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# Coming out of the ivory tower

## Dutch Public Broadcasting's accountability policy

### 1 Introduction

In recent decades the trend of public accountability, transparency and governance has become a priority in many public sectors (Bovens, 2007; Baldi/Hasebrink, 2007; Schillemans, 2007), but in the media sector and the public broadcasting sector in particular there have only very recently been substantial attempts to address the public in terms of accountability and responsiveness. This new policy is a response to often-heard criticisms of public broadcasters as a 'bloated monolith' (Birt, 2002 in Hermida 2010: 307), or as the executives of both the BBC and NOS have described the PSB: a fortress, impenetrable for outsiders (Keating, 2008 in Hermida 2010; Van Liempt, 2005). Also specific incidents have led to questions about the role and performance of media and journalists (Brants/Bardoel, 2008).

In the Netherlands, after the Dutch populist politician Pim Fortuyn was assassinated in 2002 the media were blamed for demonizing him and creating an atmosphere that contributed to his killing. In his criticism of the political establishment, Fortuyn had included the media, which, he claimed, failed to see the discontent within society. Not only these performance issues but also structural societal and media changes such as the introduction of a dual broadcasting system and the subsequent increasing competition, the advent of new media and an increasing audience fragmentation have brought media's responsibility and their public role to attention. This in turn have obliged public service broadcasters in many Western European countries to rethink new ways to address their public (Jakubowicz, 2003; Born, 2003; Coppens, 2006; Collins, 2007). In this context this article will analyze how public service broadcasting is currently coping with the performance and structural challenges and is addressing the public in terms of accountability and responsiveness.

Dutch public broadcasting particularly is an interesting case because in the Netherlands the variety of voices in public broadcasting is not, as in most European countries, provided by a national broadcaster that is supposed to represent the full range of opinions and tastes in society (internal diversity) but rather it was

created in the 1920s by a multitude of broadcasters that all represent their own political opinion and cultural preferences (external diversity). For many years, being accountable to the public was not an issue since public broadcasters were there to meet the public's interest (Brants/Bardoel, 2008). Public legitimization in the Dutch public service broadcasting has had a long tradition in a pillarized system of social movements in which broadcasting was financed by voluntary member support. Due to the gradual secularization (in the Netherlands called depillarization) process end 1960s and the entrance of commercial broadcasting in the 1990s the self-evident loyalty of the members decreased, which obliged public broadcasters to rethink their relationship with the public (Bardoel, 2008).

In this contribution we firstly want to look into the different instruments of accountability and responsiveness public service broadcasting adheres to or has introduced to come closer to the public. Secondly, we want to evaluate how well different instruments are adopted within the organization structure and culture. Before presenting the answers to these questions the used methods and theoretical notions will be described.

## 2 Methodology

A case study research was conducted of the central news desk of the Dutch public broadcaster, *NOS Nieuws*, as this type of research method allows to take an in-depth look at a phenomenon in its natural setting (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 1989). *NOS Nieuws* is the central news organization within the Dutch public service broadcasting NPO [Nederlandse Publieke Omroep]. With currently more than 400 employees it is the largest newsroom in the Netherlands and provides news on television, radio, teletext and internet.

This study is specifically interested in understanding how instruments of accountability and responsiveness are received and used within the daily journalistic practice. This was done through a triangulation of methods including observations, document analysis and interviews (Yin, 1989). The research started with an observation period at the newsroom to understand the daily journalistic routine and to possibly detect informal forms of accountability and responsiveness. This included attending meetings, observing the daily working process and having informal talks with a variety of people. The documents included annual reports, memoranda, *weblogs* and internal reports. Lastly, 42 interviews at management and professional level were conducted including the editor-in-chief, deputy editors, final editors, reporters, editors and presenters. The data were gathered between August and October 2009.

## 3 Two theoretical notions: accountability and responsiveness

This study is based on two theoretical concepts: accountability and responsiveness. Accountability is a broad concept, not only limited to formal regulation, but also

embraces the wider obligations media have to their stakeholders and the way in which they render account for their performance in a dynamic interaction between parties involved (Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2002; McQuail, 2003, 1997). Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) differentiate four different types of accountability. Political accountability is associated with laws, which are obligatory for the media to follow. Market accountability relates to the forces of the market, which means that media are accountable to their consumers based on their preferences. The third type, public accountability, is the voluntary act of justifying to the public for media's journalistic choices or admitting ones mistakes. Finally, professional accountability also has a voluntary character, but is focused more internally on the media professional within the media organization or the media profession. This article will specifically focus on instruments of political and public accountability as these are used by public service broadcasters to answer to the criticism on their performance. Market accountability is not applicable to a public organization as it was created to compensate for market failure.

The second theoretical concept, responsiveness, is to a certain extent similar to public accountability as it also is directed at the public. It indicates that media take the public's concerns and wishes into consideration, "whether media listen to and provide a platform for the expression of anxieties, wants and opinions, or whether they focus on needs defined more in market terms" (Brants/Bardoel, 2008: 475). According to Brants and De Haan (2010) responsiveness can have a civic reasoning to bridge the gap with the public or a strategic motive to bind with one's public. The difference between responsiveness and public accountability is that the former relates to taking the issues of the public into account by engaging, participating and showing involvement, while the latter means justifying to the public for one's performance. Accountability has a more formal character which is often translated in formal instruments, while responsiveness is more informal and is more of an attitude than a formal policy.

## 4 Instruments of accountability

### 4.1 Political accountability

Based primarily on document and observation analysis, we will present the instruments *NOS Nieuws* adheres to or has initiated. In the Netherlands, since the beginning of public service broadcasting (PSB) political intervention through regulation has been in place to secure the scarce wavelengths and to guarantee media diversity. The responsibilities and tasks of the Dutch PSB, Netherlands Public Broadcasting Corporation (NPO) are clearly stipulated in the Dutch Media Act of 2000 (Before Broadcasting Act, 1967, 1969, 1987). With the advent of the commercial broadcasters and subsequently more commercial competition it was of vital importance for public broadcasting to demonstrate more explicitly its public functions. Whereas in the past the legitimacy of public broadcasting was mainly

manifested by the representation of different broadcasting corporations, its legitimacy is increasingly measured by more concrete performance criteria and more public accountability (Bardoel 2008; Bardoel/Brants, 2003; Van der Haak 2001).

The new version of the Media Act (2000) represented a 'paradigm shift in the perspective of the government's broadcasting policy. The main question is no longer that of who has the 'right' to broadcasting time based upon membership figures and representativeness. The main question now "becomes what Dutch society can expect" (Van der Haak, 2001: 13). Prior to the new law, the NOS had published the memorandum *Publiek in de toekomst* ['Public in the Future'] (1998), complete with concrete suggestions for new forms of 'accountability'. The most far-reaching proposition, following the example of higher education, is that of having an external assessment or visitation committee periodically test the extent to which public broadcasting is fulfilling its societal role. Even though this instrument was suggested by public broadcasting as a form of public accountability, it received a regulatory political character after it was formalized in the new version of the Media Act in 2000 (see also De Haan/Bardoel, 2009). This Act obliges Dutch PSB to organize an evaluation of the public broadcasters' performance every five years by an external assessment commission ('Visitation Commission') (Visitatie Landelijke Publieke Omroep, 2004, 2009).

Since 2000, the NOS (as part of the Dutch public broadcasting system), is also obliged to show performance and financial accountability by providing a policy plan every five years (Tussentijds concessiebeleidsplan) and a yearly budget proposal (Meerjarenbegroting). Also, since 2007, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and NPO have agreed on yearly performance agreements.

## 4.2 Public accountability

Media accountability for the PSB gradually expanded to not merely political but also public accountability in times when public legitimization was becoming less self-evident. Where the Dutch PSB NPO is primarily focused on political accountability, we see more instruments of public accountability introduced at the professional news organization, NOS *Nieuws*, as part of NPO. These instruments are described according to the sequence that they have been introduced.

In 1997 the desk '*public information services*' was introduced as a service for external contacts. Currently, it also deals explicitly with public complaints, as a result of the increasing number of complaints with the introduction of email. Not all emails are forwarded to the editorial staff, yet all of them do receive at least a standard reply.

In 2003, two independent government advisory commissions proposed specific (self)-regulatory measures after concluding that over the years media had gained more power with little accountability to counter (Council for Social Development RMO, 2003; Council for Public Governance ROB, 2003). The Minister responsible

for the media took these reports seriously and stimulated the media to take initiative. One of the proposals was to strengthen the position of the *Council of Journalism*, which has the task to evaluate journalistic behaviour of both organized and non-organized journalists and if possible, mediate in pending complaints (Mentink, 2006). *NOS Nieuws* collaborates with the Council as it goes to the hearings when summoned and publishes a rectification when grounded.

In 2005, *NOS* was one of the initiators of a *media debate organization*, *Mediadebat*, together with the journalists' union (NVJ) and the newspaper publishers' association (NDP). This idea was also suggested by the advisory commission RMO. The goal is to stimulate public and media professional debate on the quality, trustworthiness and diversity of journalism.

Besides these two suggested accountability instruments and the desk for public complaints, only very recently we see a near explosion of new introduced instruments to improve its relationship with the public in terms of legitimization, transparency and dialogue. In 2007 an *ombudsman* was introduced, with the objective to be accountable to the public, to improve the quality of the media coverage and to enhance the internal awareness of what are the societal and political issues that people are concerned about (Van Brussel, 2008).

The *ombudsman* deals with complaints coming from the public and makes attempts to stimulate a professional debate on journalistic issues. However, after less than a year the second *ombudsman* resigned due to disagreements on how the position should be fulfilled. With the resignation of the director *NOS* in May 2010 and the editor-in-chief of *NOS Nieuws* in July 2011, two advocates of accountability, it is unlikely a new *ombudsman* will be appointed.

Another public accountability instrument is the journalistic code that was introduced in 2007. Since it is available on the Internet for the public to view, it functions as an instrument of public accountability. One can hold the organization to account if it does not live up to the code.

The *Chat on Friday* is another mechanism of overt public accountability. Since 2007, every Friday after the 5 p.m. television news broadcast, the presenter has a guest in the studio related to an issue that has been widely discussed in society. Viewers are invited to ask questions to the guest through the chat function on the website of the *NOS*. This instrument started as a form of accountability where members of the management were guests, answering questions about the organization and performance of *NOS Nieuws*. More recently, this instrument has shifted to being a mechanism of responsiveness and interacting with the public when it comes to a 'hot' topic. However, as of end 2010 *NOS Nieuws* ceased applying this weekly instrument since the return on investment was negligible. The time and effort put into organizing the weekly discussion did not yield the desired public dialogue and related input.

Accountability instruments have not only been initiated in response to specific performance issues and larger societal developments. The Internet has created more potential to interact with the public and has also created more possibilities for the

public to voice their opinion on the NOS. As a result, in 2008, *weblogs* were introduced to enhance the dialogue with the public. Mainly, the management uses the *weblogs* for accountability purposes; to show transparency, to give explanation and admit mistakes. The most recent introduced accountability instrument is the online correction box in August 2009. It is comparable to the correction box in newspapers. The aim of this instrument is to correct factual or journalistic mistakes. Mistakes are published there, that are either remarked by the public or by the editorial staff.

To conclude, historically, Dutch PSB has complied with regulatory measures imposed by the Media Act. Only in very recent years, *NOS Nieuws* has made substantial attempts to voluntarily collaborate with suggested instruments and initiate instruments itself, to be accountable to the public.

## 5 Instruments of responsiveness

### 5.1 Civic responsiveness

When in 2002 the editor-in-chief came with his memorandum 'In Attack', *NOS* made a clear attempt to invest in public's concerns and be responsive to the life issues affecting ordinary citizens. The editor-in-chief clearly wanted to make shift from institutional to *public-oriented journalism* (*NOS*, 2002). He urged the news to be accessible for all citizens, thereby creating a closer bond with the public and an understanding of their perception of society - a measure that has the potential to link the news 'of the state with the street' (*NOS*, 2002). At the same time, the editor-in-chief acknowledged the difficulty of covering issues from within society and of connecting with the public. Nevertheless, he believed improvement was visible in terms of 'understanding the world of the viewer', as opposed to adhering to the 'will of the viewer' (*NOS*, 2006: 21).

Online instruments such as the *weblogs* and *Chat on Friday* have facilitated the process of public accessibility and interaction. Increasingly, the *weblogs* are not only used for accountability purposes but also as a mechanism for interaction to explicitly ask the public on their experience or opinion on a specific issue. This then takes the form of responsiveness as it tries to get a better understanding of the public's concerns. A recent implemented tool for interaction is social networking and micro-blogging service *Twitter*. A few journalists, in particular reporters, actively use *Twitter* as a way to get in contact with relevant people, to hear what is felt within society and to notify the public in an informal way about the processes of news gathering prior to the actual broadcast.

In March 2010, the most recent digital interactive mechanism was introduced, *NOS Net*. Based on the idea of the aggregated weblog Huffington Post in the US, specific people within society are addressed to inform the news organization on issues and concerns within their working and living environment, such as local politicians, policemen and tenants. According to the editor-in-chief this is a way to

'find out what people know, and not so much what people think'. It is not about collecting the opinions of people, but using their knowledge and experience to obtain a better understanding of a specific issue. Besides the technological possibilities for online interaction, *NOS Nieuws* also tries to interact with the public and engage with relevant experts by regularly inviting *guests* to the newsroom. These do not only include experts in the field such as politicians and policy makers, but increasingly groups of youth to be able to understand their view of the world and how they evaluate the news program. This has not always been the case as in the past *NOS* was known for being cautious to inviting outsiders (Van Liempt, 2005).

## 5.2 Strategic responsiveness

Next to these instruments to get a better understanding for the agenda of the public, *NOS Nieuws* increasingly wants to understand the viewing behaviour of the audience as consumers by conducting audience research. In their monopoly position, Dutch public broadcasting hardly had any attention for audience figures and audience reach as it felt to interfere with their public task (Brants/Slaa, 1994). With the advent of the commercial broadcasters the awareness for audience reach and audience share grew as it had to compete with the commercial equivalent. This indicates a strategic reasoning for doing audience research. In conclusion, looking at responsiveness historically Dutch public broadcasting was responsive to its members as it took the needs and wishes of their grassroots supporters into account. The depillarization process created a distanced relationship between public broadcasting and its public. However, this case study shows that since 2002 being responsive has returned on the agenda.

## 6 Practicing accountability: a conflict with responsibility and autonomy

Looking at the number of introduced instruments of accountability and responsiveness one can speak of a large number of instruments introduced in a short period of time. However, initiated and often formally introduced primarily by the editor-in-chief and deputy editors, the question remains to what extent the instruments are adopted in the organization. In the following, based primarily on the interviews, informal talks and observations we will evaluate to what extent these instruments of accountability and responsiveness are adopted within the organization today. Based on organizational management literature, when innovations are in the implementation phase, the instruments (usually) have a formal place and support from management (Wolfe, 1994). The incorporation phase means there is some kind of commitment of the employees to make use of the instruments (Tornatsky et al., 1983). Finally, the internalization of the instruments means the instruments are part of routinized behaviour (Berman/McLaughlin, 1974).



## 6.1 Reactive public accountability implemented

The interviewees at different levels of the organization believe that being accountable by responding to complaints and providing explanation is a must for a public organization and this has increased in importance today, coinciding with current trends in which transparency and accountability. This attitude has clearly developed over the years. A unit head said, 'In the past we would push those things aside and we were also inaccessible so the public's concerns didn't reach us. The public accountability instruments such as the *ombudsman*, the online correction box, *weblogs* and the renewed public complaints desk are felt to be a way for the NOS to come out of the ivory tower'. These instruments are implemented as they have been initiated, formalized by the management and have a permanent place in the organization.

While the majority of the editorial staff is a proponent of accountability, the actual use of the implemented instruments seems to be a step too far. When it comes to responding to complaints journalists are not too eager to respond. They ascribe this to the quality of the complaints. According to a unit head, 'There are a number of people who always complain about the language use. We don't really take them seriously'. Moreover, a recurring complaint is bias, due to the leftward leaning slant that is perceived to exist in the media. To many this is felt to be a never-ending debate and impossible to give a correct response. Paradoxically, many journalists do not respond directly to complainants as the *ombudsman* and public complaints desk serve an intermediary role.

To the journalists many instruments of accountability including public complaints desk and the *ombudsman* are not very visible in the newsroom and therefore do not feel the need to use them. The *ombudsman* and the public complaints desk are not located at the newsroom but on another floor in the building. Many journalists made similar remarks about the *ombudsman* as this editor, 'The *ombudsman* merely introduced herself to the management and unit heads. She was only once officially announced during a plenary meeting, at which I was not present. I do not know much about this function.' Moreover, many wonder what the public effect is of these instruments, taking the invested time into consideration.

## 6.2 Pro-active public accountability incorporated

Besides the implemented measures, the *weblogs* show to be not only implemented but also incorporated in the organization. This means that the instrument has a permanent place in the organization and that the staff is familiar with the instruments and makes use of them on a regular basis. All the interviewees are satisfied with the elaborate *weblogs*, serving multiple purposes. Many heads and final editors believe it to be a good instrument to elaborate on discussions and news items, showing a more open and accessible NOS. Even though this instrument is rather new, many editors or

units make use of it and have incorporated it in their daily tasks. The fact that this instrument is incorporated might be related to the pro-active character: journalists are the ones initiating a discussion on a weblog. Instruments such as the *ombudsman*, the correction box and *public information services* are reactive, since they are based on reactions from the public. However, behind this positive attitude there still conceals a defensive attitude. It is the management that encourages and sometimes even obliges journalists to use them. The journalists themselves would rather focus on informing instead of responding.

## 7 Responsiveness: a continuous struggle

Being responsive or taking the public's concerns into consideration has increased in priority at *NOS Nieuws*. These are initially prompted by civic, but increasingly also strategic motives have become important. Yet, the adoption seems to be a struggle.

### 7.1 A mix of civic and strategic responsiveness

Just like the idea of accountability, there is agreement that being responsive to the public is important. Many said, 'It is old-fashioned to present institutional news'. The unit heads and final editors were all of the opinion that public oriented journalism was introduced within the organization in response to the Fortuyn period, answering to the accusations that media had failed to see the issues of concern within society. 'We have come out of our ivory tower. In the past the *NOS* was not accessible. Now we are much more open'. Besides a response to the Fortuyn period that the editor-in-chief addressed in his memorandum (*NOS*, 2002), a majority of the interviewees attributed the increasing interaction with the public due to a rise in technological interactive instruments such as *weblogs* and social networking websites and the subsequent increasing possibilities for the public to give their opinion.

The interviews revealed that within all the civic responsive measures there are also strategic elements to bind and bond with the public in an increasingly competitive and commercial environment. Even though public service broadcasting is funded by government in order to keep up and remain an established news organization, strategies to increase viewing figures are becoming more salient as a result of increasing competition and a large number of government cuts. The interactive instruments and bringing news from a public oriented approach are attempts to attract a large viewing audience, especially the youth, which are difficult to bind.

### 7.2 Responsiveness implemented

Even though the idea of being responsive is embraced and the instruments have been implemented and used more frequently by the journalists, journalists still struggle to make use of the instruments and incorporate this idea of responsiveness within the daily processes. Practical reasons such as time constraints and scheduling can

hinder the journalists from having time to really take into account what is felt within society, collect personal accounts and search beyond statements of institutional speakers. A radio editor admitted, 'There is a permanent discussion to make news less institutional, but in practice this is very difficult to do. There are just so many broadcasts we need to prepare that there is a tendency to take the easy way out and approach an official speaker or formal spokesperson'. Moreover, many agree that it is not always possible to make the item more personal and from the perspective of 'the man in the street' since it is usually the institutions themselves that have the facts first.

There is also no agreement on the actual effectiveness of trying to reach the public. For example, many interviewees at different levels of the organization are not very satisfied with the input they receive from the public and report an imbalance between the investment and energy they put into contacting the public, and the response they receive. An economy editor said, 'We put a call through a weblog to ask people what they think of the financial and economic crisis. But we did not receive any suitable responses to be used as material for a radio or news item should be television item'. Finally, at all levels of the organization there was also some resistance to being responsive to the public, since this can conflict with the journalistic responsibility of providing factual and trustworthy news items. A final editor for the radio said, 'I do not think that people should decide what the news should be. We also have a mission to inform people about items they are not immediately aware of and we should not only bring stories that people are already informed about'. Many thus agreed with the statement '*it is the world of the viewer, not the will of the viewer*' we aim for (NOS, 2006: 21).

Overall, while there is more acknowledgment for public oriented journalism and there is willingness to adopt this in the journalistic process, bringing news from an institutional perspective appears to still be rooted within the structure and culture of the news organization. A unit head said, 'Apparently it's difficult for us to change patterns of behavior, to deviate from the way we are used to doing things'.

## 8 Conclusion

This case study of the Dutch public news organization *NOS Nieuws* illustrates a pro-active attempt in terms of self-regulatory public accountability and increasing transparency and interaction with the public. This is in line with the conclusions of Baldi/Hasebrink (2007), who classify the Netherlands' public broadcasting as one of the 'most advanced countries' regarding accountability policy. Traditionally, public broadcasters have been reluctant to be open to outsiders and to embrace participatory opportunities (Hermida, 2010; Enli, 2008; Born, 2003). Currently, many public broadcasters have been subject to criticism for not being accountable and responsive (Collins, 2007). This in combination with increased audience fragmentation and the technological interactive opportunities, public broadcasters

have felt the need to rethink and re-address their public role in society. Until not long ago *NOS Nieuws*, as part of the post-war Dutch PSB, was associated with a closed fortress, not open to outsiders, not only by the new populist movements but also among the broader population. Political accountability secured the legitimization to the public through law and regulation. Currently, not only the Dutch public broadcasting system as a whole, but the journalistic news organization has initiated measures to change this paternalistic past performance by implementing various public accountability instruments and measures to be responsive. *NOS Nieuws* has made recent attempts to regain public trust by reaching out to the public and linking issues of 'the state with the street'. Consequently we see a shift from government policy with law and regulation to editorial policy based on self-regulation. These results comply with policy shifts within other public service broadcasters in Europe, who are increasingly listening to and taking the public's voice into consideration (Collins, 2007; Eberwein et. al., 2011).

At *NOS Nieuws* there is however a difference in mind-set between management and editorial staff. To the management, being responsive and accountable to the public has increasingly become an issue of strategic importance. While among journalists there is an increasing acknowledgment that *NOS* should be more accountable to the public, the majority of the journalists do not see the need to formalize or explicate public accountability. This rather defensive attitude to the actual use of the instruments can be related to the fact that traditionally, a prerequisite for journalists to take their responsibility is to be free from any external influence. Accountability does not live easily with media freedom (Brants/Bardoel, 2008; McQuail, 2003). Even though the accountability instruments are voluntarily, journalists believe their priority lies in informing the public and not on responding to the public. This indicates that there is a strong professional journalistic culture that is based on autonomy, freedom and responsibility in which explicit accountability does not fit well.

Over the years being responsive and relating to the public has not only been an answer to performance challenges, but more and more also strategic motives to cope with increasing competition, digitalization, decreasing (young) viewing audience and changing media consumption. There is an increasing acknowledgment to take the public into consideration, to show more empathy and to bring the news in a more understandable and accessible manner. In this sense, even though market accountability does not fit in the public broadcasting system, the market is becoming more significant, with *NOS Nieuws* making use of responsive instruments with a strategic reasoning. However, both logistical reasons and cultural factors hinder this policy and related interactive instruments to be incorporated in the organization, remaining in the implementation phase. There is still a struggle to move from policy to practice. Like in many other countries, at this point there is no overall policy in which the different instruments are linked to each other (see also Eberwein et. al. 2011). This is not only related to the organizational structure, but maybe more so to the organizations and journalistic culture.

The traditional journalistic principle of autonomy still prevails within the organization, which creates tension with the increasing need to be more open and responsive. These findings relate to other public broadcasters in Western-Europe having the ambition to engage with and be more transparent to the public, but in practice still struggling (Hermida, 2010). Similarly, other research shows that while the Internet has created increased opportunities for interaction, in practice the use of interactivity by the media is still limited (Paulussen et al., 2007; Neuberger/Nuernbergk, 2010). It seems as if currently responsiveness is more a mechanism to keep the attention and loyalty of the audience than to engage in dialogue with the public. Concluding, there is agreement on the importance of legitimization vis-a-vis the public. However, preference is given to being responsive instead of being held to account as the former is more an informal attitude, which is felt to fit better with journalistic autonomy and authority. This case study has shown a growing journalism culture of checks and balances in line with the Anglo-American media policy model (see Hallin/Mancini 2004). It is now the challenge to create harmony between safeguarding journalistic authority and autonomy and at the same time opening up to the public.

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