

# MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Professor Claude-Jean Bertrand outlines some ways of holding the media to account

Media Accountability Systems (i.e. non-governmental means of insuring that media are socially responsible) come in about twenty different forms. They could be divided into three categories according to their obvious purpose: criticism, monitoring or public access - but most M.A.S. actually belong to more than one category.

Some were quite well-known in Anglo-Saxon nations by the end of the 1960s, although not many actual M.A.S. were visible in the media landscape:

- codes of ethics which media professionals have discussed and agreed upon;
- in-house critics and "contents evaluation commissions" (like those established by Japanese dailies as early as the 1920s) to scrutinise their own newspaper and spot possible violations of ethics;
- media reporters that keep a critical eye on a whole sector of the media industry and report on it to the public;
- press ombudsmen, paid by a newspaper or broadcast station to deal with complaints from customers;
- local press councils, regular meetings of professionals from the local media and members of the community;
- liaison committees set up by newspeople and some social group with which they are bound to clash at some point, like the legal profession or the

police;

- regional and national media councils (including representatives of media owners, professionals and citizens), created by the media both to adjudicate complaints by media users and to defend press freedom against governmental threats.

Other M.A.S. are usually not set in the same category as the ones mentioned above:

- very visible correction boxes;
- Letters to the Editor and Open Forums;
- regular opinion surveys;
- the systematic presentation of pro-and-con opinions on all important public issues;
- the further education of working journalists, through one-day workshops, one-week seminars, six-month or one-year fellowships at universities;
- both books written by professionals and journalism reviews devoted principally to media criticism (e.g. the *American JR* or the *St Louis JR*).

Strictly speaking, some other M.A.S. stand outside the media world:

- consumer associations and, more particularly, associations of media users;
- non-commercial research, done by academics, on such topics as the perception of media messages by the public or the contents of media or the absence of contents (omission of news);
- and a crucial M.A.S.: higher

education.

Lastly, some M.A.S. are almost unknown and are rarely mentioned on either side of the Atlantic:

- accuracy and fairness questionnaires, either mailed only to persons mentioned in the news or published for all readers to answer;
- the "société de rédacteurs", an association of newspeople working for a print or broadcast medium, which usually owns shares in the company, hence has a voice in the setting of editorial policy. The first to attract attention was that of the French daily *Le Monde* in 1951.
- the, even rarer, "société de lecteurs", an association of readers which buys shares in the capital of a medium and demands to have a say, even a very small say, in deciding the general policy of the company.

[**Editorial note:** Claude-Jean Bertrand is a professor at the Institut Français de Presse in the University of Paris. He has written books about the British and American press as well as the French press.

In this article, Professor Bertrand summarises ways of making the media more accountable. He hopes to stimulate a debate in Australia on the M.A.S. concept.

A longer article, "Fifteen Means of Improving the Media" is available from the Council.]

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