

# RESPONSIBILITY AND QUALITY OF JOURNALISM: DIGITAL ACCOUNTABILITY INSTRUMENTS AND PRACTICES IN THE PORTUGUESE MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Although the public debate on the quality of journalism and media responsibility and accountability efforts is not novel, the recent online and digital transition context has facilitated the emergence and expansion of new forms of media responsibility and monitoring of the quality of journalistic information. This study draws on a literature review to explore the relationship between media accountability and the quality of journalism while also examining how new forms of media responsibility could enhance information quality. Three facets of this relationship are emphasised: accountability as a dimension or hallmark of media quality, accountability as a mechanism for controlling or assessing the quality of journalism, and accountability as a space for defining the quality of news information. Additionally, this paper presents and discusses findings from an exploratory study mapping and analysing the level of implementation of digital responsibility and accountability mechanisms of six Portuguese editorial projects. The mapping of instruments highlights the heterogeneous reality and potential underlying the adaptation of conventional responsibility models to online formats, as well as underscores the mandated nature of media accountability and transparency processes in the Portuguese media. The analysis of the level of implementation of these mechanisms indicates asymmetries in their application.

## KEYWORDS

media accountability, digital journalism, quality of journalism, media responsibility, transparency

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# RESPONSABILIZAÇÃO E QUALIDADE DO JORNALISMO: INSTRUMENTOS E PRÁTICAS DIGITAIS DE ACCOUNTABILITY DOS MÉDIA PORTUGUESES

## RESUMO

Embora o debate público sobre a qualidade do jornalismo e esforços de responsabilização e de prestação de contas por parte dos média não constituam um fenómeno contemporâneo, o novo contexto online e de transição digital possibilitou o surgimento e a expansão de novas formas de responsabilização dos média e de monitorização da qualidade da informação jornalística. Com base na revisão da literatura, busca-se desenvolver uma reflexão sobre a relação entre *accountability* dos média e qualidade do jornalismo, assim como sobre o potencial de novos formatos de responsabilização dos média na promoção da qualidade da informação. São sublinhadas três vertentes dessa relação: a *accountability* enquanto dimensão ou marca da qualidade dos média; a *accountability* enquanto modo de controlo da qualidade do jornalismo; e a *accountability* enquanto espaço de definição da qualidade da informação noticiosa. Simultaneamente, são apresentados e discutidos os resultados de um estudo exploratório de mapeamento e de análise do

nível de implementação de mecanismos digitais de responsabilização e prestação de contas de seis projetos editoriais portugueses. O mapeamento de instrumentos reflete uma realidade heterogénea e um potencial subjacente à adaptação de modelos convencionais de responsabilização para formatos online, assim como um paradigma mandatado dos processos de *accountability* e de transparência dos média portugueses. Já a análise do nível de implementação de vários destes mecanismos de responsabilização sugere assimetrias na sua aplicação.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

*accountability* dos média, jornalismo digital, qualidade do jornalismo, responsabilidade dos média, transparência

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The social, cultural, economic and political challenges surrounding the role and place of journalism today suggest a renewed interest in and debate about media accountability and transparency (Eide, 2016; Ramon, 2020; van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014). Public concerns about the quality of journalism and the media's responsibility and accountability efforts are not a new or contemporary phenomenon (Eberwein et al., 2019; Plaisance, 2000). However, the digital shift and the rise of a new online environment have opened new avenues for enhancing and expanding these journalism quality monitoring processes (Acharya, 2015; Fengler et al., 2011).

Building on a discussion launched by Miranda (in press), this article explores the relationship between media accountability and the quality of journalism. It will also present and discuss the findings of a more specific exploratory study into the digital responsibility and accountability mechanisms of six Portuguese editorial projects.

## 2. MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE QUALITY OF JOURNALISM

Fengler et al. (2021) argue that “[i]n media and communication research, various terms and concepts are used to describe the processes of quality management within and beyond the journalistic profession” (p. 5). Along with notions such as “self-regulation”, “transparency”, or “governance of journalism”, media accountability is characterised by its holistic nature, which involves multiple stakeholders in journalism's accountability and responsibility processes.

Although it can be difficult to translate the full meaning of media accountability and the plurality of contributions to the interpretation of the term, one definition across the literature is that of Denis McQuail (see McQuail & Deuze, 2020), who includes in this concept all the processes, voluntary or involuntary, from which the media are responsible and accountable not only for the consequences but also for the quality of their actions and what they have made public. More specifically, Fengler et al. (2011) define media accountability as the set of “informal institutions, both offline and online, performed by both media professionals and media users, which intends to monitor, comment on and

criticise journalism and seeks to expose and debate problems of journalism” (p. 20). As such, media accountability has a broader meaning than transparency and extends further than the narrower field of self-regulation, as it acknowledges not only journalists but also other stakeholders, such as media owners or users, as active participants in promoting, managing and controlling the quality of journalistic information (Bertrand, 2008; Fengler, 2019).

In fact, the array of mechanisms that activate and materialise responsibility in journalism is notably extensive and diverse, encompassing, for example, different types of documents (such as codes of ethics), processes (such as journalism education), as well as individuals or groups (such as ombudspersons or press councils; Bertrand, 2008, 2018). Furthermore, their origin extends far beyond the boundaries of the media and can either be internal or external to newsrooms and journalistic culture (Fengler et al., 2014). Particularly concerning mechanisms originating from the media’s initiative, the outcome of their actions can be classified based on when they come into play within the news production process: before, during or after publication or broadcast (Heikkilä et al., 2012). Considering the low impact that each of these instruments, separately, will have on the quality of journalism, the literature tends to emphasise the potential for cooperation or networking among these mechanisms, highlighting their collective influence as a system of infrastructures (Fengler et al., 2011).

In contrast to more imposing or coercive legal-based solutions (liability), studies on media accountability highlight the positive aspects of what McQuail (see McQuail & Deuze, 2020) calls the “answerability model”, which entails a dialogical and voluntary approach to responsibility in journalism. However, it also involves the willingness of news organisations and professionals to accept criticism from audiences and to engage in public debate about journalistic practices and news production (Brants & de Haan, 2010; Christians, 2009). As the legal system struggles to keep pace with the swiftly evolving media landscape and in light of excessive regulation risks, this second model is commonly associated with perspectives that reconcile safeguarding journalism’s responsibilities and social functions with preserving press freedom. Nevertheless, these conceptions acknowledge the essential role of regulatory measures involving state intervention in preventing potential harm and risks stemming from the media’s actions. As McQuail (1997) concludes, “the emphasis in the first instance [liability] is likely to be on issues of harm caused by the media, in the second [answerability] on issues of mass media quality” (p. 517).

Defining the essence of the quality of journalism is not just difficult but rather complex. It could be contingent on the anticipated uses and gratifications derived from the media (Jacobsson & Jacobsson, 2010; Neuberg, 2014) or the characteristics and attributes of the product or content under scrutiny (Fengler, 2008). Additionally, the concept of quality in journalism might be rooted in the set of standards defined by the moral action of the media and journalists (Jacobsson & Jacobsson, 2010), as well as the adequacy of their practices and work to the values underlying their role in society (Meier, 2019).

Moreover, stemming from these normative concepts, the quality of journalism can be appraised using criteria such as diversity, relevance, ethics, impartiality, comprehensibility, or accuracy inherent in the outcomes of journalistic work (Urban & Schweiger, 2014). Despite the multidimensionality underlying the concept, these different meanings suggest an inherent relationship between the quality of journalism and the media responsibility processes.

From an eminently self-regulatory perspective, one can argue that accountability dynamics tend to provide journalists and the media with tools for production but also for prevention and correction aimed at ensuring that their work meets information quality standards (Fengler, 2008).

Regarding their participatory or public aspect, media accountability processes primarily serve as mechanisms for monitoring and social control over the quality of information (Acharya, 2015; Bertrand, 2018). Groenhart (2012) takes this reflection a step further when the author emphasises the role of these public access mechanisms in communication on the modes of operation and principles that guide the news production process. These instruments provide the public with the information, or the “vocabulary”, from which they can assess the quality of journalism.

On the other hand, Groenhart (2012) admits that implementing accountability and transparency mechanisms, like authors’ biographical profiles, newsletters or charters of principles or mission statements, could convey a sense of authenticity and professional rigour, functioning as a “trade mark” of quality journalism.

Considering its more dialogical dimension or that of drawing public (and also media) attention to the reality of journalism and newsrooms (Groenhart, 2012; McQuail, 2003), public accountability of the media can not only influence in adapting the conduct of journalism to socially established standards of information quality but also ultimately contribute in defining these standards.

As Ward (2014) or Ananny and Crawford (2018) alert, however, a more extensive interpretation of these processes must acknowledge their limitations or the fact that the implementation of accountability instruments may not necessarily have positive effects on the quality of information — some of these responsibility practices and, above all, transparency practices (or how they are implemented) may even conflict with ethical and responsible journalism.

### 3. MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE ONLINE LANDSCAPE

Recent works — such as those by Bastian (2019), Mauri-Rios et al. (2022) and Suárez-Villegas et al. (2017) — outline three fundamental dimensions for identifying and systematising contemporary media accountability mechanisms. The first concept, self-regulation, encompasses the standards guiding journalistic work and underpins the commitment made to the public. The second, transparency, refers to different efforts to disclose journalistic structures and the news creation processes. The final dimension,

participation, refers to the procedures and instruments enabling interaction between the media and the public and facilitating the intervention of the users of news.

More specifically, the relevance of the latter concept is intricately linked to a paradigm shift in the media ecosystem and the rise of new participatory communication formulas, which have not only challenged the dominance of established media in accessing public space but have also facilitated new modes of interaction between these media and their audiences. They have made it more convenient and accessible for users to criticise and monitor the quality of journalism (Bernier, 2013; García-Avilés, 2019).

It is also amid the digital transition and reconfiguration of the communications landscape that contributions such as those by Fengler et al. (2011) suggest a conceptual distinction between “established instruments”, such as ombudspersons, letters to the editor or press councils, and “innovative instruments” of media accountability. This distinction aims to systematise the array of mechanisms and procedures emerging in the online environment. Similarly, these new digital mechanisms can be divided into web-specific instruments — such as hyperlinks to primary sources or tools for users to suggest corrections — and instruments developed by replicating or transposing conventional instruments into online formats.

Considering the relatively limited impact and reach of traditional media accountability and self-regulation models (Alsus et al., 2014), new online forms of responsibility have garnered attention in academic and professional circles. This attention arises from their potential to address the weaknesses or shortcomings of conventional formats.

In addition to lower costs or easier implementation, the underlying potential for accessibility, communication and synchronism these emerging mechanisms entail (Acharya, 2015; Fengler, 2019) suggest a broader array of opportunities for media accountability and an increased reach and impact of the network of mechanisms involved in monitoring and upholding information quality — including these new instruments’ potential to intervene in systems or environments characterised by a poor professional culture or limited civil society involvement (Lauk & Denton, 2011, as cited in Groenhart, 2012).

However, in the wake of the participatory potential of web 2.0, one of the main premises of these new models, whether developed by news organisations or emerging from other sectors of society, lies in the possibility of engaging citizens in the public debate on the responsibilities and social role of the media and the improvement in the quality of journalism (García-Avilés, 2019; Pérez-Díaz et al., 2020), ultimately giving meaning and purpose to the different public criticisms arising in different areas of the online landscape (Bernier, 2013; Chaparro-Domínguez et al., 2021).

As Meier (2019) concludes, “[q]uality in journalism cannot rest on the shoulders of individual journalists and newsrooms ‘alone’, and “[m]any initiatives and institutions in society must work together in a pluralistic process in order to strengthen quality in journalism” (p. 5). On the part of news organisations and journalists, this mindset will entail a more dialogical conception of professional ethics, not only recognising the public and other agents of society as partners in activating and materialising accountability

processes but also making them co-responsible for the quality of information (Culver, 2017; Ward & Wasserman, 2015).

#### 4. MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY IN PORTUGAL

Throughout the democratic period, the regulation of Portuguese journalism has been characterised by constant institutional reorganisation, a rather fragile model of self-regulation and what Camponez (2011) describes as a process of “juridification” of journalists’ professional ethics. Nevertheless, based on studies such as those by Miranda (2019), Camponez (2011), Fidalgo (2009), Moutinho et al. (2018) or Renedo-Farpón et al. (2022), it is possible to identify a wide range of instruments in Portugal, with different levels of institutionalisation, that play a role in media responsibility and transparency.

In contrast to what Bertrand (2018) identifies as the more elective dimension of accountability, the media accountability paradigm in Portugal can also be read in the light of what Miranda and Camponez (2022) characterise as a “mandated” approach to these processes, referring to the replacement of voluntary initiative by legal requirements or recommendations for the implementation of journalistic accountability instruments. In fact, this type of mandate can be found in the Statute of Journalist (Lei n.º 1/99, 1999), the Press Law (Lei n.º 2/99, 1999) or other legal provisions.

Although online experiences of accountability in Portuguese journalism materialise in a late and somewhat limited context (Miranda, 2019; Moutinho et al., 2018), new digital formulas for responsibility and transparency have emerged and spread in Portuguese media (Christofoletti et al., 2019; Miranda, in press; Renedo-Farpón et al., 2022).

#### 5. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Despite the various contributions highlighted in the previous section, the paradigm of digital accountability mechanisms in Portuguese media still lacks a more in-depth characterisation and systematisation.

In this context, the main objectives (O) of this exploratory study are: (O1) to contribute to the mapping of the digital accountability instruments of the Portuguese media; and (O2) to understand the extent and ways in which these instruments are implemented.

With the specific objectives of this research in mind, this study focuses on the analysis of a sample of journalistic editorial projects comprising the digital versions of two print media (*Público* and *Expresso*), two digital natives (Observador and Notícias ao Minuto) and two news segments from online portals (SAPO24 and ZAP aeiou). The selection of these media is based on audience and consumption data from the Associação Portuguesa de Circulação e Tiragem (n.d.) and the findings of the study by Newman et al. (2022). *Público* is a quality daily newspaper founded in 1990 and launched its online version in 1995. The website of the weekly *Expresso* (founded in 1973) was launched in 1997. Among the digital natives, Observador began its activity in 2014. Founded in 2012, the editorial project Notícias ao Minuto favours shorter news stories (Zamith, 2015). Unlike

the other three media outlets, which adopt a business model based on subscriptions, the latter focuses on distributing free information and advertising revenue. The SAPO24 and ZAP aeiou projects represent the news segments of the SAPO and aeiou portals, respectively.

In order to answer O<sub>1</sub>, adopting the methodological options pursued by Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas (2015), a first approach to the study aimed to trace the digital accountability mechanisms implemented by the six news organisations. Mapping these mechanisms was based on systematising the instruments identified in previous studies (Table 1), complemented by using non-probabilistic sampling procedures from the websites and other digital channels of the analysed media. The mapping was accompanied by applying content analysis strategies to identify key characteristics of the systematised instruments, namely their digital nature (replication of offline formats or specific to the web) or their framework (self-regulation, transparency or participation).

AUTHORS	YEAR
Renedo-Farpón et al.	2022
Pérez-Díaz et al.	2020
Fengler and Speck	2019
García-Avilés	2019
Christofolletti et al.	2019
Suárez-Villegas et al.	2017
Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas	2015
Koliska	2015
Fengler et al.	2014
Bichler et al.	2012
Heikkilä et al.	2012
Fengler et al.	2011
Meier and Reimer	2011
Bertrand	2008

**Table 1.** Previous studies underlying the mapping of digital media accountability mechanisms

Seeking to expand and elaborate the characterisation of the practices and instruments identified in the first stage of the study and drawing on the procedures applied by García-Avilés (2019) and, in particular, Pérez-Díaz et al. (2020), the second approach focused on analysing the implementation of 15 digital accountability instruments that represent the three phases described in the literature review, promoted by at least one of the news organisations. This second approach also aims to answer O<sub>2</sub>. Using a code sheet with performance categories, such as frequency, function or results of the mechanisms, a content analysis was carried out over nine months (from July 2022 to March 2023) in non-consecutive weeks. Each instrument in each organisation was classified according to its level of implementation: consistently implemented (1 point; ●), irregularly

implemented (0.5 points; ●) or not implemented (0 points; ○). No advertising or opinion content was considered in this second part of the analysis<sup>1</sup>.

## 6. MAPPING MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY INSTRUMENTS AND PRACTICES

The first segment of this study identified 40 digital accountability instruments among the analysed news organisations (Figure 1). These instruments range from permanent and established procedures to occasional or irregular solutions. While they have specific features of their implementation and activation, this list does not suggest radically different or original elements compared to surveys in other geographical areas. Furthermore, there are no significant differences from previous mappings of the broader Portuguese media scene (Miranda, in press) — however, the lack of permanent media monitoring sections or the absence of clear or more detailed information on funding sources stand out.

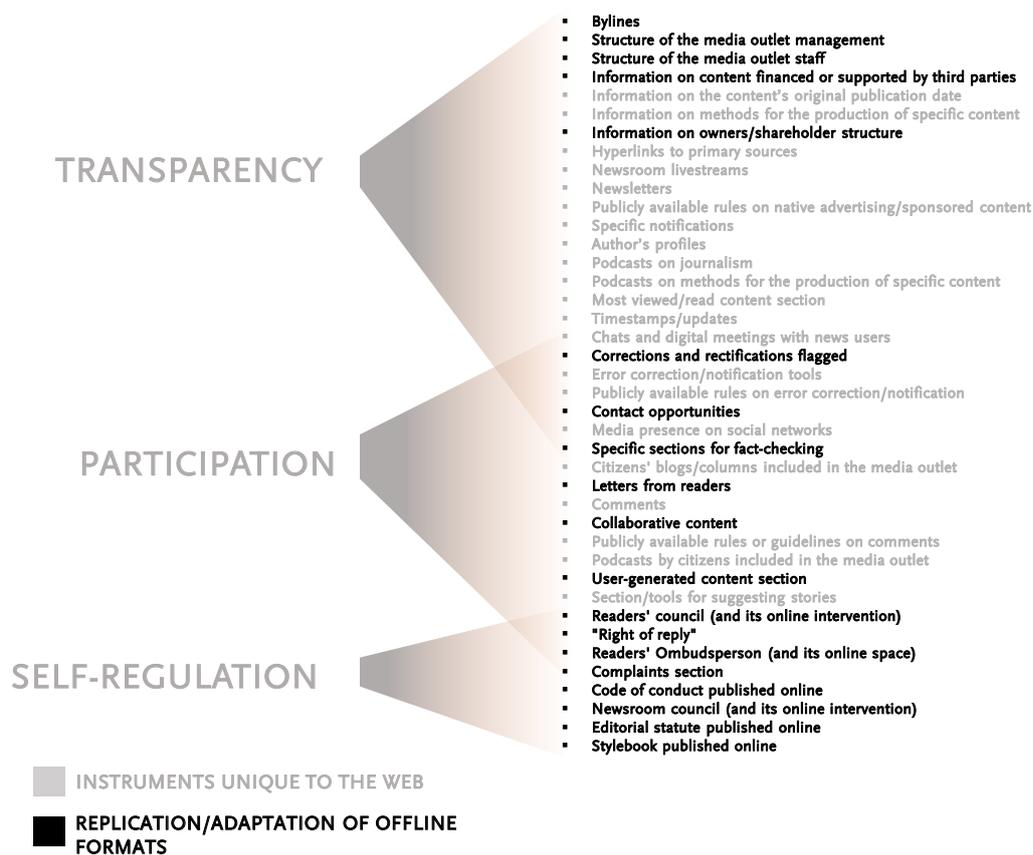


Figure 1. Mapping of digital media accountability practices and instruments implemented by the news organisations analysed

<sup>1</sup> In order to confirm and further analyse elements of the information obtained, exploratory interviews were conducted with the editors of a number of the media analysed.

Among this list of instruments, 21 are specific web mechanisms, such as error reporting systems or hyperlinks to the primary sources. The remaining 19 are ways of replicating traditional mechanisms in a digital context. Within the latter field, it is possible to differentiate between practices of reproducing conventional mechanisms in the media's digital channels — as is the case, for example, with editorial statutes — or efforts to adapt these traditional instruments to suit the digital potential — as seen in *Livro de Estilo* (Stylebook) do *Público*, or, as will be discussed later, in the right of reply procedures implemented by *Expresso*. In both cases, the digital transition tends to amplify the opportunities for media accountability and responsibility, facilitating accessibility and increasing their reach. Notably, *Livro de Estilo* (n.d.) do *Público* encourages reader participation by inviting them to suggest changes to its chapters, promoting active engagement in its design and improvement.

However, the mechanisms specific to the online environment predominantly focus on transparency. In addition to examples like digital meetings with users or references to content publication dates, the traditional media under review include the promotion of different types of podcasts, which, broadly targeted or more specialised and on an ad hoc basis, contribute to explaining the inner workings of newsrooms, the processes involved in news production, or the methodologies and sources behind particular stories.

Notwithstanding the voluntary nature of several media transparency and self-regulation mechanisms, it is also worth noting that references to information regarding editorial project principles and guidelines or media management often align with legally mandated requirements and recommendations, as stipulated in laws such as the Press Law (Lei n.º 2/99, 1999) or the Media Transparency Law (Lei n.º 78/2015, 2015).

## 7. IMPLEMENTATION OF MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY INSTRUMENTS AND PRACTICES

### 7.1. BEFORE PRODUCTION

According to Pérez-Díaz et al. (2020), accountability practices in the media with an impact before news production encompass procedures related to content creation and include accountability instruments concerning the news organisation itself, its structure, and business strategies. Table 2 suggests cross-cutting transparency practices related to news organisations but also demonstrates varying degrees of application of these procedures and a tendency to comply with legal requirements. When describing the media's mission and objectives, the information provided typically circumscribes to the editorial statute, a mandatory element by law — there is no evidence of a voluntary effort to go beyond what is legally mandated.

		EXPRESSO	PÚBLICO	NOTÍCIAS AO MINUTO	OBSERVADOR.	SAPO24	ZAP AEIOU
Mission statement	T	●	●	●	●	●	●
Publicly available code of conduct/ethics	S/T	●	●	○	○	○	○
Information on the structure of the editorial staff	T	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ownership structure	T	●	●	●	●	●	●
Information on funding	T	●	●	○	○	○	○

**Table 2.** Implementation of media accountability instruments with an impact before production

Note. Participation (P), self-regulation (S), transparency (T); implemented (1 point; ●), irregularly implemented (0.5 points; ●) and not implemented (0 points; ○)

Meanwhile, the public debate stirred by the 2019 revision of *Expresso's* code of conduct (Martins, 2019) may exemplify the significance of this type of mechanism, not just as an instrument for self-regulation but also as a form of bond between the media and society. However, among the media outlets analysed, only *Expresso* and *Público* share their operational guidelines publicly — the former provides these through a dedicated subpage, and the latter presents this information within a section of its *Livro de Estilo* (n.d.), which is also accessible online.

Information about the organisations is usually included in the fact sheet or dedicated subpages, identified at the end of the menus or at the bottom of the websites across different media outlets. It is in the latter segment that *Público* includes information on the main financial flows. *Expresso* includes details about the business group at the bottom of its website, offering a link to Impresa's financial information. The inclusion or omission of information on news organisations' financial and managerial aspects is closely tied to the specific context of each editorial project and its respective media group. However, it is essential to view this through the lens of a set of obligations to declare this information to the Regulatory Authority for the Media, which might partially suppress the demand for this voluntary transparency initiative.

## 7.2. DURING PRODUCTION

Attributing content authorship holds creators accountable and allows the public to check and control the quality of journalistic work. Except for articles produced as a direct adaptation of agency content or press releases, there is a widespread practice of signing journalistic content. There is, however, a notable difference between the procedures of news portals, where content is predominantly signed by the media outlet, and other editorial projects, where individual journalist signatures are more common. The unique setup of SAPO 24 cannot be dissociated from its editorial model, as content production results from a partnership with the MadreMedia agency.

In four media outlets analysed, content authorship is complemented by the authors' biographical data — although not all journalists provide this information (Table 3).

		EXPRESSO	PÚBLICO	NOTÍCIAS AO MINUTO	OBSERVADOR.	SAPO24	ZAP AEIOU
Authors' signatures	T	●	●	●	●	●	●
Author profiles	T	●	○	○	●	●	○
Support/funding of specific content	T	○	●	○	●	○	○
Hyperlinks to primary sources	T	●	●	●	●	●	●
Corrections/updates	T/S	●	●	●	●	●	○

**Table 3.** Implementation of media accountability instruments with an impact during production

Note. Participation (P), self-regulation (S), transparency (T); implemented (1 point; ●), irregularly implemented (0.5 points; ●) and not implemented (0 points; ○)

In addition to transferring practices for identifying support for the production of specific journalistic content into the online format — like using the formula “the newspaper visited ( ... ) at the invitation of ( ... )” — there is evidence of leveraging digital resources' potential to more conspicuously and transparently indicate partnerships and the various sources of funding for particular journalistic content and editorial projects.

The identification of sources is a foundational and standard procedure in contemporary journalism. The media outlets examined strive to enhance these practices by incorporating hyperlinks to primary sources of the information — including content from their editorial projects, other media, external websites or other types of documentary sources, such as official statements, dispatches or legislation. Additionally, embedding original content from social networks is also common practice. Occasionally, public and/or official documents are made available through the media outlet's server as article sources.

The fast-paced and intensified environment of journalistic production underscores the importance of upholding values associated with correcting and rectifying errors. As journalism becomes more vulnerable to inaccuracies, the agility and information accessibility of digital platforms allow for swifter and more informed ways of correcting these errors (Karlsson et al., 2017; Plaisance, 2016; Saltzis, 2012). Most of the media analysed identify updates and corrections to their content. However, the frequency and methods of implementing these practices vary significantly. While projects such as Notícias ao Minuto or SAPO24 generally restrict their actions to simply indicating the existence of an update and the time of the change (usually at the end of the text), Público, Observador or Expresso go further by summarising the changes made and explaining the reason behind them. In this context, it is also worth highlighting the specific case of Observador, which devotes a subpage within its editorial project section to its policy for correcting and updating content. In the text, the media outlet begins by acknowledging the “real risk” of

errors, commits to swift and transparent corrections, and provides detailed guidelines and procedures for specific situations: “correcting factual data”; “clarification of information”; “updates”; “correction of notifications”; “corrections and updates on social networks”; and “deletion of published content” (*Política de Correção*, n.d.). Although not exclusive to the digital sphere, Point 6 of *Expresso*’s code of conduct also states that “all factual or omission errors must be promptly and explicitly acknowledged and corrected, with due relevance” and that “when justified, a public apology must be issued” (“Código de Conduta dos Jornalistas do *Expresso*”, 2008, Point 6). Related to correction and rectification, although the right of reply is a legal requirement that predates the advent of the internet, procedures such as the one adopted by the *Expresso* website — establishing a network of hyperlinks between the content(s) targeted and the text of the right of reply — demonstrate the potential of online journalism to promote and expand media accountability.

### 7.3. AFTER PRODUCTION

The forms of media accountability with an impact after production identified in this study involve increased public participation and interaction between users of news and editorial projects. In this context, it is important to note that both digital natives and traditional media feature subpages dedicated to the different newsroom contacts, providing more direct contact with the content authors. Meanwhile, ZAP aeiou consolidates this information in its fact sheet. SAPO24’s page does not provide clear and easily accessible contact details. Once again, this should be considered within the framework of the media outlet’s editorial model and the project’s specific context as a sub-segment of the online portal (Table 4).

		EXPRESSO	PÚBLICO	NOTÍCIAS AO MINUTO	OBSERVADOR.	SAPO24	ZAP AEIOU
Mechanisms for suggesting corrections	P	●	●	○	●	○	○
Comments	P	●	●	●	●	●	●
Contacts	P	●	●	●	●	○	●
Mechanisms for suggesting content	P	●	○	○	●	○	○
Ombudsperson	P	○	●	○	○	○	○

**Table 4.** Implementation of media accountability instruments with an impact after production

*Note.* Participation (P), self-regulation (S), transparency (T); implemented (1 point; ●), irregularly implemented (0.5 points; ●) and not implemented (0 points; ○)

Another opportunity for the public to engage in the accuracy and responsibility of journalistic information involves mechanisms for suggesting corrections. Both Observador and *Público* have tools to flag errors. The first uses a highlighted text at the end of articles, showcasing the author's email address and inviting readers to suggest corrections. In the second case, this tool consists of a button at the end of the content, linking to a dedicated form for error reporting. This procedure generates an email that can be received by the "last minute" section team or the online segment editors, the copy desks and, in the case of signed content, the author. As a rule, the online section coordinators handle these messages initially, liaising with various newsroom staff based on the type of error reported (such as typographical or factual errors).

Besides including an invitation to suggest corrections, Observador also encourages readers to add a "lead" for new news stories at the end of the articles. This feature serves the dual purpose of prompting more in-depth stories and inviting a more active role from readers in shaping the media outlet's agenda. Following a revamp implemented in March ("O Novo Clube Expresso: O que É, Para Quem, ao que Vem? E Como Pode Fazer Para Entrar?", 2023), *Expresso* has also adopted a highlighted text at the end of articles, similar to Observador's model, which allows for the submission of questions, suggestions or criticisms directly to the authors of the content.

User comments are often based on more or less constructive critical opinions regarding media conduct and the attributes of journalistic content offered, which can impact the perception of news quality and the responsibility of news organisations (Dohle, 2018; Prochazka & Obermaier, 2022). However, framing this user participation mechanism as a vehicle for media accountability should be given greater consideration (Eberwein, 2019; Ksiazek & Springer, 2020). The effectiveness of this approach might depend on the level of identification or anonymity of the comment authors (Shanahan, 2017) and the management or moderation model applied to these contributions (Reich, 2011). Ultimately, it will also involve how journalists and news organisations perceive the criticism emerging from these participatory spaces (Prochazka & Obermaier, 2022). For example, whether they ignore it, consider it, or actively engage in the debate.

Among the media outlets analysed, there is heterogeneity in how comment tools are implemented and managed. *Público* and Observador have the most similar models: both editorial projects reserve comments on the websites and their mobile applications for identified users; readers themselves moderate, and the participation management involves a scoring system or subscriber reputation — although *Público* limits daily comments to two and moderation actions to three for non-subscribers<sup>2</sup>. Both media outlets also have community rule subpages that outline scenarios demanding editorial team intervention, namely eliminating a record that "is false or presents a doubtful identity" (*Regras da Comunidade—As Regras dos Comentários*, n.d.). *Público* ("Comentários", n.d.) allows "the use of pseudonyms, as long as they are not used for purposes contrary to the community rules" (Critérios de Publicação, Point 6) but prohibits, for example,

<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that, as of November 2023, *Público* has restricted the possibility of commenting to subscribers only.

“comments that deliberately aim to disinform readers about electoral processes, legal issues or matters of public health and safety” (Critérios de Publicação, Point 3). Alongside the comments, this second newspaper provides a space for debate, “Fórum Público” (Public Forum), with a section dedicated to the media. Also, as part of the strategy implemented in March 2023, *Expresso* has once again boosted its commentary tools, although this is restricted to subscribers only. Concerning comments, *Expresso* mentions the media’s promise to take part in the debate (“O Novo Clube Expresso: O que É, Para Quem, ao que Vem? E Como Pode Fazer Para Entrar?”, 2023) — a practice identified in various articles, in which members of the editorial team reply to readers’ questions and suggestions.

ZAP aeiou and SAPO24 do not explicitly or clearly outline their comments section’s rules. Regarding the latter project and Notícias ao Minuto, the comments function is limited to users registered on the Facebook social network.

Similar to trends observed in other geographical areas (Enkin, 2021), Portugal has also experienced a decline in the presence and scope of public ombudspersons. Except for the public audiovisual sector, *Público* stands out among privately-owned Portuguese media for maintaining this position. Although their interventions and texts are not exclusively reserved for the online space, the newspaper’s website provides a dedicated space for the ombudsperson, featuring their articles, an archive of previous ombudspersons’ texts, and a subpage outlining the ombudsperson’s “definition”, their “responsibilities”, the criteria for “appointment and termination of functions” and declarations of “incompatibilities” (“O que É o Provedor do Leitor”, n.d.).

## 8. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

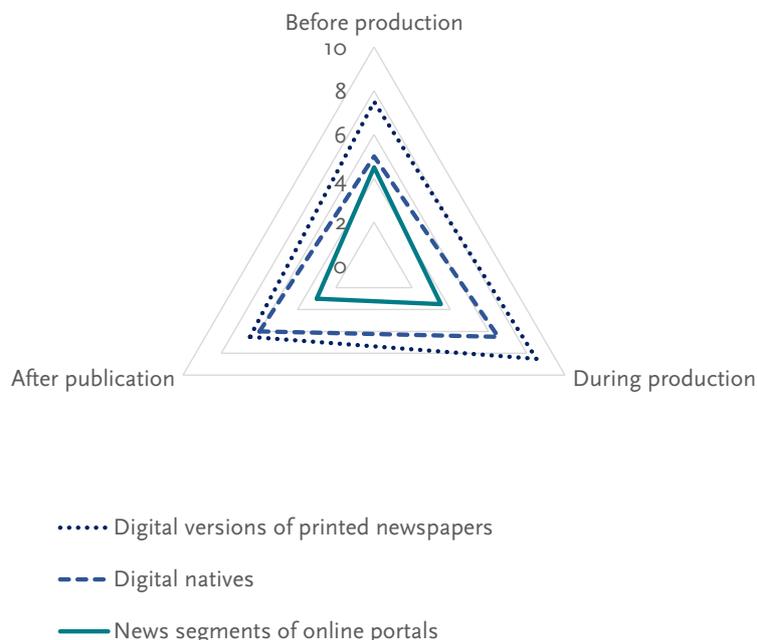
The survey from the first phase of this study points to a rather broad and diverse array of digital media accountability instruments and practices. These encompass not only the digital replication of traditional formats — particularly regarding professional self-regulation — but also the emergence of new web-specific mechanisms — notably those inherent to a transparency dimension. The findings suggest that in the Portuguese context, the advent of a new online landscape has facilitated new opportunities to mobilise and broaden the scope of journalism quality monitoring processes, as well as expanding the potential for user participation and dialogue between the media and their audiences — for example, through digital meetings or debates in comment spaces. This growing participatory or public aspect of responsibility processes becomes all the more relevant when we understand accountability not only as a measure of media quality but also as a means of managing and socially “controlling” the quality of journalistic information (Bertrand, 2008). As the perspectives of media outlets and users regarding journalistic information quality might not necessarily align (Schwaiger et al., 2022), the evolution of these new interactive and dialogical forms of media accountability could play an important role in defining and consolidating the standards that govern the quality of journalism.

Another feature that underlies the findings of both phases of this study concerns the “mandated nature” (Miranda & Camponez, 2022) of the different instruments identified.

For instance, requirements such as the obligation to disclose data on media ownership and funding as specified in the Media Transparency Law (Lei n.º 78/2015, 2015) or the Press Law's (Lei n.º 2/99, 1999) stipulation for an editorial statute might contribute to the widespread adoption and reinforcement of methods that advocate and validate journalism quality. Along with comments sections, the mandated mechanisms demonstrate a consistent degree of implementation across all the media scrutinised in the study's second phase. Nevertheless, formalising these aspects might mitigate the voluntary nature of media accountability dynamics and could ultimately deter innovation and the adoption of alternative or complementary accountability formats.

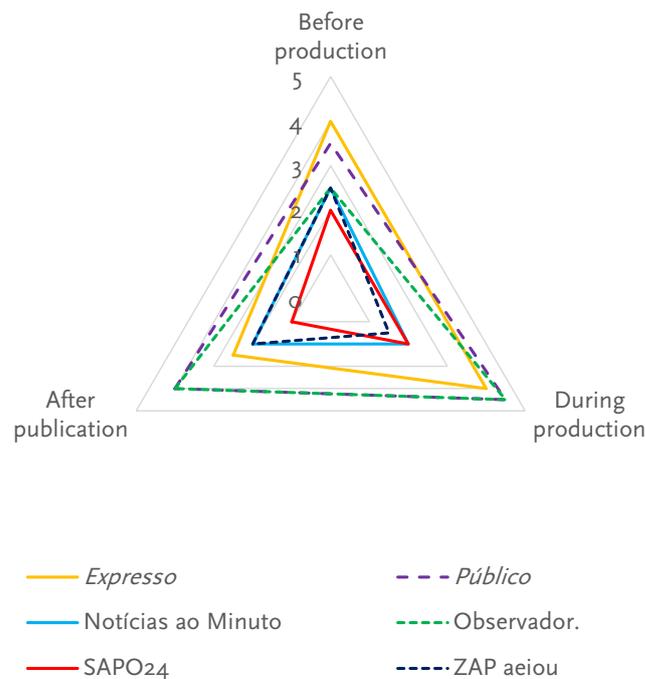
To further delineate and expand on this characterisation, the second stage of the study focused on analysing the implementation of different digital accountability mechanisms. A general conclusion drawn from these findings is the heterogeneity in the frequency and methods through which the various editorial projects analysed pursue different responsibility and transparency processes.

The data in Figure 2 illustrates a higher diversity and increased implementation of the digital mechanisms analysed among the two more traditional media outlets. On the other hand, there is a lower occurrence and uniformity in implementing these digital tools within the news sections of online portals. This aspect should be considered in light of the fact that these news projects have a smaller editorial dimension and fewer resources. Additionally, they only represent a fraction of the means that provide broader and more diverse services.



**Figure 2.** Level of implementation of digital accountability mechanisms by the three types of media according to the three stages of news production

Concerning digital native platforms, as shown in Figure 3, it is important to highlight the contrast between Observador — which tends to align more closely with traditional media — and Notícias ao Minuto, which shows less consistency, particularly in the application of mechanisms during and after the publication of content. Once again, the particular situation of this latter platform should be considered in context with its editorial model and objectives. Moreover, in line with the conclusions drawn by Pérez-Díaz et al. (2020), this scenario also suggests that rather than a dichotomy between traditional and new media, the asymmetries in implementing and experimenting with new digital formats for responsibility and transparency stem from cultural, technological, or financial factors. These encompass aspects such as the financial capacity of the media, their editorial objectives, or their business model and relationship with audiences. Notably, the highest levels of implementing digital accountability mechanisms are observed among the projects relying on subscription models and greater public involvement.



**Figure 3.** Level of implementation of digital accountability mechanisms by the six media outlets analysed according to the three stages of news production

Within this context, it is important to revisit the discussion on the dialogical dimension of the new accountability models. Expanding on previous observations, the interactive and participatory nature of these responsibility and transparency mechanisms plays a pivotal role in promoting news quality. The conduct and actions of news organisations and journalists are influenced by the awareness that they will have to answer to their audience and explain the news production processes (von Krogh, 2008). Concurrently,

these dialogical dynamics could prompt the public to articulate their expectations regarding quality and responsible journalistic information while enabling the media to assist audiences in defining what constitutes quality journalism (van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014). Although the discussion around *Expresso*'s code of conduct was fairly limited in time and scope, it shows that the potential for debate about the quality of journalism is not limited to interactive mechanisms; it can also emerge in the discussion about the instruments of accountability.

As Christians (2009) or Brants and de Haan (2010) argue, the success of these initiatives concerning responsibility in defining and promoting the quality of journalism heavily relies on the willingness of the media and professionals to engage in dialogue with the public. Despite comment boxes being the most commonly implemented voluntary mechanism, the instances of direct intervention by the editorial team in the ensuing discussions are limited, as observed. Ultimately, the lack of response from journalists to the criticisms and questions arising from these spaces could even have adverse consequences on the quality of the media or, at the very least, on how users perceive quality, as it creates a void in the debate that other players could occupy (Prochazka & Obermaier, 2022). These waves of participation may not always lead to constructive forms of dialogue or improved information quality (Waisbord, 2020). Journalists' appeal for increased active participation in these interaction processes must consider the potential risk of exacerbating work overload and professional fatigue among information professionals (Porlezza, 2019).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the erosion of mechanisms such as the public ombudsperson — this figure is the instrument with the lowest representation among the media analysed — reflects the challenges in sustaining responsible, quality journalism. Indeed, in an environment of moderate expenditure and consolidation of new commercial strategies in journalism, the low cost and participation associated with these new models might even pose a risk of replacing established forms of promoting, assessing and controlling the quality of information (Evers, 2012).

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the elusive or ambiguous definition surrounding the quality of journalism and news (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020), this study aimed to briefly explore various associations between these concepts and the potential dynamics of media responsibility and accountability. In essence, the study sought to highlight three facets of this relationship: accountability as a dimension or hallmark of media quality, accountability as a mechanism for controlling or assessing the quality of journalism, and accountability as a space for defining the quality of news information.

In their more participative or public dimension, media accountability processes are, first and foremost, forms of promoting, managing and socially controlling the quality

of journalistic information while also providing tools to guide the work of journalists and news organisations. Conversely, these processes can also enhance the professionalism and credibility of information and editorial projects.

The ongoing digital transition and the emergence of a new online landscape have expanded new opportunities for mobilising and broadening the scope of these journalism quality monitoring processes. They have also heightened the potential for user participation and dialogue between the media and their audience.

A more comprehensive analysis of the digital accountability mechanisms implemented by the media analysed in this study tends to highlight, on the one hand, the heterogeneous reality and potential underlying the adaptation of conventional responsibility models to online formats. It also underscores the mandated nature of media accountability and transparency processes, suggesting the need for further in-depth research into this phenomenon.

Notwithstanding the advantages and possibilities underlying increased user intervention and participation in monitoring the quality of information, as previously highlighted, this potential should be approached with some caution. Therefore, considering the prevalence of the participatory domain among the innovative instruments identified, it is also imperative to conduct further research on journalists' expectations and attitudes towards these new dynamics and possibilities for media accountability.

Furthermore, a more specific analysis of the level of implementation of several of these mechanisms indicates some disparities and asymmetries in their application. These disparities encompass differences between a more public dimension of their actions and limitations to intervention accessible only to members or subscribers. While instruments such as the podcasts identified in the mapping, the commentary tools analysed in the second segment of the study or other mechanisms aimed at the media outlets' community portray a higher level of transparency, they may also mirror the commercial strategy of these organisations, prompting further investigation into the relationship between these elements.

Although it aims to contribute to an exploratory approach to the reality of digital accountability mechanisms in the Portuguese media, this study has some limitations. It should be noted that the analysis focuses on a restricted sample, though it intends to illustrate different realities of Portuguese digital media. Moreover, it addresses a specific analysis period and may not reflect accountability dynamics beyond this time frame. In this context, the possibilities for further studies presented here may assist in mitigating these limitations.

**Translation: Anabela Delgado**

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