

# Assessing potentials of journalists' blogs as an instrument of media accountability in Estonia



Halliki Harro-Loit  
 Juhan Lang  
 Marju Himma-Kadakas  
 UNIVERSITY OF TARTU, ESTONIA

**ABSTRACT:** A distinction should be made between institutional media accountability and journalistic accountability. The latter individualizes the accountability of media organizations and enables the public to see the individual journalist (with his own ideas, sense of moral values) instead of a homogeneous mass that fits into the corporate journalistic system. This paper focuses on the possibilities accomplished by journalists' blogs: are these new instruments of accountability that enable individual journalists to highlight their personal moral sensitivity and open their information processing practices to the public? Do Estonian journalists have enough incentives and autonomy to use weblogs as an opportunity to explain their professional decisions or even openly confront the editorial opinion? The analysis draws on 11 qualitative interviews conducted with Estonian journalists and editors. The findings indicate that the fading interest in weblogs is not the main reason why personal blogs of professional journalists would not function as accountability instruments. Journalists seldom describe attitudes that would characterize the "socially responsible existentialist."

**KEYWORDS:** journalism, weblogs, accountability, transparency, journalistic autonomy



## INTRODUCTION

The era of networked communications has challenged the status and (business) model of professional journalism. Although millions of people constantly produce and disseminate information and news, the democratic society still needs professional journalism as a source of autonomous and reliable information encompassed with analysis, and framing the most important issues for the public. Therefore, there is a need to discuss whether the era of digital media has changed and extended the range of accountability mechanisms that help to counterbalance market pressures and maintain the quality of journalism. The interactive nature of media has increased the possibilities for the public to "keep an eye on journalists": readers' reactions and interactive feedback in the form of commentaries, correction boxes (but-

tons), weblogs and use of social media to discuss media behavior. At the same time, online production decreases the visibility of individual journalists, which can be seen as a threat to occupational identity. John Merrill, the leading advocate of existentialism in journalism studies, argues that individual journalistic autonomy is a paramount concept, integral to the commitment of seeking truth (Merrill, 1989).

Assumingly, in a media market of such a small scale as Estonia (population of 1.34 million), professional journalists are well-known and one may assume that personal responsibility is inevitable. However, the analysis of the self-regulatory nature of the Estonian system shows that journalistic accountability is biased towards media organization and management. While the code of ethics of Estonian journalism lays the responsibility both on journalists and the media organizations, (Loit et al., 2011, pp. 42–43) in the case of most complaints to the press council the answer from the media organization is usually composed by the chief editor. At the same time, journalists can express personal views and ideas via blogs and social media while also working for some media organization. This study raises the question of what kind of rewards do Estonian journalists seek to attain when they write their blogs? Whether the weblogs of professional journalists could carry some functions of an in-house ombudsman of news organizations? How does the journalists' perception on the function of blogs reflect the accountability culture in Estonian media?

The Estonian media market is specific due to its small size. At the same time, its specificity also expresses a wide usability of different platforms for both content production and functional interactivity of conversing with the audience. The latter applies to blogging, micro-blogging (Twitter) and interacting with audiences in social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, etc.)

A number of international news establishments in Europe consider the typical form of blogging as a chance for journalists for publishing their opinions, background stories, responses to feedback, as well as making the production of content more transparent, resulting in greater accountability. Social networking and micro-blogging, on the other hand, contribute more towards marketing purposes, while also carrying the role of functional interactivity.

The beginning of the millennium was the high point for blogs in Estonia. Journalists' and editors' blogs were an innovative, if rare, phenomena. New environments of functional interactivity have taken over the purposes of these blogs. However, journalists' blogs have maintained some of their earlier functions, such as offering a space for publishing stories in full length as well as for niche topics, personal visibility and media criticism. Therefore, (blogging) journalists' and editors'-in-chief perceptions on weblogs as potential instruments of accountability are vital.

This article is based on six qualitative interviews with editors-in-chief (four of them are or were active bloggers by themselves) and five interviews with journalists who are, or have recently been, the most active bloggers among Estonian journalists.

## **JOURNALISTIC AUTONOMY AND TRANSPARENCY NOTION IN NETWORKED MEDIA**

The relationship between autonomy, transparency and (journalistic) accountability contributes to a long-standing debate in the field of journalism studies (e.g. Singer, 2006; Hayes et al., 2007; Plaisance & Deppa, 2009; van der Wurff & Schonbach, 2011). However, debates between academics of journalism studies and media ethics tend to conclude that these concepts are not easily achieved in professional journalism practice. While the journalistic institution itself seeks to exercise autonomy from governmental control, individual journalists actually give up personal autonomy to a significant degree (Christians et al., 1991, pp. 33–57; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991, pp. 115–144; Sanders, 2003, p. 27; Singer, 2007). Moreover, press freedom and journalistic freedom are not synonymous. Press freedom is not a democratic but an institutional concept tied in with economic control and power that lies in the hands of the press power elite (Merrill, 1989, p. 35). Merrill's extreme existentialist's evaluation is in a sharp contrast with the "idealistic, journalistic autonomy discourse," as he cynically declares that "... journalists in the lower echelons are going about their duties not as professionals who deal with their clients directly and independently, but as functionaries who fashion their work in accordance to supervision and direction by their editors, publishers and news directors." (Ibid., p. 36). Even if this exaggerated claim does not apply to all members of the professional community, an independent and autonomous journalistic institution does not mean individual journalists are autonomous enough to remain as responsible as the society usually expects them to be. Moreover, the general public is not necessarily aware of the actual power and accountability of individual journalists, their personal possibilities for upholding public trust, nor by whom the most important decisions are made in media organizations. This question takes us to the discussion on transparency of professional journalism in the era of networked journalism and of the functional interactivity (Deuze, 2003, p. 214) that enables professional journalists to interact with their audiences both through their publications (serving an organization) and as individuals (using weblogs, microblogs and social networks).

The notion of transparency deserves further elaboration. Similar to "availability," "transparency" is a passive concept, referring to a state in which documents, statistics, procedures, motives and intentions are accessible to the public. Just as "disclosure," "transparency" is active, connoting a process of bringing information into view (Heim & Craft, 2008). In the context of the present study, we are focusing on disclosure transparency concerned with the openness of news producers on the process of news production (Karlsson, 2010). The long-debated focus on transparency has been the news gathering methods and the relationship between journalists and news sources (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Rupar, 2006; Phillips, 2010). Rupar emphasizes that

The new media landscape, where news is not manufactured by interaction between agents of reality (sources) and agents of representation of reality (journalists), demands new rules. A good start would be an acknowledgement of the existence of the people in the middle (para-journalists: e.g. public relations firms, public information officers, political spin doctors etc.), and an indication of their intervention in reality. Clearly, no one expects all articles to provide a complete list of explanations regarding the news gathering process. [...] But, presentation of certain forms of public discourse, such as press releases, requires sharper journalistic alertness. (Rupar, 2006, p. 139)

The important aspect Rupar touches here is the extent to which news processing can be explained so that explanations would not break the narrative. Heikki Heikkilä distinguishes two forms of journalistic transparency: *actor transparency* involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. *Production transparency* denotes practices where media organizations disclose information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of news production to users (Heikkilä, 2011, pp. 11–13). Production transparency coincides with what Rupar denotes as the transparency of the newsgathering process. In regard to actor transparency, Heikkilä admits that

[...] the choice of not investing in actor transparency seems to be in line with a culturally held assumption of professionalism wherein transparency of an individual journalist is easily associated with self-promotion. This viewpoint makes sense, if we take into account that professionalism in journalism is collectively rather than individually defined within the Finnish news culture. (Heikkilä, 2011, p. 12)

Hence, the journalistic culture contains at least two obstacles to transparency: the need for smooth narratives and the collective nature of journalism. The third obstacle to actor and production transparency is the question to what extent transparency is healthy for a media organization (Smolkin, 2006; Heim & Craft, 2008).

In addition to the question of “what should be transparent?” one also needs to ask about who would be accountable for transparency? The in-house ombudsman has been considered as a widely used transparency mechanism. The roles and functions of newspaper ombudsmen cover a wide spectrum: on the one hand, they see themselves as the “readers’ advocates” whose loyalty lies with the reader. On the other, they are the “paper’s ambassadors” defending the interests of the news outlet (Dahlen & Deuze, 2006). From the point of view of the accountability system, the importance of ombudsmen derives from them generally being media professionals engaged in monitoring, investigating and analyzing developments in journalism and in the media business. As such, they expose mistakes, point towards potentially harmful developments and encourage journalists to pay attention to ethics (Fengler, 2003). The role of an ombudsman began to develop in 1967 in the United States (Kapoor & Smith, 1979, p. 628) and in the 1970s in European news organizations. Nevertheless, the task of the ombudsman to act as an in-house critic and quality watchdog has been used by few publishing houses or has been decreasing

over the recent years (e.g. Dalen & Deuze, 2006; Alsius et al., 2011, p. 163; Eberwein, 2011, pp. 84–85). Over the last few years, local Dutch newspaper companies have demonstrated a tendency of linking the ombudsman or the readers' representative to the marketing department, or abolishing the relatively costly position of ombudsman out of financial considerations (Evers, 2011, p. 124). The Estonian press has never had an ombudsman. The Estonian National Broadcasting Act did, however, institute the post of an ethics advisor directly accountable to the Broadcasting Council (Loit et al., 2011, p. 43). This position, however, does not have much influence on the wider media debate in Estonia.

Subsequently, the question of who is responsible for making news production transparent is still not resolved. Do weblogs enable (existential) journalists to seek autonomy, not just from outside forces but also from internal control imposed by employers, conventions of newsroom practices and loyalty to colleagues? Do weblogs support journalists in taking personal responsibility for their choices and explain to the public the limits of the journalists' choices? On the one hand, autonomy is the defining characteristic of a blogger. The blog is purely an existential form of self-expression: the blogger can choose to act either responsibly or irresponsibly, and neither choice necessarily curtails or even influences subsequent decisions or actions (Singer, 2006, p. 9). On the other hand, professional journalists are employees of media organizations and should, therefore, be loyal to their employers. Determining to whom the journalist should be responsible and loyal when writing a personal blog remains problematic. Does a win-win situation for both the public and the journalist entail demonstrating solidarity with colleagues on the journalist's part by publishing journalistic content under the "umbrella" of a certain edition or program and using the existentialist approach when writing for a blog? More specifically, a revised consideration of just who is and is not a journalist must include the notion of assuming personal responsibility for safeguarding the public trust as a distinguishing characteristic (Singer, 2006, p. 8). Therefore, the existentialist approach to individual autonomy of the journalist might even be useful for professional media organizations.

## **JOURNALISTS' BLOGS AS TRANSPARENCY AND AUTONOMY INSTRUMENTS IN ESTONIA**

Domingo and Heinonen (2008) propose a typology of journalistic weblogs: weblogs produced by the public outside media companies (citizen blogs) at one end and those that are part of media content and produced by professional staff (media) at the other. In the middle, there are weblogs the audience can produce on platforms provided by the media (audience blogs) and weblogs that journalists maintain outside their companies (journalist blogs). Citizen blogs challenge journalism from the outside without any of the constraints media institution would impose on journalists, while media blogs transform journalism from inside. The latter is relevant for understanding how professional newsrooms are "normalizing" (Singer, 2006).

In response to whether bloggers from outside the media could influence media organizations to be more accountable and transparent, Lowery and Mackay (2008, p. 76), conclude that:

Blogger activity has no impact on journalists' transparency with readers [...] Though bloggers point out journalists' mistakes and decry journalists' inaccessibility, strong local blogging activity does not correspond to greater access to reporters' information and personal time.

Researchers stress that their findings only shed light on the practice of journalism in the United States (Lowery & Mackay, 2008). Nevertheless, outside-house critique does have its limits. Research shows that functional interactivity by which the audience could converse with the author and the newsroom has not realized its goals, especially in Estonia, where media criticism was rare even in the early 2000s when blogging was at the height of its popularity.

Journalists' blogs are in a controversial position. Some organizations have "newsroom that have proved to be particularly insightful when offering descriptions of the context within important editorial decisions were made, responses to external criticisms of performance and interaction with audiences. Other journalists are constrained by upper management fear of blogs as the weblogs are unpredictable" (Bivens, 2008, p. 124). Despite the now widespread acceptance of blogging on the part of news organizations, tensions remain over what role a journalist should play as a blogger and how news organizations should handle their staff-produced blogs (Grabowicz, 2011).

## THE WEBLOGS OF ESTONIAN JOURNALISTS

A survey of 226 reporters and editors working in Estonian daily newspapers showed that only five of them kept a public blog concerning media topics. Micro-blogs (Twitter) open to public were used by 57 respondents, while 159 (more than 70%) reporters and editors had a social network account (Facebook), which also functions as a micro-blog, commenting space and an accountability system (Laurson, 2011). In the present case study, some journalists not working in daily newspapers but blogging on media issues were added to the selection. Five journalists-bloggers were engaged for the purposes of this study: Jaanus Piirsalu, a foreign correspondent in Moscow; Preet Pullerits, a senior editor for the national daily *Postimees*, mostly blogging as a sports journalist; Tarmo Õuema, a local reporter and editor-in-chief for a regional daily; Sulev Valner, previous editor-in-chief; Ivar Soopa, a local journalist; Vahur Koorits, who continues working as a reporter at Delfi (portal) after being fired from a similar position in the daily newspaper *Postimees*. Five editors-in-chief from national dailies and weeklies (their status as of the time of the interview in April 2011): Lea Larin, from the national daily *Eesti Päevaleht*; Aivar Viidik, from the weekly *Maaleht*; Ivar Soopan, from the regional daily *Lääne Elu*;

Priit Hõbemägi, from the weekly *Eesti Ekspress* and Vahur Kalmre, the senior editor of *Tartu Postimees*.

Journalists' posts in weblogs mainly serve four purposes: 1) posting full texts of their articles, 2) commenting on newsgathering processes and replying to their readers, 3) collecting a portfolio for themselves and, sometimes, 4) discussing topics for which they have no space or possibility in their media outlet. Explanations on news processing and reactions concerning some topics or events are rare. Qualitative interviews were conducted in April 2011. The interview with the Moscow correspondent was conducted via Skype and one editor-in-chief answered via e-mail. The interviewees were asked the following questions which were specified if needed:

1. Why do you blog (what are the incentives); how did you start the use of resources?
2. Could journalists' blogs function as accountability instruments?
3. Your perception on the critical blog of Vahur Koorits (an extract is presented later in this text)?
4. Your general perception of the accountability instruments and media criticism in Estonia.

## **THE PERCEPTIONS OF ESTONIAN JOURNALISTS CONCERNING NEWS PRODUCTION AND ACTOR AUTONOMY**

Estonian journalists and editors share their opinions on the blogs: there is no economic benefit, there are too few readers for acquiring wide publicity and blogging is time-consuming. The main benefit is the possibility for gathering social capital. Koorits admits that blogs could reduce the anonymity of the journalist:

People tend to skip the names and that prevents the name from turning into a trademark. Worse is all kind of online where you frequently see no name at all. [...] for those, who really plan to involve themselves with journalism, it is demoralizing. You are building your career; you strive to turn your name into a trademark, so thereby to increase your market value as a journalist (Koorits).

These ideas are in accordance with Heinonen's remark about self-promotion, while concurrently, Koorits points out the problem of the journalists' need to build a personal career and transform their names into a certain type of trademark.

For the senior editor Priit Pullerits, the primary function of his blog is personal freedom and autonomy. He says that he has kept his blog separate from the trademark of *Postimees*, as otherwise there would rise an unclear question of supervision. At the same time, Pullerits admits that his identity as a journalist of *Postimees* is a prime position. He clearly contrasts his personal blogging to the normative aspects of the newspaper that he calls the "institution":

Look, in a blog you write more freely, regarding the vocabulary and so, but in Postimees I often felt that I sounded too radical, or too forcefully or something. [...] The blog is me, me myself, what I think, what I do, but the newspaper is the whole institution and here you cannot function in the manner “I do, I respond, I correct my mistake immediately myself.” To blog I can put rumours that I hear from people, but I always identify them [...], that I could never do in the paper, because in the paper the sources must be named very punctually. [...] the blog — it is a place for your creative you and a place to satisfy your ego. (Pullerits)

The comparison of these two different approaches shows that although one emphasizes career and the other creative freedom, both reflect the need for author’s position. Not all the interviewees share the same passion about unrestricted personal identity. Pullerits sees blogging also as a means for distancing himself from the strict rules of objectivity countering the latter with more conversational and free-flowing conventions he makes use of in his personal blog.

Journalists have different ideas about the value of commenting on their reporting process. Some journalists see that such background information could be of importance to their colleagues (from other news organizations), others speak about the need to inform and educate their readers. Senior editor Priit Pullerits says that he would not bother the reader with background information if the reader is not interested in the way information is processed. This, on the other hand, is exactly what a weblog could be used for, as is done in the practice of international news outlets. Pullerits also admits that he uses these explanations in order to show that he has done his best. Showing his efforts is important for his credibility. For Pullerits, personal credibility is an important value:

In a journalistic outlet it usually does not matter how I got this or that information. You just submit the information and nobody cares how much effort you made to excavate the topic. In a blog you can also focus on your information gathering process, add this to the background; however, this cannot be a self-dependent aim. Sometimes you need to convince the readers that the material is authentic, and the best that could be gathered. (Pullerits)

On the contrary, Tarmo Õuema, who has worked for a local paper for more than twenty years, and Ivar Soopan, a journalist of the same regional newspaper (and also the editor-in-chief for that newspaper), see the major potential of blogs as means of media education for the readers. They both agree that there is a need to build up partner-relations with the public and allow the people closer to the newsroom:

For me journalists’ blogging could be more intensely aimed to the process of backstories, [...] the readers do not know much about how the life of a reporter works and what goes on behind the scenes [...] the public tends to see the journalist as a very hostile person, that is scary [...] that shows that we are unfamiliar to our readers, our work is very opaque to them. [...] if the newspaper also would advertise its workers blogs or would link to them, people would find their way to journalists’ blogs. (Soopan)

Soopan says that people are afraid of talking to journalists, believing that all they say could subsequently be used for a news story. The human dimension of journal-

ism is diminishing and blogs, especially if linked to a main newspaper, could be used as a bridge to those who are more interested in journalistic performance. In conjunction with re-creating physical access to the newsroom, blogs have the potential to provide the readers with a more personal image of the journalist.

In contrast, all the editors-in-chief of the national dailies and weeklies did not consider journalists' blogs important. The answer of Priit Hõbemägi, the former editor-in-chief for the Estonian weekly *Eesti Ekspress*, represents all the critical points also mentioned by other interviewees:

[...] if the journalist's blog is more interesting than his articles in paper, it raises the question of why is that? You get paid for writing good stories, not blogging. There was a time when blogging was promoted, even forced, because it was hoped to ensnare the readers to read online-editions. But journalists' blogs turned out to be boring for the readers. [...] Blogs in general are a dying phenomena. Social media — Facebook and Twitter have taken over their role. [...] There is no need for long ramblings. I stopped blogging, because it lost its meaning. A blogger starts to operate in the interests of his reader and turns into their servant. But he gets nothing in return, and it wastes time. In Estonia journalists' blogs have so few readers that the blogs cannot be put into function in a financially effective manner. (Hõbemägi)

Hõbemägi does not consider the advantages of longer formats. However, he makes a straightforward claim that in such a small market as Estonia, blogs just do not have any successful business model. Indeed, most of the interviewees hesitated about the influence of blogs. Therefore, the main threat to blogs is that journalists have limited motivation for current posting:

I don't believe that blogs could be the mean of transparency, because I don't see how the blogosphere influences journalism. [...] I have this feeling that the intensity of blogs has faded, because how long one has the motivation to do it. I have been posting for four or five years. It is an extra assignment, it takes time. (Pullerits)

Comparing journalists' and editors' main opinions on blogs' opportunities and functions, the assessor's perspective emerges. The editor-in-chief focuses on the revenue of the newspaper, while the reporter sees the publication as a channel for creative freedom and career. In regional news outlets, editors put more emphasis on reducing the distance with the audience. These perspectives enable to see and analyse the barriers where the journalists' perceptions on individual autonomy and their perceptions concerning blogs as possible instruments of accountability meet.

## **NEWSROOM DISCLOSURE AND JOURNALISTIC AUTONOMY VERSUS LOYALTY TO THE EMPLOYER**

Former reporter for the Estonian daily newspaper *Postimees*, Vahur Koorits posted a critical blog entry on everyday working routines, data processing and news editing in *Postimees*. Although his blog was a very subjective and critical reflection of his conflict at the newspaper, some of his descriptions can be considered as being

important for the general public. The following extract illustrates the borderline and also litmus paper for the tolerance of transparency by the newsroom management. The extract is presented so that the author's perceptions on major ethical aspects that could be important for a discussion either among professionals or public are marked in extended spacing.

[...] Another story was about how fast the regular mail is delivered in Estonia. [...] The idea was to post a pile of letters and measure how fast these would be delivered. [...] I notified that if we need to measure the delivery speed, a programme named Unex exists and Europe scrutinizes the indicator for 40 countries. I told that the information about average delivery time e.g. in Italy lies within a phone call.

In reply, /editor-in -chief/ scornfully declared that no official investigation is of interest and insisted own experiment to find out our truth. ... As the chief editor strongly pushed the story, I finally agreed.

When we launched the list of recipients, it occurred that an extreme trick was constructed. It was planned to post the letters on Friday evening to achieve that some letters reached Helsinki earlier than Võru [small town in Southern Estonia — authors]. As we knew, the inland mail services did not work, but the international did, thus it was expected in advance to get a good headline about the Finnish Post delivering mail faster than the Estonian Post. Then I refused to continue this work. I tried to explain that this is against the principles being introduced already to the first year students at the university — the experiment cannot be manipulated to achieve the desired results. The news manager agreed with me but the front office's will surpassed everything. In reality all letters were delivered the same day which of course diluted the story, but it was still published.

This extract is exceptional due to the fact that in Estonia there usually is no public access to journalistic explanations concerning conflicts between organizational decisions and journalists' personal beliefs and ethical principles. The job market is relatively small and few journalists would risk being disloyal to their employers. At the time of writing the blog entry, Vahur Koorits had already lost his job and did not care about being biased. As mentioned before, we used this example to provoke interviewees to argue the question on how much autonomy a journalist can use if they would use their blog in disclosing.

The journalists and the senior editor working for the local newspaper had the highest tolerance for in-house conflict disclosure. Nevertheless, they both provided a slightly different perspective when discussing the dilemma between loyalty to the media organization, need for media transparency and journalists' autonomy. Ivar Soopan was the only interviewee who saw a possible benefit for the company and owners where journalists had rejected the topic. Clearly, Soopan is loyal to the readers and sees the journalist as the key position holder for journalistic quality:

It's hard to say [...] the employee should protect its companies' interests, owners' interests, but one should not be so, to say, kamikaze and do whatever you're told. [...] I think he did the right revolt-

ing, it is right and it should work that way, because the journalist is the first sieve who doesn't let that kind of stupidity through. Bosses may tell you whatever they like, but if you try to explain why in this or that story has no news value, or this news is for some reason rubbish, pointless, bloated, and you can argue your point, it would be very stupid to give it to the readers. (Soopan)

At the same time, Soopan is not sure how to write about such incidents, as he was disturbed when he discovered that the journalist had been aggrieved. Soopan stresses several times that both the content of an issue, as well as its presentation are important:

I don't know whether it should come to the public like this. In this case I didn't find it very convenient to read. [...] well, if he had written about it in a very soft and delicate manner, it would have been very positive and would make the whole story clearer between readers and journalists.

Later, he concludes in a more general manner:

[...] the blogger should have some self-censorship, it is always good, I mean the kind of editor's censorship, that certain things are what you don't notice or things that should be said in a softer manner. Bloggers seem to lack it. It is not really a censorship but just a second look at your text and giving a notice about it to the reporter. (Soopan)

However, such an integral view on the journalist's key position in assuring media accountability was not represented in other interviews.

Priit Pullerits, the senior editor for *Postimees*, primarily stressed the transparency that should be applied equally to all institutions in a society. Pullerits said that when media demands all other companies to be transparent, the media themselves should also be transparent to the readers to make understanding the basis of a particular material easier. At the same time, he admits that every company (banks, security companies, but also newspapers) has some in-house information that is not to be talked about in public. Pullerits' arguments are controversial: on the one hand, he refers to the specific function of journalism as the social watchdog demanding transparency. On the other hand, he equalizes the journalistic organization with other enterprises. The same type of argumentation was provided by the previous editor-in-chief and current freelance journalist Sulev Valner. However, the reasons for Valner's counter-argument to publishing in-house information come from collegiality and trust between colleagues:

The more different points of view come to light, the more versatile and complete is the whole picture. The public should be aware of what goes on in that sort of influential newsroom as 'Postimees' is, at least to some extent. At the same time it is in large a question of teamwork and it would be unthinkable that it would be brought to the public all the time. Those kinds of people who bring it to the public just lose their colleagues' trust. Imagine the atmosphere in the newsroom, where you have to weigh your every word, because somebody might post it to some blog. I wouldn't want to work in a newsroom like that. Mostly there is an agreement that the things discussed in the department meeting stay there. (Valner)

Valner touches upon the most delicate issue concerning in-house critique: the departmental meeting. On the one hand, the newsroom meeting could be the time and place where journalistic autonomy may become most vulnerable, especially when the critique that should serve the interest of the audience is not taken into consideration. On the other, the subjective interpretation of any situation would certainly be harmful to trust.

The foreign correspondent Jaanus Piirsalu goes even further and says that publishing organizational information leads not to transparency, but to absolute nakedness:

So the journalists would, say, start to gouge the newspaper in their blogs? It would be easier to put up the cameras that would broadcast 24 hours. That, as I have heard, has been done in some foreign newsrooms. But then private things will be done in places where the cameras can't reach. As an absolute idea it could be nice, but the devil always hides in details. (Piirsalu)

Senior editor Vahur Kalmre claims that a member of the newsroom cannot function as an ombudsman because of the bounds of collegiality ethics, no matter what kind of means for publishing they may have. If a reader comes forward with a question and a member of the newsroom can provide the answer there is no need for a blog. The critical point is the reader who knows what to ask. Kalmre sees the accountability instrument in the reader who still does not exist in Estonia:

Reporters can't take the role of the ombudsman because they are employees of the company, they are bound with an agreement, and they cannot talk bad about the company or bring out certain things. That is absolutely normal, isn't it? They may whack in department meetings, but they can't do it outside the newsroom. In that sense the only ombudsman can only be the reader. So if that kind of readership develops — why not. But that hasn't happened yet. (Kalmre)

The arguments of the former editor-in-chief Lea Larin are basically the same: journalistic transparency versus in-house confidentiality. The following quote shows well that in practice, media people do not see a difference between the media organization and other forms of enterprise. The transparency of the newsroom is, rather, a stated value:

Certainly all reporters, editors, language editor, photographers, and designers can describe the working days and process of their work, also do it in their blogs. And if it raises the public's awareness of function mechanisms of journalism, it is positive. In any case I point out that blog entries that describe directly work-related experiences may concern colleagues' rights and get into conflict with organization's regulations. (Larin)

In brief, the preceding quotes indicate the central dilemma: the transparency of news making process versus organization's request not to disclose information on the working processes of the newsroom. Interviewees demonstrate different views on attitudes towards transparency and accountability, seeing the accountability as-

pects vary from denial, to full support of radical in-house critique, while taking into consideration the profitability of the organization.

Only one journalist among the interviewees attempted to formulate the borderline: the thin line between the style of critique made and the conscience of the journalist. None of the interviewees commented on how collegial trust would be damaged. Some discussions, no matter how radical, seem to be acceptable in newsrooms, but not polite enough to be communicated to the public. The fear discourse is dominant: interviewees see fear of disclosure as a regular agreement on confidentiality. The opinions never take the opposite view: namely, that certain moments and places in the newsroom could be as public as certain procedures in a parliament or in court (if the idea of journalism as the "Fourth Estate" is taken into consideration).

Though all reporters emphasize the need for media criticism, only the editors of regional newspapers perceive blogs as possible channels for media criticism. They see journalists' blogs as potential instruments for polyphonic media criticism, of which the major value would be in their variety. At the same time, all of the interviewees admit that writing for blogs takes time and journalists cannot do it regularly. Ivar Soopan, the editor for a regional newspaper, points to the alienation from audience and the difference between regional and local press:

Estonian media is very closed for the readers. It starts from the fact that readers cannot come to the newsrooms. I saw it in 'Eesti Päevaleht' (Estonian daily newspaper — authors) how it used to be. [...] some years ago people came to the newsroom [...] That was considered to be bad, because people came to complain and journalists didn't want to talk to them, they were disturbed. This is very wrong that people can't come to the newsroom any more. Regional newspapers are somewhat the exception in that matter, people can come there more often, and dozens of people come in a week. [...] of course it is annoying for the reporter, but I don't understand why the reporter's life should be so easy. [...] Maybe these days when there is shortage of workforce in newsrooms the work may be somewhat more intense, but meeting the readers is also a way to increase transparency. (Soopan)

Is diminishing the gap between the readers and journalists also one aspect of media accountability? Soopan's comment on the physical accessibility of the newsroom might seem outdated in the era of networked communications, but this recalls a very important aspect: the large variety of journalistic organizations and journalists. If journalistic interactivity works differently in regional, national and globally oriented media, the accountability system might also have different strengths and weaknesses within different mediums.

## CONCLUSIONS

Making use of the blog as a medium depends on the individual journalist's personality. For some journalists, the blog can serve as their personal portfolio or as a space for being a real "author" without the bounds, the style and norms of some media

outlets can create, without worrying if their explanations may bother some readers. Those who are not interested simply do not read blogs and in this sense the journalists feel the blogs are delicate.

Additionally, many blogging journalists and journalists otherwise active in microblogs and social networks do it for marketing purposes. The aim to use blogs and microblogs for self-promotion rather than expressing the mode of personal freedom and responsibility means that the the journalists should not be regarded as servants to the “public interest” only but rather self-interested newswriters who seek to maximize attention to their work and forge personal careers. Journalists consider transparency as the means for educating the reader but rarely as an instrument for improving the quality of journalism.

This study, and others on the same topic, suggest that blogs and other means on functional interactivity can function in the service of accountability. However, a number of journalists tend to handle the issue of newsroom transparency from the point of view of entrepreneurship. This qualitative case study brings to the surface one important reason why neither the ombudsman nor journalists’ blogs could serve as media accountability instruments in Estonia. Publishing in-house criticism is not acceptable and people who would prefer full disclosure cannot survive in such a small community for long. With some exceptions, journalists perceive news organizations in the same way as they see other enterprises. Transparency of newsroom decision making processes and backstories is seen as inside information of the organization and, therefore, as a form of trade secret.

Most news outlets are owned by commercial enterprises, resulting in all processes taking place in the newsroom being handled according to an ideology based on principles of entrepreneurship. Editors more than reporters see transparency from the point of view of business models and organizational policy. The concern lies in the mentality that the working processes of the newsroom should unquestionably be opaque to some extent.

In summary, the era of blogs seems to be moving toward its end, at least in Estonia. However, the potential transparency instruments of the new media are still available and could function in a different, more compact format in microblogs and social networks, in case the majority of the professional community would see “the socially responsible existentialist” as the key actor in the new media environment. Individualized accountability enables the public to trust the individual journalist instead of criticizing the homogeneous mass that works for the corporate system of journalism.

## REFERENCES

- Alsius, S., Mauri, M., Martinez, R.R. (2011). Spain: A diverse and asymmetric landscape. In: Eberwein, T., Fengler, S., Lauk, E. (eds.). *Mapping Media Accountability — in Europe and Beyond*. Köln: Herbert von Harlem Verlag, pp. 155–167.

- Bivens, R.K. (2008). The Internet, mobile phones and blogging. How new media are transforming traditional journalism. *Journalism Practice*, 2 (1), pp. 113–129.
- Christians, G.C., Rottzoll, K.B., Fackler, M. (1991). *Media Ethics. Cases and Moral Reasoning*. Third edition. New York and London: Longmann.
- Dalen, A. van, Deuze, M. (2006). Readers' advocates or newspapers' ambassadors? Newspaper ombudsmen in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Communication*, 21 (4), pp. 457–475.
- Deuze, M. (2003). The Web and its journalisms: Considering the consequences of different types of newsmedia online. *New Media & Society*, pp. 203–230.
- Domingo D., Heinonen, A. (2008). Weblogs and journalism. A typology to explore the blurring boundaries. *Nordicom Review*, 29 (1), pp. 3–15.
- Eberwein, T. (2011). Germany: Model without value? In: Eberwein, T., Fengler, S., Lauk, E. (eds.). *Mapping Media Accountability — in Europe and Beyond*. Köln: Herbert von Harlem Verlag, pp. 77–89.
- Evers, H. (2011). The Netherlands: Bits of accountability in a sea of freedom. In: Eberwein, T., Fengler, S., Lauk, E. (eds.). *Mapping Media Accountability — in Europe and Beyond*. Köln: Herbert von Harlem Verlag, pp. 114–130.
- Fengler, S. (2003). Holding the news media accountable: A study of media reporters and media critique in the United States. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 80 (4), pp. 818–832.
- Grabowicz, P. (2011). The transition of digital journalism, Retrieved October 1, 2011, from <http://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/digital-transform/blogs/>, update of September 6, 2011.
- Hayes, A.S., Singer, J.B., Ceppos, J. (2007). Shifting roles, enduring values: The credible journalist in a digital age. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22 (4), pp. 262–279.
- Heikkilä, H. (2011). *Leaving it up to professionals (and the market): Development of online media accountability practices in Finland*. MediaAct Working paper 2, Retrieved March 19, 2012, from <http://www.mediaact.eu/online.html>.
- Heim, K., Craft, S. (2008). *In the interest of full disclosure: Transparency at The New York Times*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Meeting, pp. 1–25.
- Kapoor, S., Smith, R. (1979) The newspaper ombudsman — a progress report. *Journalism Quarterly*, 56, pp. 628–631.
- Karlsson, M. (2010). Rituals of transparency. Evaluating online news outlets' uses of transparency rituals in the United States, United Kingdom and Sweden. *Journalism Studies*, 11 (4), pp. 535–545.
- Kovach, B., Rosenstiel, T. (2001). *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Laurson, K. (2011). *Blogid ajakirjanduses*. [Blogs in Journalism]. BA thesis, Tartu.
- Loit, U., Lauk, E., Harro-Loit, H. (2011). Estonia: Fragmented accountability. In: Eberwein, T., Fengler, S., Lauk, E. (eds.). *Mapping Media Accountability — in Europe and Beyond*. Köln: Herbert von Harlem Verlag, pp. 36–49.
- Lowery, W., Mackay, J.B. (2008). Journalism and blogging. A test of a model of occupational competition. *Journalism Practice*, 2 (1), pp. 64–81.
- Merrill, J.C. (1989). *The Dialectic in Journalism. Toward a Responsible Use of Press Freedom*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press.
- Phillips, A. (2010). Transparency and the new ethics of journalism. *Journalism Practice*, 4 (3), pp. 373–382.
- Plaisance, P.L., Deppa, J.A. (2009). Perceptions and manifestations of autonomy, transparency and harm among U.S. newspaper journalists. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 10 (4), pp. 327–386.
- Rupar, V. (2006). How did you find that out? Transparency of the newsgathering process and the meaning of news. A case study of New Zealand journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 7 (1), pp. 127–143.

Halliki Harro-Loit, Juhan Lang and Marju Himma-Kadakas

- Sanders, K. (2003). *Ethics and Journalism*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage.
- Shoemaker, P.J., Reese, S.D. (1991). *Mediating the Message. Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*. New York and London: Longman.
- Singer, J. (2006). The socially responsible existentialist. *Journalism Studies*, 7 (1), pp. 2–18.
- Singer, J. (2007). Contested autonomy. *Journalism Studies*, 8 (1), pp. 79–95.
- Smolkin, R. (2006). Too transparent? *American Journalism Review*, 28 (2), pp. 16–23.
- Wurff, R. van der, Schonbach, K. (2011). Between profession and audience. *Journalism Studies*, 12 (4), pp. 407–422.