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## Media Accountability Systems

**M\*A\*S could have contributed more if they had been used more. What was needed at the beginning of the 21st century was a wider, clearer awareness of what media accountability meant for the press**

### Sažetak

Autor je postavio MAS kao sustav vrijednosti suvremenog novinarstva i samo-regulacije profesije koja pruža odgovore na goruća pitanja poštovanja etičkih načela i deontologije novinarstva. Na temelju MAS-a osnivaju se vijeća za medije koji mogu utjecati na poštovanje profesionalnih standard novinarstva

**Key words:** mediji, samoreguliranje, etika, deontologija, novinarstvo.

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"Media accountability systems", M\*A\*S for short, is a new concept. It gathers a startling diversity of *existing* non-State instruments whose unifying purpose is to improve news media. Among the better known ones: correction boxes, press councils, news ombudsmen, books attacking press misbehavior. A M\*A\*S can be an individual, like a media reporter, or a structured groups, like a 'TV viewers' association. It can consist in a single document, like a code of ethics, a critical report, or a small censorious publication like a blog on the internet. It can be a process, short (like an ethical audit) or long (like a university education).

Some M\*A\*S have existed since the press was born. Why pay more attention to them now? For the same reason that there are more and more of them: it is generally agreed that news media are not good enough for democracy to function well - yet nowadays the survival of civilization is predicated on the extension of democracy. So a crucial issue is how to help news media inform the public well. Both a free market and restrictive legislation (to avoid abuse of freedom), are certainly indispensable but neither can deliver a quality press. Worse, both can be dangerous: remember what State tyranny did to soviet media, and what near total deregulation has done to the US media from the 1980's.

A third force exists in the field which is called "media accountability". That concept embraces "ethics", an individual journalist's sense of right and wrong; "media ethics", guidelines drawn up by the profession in order to serve the public well; and "quality control", the techniques used by a manufacturer to satisfy and retain his customers. Media accountability involves the public: that makes it quite different from "self-regulation", which has rarely proved efficient. Media users are also voters and consumers: they can wield great influence on media but they have rarely done so up to now.

The basic M\*A\*S, media codes of conduct, started being drafted at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when "mass media" developed and commercialisation spread. Today, probably no nation on earth is without a media code. In the US, most major newspapers have one of their own. Reading hundreds of them from all over the planet <sup>1</sup> leads to the conclusion that they all essentially agree. With a few exceptions, what is wrong and what is right in journalism are the same in every democracy. So the main problem is not in defining the principles or justifying the rules of

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<sup>1</sup> Over 400 of them are available on [www.media-accountability.org](http://www.media-accountability.org)

journalism but in getting media and journalists to respect them . And since history teaches us not to trust the government, its police and its courts, the focus has to be on *non-State* means to enforce the rules, M\*A\*S .

The purpose of the existing 120 M\*A\*S <sup>2</sup> is not limited to the enforcement of code rules, however. The situation may be summed up in six points:

- 1 The goal is quality information, needed for democracy.
- 2 Quality information depends largely on the quality of journalists.
- 3 The quality of journalists requires that they resist political and economic pressure.
- 4 To resist, they need to bring two forces into play:
  - First, solidarity within the profession;
  - Second, the profession needs public support, as all institutions do in a democracy.
- 5 Public support will only be available if the public feels trust and esteem towards the profession.
- 6 Trust and esteem will be available on three conditions: that quality services be provided, but also that journalists keep listening to the public and that they feel accountable to it for what they do.

Quality services first? Journalism needs to be redefined. Input from consumers, researchers, academics needs to correct the old-fashioned kind of news coverage still practiced. That consists, among many other features, in such distorting usages as "iceberg journalism", i.e. covering only the small visible part of reality and ignoring the much larger part under the surface, the quiet processes that are transforming society. Consisting also in "negativism", i.e. the coverage mainly of conflict, violence, failure, disaster, death and suffering. Or again consisting in "infotainment", covering what is interesting and ignoring what is important. The Law and the Market can do little, if anything, to correct such failings. M\*A\*S can.

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<sup>2</sup> The full list and comments can be found on see [www.media-accountability.org](http://www.media-accountability.org)

## Evaluation: Positive

While their purpose is the same, M\*A\*S use one or more among four approaches. Evaluation is one: media criticism is as old as media, not liked by newspeople but indispensable. Education is another, both that of the public and that of professionals. Journalists should never stop training, through courses, conferences, publications and on the job – to become both more competent and more aware of their responsibilities towards society.

Monitoring is a third approach: rank-and-file media users, independent experts and academic researchers are to provide long-term examination of media, reliable in-depth analysis and serious study of media effects. Lastly, public intervention: many paths are open for it, like 'Letters to the editor', an 'op-ed page' for minority voices, on-line message boards annexed to published stories; meetings with professions that may conflict with the media (like the police), questionnaires sent to people cited in news stories, etc.

M\*A\*S are amazingly diverse.<sup>3</sup> They can be internal to media, like an editor's memo to the staff, or external to them, like a "journalism review" based on a campus (e.g. *The Columbia JR*), or they involve co-operation of profession and public, like a panel of readers regularly consulted.

Besides, one may distinguish between M\*A\*S that function at local or regional or national or international level - or even at all four levels (like press councils). Or again between those that produce an effect that is immediate (like a correction box), or short term (like an awareness-raising session) or long term (like higher education).

M\*A\*S are flexible: they can easily be adapted to circumstances: some ombudsmen write a regular column about the complaints they receive and consequent action they take – and some don't. Critical blogs come in all shapes and sizes. M\*A\*S complement each other: while none is sufficient, while few are strikingly efficient, all are useful. And they can function with one another, so can form a vast loose network for quality control. The question is not to choose among them. All must be used, just like weapons in a war. There is no alternative.

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<sup>3</sup> See the table at the end of this chapter.

Last but not least, experience shows that, contrary to frequent accusations, M\*A\*S are harmless – which is not true of the Law and of the Market. A crucial point.

## Evaluation: Negative

In spite of those assets, M\*A\*S may seem to be largely ignored or rejected. Large democracies like Brazil, France or Japan do not have a press council. Very few have "journalism reviews", periodicals mainly devoted to media evaluation. Over 50% of countries, like Germany, report "no ombudsman here": there are fewer than 300 for tens of thousands of media outlets.

Why so few M\*A\*S? One obstacle is ignorance. Most people, many even inside the media, have never heard about M\*A\*S . And if they have, they may dislike them simply because they are new. And, mainly, because M\*A\*S are about rendering accounts to clients, which no professional enjoys.

Generally speaking, what are the accusations brought against M\*A\*S? They are said to be purely cosmetic, to belong with public relations. If that is so, then why should media decision makers be hostile to them? Paradoxically, M\*A\*S are also considered dangerously radical, a leftist conspiracy against freedom of expression and free enterprise: governments will use them to censor the news media. That has never happened. Indeed, when in 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democracy in India, one of her first moves was to kill the press council.

Some journalists judge M\*A\*S unacceptable, on principle. According to the code of the International Federation of Journalists (1954), "the journalist recognizes, in professional matters, the jurisdiction of his colleagues only; he excludes every kind of interference by governments or others " [*emphasis added*]. These days, however, journalists need "others" to retain their independence.

A very common criticism is that M\*A\*S are unrealistic: good media do not need quality control; the bad ones will never accept it unless the Law forces it upon them. Real power is in the hands of media owners: for them sales are enough to evaluate public satisfaction. If media consumers

are truly angry, let them go to court. As for journalists, they cannot afford to antagonize their employers by insisting on respect of ethical rules.

Admittedly, some M\*A\*S are costly, though most are not. An ombudsman needs to be an experienced and respected journalist, entitled to a high salary. A press council needs an important budget to do its job well, fully, quickly and visibly. And many believe it is better not to ask the State for funds; reporters do not have money to spare; and media owners are reluctant to pay to be criticized or shed some of their power.

## **Protagonists Involved**

A major reason why there are so few M\*A\*S in operation is ignorance. Publishers and journalists, when told about experiments made, often react with great interest. M\*A\*S need to be promoted. All the protagonists in social communication should be involved.

Politicians can help by pressuring reluctant media owners and journalists into being ethical, mainly by threatening to pass restrictive laws - which is how most press councils got created. Also, by giving money with no strings attached, like the Finnish treasury giving the PC there half its budget.

What of the Public? Contrary to conventional wisdom, the media user is not stupid and not easily manipulated, but does not have the knowledge, the motivation, the time, the organization to get involved - and feels powerless. The public needs to be informed and stimulated, mobilized, made to trust and support. It absolutely must be involved.

Media owners and managers now: any fast success of ethics and M\*A\*S is predicated on their cooperation, simply because they possess both authority and money. They can authorize, encourage, publicize, fund, participate in many M\*A\*S. And they have legal, social, moral and, most importantly, economic reasons to support such "quality control", even though many may not be aware of it. Quality pays.

Lastly, journalists. They are the ones that can benefit most directly from M\*A\*S, since quality public service can provide them with credibility, influence and social prestige. Yet recent history shows that media staff is often more opposed to M\*A\*S than management. Professionals argue that they are not independent, hence they cannot be held responsible.

True it is that media ethics focuses on journalists, inevitably since companies do not have a moral conscience. It turns journalists into scapegoats, although they commit only minor sins, while media companies commit the mortal sins. This is why that media ethics and M\*A\*S should not aim just at the improvement of media, but also at restoring the bond of trust between journalists and public so that the public will support journalists in their fight for autonomy.

## Conclusion

Considering the great number of M\*A\*S, some in operation for more than a century, their harmlessness, their diversity in meeting paramount needs of our time, one may feel pessimistic when faced with the relative rarity of them. For quite a few, only a single example can be cited, in some faraway land.

Actually, however, the picture is not as dark as it may seem. Many M\*A\*S have become such a normal part of the media environment that they are not noticed anymore: the less spectacular, the less controversial M\*A\*S, like codes of ethics, letters to the editor, university level training, required courses on media ethics, non-profit research, correction boxes, regular pages or programs devoted to media, media reporters, associations of specialized journalists, readership surveys, alternative media, public broadcasting, etc.

Even though some may be rare, compared to the tens of thousands of media outlets, M\*A\*S are more numerous than ever. In the US, ombudsmen serve over 40 newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. The best dailies in Britain, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, have one. Almost 60% of present press councils were set up since 1990 and 35% since 2000. The near 20 national PCs in Europe have held annual conferences since 1999.

All are signs of a change of climate, but they have also played a major part in the change. Media are far more concerned with the public than they used to be. Many now understand the need to forge closer links with their customers. Journalists now understand that citizens too are entitled to "a voice in the product", that their support is vital.

Together with technology, M\*A\*S have thus contributed to the improvement of media, which are certainly not good enough but are indisputably better, as a whole, than they were 50 or 100 years ago. M\*A\*S could have contributed more if they had been used more. What was needed at the beginning of the 21st century was a wider, clearer awareness of what media accountability meant for the press.

### Internal M\*A\*S

Correction box, column	Code of ethics
Media page/ program	Ethics committee
Letter from the editor, sidebar	Disciplinary committee
Behind-the-scenes blog	Training to organize
Newsletter to subscribers	Whistle-blower
Media reporter	Newsroom committee
Consumer reporter	Media observatory
In-house critic	Order of journalists
Daily self-critical report	Company of journalists
Investigative panel	Assoc. of specialized reporters
Media weblog by journalist	Assoc. of publishers & editors
Evaluation commission	International defense org.
Filtering agency	Publishing foreign material
Internal study of issues	Foreign views on own country
Readership survey	Non-profit newspaper
Ethical audit	
Ethics coach	[ Public broadcasting]
Internal memo	[ International broadcasting ]
Awareness program	[ Quality service-oriented media]

### External M\*A\*S

Media-related website	Public statement by VIP
Readers' info blogs	Higher education
Critical blogs	Required ethics course
Blog by sources	Non-profit research
Alternative media	Opinion survey on media
Satirical news show	Media-at-school program
Daily report on media	Media literacy campaign
Journalism review	Media literacy website
"Darts and laurels"	Consumer group



Critical book / report / film	Association of militant citizens
Guides to influence	Monitors for profession. groups
Watchdog's watchdog	Media-serving NGO
Petition to pressure media	
Ad hoc federation	[Royal commission]
	[Indep. regulatory agency]
<b>Co-operative M*A*S</b>	
Letter to the editor	Citizen on board
On-line message board	Club of readers/ viewers
Outside media columnist	Local press council
Ombudsman	Annual conference
Complaints bureau	Seminar on media criticism
Listening session by editors	Training foreign bloggers
Accuracy & fairness question.	Yearbook on media crit.
Annual self-audit report	National press council
Grading the news	National ombudsman
Media barometer	Liaison committee
Paid advertisement	Occasional demonstration
Encounter with public	Media-related association
Website for public reaction	International cooperation
Panel of media users	Training NGO
Inviting in readers	Multi-purpose center
Readers choosing Page One	Continuous education
Citizens journalism	Bridge institution
Radio clubs	Prize or other reward
Journalists' email and phone	

To clarify the nature of the M\*A\*S listed below, please consult the M\*A\*S website: [www.media-accountability.org](http://www.media-accountability.org)

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