

# Indicators for evaluating media accountability

## Indicadores para evaluar la rendición de cuentas en los medios de comunicación

### *Indicadores para avaliar a prestação de contas na mídia*

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**ABSTRACT** | This research aims to determine key indicators to assess the capacity for transparency, self-regulation, and user participation, accountability's three dimensions. We adopted a triple methodological starting point: a systematic review of literature on accountability indicators and their characteristics, a mapping of mainstream media that have accountability indicators, and media accountability assessment. We obtained a system of 11 key indicators to measure and compare media websites and determine whether they comply with the three key dimensions of accountability. This system can be applied in multiple settings to promote quality journalism.

**KEYWORDS:** accountability; journalism; ethics; indicators; transparency; self-regulation; participation; users; audience.

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**RESUMEN** | *Esta investigación tiene como objetivo determinar indicadores clave para evaluar la capacidad de transparencia, autorregulación y participación de los usuarios, las tres dimensiones de la accountability. Se adoptó un triple punto de partida metodológico: revisión sistemática de literatura sobre indicadores de accountability y sus características, un mapeo de medios de referencia con indicadores de accountability, y evaluación de medios. Se obtuvo un sistema de 11 indicadores clave para medir y establecer comparaciones entre sitios web de medios de comunicación y determinar si satisfacen las tres dimensiones clave de la rendición de cuentas y los elementos asociados. Dicho sistema puede ser aplicado en múltiples escenarios para fomentar un periodismo de calidad.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *rendición de cuentas; periodismo; ética; indicadores; transparencia; autorregulación; participación; usuarios; audiencia.*

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**RESUMO** | *Esta pesquisa visa determinar indicadores-chave para avaliar a capacidade de transparência, autorregulação e participação dos usuários, as três dimensões da “prestação de contas”. Um ponto de partida metodológico triplo foi adotado: uma revisão sistemática da literatura sobre indicadores de prestação de contas e suas características, um mapeamento dos meios de referência com indicadores de prestação de contas, e avaliação da mídia. Um sistema de 11 indicadores-chave foi obtido para medir e comparar sites de mídia e determinar se eles satisfazem as três dimensões-chaves da prestação de contas e os elementos associados. Tal sistema pode ser aplicado em múltiplos ambientes para fomentar o jornalismo de qualidade.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *prestação de contas; jornalismo; ética; indicadores; transparência; autoregulação; participação, usuários; público.*

## INTRODUCTION

Journalism is undergoing multiple transformations that directly affect all phases of the information process, including the production, dissemination, and consumption of news. The digital revolution (Carlson & Lewis, 2019) has multiplied the dissemination platforms, the ways of presenting content, the possibilities for obtaining information, as well as for deepening the relationship with audiences. In a complex and constantly evolving scenario, journalism faces structural changes of the first magnitude, such as the turbulence caused by the economic crisis, the decline in advertising investment, and the collapse of traditional business models (Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2020; Waisbord, 2019). Likewise, news cycles have accelerated dramatically (Usher, 2018), and journalistic companies are oriented towards metrics (Nelson, 2019). Media are “progressively orienting their production and circulation strategies towards recommendation, rankings and other types of end-user facing algorithms” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4280). This has led, on many occasions, to the rise of clickbait and spectacularization (Ferrucci, 2020). Added to this is the progressive expansion of disinformation (Amazeen, 2020), a phenomenon that exacerbates the crisis of trust and credibility of journalism (Serazio, 2019).

En este contexto convulso, los profesionales de la información deben mantener la ética y la excelencia informativa como objetivos fundamentales (Christians et al., 2009). Según la teoría normativa de los medios, las empresas comunicativas son “actores morales, esto es, entidades dotadas de una consciencia e intencionalidad ética” (Luengo et al., 2017, p. 1147). Por ello, parte ineludible de su responsabilidad es involucrarse activamente en la tarea de fomentar la rendición de cuentas (*accountability*).

This concept refers to the “imperative that forces an actor to respond, explain and/or justify his/her behavior to other individuals or institutions” (Ramon-Vegas et al., 2020, p. 222). In the journalistic field, this action emphasizes the “commitment of the media to answer for their professional practice before society” (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon-Vegas, 2017, p. 916). Accountability pursues “protecting and promoting freedom of expression”, “preventing or limiting the harm that the media may cause”, and “promoting positive benefits to society” (McQuail, 1997, p. 525). It is closely linked to the social responsibility of journalism and journalists to society (Harcup, 2021; Lee & Riffe, 2017). As Plaisance (2000) emphasizes, “to be accountable is, in fact, to be responsible” (p. 260). Ramon-Vegas and Mauri-Ríos (2020) have concretized the concept of media accountability in three key dimensions: transparency, audience participation, and self-regulation.

**Dimension 1. Transparency.** This refers to the public dissemination of corporate information (principles and values, organizational composition and structure, financial situation) and to explaining ethical standards, as well as editorial processes and decisions in a clear and accessible way (Craft & Vos, 2021; Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017). In recent years, the concern for ensuring information transparency vis-à-vis the public has acquired a central role in multiple areas (Díez-Garrido et al., 2019).

**Dimension 2. Audience participation.** The media progressively abandon the notion of the audience as a passive agent to encourage their discursive and creative participation (López-Cepeda et al., 2019). The audience creates content (*produser*) and participates through digital platforms (Bruns, 2015; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2020). In the era of digital deliberation (Masip et al., 2019), the direct relationship with audiences in their creation, review, and critique of information is encouraged (Eberwein et al., 2011; Fuente-Cobos et al., 2014; Pérez-Díaz et al., 2020). Audiences can play a transformative role, co-responsible for the activity of journalistic information accountability (Culver, 2017). The willingness to encourage participation is intrinsic to the role of the media, given its “enormous responsibility not only to inform truthfully, but also to listen and give voice to the citizenry” (Moreno-Gil, 2019, p. 55).

**Dimension 3. Self-regulation.** Emphasizes the ability of the media and its professionals to establish their own guidelines for action and avoid excessive regulation by governments (Marqués-Pascual & González-Peláez, 2020). It takes the form of codes of conduct and other mechanisms created by the media to ensure responsible journalistic work (Fengler et al., 2014; Eberwein & Porlezza, 2016).

These three dimensions are channeled through a wide range of accountability instruments. For Bertrand (2018), they are mechanisms driven by companies, journalists, organizations, and citizens, without State intervention (Eberwein et al., 2011) to ensure media accountability and the quality of the information product.

This paper seeks to offer a system of indicators that will allow the media and the general public (as the ultimate recipient of journalism’s essential function) to determine whether journalism is adequately accountable, based on the three dimensions mentioned above.

## STATE OF THE ART RESEARCH ON MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY INSTRUMENTS

A large part of the studies at national and international level examines ethical codes and stylebooks (Alsuis, 1999; Aznar, 1999; Díaz-Campo & Chaparro Domínguez, 2020; Marqués-Pascual & González-Peláez, 2020; Wilkins & Brenner,

2004), recognized as the traditional mechanisms with the greatest relevance for professional practice, as shown by the results of the Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe –MediaAcT– project (Fengler et al., 2014). This research, coordinated by the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism (EBI), surveyed 1,762 journalists from 14 European countries and the Arab world (Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Jordan, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom). Stylebooks were the most highly rated accountability tools by journalists (3.74 out of 5 points).

The study of the reader ombudsman figure has also received preferential attention in Europe and the United States (Ferrucci, 2019; Maciá, 2006; Nolan & Marjoribanks, 2011; Ramon-Vegas et al., 2019, van Dalen & Deuze, 2006). The roles of other traditional instruments, such as media criticism (Fengler, 2003), letters to the editor (Pastor, 2010; Raeymaeckers, 2005; Wahl Jorgensen, 2002) or news tips (Mauri-Ríos et al., 2018; Suárez Villegas, 2015) have also been extensively addressed.

As Plaisance (2000) points out, accountability is a constantly evolving phenomenon. Recent works study new possibilities in the online environment, such as media criticism blogs (Cheruiyot, 2017), criticism in social networks (Eberwein et al., 2011), comments on published content (Craft et al., 2016), error notification and correction systems (Moreno-Gil, 2019), dynamic Twitter stylebooks (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon-Vegas, 2017), and corporate transparency mechanisms (Campos-Domínguez & RedondoGarcía, 2015). These innovative mechanisms inject the profession with new ways to incentivize transparency, self-regulation, and participation, helping to overcome the limitations linked to traditional instruments.

Other researches map the existing instruments in the Spanish context. Alsius and colleagues (2011) provide an overview of traditional mechanisms, complemented by subsequent snapshots on innovative instruments (García-Avilés, 2019; Mauri-Ríos & Ramon-Vegas, 2015). Rodríguez-Martínez and collaborators (2017) analyzed 60 mechanisms created exogenously to the media in the autonomous communities of Catalonia, Galicia, Madrid, and Valencia. The history and peculiarities of accountability initiatives in the Catalan context were addressed by Almiron and colleagues (2016). Likewise, the mapping of accountability instruments in specialized areas, such as sports journalism, has been promoted (Ramon-Vegas & Rojas-Torrijos, 2017). Ramon-Vegas and Mauri Ríos (2020) completed the mapping of accountability instruments in the Spanish landscape, focusing on analyzing citizen perception and how accountability facilitates participation.

## OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Despite the extensive literature on media accountability, no research has been developed that specifies which indicators can be used to evaluate the three dimensions of accountability: transparency, audience participation, and self-regulation. This article seeks to fill this gap by presenting a standardized system of indicators to identify the extent to which a media outlet is accountable. Such a system also makes it possible to quantify these parameters and compare different media websites to determine which ones meet them more adequately. As a complementary objective, the study compiles the most relevant cases of international media that include accountability indicators, with special emphasis on mapping the existing instruments in the Spanish media system.

To develop these indicators, we adopted a three-stage methodological strategy. First, we conducted a systematic literature review on accountability, identifying the indicators of internal accountability to the media existing in the international panorama and determining their characteristics. Based on the key academic references detected (Bastian, 2019; Bertrand, 2018; Domingo & Heikkilä, 2012; Eberwein et al., 2018; Fengler, 2003; Fengler et al., 2014; Fengler et al., 2015; García-Avilés, 2019; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Pérez-Díaz et al., 2020; Silva & Paulino, 2007), we created a system of dimensions and indicators to assess media accountability (table 1). To systematize these indicators, the map of accountability instruments in the Spanish scenario elaborated by Ramon-Vegas and Mauri-Ríos (2020) was considered and completed. Our research defines the accountability instruments detected in the literature and assigns them a scoring system that makes it possible to evaluate the degree of accountability of a medium. Secondly, a mapping of media with some of the mentioned indicators was carried out in the three geographical areas of reference for the development of accountability initiatives: Europe, North America, and Latin America (Bastian, 2019; Eberwein et al., 2018). Reference media were selected from those territories where these accountability instruments have traditionally been more deeply rooted and developed (Ramon-Vegas et al., 2016).

These were identified by means of a twofold system. On the one hand, non-probabilistic convenience sampling (Ruiz Olabuénaga et al., 1998) was used among reference media from different countries in the three areas referenced in the literature reviewed. On the other, the snowball sampling strategy (Goodman, 1961) was used on the basis of subjects or experiences that appear in the literature reviewed. Starting from a small number of media, other cases are located. The selection also sought to offer media of all typologies: print newspapers, native digital media, which since their genesis incorporated accountability mechanisms (Benson, 2018), radios, and television channels (table 2). No media presents all the accountability indicators included here. However, the media mapping allowed the identification of reference models for each of the indicators.

<b>Dimension 1. Transparency</b>	
1.1	Editorial blog.
1.2	Web section with corporate information.
1.3	Other transparency tools: open news lists of topics in production, video explanations of editorial decisions, online broadcasting of editorial boards news lists, video explanations of editorial decisions, online broadcasting of editorial board meetings.
<b>Dimension 2. Self-regulation</b>	
2.1	Reader/audience ombudsman.
2.2	Media style guideline.
2.3	Other self-regulatory tools: a section, space, or blog prepared by journalists dedicated to the critical reflection of the contents published by other media.
<b>Dimension 3. User participation</b>	
3.1	Users' comments on the news published on the media's website.
3.2	User's comments on social networks.
3.3	Error correction input buttons.
3.4	Users' contributions to content creation and review.
3.5	Other participation tools: letters to the editor, chats and digital meetings with readers, mailbox for sending confidential material, etc.

**Table 1. Dimensions and indicators for assessing media accountability**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

After drawing up the list of accountability indicators and identifying the reference media that have them, we applied the methodology for obtaining and documenting indicators (Codina, 2000) to articulate a system for measuring the degree of accountability of a media outlet. For each indicator, categories of analysis were established:

- Presentation and characteristics Definition
  - › Specific characteristics
  - › Reference models
- Assessment
  - › Analysis
  - › Score
  - › Remarks

The scoring proposal for evaluating the analyzed media is presented in table 3.

Territory	Country	Media
North America	United States	The New York Times
		The Washington Post
		Associated Press
		National Public Radio – NPR
		ProPublica
		MinnPost
		Texas Tribune
	Canada	The Globe and Mail
Latin America	Brazil	O Globo
	Ecuador	El Comercio
	Chile	El Mercurio
	Colombia	El Tiempo
	Uruguay	El País
	United Kingdom	The Guardian
		BBC
		The Economist
		La Repubblica
	Italy	La Repubblica
	Belgium	De Standaard
Europa		El País
		El Mundo
		La Vanguardia
		ABC
		El Periódico de Catalunya
		ARA
		ElDiario.es
		La Marea
		Fíltrala
		RTVE

**Table 2. Geographical areas and reference media with some accountability indicators**

*Source: Own elaboration.*



Score	Type of media
0–5	Weak accountability orientation.
6–10	Partially favors accountability.
11–15	Actively encourages accountability.

**Table 3. Media accountability evaluation scale**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

The proposed system guarantees: (1) the operability of the indicators, i.e., that the elements to be analyzed are effectively measurable or assessable; (2) the transparency and intersubjectivity of each indicator, and (3) the replicability or extension of such indicators by other research teams.

## RESULTS

### Dimension 1. Transparency

#### Indicator 1.1. Editorial blog

- **Definition:** the media has a blog or space designed to deepen the news production processes. This space can be used to present the news of the editorial project. Thus, the transparency of the journalistic task is promoted and a process of public reflection on this task is opened.
- **Specific features:** in order to optimize its proper functioning as an accountability instrument, the following should be observed:
  - › Dissemination of the instrument's existence.
  - › Regularity and constant publication updates.
  - › Explanation of the novelties of the editorial project and commentary on the coverage developed.
  - › Need to clearly demarcate the entries dedicated to informative processes and those focused on cross-promotion of media products.
  - › Possibility for readers to comment and response from the editorial staff.
- **Reference models:** some key blogs are those promoted by *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/help/insideguardian>), *Eldiario.es* (<http://www.eldiario.es/redaccion/>), and *El País*, with its blog *El País que hacemos* ([https://elpais.com/agr/el\\_pais\\_que\\_hacemos/a/](https://elpais.com/agr/el_pais_que_hacemos/a/)).

## Assessment

- **Assessment:** Is there a newsroom blog or other space for editorial transparency?
- **Scoring:** 0/0.5/1 (0: this space does not exist; 0.5: the space exists, but does not meet several of its essential characteristics; 1: the space exists and meets the specified features).

### *Indicator 1.2. Section on the website with corporate information*

- **Definition:** on its website, the media must provide corporate information that allows users to clearly understand the editorial principles and business characteristics under which it conducts its informative activity.
- **Specific features:** the section must contain the following information:
  1. **Audience:** information on audience figures.
  2. **Year of foundation and trajectory:** year of foundation and history of the media, relevant coverage, and changes in ownership.
  3. **Ownership and membership to a media group:** information on public or private ownership. Specify whether the company belongs to a media group and the relationship with other companies.
  4. **Public accounts and financial statements:** easily accessible information on the annual income statements and financial statements of the medium. The financing model and sources of income of the business model can also be detailed. If the media outlet receives a subsidy or State aid, specify the amount and the reasons for it.
  5. **Mission, objectives and editorial trend:** information on the ideological trend and editorial positioning of the medium, as well as its mission.
  6. **Organization/members of the editorial staff and management:** information about the structure of the media (departments, sections), about the professionals (biography, image, email or link to their publications and information about their profiles on social networks), and the members of the board of directors.

To be effectively accountable, the media must include this information on their website. The inclusion of this data on a media group's website makes it difficult for users to locate.

- **Reference models:** the *About Us* sections of *MinnPost* ([www.minnpost.com/about/](http://www.minnpost.com/about/)), *ProPublica* ([www.propublica.org/about/](http://www.propublica.org/about/)), and *The Texas Tribune*

([www.texastribune.org/about/](http://www.texastribune.org/about/)) provide a wide range of elements of corporate transparency. The digital newspaper *Eldiario.es* ([https://www.eldiario.es/escolar/periodismo-servicio-publicocuentas-eldiarioes\\_6\\_907169284.html](https://www.eldiario.es/escolar/periodismo-servicio-publicocuentas-eldiarioes_6_907169284.html)) clearly details its finances. Through the *Memória* section (<http://memoria.oglobo.globo.com>), the Brazilian newspaper *O Globo* presents an overview of its history over the years.

#### Assessment

- Assessment: Does the medium have a section on its website where corporate information is provided?
- Scoring: 0-3 (0.5 points for each of the items described).

#### Indicator 1.3. Other tools that promote transparency

##### Presentation and features

- Definition: existence of other innovative tools implemented by the media, such as open news lists, videos explaining editorial decisions, online broadcasting of editorial boards, or other spaces to explain editorial processes.
- *Specific features*: to optimize their proper functioning as an instrument of accountability, transparency tools should observe the following aspects:
  - › Dissemination of the instrument's existence.
  - › Permanent use and updating.
  - › Possibility to later consult the information in a repository or archive hosted on the media's website.
- Reference models: so far, this type of tool has been used by media such as *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/open-newslist>) or *La Repubblica* (<http://video.repubblica.it/rubriche/repubblica-domani/>).

#### Assessment

- Assessment: Has the media developed other transparency tools?
- Score: 0/1 (0: no other tools exist; 0.5: other tools exist, but do not meet several of their essential characteristics –for example: regularity of use and updating–; 1: other tools do exist and meet the specified characteristics).
- Comments: if any, explain the nature and operation of these transparency tools.

## Dimension 2. Self-regulation

### Indicator 2.1. Reader/audience ombudsman

- Definition: the figure of the ombudsman is clearly one of the mechanisms that the media have to exercise their work with a better ethical level. The ombudsman must collect complaints from readers, listeners, or viewers on various aspects of substance or form, talk to journalists and producers, and give a public response through a blog or specific section.
- *Specific features*: to optimize its proper performance as an accountability instrument, the following aspects should be observed:
  - › Disseminate the existence of this figure.
  - › Constant regularity of publication and updating of its site.
  - › Clearly indicate the procedure for sending complaints, comments and suggestions.
  - › Discussing issues related to journalistic ethics and quality.
  - › It is recommended that the term of the work period should not exceed three years.
- Reference models: in general, the media that have incorporated this figure are usually among the most prestigious in their respective countries. There is a list of the members of the ONO (Organization of News Ombudsmen) and the media they represent at <https://www.newsombudsmen.org/regularmembers/>. *The Guardian's Open Door* blog (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/open-door>) and Elizabeth Jensen's blog in *NRP* (<https://www.npr.org/sections/ombudsman/>) are references in the international arena.

#### Assessment

- Assessment. Does the media have a reader/audience ombudsman?
- Score: 0/0.5/1 (0: the media does not have an ombudsman; 0.5: the media has an ombudsman, but its space is not updated; 1: the media has an updated reader/audience ombudsman space).

### Indicator 2.2. Media style guideline

- Definition: document that establishes the linguistic (syntactic and lexical correctness) or stylistic (media preferences regarding the way of writing) recommendations, as well as the professional's procedures and resources, and deontological behavior, to be followed in a journalistic company to develop a quality product.

- *Specific features:* to optimize its proper functioning as an instrument of accountability, the following aspects should be observed:
  - › Dissemination of the instrument's existence.
  - › The style guide must serve its dual function.
  - › The style guidelines must be updated and adapted to issues related to the digital environment and social networks.
  - › The style guidelines cannot be an instrument of restricted circulation and must be accessible through the media's website.
  - › Optimally, offer the possibility for users to participate in the review and update process.
  - › As a complement, promote the implementation of dynamic style guidelines in social networks.
- Reference models: *The New York Times* with its *Ethical Journalism. A Handbook of Values and Practices for the News and Editorial Departments* (<https://www.nytimes.com/editorial-standards/ethical-journalism.html>); *BBC's Editorial Guidelines* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/>), or the *Manual de Estilo de RTVE* (<http://manualdeestilo.rtve.es>) are references to be considered. The *Manual de Buenas Prácticas de El Comercio* (Ecuador) (<http://www.grupoelcomercio.com/images/pdf/redes.pdf>) provides specific guidelines on journalistic performance in social networks. Some media pioneers in the introduction of dynamic stylebooks on Twitter are *The Guardian* (@Guardianstyle), *The Economist* (@Econstyleguide), or AP (APStylebook).

#### Media assessment

- Assessment: Does the media have a code of ethics or style guideline?
- Score: 0/1.5/3 (0: the media does not have the instrument; 1.5: the media has a style guideline, but it is not accessible online; 3: the media has the instrument and it is accessible online).

#### Indicator 2.3. Other self-regulatory instruments

- Definition: the media has other self-regulation instruments, such as a section, space or blog prepared by journalists dedicated to critical reflection on the contents published by other media.

- Specific features:
  - › To optimize its accountability function, this section or space should not only deal with industry news, information on audiences or focus on personalities/celebrities, but should also promote debate and critical reflection on journalistic content published by other media. Regularity in the publication of contents must be ensured.
- Reference models: the *Media* section of *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/topic/subject/media>) is a relevant international example. *Pareu Màquines en Ara* favors media criticism ([https://www.ara.cat/etiquetes/pareu\\_maquines.html](https://www.ara.cat/etiquetes/pareu_maquines.html)), complementing Mònica Planas' columns ([https://www.ara.cat/firmes/monica\\_planas/](https://www.ara.cat/firmes/monica_planas/)) on television criticism and journalistic reflection.

#### Assessment

- Assessment: Is there a section, space, or blog dedicated to media criticism?
- Score: 0/0.5/1 (0: this space does not exist; 0.5: the space exists, but does not meet several of its essential characteristics; 1: this space does exist).

### Dimension 3: user participation

#### Indicator 3.1. User comments on the news published on the media's website

##### Presentation and features

- Definition: the media allows users to comment on published information, read, and respond to comments previously made.
- Specific features: to optimize its proper functioning as an accountability instrument, the following aspects should be observed:
  - › Offer the possibility for users to comment on the news from an open text. It is also possible to offer them to rate the news according to a rating scale.
  - › Have a posting policy to guide user interventions. This should include guidelines such as prohibiting the use of offensive language, posting advertisements, or deviating from the topic under discussion. Indicate whether the user must be registered or be a subscriber to participate.
  - › Implementing an effective moderation system.
- Reference models: the rules of participation of media such as *El País* (<https://elpais.com/estaticos/normas-de-participacion>), *Eldiario.es* (<https://www.eldiario.es>).

eldiario.es/participación/), and *Elmercurio.com* (<https://static.emol.cl/emol50/pdf/TyC-Comentarios-Emol.pdf>), accessible from the comments section of each news item, are good examples of rules that guide user contributions.

#### Assessment

- Assessment: Can the user comment on the information published?
- Score: 0/0.5/1 (0: this action cannot be performed; 0.5: this action can be performed, but the comments are not moderated, or the user must not be registered to participate; 1: this action can be performed and there is moderation and the user must be registered or be a subscriber to participate).

### Indicador 3.2. Comentarios de los usuarios en las redes sociales

#### Presentation and features

- Definition: the media has profiles on the main social networks (Twitter and Facebook), and allows users to issue comments, suggestions, and complaints through them. In addition to the general profiles, it may have specific channels to allow user participation.
- Specific features: to optimize its proper functioning as an accountability instrument, the following aspects should be observed:
  - › Disseminate the instrument's existence.
  - › Use social networks not only as a channel for dissemination or promotion of content. Media/journalists must respond to criticism in order for networks to be an effective and real instrument of accountability.
- Reference models: media such as *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/guidelines/social-media.html>) or *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/reader-center/social-mediaguidelines.html>) have specific policies that contemplate social networks as a space for participation, debate, and journalistic reflection.

#### Assessment

- Assessment: Does the media allow users to participate in social networks?
- Score: 0/1 (0: the media does not use the networks for accountability purposes; 1: the media actively uses social networks for accountability purposes).

### Indicator 3.3. Error correction buttons

- Definition: the media allows users to report errors detected in journalistic pieces by means of a button, form, or e-mail. In this way, it demonstrates its capacity to account for errors made.
- Specific features: in order to optimize its proper functioning as an accountability instrument, the following aspects should be observed:
  - › Systematicity: ensure the existence of a notification button on each of the published news pieces.
  - › Location: ensure that the position (top or bottom of the news item) is constant and easily identifiable by users.
  - › Specify the data required for user identification.
  - › Possibility of detailing the type of error detected (ethical, data or typographical, moderation problem, rights and permissions, other).
  - › Provide sufficient space to report the error.
  - › The media can systematize errors and corrections in a space hosted on its website. This must be kept duly updated.
- Reference models: media such as *De Staandaard* in Belgium, *El Tiempo* in Colombia, or *El País* in Uruguay have this tool. In the United States, *The Texas Tribune* (<https://www.texastribune.org/corrections/>) and *ProPublica* (<https://www.propublica.org/corrections/>) have a page that includes the errors and corrections made. *El Mercurio*, in Chile, also incorporates this reference at the end of each news item: “Did you find any error? Let us know”.

#### Assessment

- Assessment: Is there an error detection and correction system in place?
- Score: 0/1 (0: the media does not have the mechanism; 1: the media has the mechanism).

### Indicator 3.4. User contributions in the creation and revision of contents

- Definition: the media has a channel dedicated to written, audiovisual, or multimedia user generated content.
- Specific features: in order to optimize its proper functioning as an accountability instrument, the following aspects should be observed:



- › Disseminate the opportunity for users to contribute to the creation of journalistic content.
  - › Clearly indicate the procedure for sending contributions.
  - › Suggest priority topics, approaches, and sources for the media.
  - › To optimize this tool's value, it should go beyond a simple collection of images or opinions, as is predominant in pages such as *Community*, in *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/community>), which replaces another tool of the same newspaper that pursued the same goal: *GuardianWitness* (<https://www.theguardian.com/help/insideguardian/2018/aug/21/guardianwitness-is-closing-but-youououcan-still-contribute-your-stories>).
  - › Regularity of publication and updating of the section or channel.
  - › Possibility of comments from other readers and active discussion with journalists.
- Reference models: Examples include *Eu Reporter* from *O Globo* (<https://oglobo.globo.com/eu-reporter/>) or *Los socios/as escriben* from *La Marea* (<https://www.lamarea.com/secciones/los-socios-escriben/>). The *TribTalk* section of *The Texas Tribune* (<https://www.tribtalk.org>) –now closed– was a reference in publishing in-depth articles on the news topics covered by the media.

#### Media assessment

- Assessment: Is there a section dedicated to user generated content?
- Score: 0/1 (0: the media does not have this section; 1: the media has this section).

#### Indicator 3.5. Other participation tools

- Definition: the media has implemented other tools that allow users to contact the journalists to express their perception of the published content or to contribute to the development of new journalistic coverage. Some relevant typologies of tools are:
  - › Letters to the director: there is a section for letters to the director, where users can send and receive a response to their suggestions and complaints about the treatment of information. Letters to the director are also an ideal space to discuss issues of general interest.

- › Chats and digital meetings with readers: the media allows users to contact the editorial team through chats and digital meetings (in written or video-chat format) to discuss in real time the information published or other questions about the journalistic process.
  - › Mailboxes for sending confidential material: systems that allow the secure sending of leads or confidential material to the media, to contribute to the development of a journalistic investigation.
- Specific characteristics: disseminate the existence of the instrument. Clearly indicate the procedure for sending contributions, which should be simple.
- Reference models:
  - › Letters to the director: frequent spaces in the media, such as *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/section/opinion/letters>), *The Globe and Mail* (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/letters/>) or *El Mercurio*, with the section Blogs, letters, and opinion (<https://www.elmercurio.com/blogs/>).
  - › Chats and digital meetings with readers: *The Washington Post*, with its Q&A, is a reference in holding and systematically archiving digital meetings (<http://live.washingtonpost.com/>). The Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* holds virtual meetings, but also face-to-face, between the editorial team, external experts and readers (<https://encuentros.elmercurio.com>).
  - › Mailboxes to send confidential material: *The New York Times* allows users to send tips through various channels (WhatsApp, Signal, email and postal mail, SecureDrop). In Spain, the equivalent system is *Filtrala* (<https://filtrala.org/>), used by media such as *Eldiario.es* or *La Marea*. *Ara* has its own tool for the same purpose (<https://www.ara.cat/investigacio.html>).

### Assessment

- Assessment: Does the media have other participation tools?
- Score: 0/0.5/1 (0: the media does not have other participation tools; 1: the media has other participation tools).
- Remarks: if available, the nature and operation of the space or tool should be explained.

## **DISCUSSION**

This work confirms the need to deepen the academic study on media accountability, one of the key issues in journalism today (Bertrand, 2018; Eberwein et al., 2018). Among the various contributions derived from the research, we note, first, the feasibility of formalizing a proposal of categories of analysis that includes the three dimensions that define accountability: transparency, self-regulation, and audience participation.

This contribution builds on previous mappings of existing indicators that contribute to media accountability (Bastian, 2019; Bertrand, 2018; Domingo & Heikkilä, 2012; Eberwein et al., 2018; Fengler, 2003; Fengler et al., 2014; Fengler et al., 2015; García-Avilés, 2019; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Pérez-Díaz et al., 2020; Ramon-Vegas & Mauri-Ríos, 2020; Silva & Paulino, 2007) and proposes a model to measure the degree of accountability of a media. The analytical tool makes it possible to know to what extent accountability is present or not in the media, and to quantify whether this presence is scarce or whether it is adequately implemented.

The proposal stresses the need to strengthen the connection between academia and the practical practice of the profession. The correlation between the existing literature on accountability and the presence of the proposed indicators in reference media confirms this link. On the other hand, although each media system has its own features, the presence of common indicators that guarantee the dimensions of transparency, self-regulation, and audience participation in European, North American, and Latin American media (Bastian, 2019; Eberwein et al., 2018; Fengler et al., 2015; Silva & Paulino, 2007) confirms the similar acceptance of the concept of accountability in Western media contexts. This contribution, derived from this analysis, raises the need for future research that includes different geographical areas to know the suitability of its application in other journalistic cultures.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION SCENARIOS**

Accountability of journalistic information is of paramount importance in the current scenario. Studies that examine the characteristics and functions of traditional and innovative instruments, as well as those that map their existence or absence, should give way to more complex studies that evaluate in detail the capacity of the media to respond to transparency, audience participation, and self-regulation, also contributing to decision-making by media companies. The proposed analysis methodology can be used by academics and professionals to analyze the media, by allowing them to observe the quantity and quality of indicators present on a website, identify the most used ones, and monitor the emergence of new mechanisms.

The research contributes to the existing literature by providing a plausible and useful proposal for future studies. These indicators can be very useful for academic analysis of the media, as they can provide comparative results on their presence in media with common characteristics or between media from different regions and journalistic cultures. This can help to identify trends, similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses of the analyzed media.

In the professional sphere, this proposal can be used by media managers to determine whether their organization's website is adequately adapted to the requirements of transparency, user participation, and self-regulation or whether it needs to be improved. This methodology can also be used as a reference model for creating or redesigning media websites that wish to consider the concept of media accountability.

On the other hand, this analysis methodology applied to the media can be useful in the following scenarios:

- Scenario 1: enable media decision-makers to reflect and make decisions on the introduction or redesign of their accountability tools to improve their transparency, self-regulation, and audience participation.
- Scenario 2: encourage academic and professional analysis of the media. The templates make it possible to assess the presence or non-existence of instruments that facilitate media accountability. It is possible to observe the degree of implementation and the nature of the instruments present in a number of media and to identify the most used ones within the framework of a territory or region. This can help to identify trends, similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses of the analyzed media.
- Scenario 3: these templates make it possible to measure and establish comparisons between media outlets of different journalistic cultures to determine to what extent media contexts influence the incorporation of instruments that adequately satisfy the three key dimensions of accountability.

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