

Public editors, ‘media governance’ and journalistic practice

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Abstract

This paper develops an analysis of the work of Ian Mayes, the first Readers’ Editor of *The Guardian*, to provide an empirically grounded reflection on the emergent role of public editors as a means of both public engagement and internal regulation. To do this, the paper positions the emergence of readers’ editors as part of a wider trend towards the adoption of mechanisms of media accountability, and engages with academic literature that has positioned this trend within an emergent paradigm of ‘media governance’. The empirical dimension of the paper is grounded in quantitative and qualitative analysis of columns written by Ian Mayes during his time as Readers’ Editor at *The Guardian*, as well as key organisational documents, aimed at uncovering important trends and issues that emerged during his time as Readers’ Editor. The findings of the data analysis suggest that, in the context of debates around media accountability and governance, there is a need to consider forms of governance such as ombudsmen in the context of broader social and organisational concerns with declining trust, managing corporate risk and providing external demonstrations of legitimacy, while also contributing to a renewed and targeted emphasis on journalistic professionalism.

Keywords: Media governance, Accountability, Public Editors, Journalistic Practice, The Guardian, Ian Mayes

Introduction

This paper develops an analysis of the work of Ian Mayes, the first ‘Readers’ Editor’ of *The Guardian*, to develop an empirically grounded reflection on the emergent role of public editors as a means of both public engagement and internal regulation. To do this, the paper begins by positioning the emergence of readers’ editors as part of a wider trend towards the adoption of mechanisms of media accountability, and engages with academic literature that has positioned this trend within an emergent paradigm of ‘media governance’. To a considerable extent, this work has tended to adopt a

normative and functionalist perspective on accountability. Some work, however, has sought to position the development of the adoption of more formalised mechanisms of accountability within a shifting social and political context, and to consider the conditions, motivations and interests underpinning this trend. Drawing on this work, this paper considers how this trend towards the introduction of public editors can be seen not only as the adoption of ‘best practice’ governance, but emerges from a social context in which arresting declining trust, managing corporate risk and providing external demonstrations of legitimacy have become paramount concerns for media organisations, which have also contributed to a renewed and targeted emphasis on journalistic professionalism. To some extent, a consideration of this context returns us to a question asked by earlier scholars regarding whether the practice of news ombudsmen, also referred to as public editors or readers’ editors, served as a basis of accountability or public relations. An initial analysis of findings suggests that this should not be regarded as a foregone conclusion and that, while it is important to maintain a critical perspective on the reasons underpinning such developments, it is equally vital that we keep an open mind regarding their impacts.

‘Media accountability’ and ‘media governance’

In Britain, following the development of the role of Readers’ Editor by *The Guardian* in 1997, a number of other newspapers followed suit, including *The Observer*, *The Independent* and *The Daily Mirror* (Mayes 2004). This growing trend towards the introduction within media organisations of formal positions concerned to publicly promote journalistic accountability, and engage with public concerns regarding actual or potential problems of journalism was mirrored across the Atlantic when, in 2003, *The New York Times* reversed its previous opposition to employing an external

ombudsman, hiring the first in a series of ‘public editors’ employed on fixed term contracts to investigate instances where the paper may have breached its own standards, and to write a fortnightly column commenting on the paper’s practices. These developments follow a larger trend toward the development and adoption of various mechanisms of accountability and self-regulation that have, in recent years gained increasing attention (Bardoel and D’Haenens 2004; Bertrand 2002; McQuail 2003; Meier and Perrin 2007). To a large extent, the existing literature has tended to welcome this trend, positioning it within a neutral framework of ethics and accountability, while seeking to contribute to the question of developing best practice systems of media governance. Such work has also positioned ‘governance’ as a new paradigm of media regulation that provides an enhanced set of mechanisms for understanding and acting upon forms of media practice. ‘Governance’, in such definitions, refers to the rules that are developed in order to mediate the relations between interdependent actors, that emerge socially as a means of mutually established and more or less formalised rules of conduct (Donges 2007). ‘Governance’, as a term, can be distinguished from ‘government’ in two senses. On one hand, as Manuel Puppis puts it, ‘a media governance perspective not only underlines the relevance of non-statutory regulation but also questions the role of the state’ (2007: 330). While not excluding the state, governance perspectives place emphasis on a shift toward forms of private regulation through models of structures and practices of self- and co-regulation (Puppis 2007: 331), that also occur in contexts where regional and global regulation serve to displace the nation-state as regulatory centre. As Mitchell Dean (2007) has argued, this descriptive justification for analysis of governance is frequently tied to a prescriptive advocacy of it as both an inevitable and positive development. The second distinction between governance and

government is that while the former tends to be viewed as an exercise of (usually sovereign) power, the latter tends to be positioned in apolitical terms as a mode through which the interests and concerns of different actors may be mutually mediated through the development of transparent rules.

Some, however, have sought to provide a more critical and analytical perspective on trends in media governance. For example, in her analysis of the development of new accountability and audit mechanisms at the BBC, Georgina Born positions these as a 'visible performance of accountability as an attempted means of strengthening the BBC's legitimation' (2003: 64). Born positions this development at the intersection of numerous forces impacting the BBC, including ongoing government hostility, regulatory change and increased competition, technological change and the development of a crisis of legitimation and funding for the organisation. At the same time, Born positions the deployment of accountability and audit mechanisms at the BBC as consistent with a broader 'new managerialism' that is characteristic of a broader 'audit culture' that emerged in 1990s Britain.

Clearly, a consideration of newspapers requires a different analysis, not least because of the very different regulatory circumstances that pertain to commercial newspapers and public service media respectively. Nevertheless, there remain points of intersection between the two, not least in the manner in which the trend toward 'accountability', in both cases, can be seen to be influenced by the rise of what Michael Power describes as 'audit culture'. While designed to build trust, 'audit' and 'accountability' seek to address the risks faced by media organisations as a consequence of a documented decline in public trust in media institutions, as 'audits become needed when accountability can be sustained no longer by formal relations of trust alone but must be formalised' (Power 1997 quoted in Born 2003: 67). As Daniel

Hallin (2008) has argued in relation to the US, this decline is consistent with a more general suspicion of forms of public authority following transformations in the sociopolitical and economic conditions that had underpinned a (relative) post-war political consensus that made claims to represent a unitary 'public interest'. This was exacerbated as a consequence of the effect of shifts in the political economy of media organizations, particularly as these increasingly came to operate under the auspices of shareholder-owned conglomerates. For Hallin (2008), these trends contributed to, and were reciprocally influenced by, the emergence of neo-liberalism and its orientation towards markets as the predominant basis of social legitimacy.

In light of these trends, an increased focus on accountability must be understood not merely as attendant to an emergent ethical paradigm of governance, but as an important element within risk management strategies that, to a considerable extent, have become imperative because of these transformations. Indeed, it is notable that the establishment of the public editor position at *The New York Times* (NYT) occurred in the wake of the Jayson Blair scandal, as part of a broader set of initiatives designed to protect and promote public credibility. Central to these initiatives was a commitment to increased dialogue with the public that, apart from the establishment of a public editor, also included initiatives such as moderated question and answer sessions between senior editors and the NYT readership (Keller 2005). In a similar move to strengthen communication with its readership, *The Guardian's* 'Editorial Code', updated in April 2007, sets out a key range of organizational and regulatory processes, whose purpose is 'above all, to protect and foster the bond of trust between the Guardian (in print and online) and its readers, and therefore to protect the integrity of the paper and of the editorial content that it carries' (Guardian 2007:1). As this code makes explicit, for *The Guardian* 'the most important currency is trust'

(Guardian 2007: 1), and a key way in which trust is to be built is through communication. Accountability, in this sense, is explicitly embraced on the basis of an ‘enlightened self-interest’, and here it is notable that this is consistent with a tradition of work surround the perceived benefits of ombudsmen to news organizations. For example, major advantages of the role are seen to include increased accessibility for readers, which is claimed to produce not only increased sensitivity to readers’ perspectives, but also strengthen readers’ loyalty to the newspaper. Other perceived advantages include the perception the paper is serious about accountability (Pritchard 1993); an enhanced dispute resolution process and reduction of litigation (Press Gazette 2007); and that the role provides for a more efficient and effective management of complaints, thereby promoting the paper’s self-regulation credentials and reducing the threat of unwanted governmental interference (van Dalen and Deuze 2006).

While, by comparison to work addressing accountability and governance in theoretical terms, work that addresses the actual performance of ombudsmen is limited, investigations by Nemeth and Sanders (1999, 2001) provide a useful typology categorising the engagement of ombudsmen’s published columns as ‘public relations behaviour’, ‘accountability’ and ‘criticism’ (Nemeth and Sanders 1999: 4-5). Using this schema, columns are measured on a continuum from ‘explain[ing] the ombudsmen viewpoint of the newspaper’s behaviour’ (1999: 4), through to ‘the informed, analytical evaluation and judgment of a newspaper’s behaviour’, to columns that engaged in criticism of the ombudsman’s own paper (1999: 4). Findings support the arguments made by others (Ettema and Glasser 1987, Van Dalen and Deuze 2006), that ombudsmen columns tend to be dominated by public relations behaviour, and tend to focus more on correcting ‘errors of fact’ (objective errors) than

errors of judgment (subjective errors) (Nemeth and Sanders 2001). Whether such findings for US ombudsmen apply in the case of public editors, however, remains in question.

Methods

The primary data for this paper is the published columns of Ian Mayes, the first Readers' Editor for *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK from 1997-2007. *The Guardian* was selected for analysis as it is an international leader in terms of innovating with the creation of an ombudsman, while Ian Mayes has been influential as an ombudsman, both within *The Guardian* and internationally through his subsequent position as President of the Organization of News Ombudsmen, an international organization for ombudsmen from all media.

In total, 93 of Ian Mayes' articles, published under the heading 'Open Door', were available on the newspaper's website when data collection for this paper in 2009 was undertaken. All articles were analysed using quantitative and qualitative techniques. A quantitative coding sheet was developed to identify and count items such as the topic of the article, the sources and materials used in the article, and the focus of the article in relation to journalism and the role of the Readers' Editor. Textual qualitative analysis was undertaken to focus on issues including the type of language being used, and the practice of the ombudsman as discussed in his own words. 'Open Door' articles directly quoted in this paper are referred to by their code number, assigned by order of publication.

Findings

The position of Readers' Editor was introduced to the Guardian in 1997 in the context of debates and concerns about journalism standards and practice. Reflecting on this period some 10 years later, Mayes commented that '[w]hen I started, the whole of the British media was gripped in a culture of denial-a resistance to correcting' (Mayes 2007). For Mayes:

The key principle is a simple one: news organizations that, almost by definition, constantly call others to account should be more readily accountable and open themselves, and should be seen to be so. (Mayes, 2004)

Other key elements of the position of the readers' editor include requirements that the readers' editor should be independent, have access to staff within the organization, and be able to operate so as to increase accountability of members of the organization, in particular in their relations with their readership (Guardian 2009).

Within this formal organisational context, we now turn to analyse key aspects of how the role of the Readers' Editor operates in everyday organisational practice. As indicated in Table One, in the more than 75% of articles that deal with some sort of 'error', a relatively small percentage (11%) deal with errors of fact, or 'objective errors', such as misspellings or minor misquotes. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that many such errors of fact would be dealt with in the separate daily corrections column in the newspaper. This means that 64% of columns engaged with questions of interpretation and judgement on the part of journalists and editors, or 'subjective' issues. Much more so than mistakes of fact, question of interpretation and judgement are the potential source of highly sensitive discussions within the newsroom, as they directly raise questions around journalistic and editorial competence and standards in a way that may threaten professional boundaries. In such cases, the formal and informal processes put in place in the organization to deal with these issues are of critical importance, and will be discussed shortly.

Table One
Focus of column

	N	(%)
Error of fact	11	(11.8%)
Journalistic interpretation and judgement	19	(20.35%)
Editorial interpretation and judgement	41	(44%)
N/A	22	(23.6%)
Total	93	(100%)

Source: Authors' data collection of Mayes' articles from Guardian website

In terms of the tone and approach of the articles, the majority were either supportive (50%) of journalism practice or neutral (26%), with almost a quarter of articles being outright critical (10%) or containing some element of critical engagement (14%).

This 24% of articles is of particular importance in providing a space in which the Readers' Editor reflects on journalism and editorial practice. It is important to note, however, that such reflection also occurs, even in some more supportive articles.

In these critical articles, Mayes also took the opportunity to reflect on his role as a readers' editor, engaging with issues including the creation of trust between the newspaper and the reader, the opening up of communication between the newspaper and the readers, and within the newspaper, and the critical importance of the relationship between the ombudsman and the organisation. To give an example, on one occasion, Mayes wrote that:

What self-regulation at the Readers' Editor level depends upon is a recognition that news media organizations that call upon others to be open and accountable should be open and accountable themselves. That necessarily requires discussion of the relationship between the news organization and its readers, listeners or viewers (Mayes, 024).

In addition to these calls for communication and engagement, it is important to note that on a number of occasions (n = 15, 16%), Mayes provided explicit recommendations for action to engage with specific issues and identified who should be responsible for undertaking such action. As such, the work of the ombudsman goes beyond identifying challenges or responding to the concerns of readers, to providing recommendations for action, ranging from use of inappropriate language (Mayes, 091) through to controversial decisions such as whether it was right to publish a camera phone photographic image of the hanging of Saddam Hussein (Mayes, 083). In analysing such columns, it is evident that Mayes gave readers an opportunity to have their say. Readers' comments and reflections were then used by Mayes as a basis for internal discussion and reflection within the organization, through means such as meetings and internal polls with staff, and conversations with individual journalists, often with the goal of making recommendations around modifying journalism practice.

Conclusions

While the findings from a single case study cannot be generalised, the data presented in this paper is suggestive of important ways in which *The Guardian*, through the introduction of a Readers' Editor, is actively engaging in developing new forms of organisational practice around media accountability and governance. For example, the data reveals a concern within the organisation to create processes through which the work of journalists and editors can be open to discussion and engagement, both internally and externally. At the same time, the data also indicates an increased emphasis on holding journalists and editors to account in contexts of errors of fact, judgement and interpretation. In such instances, in particular, where issues of

journalistic judgement are being discussed, the approach of Mayes as reported in his columns has been to create a process of dialogue in which the views and insights of those directly involved in the article are given a space to discuss and reflect, in dialogue with others in the news organization and with the public.

While these results merely represent some preliminary findings in an ongoing study, they suggest that there may be a need to reconsider the binary terms in which debates on media governance and accountability tend to be structured. On one hand, positions on media governance tend to be overly idealistic, and consequently to ignore the manner in which trends toward accountability emerge as a consequence of particular material and discursive influences that have served to place the management of trust and risk as key concerns, rather than as the embodiment of a normative ethical project. On the other, critiques of accountability may too readily rely upon a moralised dichotomy between 'public relations' and 'accountability'. While there can be little doubt that a strong motivation of such initiatives is to demonstrate a visible public performance of accountability, it does not follow that such initiatives are either insignificant or negative. This case study provides an important example of a process through which reflective processes within organisations are providing a means for discussion to occur around journalistic practice which involves a range of actors, including the public who had previously been largely excluded from such processes. These initiatives can also be seen as part of what Aldridge and Evetts (2003) have identified as a renewed and targeted emphasis on journalistic professionalism which demand much greater investigation.

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