness (dialogue transparency)* – fostering criticism and feedback on media performance after the process of publication (*Figure 2*).
Generally, the level of *actor transparency* involves practices of media organizations offering contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. The set of practices fostering actor transparency in the online space has been analyzed on the basis of bylines, blogs and profiles of journalists, published mission statements, codes of ethics and information about company ownership accordingly. Additionally, online innovations in news organizations in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia have been measured with a reference to *production transparency*. This level might be described as the situation in which media organizations disclosed information about sources of news and other professional decisions by using newsroom blogs, collaborative story production, social networks or instruments supporting user generated content. Finally, practices fostering media accountability and transparency have been analyzed with respect to the level of *responsiveness*, emphasising reactions of news organization to feedback from users. This level of the research focused on online news comments, notification of errors in the news, tip-offs for potential topics and the presence of audience blogs. To this end, media responsiveness refers to ways in which online media engaged in dialogue with users, who asked for explanation, justification or apology after publication (Domingo and Heikkilä, 2011).

Given that practices and the degree of how they have been established at the level of news production vary from one country to another, the research team decided to define three main categories to evaluate their developments. Thus, a given practice appears to be “widespread” in a given news culture if it has been applied by several online news services on a regular basis. Online media accountable practices are regarded “partly applied” if some online news organizations have that practice, while others implement it very rarely. In the third category, a given media accountability practice is regarded “not available/rarely applied” if it is has not been identified in the given news culture.
ACTOR TRANSPARENCY

Instruments supporting actor transparency in Bulgaria have been widely discussed with respect to transparency of media ownership. Numerous controversies related to unclear information on several media stakeholders has been subjected to different debates for years. For instance, the ownership of the New Bulgarian Media Group that owns both terrestrial and cable TV channels, daily newspapers, one weekly paper and several online media outlets is not transparent at all and could not be defined. In addition to this, very few Bulgarian media organizations introduced other instruments supporting media accountability online, with numerous examples emphasising the lack of published codes of journalistic ethics or mission statements of media companies. Furthermore, not every Bulgarian media outlet that signed the media code of ethics has published the document on its website. Although there are blogs written by journalists within media organizations, the practice has not been that common (Głowacki, 2011).

The level of actor transparency practices in Poland seems to be more developed. However, at the same time, a large number of differences between particular cases might still be observed. Overall, media organizations are transparent when it comes to their ownership. This kind of information is usually available (although not always directly on the website of a particular media outlet and sometimes only on the website of the media group or company, linked from the news website). In contrast, Polish media rarely possess and publish mission statements or codes of ethics developed internally. Moreover, information about journalists and their profiles are not as common as the use of bylines. However, the good practice of presenting journalistic profiles, including photos, biographies and contact information (e-mail, personal websites, etc.) may be observed, as in the case of Polskie Radio Wrocław. Similar to this, the online platform of the weekly “Polityka” offers profiles, photos and links to blogs developed by journalists (Kuś, 2011).

Finally, only a few practices related to actor transparency online have been introduced by media organizations in Serbia. In most cases, a majority of instruments, such as bylines, public mission statements or information on the internal codes of ethics, are not in use at all. However, some significant exceptions from this tendency have been observed in relation to public service media, “City Magazine” and the performance of B92. For instance, the online platform B92.net offers the company’s mission statement, journalistic profiles and information on the company’s ownership. In addition to this, part of the website has been designed to strengthen the role of journalistic blogs and interaction with media users (Głowacki and Kuś, 2011).
Instruments supporting actor transparency in online news media in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia have been listed in Table 2. Significant differences may be found between Poland and Bulgaria as well as between Poland and Serbia when taking into account information on media ownership, the usage of bylines and development of journalistic blogs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Serbia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bylines</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Profiles of journalists</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Journalist blogs</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Published mission papers</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Published Code of Ethics</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>News policy document, in-house code of ethics</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public information on company ownership</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Practices fostering actor transparency in online news media.

**PRODUCTION TRANSPARENCY**

Social networks have been the most popular instruments in fostering transparency of news production in Bulgaria so far. Newsroom blogs, collaborative story production as well as the development of citizen journalism have not created common practices for the improvement of media accountability in the online space (Głowacki, 2011). Similar conclusion could be drawn from the Serbian case, where the use of Twitter improved the level of news coverage during the 2010 earthquake in the city of Kraljevo. However, a large number of journalists in Serbia use social networks for personal gains rather than for professional profits (Głowacki and Kuś, 2011). In all cases, the practice of providing links to original news sources has been misunderstood or neglected. Some initiatives supporting citizen journalism have been recognized in Poland, most notably in the case of Kontakt24.pl and Alert24.pl (Kuś, 2011).
Table 3 underlines the main similarities and differences with respect to news production transparency in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia. The most relevant differences might be observed at the level of links to original sources and citizen journalism initiated by media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Serbia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link to original sources</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsroom blogs</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence in Facebook</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence in Twitter</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative news production</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen journalism, initiated by the news media</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESPONSIVENESS

Finally, due to technological developments, traditional mail or phone correspondence has been replaced by new tools supporting interaction between media and its users. In context of online news media in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia the sufficient level of responsiveness has been fostered mainly by the development of online news comments. For instance, the ability to comment on the news has been introduced by “Dnevnik” and “Capital”, both published in Bulgaria (Głowacki, 2011). Similar instruments have been observed in the case of online news media in both Serbia and Poland. So far the forum of Serbian B92 has been successful in gaining opinions from users on a wide range of issues, including politics, technology, language, economy, environment or religion. Another good example has been identified in the case of news media organizations belonging to Ringier Axel Springer Serbia, where users are allowed to comment on almost every news item without going through the internal editorial processes (Głowacki and Kuś, 2011). Feedback forms have been developed by a large number of media
organizations in Poland, while correction buttons have not been introduced at all. Social networks have already improved the level of Bulgarian, Polish and Serbian media responsiveness. However, the usage of social media by journalists is often connected to fashion rather than being a matter of strategic choice (Kuś, 2010).

Similarities and differences concerning media responsiveness have been summarized in Table 4. The main set of differences has been defined in connection to practices that fosters feedback forms and tip-offs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>Poland</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback form and tip-offs</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correction buttons</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online news comments</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Widespread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audience blogs</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
<td>Not available/rarely applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responding to users through social media</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
<td>Partly applied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**COMPARING ONLINE INNOVATIONS IN BULGARIA, POLAND AND SERBIA. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PUBLICS**

The new communication platforms, especially Internet and mobile technologies, have enabled the public to get involved in the discussions on the quality of media performance in a way which was not possible before. In the comparative study on online innovations, the following online media accountability practices initiated outside the media organizations have been discussed in accordance to:

1) media blogs,
2) media criticism in social media,
3) different types of (more or less) institutionalized mediawatch initiatives present online.
MEDIA BLOGS

The media blogs scene has not been well developed in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia. Additionally, media bloggers still tend to focus on technological developments, media marketing etc. rather than issues connected to media criticism and discussions on media performances.

However, some significant exceptions, including Bogo’s “Blog About the Open Web” and the blog written by Veni Markovski, might be identified in Bulgaria. Moreover, Bulgarian media bloggers have been active in some public discussions related to media policy proposals with respect to the law on data retention. Another example in this matter might be found in the case of the blog run by Elenko Elenkov. The author won two court cases against newspaper “24 часа [24 Hours]”; after an image from his blog had been used by journalists on the front page of “24 часа” and quoted as an unnamed “Internet source” (Głowacki, 2011).

The Polish blogosphere, which seems to flourish, also offers some examples of media blogs, but not many of them concentrate only on issues related to media performance. A similar situation might be observed in Serbia, where the blogosphere is dominated by public figures such as politicians, artists or celebrities. The number of thematic blogs is increasing but real media blogs dedicated to media accountability and transparency have not yet developed. Blogs written by Larisa Rankovic (Media Mix), Danica Radovanovic (Serendipities) and Nebojša Radovic (Eniac’s Ground) are among a few significant exceptions. However, in Serbia, a relatively new initiative - “whistle blowing” blog Pistalka.rs – has already become one of the first platforms to develop citizen journalism and cooperation between journalists and their public (Głowacki & Kuś, 2011).

MEDIA CRITICISM IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In addition to the significant role of social media in fostering media accountability, responsiveness and transparency in the newsrooms, participatory platforms have offered numerous possibilities for media users to control and assess the quality of media.

However, as the study confirmed, these possibilities have so far been exploited only to a limited extent. Online media users are generally successful in using social media as tools to put pressure on media organizations in terms of their “consumer rights”, as in the case of Poland, where one of the biggest newspapers – “Rzeczpospolita” – started to use a Facebook account under pressure from the readers. However, when taking into account the development of social networking in Poland, there is still a low number of successful stories in terms of developing criticism on activities of media (Kuś, 2011).
Similarly to this, the most important cases discussed on social platforms in Bulgaria are not directly related to the quality of media output, but rather to criticism of national media policy. Facebook became an important tool for people protesting in January 2010 (with slogan “Bulgaria is not Big Brother, 2010 is not 1984”) against changes in the laws in the field of data retention. The Facebook group “Не искаме МВР да ни следи безконтролно в Интернет! [We do not want the Interior Ministry to eavesdrop on us online without control!]” appeared and was widely refreshed and updated during the time of protests (Głowacki, 2011).

Similar situations might be observed in Serbia, where a Facebook group was created by the brother of Slavko Curuvija – a journalist and newspaper publisher, murdered in Belgrade in 1999 during the time of Milošević’s regime. In January 2011, Jovo Curuvija’s Facebook group appealing to “Please help me demonstrate that Serbia is not a country in which it is possible to kill a journalist with impunity” gained 1362 followers (Głowacki and Kuś, 2011).

Finally, in Poland, the most significant case of media criticism initiative organized directly around a social media platform was rather anecdotal, because of support of over 45000 Facebook users for the group “Polsat zabił Święta - w tym roku nie będzie Kevina [Polsat killed Christmas – there will be no “Home Alone” movie this year]”. It was an ironic protest against the absence of the “Home Alone” movie on the private TV channel Polsat during the Christmas holiday. In fact, the initiative was successful and the programming directors of Polsat finally decided to broadcast “Home Alone” during Christmas Eve.

MEDIAWATCH INITIATIVES AND THEIR PRESENCE ONLINE

As media journalism websites in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia pay little attention to the quality of media performance and instead concentrate on the development of the media sector with respect to economy, institutionalized mediawatch initiatives are very important instruments supporting media accountability and transparency. Generally, one may distinguish all the mediawatch initiatives in three groups: related to academia, activities of NGOs and initiatives undertaken by independent activists.

Obviously, development of interactive tools makes mediawatch activities much easier, especially in terms of dissemination of research results (Domingo and Heikkilä, 2011). However, the number of mediawatch initiatives, as well the level of their influence, is still limited.
For instance, it is very difficult to find initiatives directly related to mediawatch activities in Bulgaria. To some extent, non-profit organizations, such as Internet Society of Bulgaria (ISOC), Interactive Association Bulgaria (IAB) or Electronic Frontier Bulgaria (EFB) are related to some kinds of mediawatch initiatives, but generally they concentrate on issues related to the protection of human rights on the Internet as well as the protection of the free flow of information and privacy in electronic communications. One of the most important exceptions is Media Development Center – an NGO based in Sofia monitoring media trends and developments in the whole country.

In Poland, some academic mediawatch initiatives are functioning online, as in the case of the Polish division of European Journalism Observatory (EJO), and since 2012, it is also present in Serbia. Taking into account NGO initiatives, the Batory Foundation is also worth mentioning. One of the most important initiatives of the Batory Foundation is connected to the preparation of reports about public service media performance during election campaigns, which are usually based on an in-depth empirical study.

Serbian mediawatch initiatives are generally related to NGO’s activity and the Serbian version of EJO, launched in 2012. In the context of initiatives that emerged outside of a media organization, the Media Center in Belgrade (Media Watch Serbia Research Group and Media Watch Project) could also be underlined. Finally, an interesting initiative that has been undertaken in connection to the Media Center is Press Club – a series of meetings (initiated in April 2010) dedicated to media accountability and transparency matters. Participants of discussions are representatives of the Media Center and their guests – and the audience consists mainly of journalists and journalism students. The discussions are broadcast by several traditional media organizations, including radio and TV stations.

An in-depth analysis of online innovations helps to underline the main tendencies and challenges as well as the current structure and perspectives for the future development of media accountability systems in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia.
CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, media accountability, transparency and responsiveness are not exclusively normative or technological issues. They are rather an object of struggle about the role of journalism and the public, which might be described as an important factor responsible for differences between contemporary media systems. Although Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia are at the early stages of introducing self-regulation on the Internet and the ongoing debate is still mostly related to the performance of traditional media, several trends with respect to development of journalistic professionalization and Internet users’ culture might be observed. This applies to practices introduced by media organizations as well as the public’s willingness to be involved in media criticism online. The research has proven, above all, that a potential for innovations offered by new technologies has been introduced only partially to date.

Firstly, the development of new media platforms and players has increased, to a limited extent, the level of journalistic professionalization with respect to performance of online news media. Still, journalists in a large number of Bulgarian, Polish and Serbian cases might have not yet agreed on how to be professional in the online space and how to interact with their audiences. In addition, the current governance approaches do not necessarily follow the growing importance of the public in terms of content creation, participation in the news-making processes or provision of feedback on the content published in the media and policy proposals. As a result of this, the major websites of online news media are built mainly upon their traditional content with a low level of innovation, creativity, participation and practices fostering media accountability and transparency. For instance, little attention is paid to media problems, such as media ownership in Bulgaria. Very few media organizations have introduced mechanisms supporting the level of actor transparency, including bylines, profiles of journalists, media blogs or published mission statements. Similarly to this, only a small number of news media in Serbia do publish the profiles of journalists and links to their stories online. As only one exception, online news media in Poland managed to develop the usage of bylines or feedback forms and tick-offs that have been missing in the case of news media in Serbia and Bulgaria. In line with this, with the exception of a practice related to online news comments, most of the mechanisms that could further improve the feedback activities of different audience groups have been introduced by only a few media organizations. Social networks, so far, have been the most popular instruments for fostering the transparency of media production, with the example of Facebook, gaining significant support from the newsrooms in all the analyzed cases.

Secondly, online media users in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia might still be described as relatively passive - in terms of holding their media accountable and thus rais-
ing comments and criticism on the quality of media performance. Even in Poland, where citizen journalism is relatively well-developed (especially in comparison with Bulgaria and Serbia), less than 10 percent of Internet users perform as active content producers. Entertainment and communication with other media users (e-mail, social networking) remain the most important and dominant fields of their activity. Their willingness to debate issues related to media performance is very limited. Possible origins of this situation are various, but one may connect it to a historical legacy of being passive in relations with media as well as a low level of media literacy. All these factors are real obstacles for development of innovative forms of media accountability, based on new platforms of communication (Internet, mobile technologies) and involvement of media users as new, crucial stakeholders in the process of holding media accountable. In this context, the moderate role of institutionalized mediawatch initiatives in building social awareness of the importance of issues related to media performance also needs to be underlined. It seems to be one of the crucial factors for improving the quality of journalism in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in terms of mediatization of contemporary politics.

Finally, all of the cases and examples above prove that online news media in Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia still need to develop instruments supporting accountability in the online space and online innovations might still be described as “sleeping mechanisms for the time being” (Głowacki, 2011). In addition, the current debate on media accountability and transparency shall be further connected to the performance of traditional media organizations, which have yet to fully develop their own media accountability systems. Thus, the debate on contributions of new media platforms to Central and Eastern European democracies shall be connected to features of regulatory framework, characteristics of national media systems and current stages of democracy development. Young democracies in Central and Eastern Europe have to deal with two transformations (political/social and technological) at the same time. In some cases they even need to jump from one transformation to another without completing the challenges related to the previous stage. In line with this, the Western concepts of media accountability and transparency cannot be fully transmitted to conditions under which Central and Eastern European media operate. Accountability may only exist when there is the proper level of autonomy and independence from both politics and the market. The development of self-regulation, the improvement of media literacy among citizens, as well as a huge effort to improve the quality of journalism and the editorial processes should be among the guiding principles when discussing challenges and the future of media accountability in Central and Eastern Europe today. All of these: preserving the necessary independence of media, strengthening the level of media literacy as well as the interaction with the public.
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