

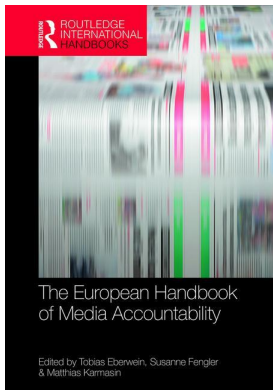
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BELGIUM

Divided along language lines

Karin Raeymaeckers and François Heinderyckx

Abstract

Belgium is a country with a highly complex political structure related to three different language communities. This results in segmented authority along communities' dividing lines for several aspects of the political and regulatory framework. The media are part of the political level related to the cultural sphere, and thus media regulation and media accountability are at sub-national political levels. As a result, there is essentially no 'Belgian' media regulation, but rather two distinct, and sometimes significantly different, regulation systems. The media depend on different professional accountability instruments as ethical codes for journalism, and councils for journalistic issues, although their power can be different north and south of the language border. The efforts of the individual media to safeguard accountability can be seen in both parts of the country but they are largely related to the individual decisions of the media brands. Some media have letters to the editor as strong features, some media have an ombudsperson and some editors-in-chief establish a personal dialogue with their public on specific case-related issues or on a more regular basis.

Introduction

Accountability is closely related to the social responsibility media model. Recent discussions on media accountability have been about the commercialization of media and journalism. The criticism of commercialization concentrates on the structure of the sector and the continuing process of concentration of media institutions, especially in the traditional print media. There is also criticism about content elements, for example, the decreasing difference between editorial and commercial content, the pressure for scoops and the down-market trend. The growing importance of information subsidies, related to cost-cutting measures in newsrooms and the dismissal of journalistic staff, particularly strengthens the position of lobby groups and interested parties.

Criticism of the relationship between the media and the political actors was not prominent until recently. In the historical development of our national media market, media brands were characterized by either or both political and ideological ownership. In the concentration process, these affiliations faded out (depillarization), so the discussion about links between political actors and media was not at the forefront. However, one element in the concentration process

of media actors and media brands recently provoked some criticism. In a media landscape characterized by fading political parallelism, a recent consolidation in the media sector in Wallonia brought back the question of political ties with the media industry as *Tecteo*, a cable provider and an important industrial actor with strong ties with the socialist party, bought a regional newspaper group *Éditions de l'Avenir*.

The Flemish-language and French-language media markets in Belgium are quite different from one another. First of all, the French-language market is even smaller than the Flemish one and is characterized by a steep decline in newspaper circulation – French-language dailies have lost about a quarter of their circulation in recent years. In Flanders, the erosion is present, but at a more moderate level. Television channels from France are quite popular among French-speaking Belgian viewers (about a third of the market share) while channels from the Netherlands are of very little interest to Dutch-speaking viewers in Belgium. The journalism cultures are also different, with a much more significant trend towards commercialization and tabloidization in the Flemish media. The two journalist communities seem to live in different worlds: there is an astonishing lack of journalistic interest in what happens in the other community, and only in moments of major crisis do journalists from both communities engage in any kind of dialogue. One example of such a crisis moment was the mock newscast from the French-speaking public television channel, *Radio Télévision Belge Francophone (RTBF)*, on December 13, 2006, that staged a string of imaginary events about a unilateral declaration of independence by Flanders. Although there were various signs hinting that this was not a true newscast, as it featured the main news anchor, well-known political journalists and even political figures, the programme made quite an impression on a large number of viewers. The programme triggered a major controversy in the ensuing days and led media makers in the north and south to reflect on their role and functioning, and it was the starting point for efforts to restore the lost lines of dialogue and communication.

Other crises have stemmed from debatable choices by news media, as in the coverage of the tragic bus accident in Sierre, Switzerland, in which 28 people, mostly Belgian schoolchildren, died. Controversial initiatives by some journalists triggered a public debate on ethical and deontological values. Some media published photos of the children without the permission of their families, sometimes even retrieving the material from school websites and social media. At these specific moments, the debate with the media representatives themselves, the journalists and their representative institutions is prominent. In other, less dramatic cases and situations, critical voices on the performance of the media are often disputed or altogether ignored by the media sector itself. Many editors-in-chief deny that journalism has embarked on a path of tabloidization and commercialization. The media management strongly argues against these criticisms from academic scholars and online discussion forums and blogs. In their editorials, their interviews and their open letters to the public they argue that the quality of journalism in Belgium is of a high standard. However, this contrasts with the views of the journalists themselves: In a survey of journalists (Raeymaeckers et al., 2013), 79% of Flemish journalists and 90% of French-speaking journalists agree that the “news is more sensational than 5 years ago”.

The news media sector is faced with a major sectorial crisis: concentration, consolidation, declining sales and circulations, declining advertising and classified revenues, major newsroom downscaling, casualization of employment and increasing pressure and workload on news workers. The concern for this strategic sector has triggered significant initiatives from the public authorities. In Flanders, media ministers organized three successive *Staten Generaal van de Media* (2009, Minister Peeters; 2011 and 2014, Minister Lieten). In the French-speaking part of the country, Parliament convened its own *États généraux des médias d'information* from 2010 until 2014. Different working groups discussed core elements of journalism culture, regulation and accountability.

Journalistic culture and media system

When comparing media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004a) place Belgium, together with Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Sweden and Switzerland, in the North and Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model. Although Belgium is historically defined in a Catholic cultural and ideological framework, unlike the other countries, the historical characteristics of this model can indeed be found in the Belgian case. The historical development of the media is rooted in a tradition of high political parallelism and a press, until the 1960s, with either or both a clear political and ideological branding. Belgium was one of the early consolidated liberal countries with strong liberal institutions and freedom of the press anchored in the constitution of 1831. The media reflected the cultural and societal cleavages of their time, and this explains why the French language, which was the cultural language of the elite, even in the Flemish-speaking north, initially dominated the historical development of the print media. From 1880–1900, newspapers blossomed, with broad ideological diversity, already segmented into distinct brands for the elite readership and for mass readership. The Second World War was another turning point in the development of the media in Belgium. In the aftermath, many brands disappeared or were taken to court because of their wartime activities. The post-war years are considered to be the starting point of the concentration of media ownership (De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010).

Today, newspaper ownership is characterized as a double duopoly, in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgium, respectively, with an unusual persistence of family-owned conglomerates. Broadcasting was initially organized as a public service monopoly. Deregulation later opened broadcasting to commercial ownership. Commercial television came to the French-speaking part of Belgium in 1987 with *RTL-TVi*, while in Flanders the commercial broadcaster *VTM* was launched in 1989. Print media groups have been significantly involved in the development of commercial television in Belgium (see Table 3.1 for a list of key actors in the Belgian media system).

Table 3.1 Key actors in the Belgian media system (source for circulation: CIM certified figures)

Group	Brand	Circulation 2015	Ownership and characteristics
IPM	<i>La Libre Belgique</i>	33,472	Quality newspaper
IPM	<i>La Dernière Heure/Les Sports</i>	41,876	Popular newspaper
L'Avenir	<i>L'Avenir</i>	81,356	Regional newspapers (several editions)
Rossel	<i>Le Soir</i>	59,484	Quality newspaper
Rossel	<i>Sud Presse</i>	88,148	Popular newspaper
Rossel/Persgroep (50/50)	<i>L'Echo</i>	10,606	Financial newspaper
Persgroep/Rossel (50/50)	<i>De Tijd</i>	27,562	Financial newspaper
Persgroep	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws + De Nieuwe Gazet</i>	269,595	Popular newspaper
Persgroep	<i>De Morgen</i>	41,690	Quality newspaper
Mediahuis	<i>Het Nieuwsblad + De Gentenaar</i>	242,650	Popular newspaper
Mediahuis	<i>De Standaard</i>	88,088	Quality newspaper
Mediahuis	<i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>	90,406	Regional newspaper
Mediahuis	<i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i>	88,563	Regional newspaper
Public broadcaster	<i>VRT</i>		Flanders
Public broadcaster	<i>RTBF</i>		French-speaking market
Commercial broadcaster	<i>VTM</i>		Flanders
Commercial broadcaster	<i>VIER</i>		Flanders
Commercial broadcaster	<i>RTL TVi</i>		French-speaking market

The media landscape gradually became depillarized, starting in the 1960s. At present, none of the major media outlets are clearly associated with a political or ideological position (except for the openly progressive daily *De Morgen* in Flanders). Historically, some media used to be in the hands of political stakeholders, labour organizations, etc. This is no longer the case and the media are now fully in the hands of commercial stakeholders with only remote echoes to the traditional political and ideological branding. Yet, this might change again in the future, as shown recently when *Tecteo* (an industrial group active in energy and telecommunication, with strong ties to left-wing political stakeholders) took over the French-speaking regional newspaper group *L'Avenir*.

Public broadcasting is important in Belgium and the subsidies provided to the public service media (PSM) are substantial. However, we see a clear difference between the north and the south of the country. In Flanders, public broadcasting has a market share of 69% while the French-speaking counterpart, *RTBF*, has only 23%. As media subsidies are in the hands of the different language communities, the attribution system for PSM and for media policy are distinct, with each public service medium (*VRT* and *RTBF*) receiving public funds but being constrained by multi-annual (4–5-year) protocols signed with the governments of Flanders and Federation Wallonia-Brussels, respectively.

Both *VRT* and *RTBF* are allowed to earn additional, though strictly limited, income from other activities (with *RTBF* being allowed to advertise both on radio and television). In 2013, the endowment granted by the Flemish government to *VRT* was €289.6 million and the government of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels granted *RTBF* €228.9 million.

Print media also benefit from public subsidies, both direct and indirect. A reduced value added tax (VAT) of 6% is applied to the sales price of print media. Media companies also benefit from a range of measures such as reduced rates for distribution costs and tax measures for investments. Other measures are different in the different parts of Belgium. In the French-speaking part of Belgium, direct public funding still exists, providing limited subsidies to newspapers each year, primarily with the aim of maintaining diversity and encouraging employment. On the Dutch-language side, the system of direct press subsidies was abolished in 1997. Instead, a protocol was initiated between the sector and the relevant political level for more tailored measures of support for innovation, and for the preservation of the reader market. In 2011, Flanders revised the system of media support for print media in the *MediAcademie*, which also integrated platforms for sustaining different forms of journalism and journalism education. The principle for all forms of subsidies is to sustain a pluriform and independent media landscape, taking up its role in civil society and acting as the Fourth Estate.

Press freedom is described as one of the important cornerstones of the Constitution of 1831 of the nascent Belgian nation. Article 25 solemnly states that “The press is free; censorship will never be established”. Freedom of speech is only restricted when promoting hate; inciting violence, and either or both racism and xenophobia; and when defamation or libel are established. For a long period, this press freedom was considered to be unquestioned, thus rejecting all forms of regulation. Since the appearance of radio and television, regulation became inevitable, if only for the organization of the structural regulation of technical infrastructure and spectrum allocation. Regulation soon also integrated elements to protect the general interest by safeguarding plurality, cultural diversity, access to information, protection of minors and editorial independence from political and commercial pressures. The more recent evolution of the media landscape resulting from technological innovation, convergence and the Internet led to new challenges requiring new regulatory initiatives, many of which developed in various forms of self-regulation or co-regulation, especially for matters related to media content. Belgium also issued, at the national level, specific policies to protect journalists’ sources and to regulate the right to reply.

Access to information remains problematic, particularly for anyone engaged in investigative journalism. Research by Dirk Voorhoof (2009, 2010, 2012, 2013) shows that journalists are often denied access to information that they are entitled to, forcing them to turn to the courts of justice. His research shows that a broad range of arguments is arbitrarily used to deny journalists access to the information.

The autonomy of journalists was strengthened by specific legislation (April 7, 2005) to help them protect their sources. Prior to that law, the protection of sources was only included in the ethical codes of the journalists' associations, which proved insufficient as it gave legitimacy to journalists protecting their sources but was of little help when defending that right in courts. The scope of application was broadened in 2006 to anyone who provides information to the public. Thus, it is not restricted to accredited journalists, or journalists as a professional group, but includes bloggers, citizen journalists and activists.

The professionalism variables as defined by Hallin and Mancini are different and often specific for different media types. At the level of the language communities, there is a press council and there are codes of ethics; journalists are organized in specific associations but editorial statutes are rare. If they exist, they are often created in the historical process of concentration to safeguard the newsroom identity of ideological branding. Today they might still exist in some media, but they have little influence on important issues, on newsroom organization or newsroom autonomy.

The professional organizations of journalists reflect the typical intertwined situation between language communities in Belgium. The *VVJ (Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten)* in Flanders and *AJP (Association des Journalistes Professionnels)* in the French-speaking part of the country are intertwined with the *AVBB/AGJPB (Algemene Vereniging van Beroepsjournalisten van België/Association Générale des journalistes professionnels de Belgique)* at the national level. The latter organization defends journalists' rights in matters that are regulated at the national level. The *VVJ* and *AJP* defend the rights of journalists in those issues that the language communities and institutions regulate.

Established instruments of media accountability

Press Councils

The national professional organization of journalists (*AVBB/AGJPB*) is the cradle of initiatives to draw the lines of ethical codes for journalists. In 1995, these initiatives resulted in the creation of specific institutions such as the 'Council' and the 'College' for monitoring and safeguarding that ethical code. To improve the performance and increase the visibility of their efforts, a Council for Journalism (*Raad voor de Journalistiek – RvdJ*) was founded in Flanders in 2002. It involves representatives from the publishers and media companies, journalists and experts from outside media circles. To file a complaint, one must establish that one's own interests are at stake. The outcome of all complaints procedures is made public. The Council has an impressive track record, and the self-regulatory body appears to sustain the quality of journalism (Voorhoof, 2012). A large proportion of the complaints evaluated by the Council are related to invasion of privacy or perceived invasion of privacy, but there are also complaints related to tabloidization or sensationalism.

For the French-speaking part of the country, a Council for Journalism Ethics (*Conseil de Déontologie Journalistique – CDJ*) was created in 2009 and its missions were defined by law, making it more 'co-regulator' (public authorities and the sector) than 'self-regulator' (the sector only). It involves representatives from the publishers, journalists, editors-in-chief and civil

Table 3.2 Characteristics of the Belgian press councils

<i>Press Council</i>	<i>RvdJ</i>	<i>CDJ</i>
Created	2002	2009
Scope	Dutch-speaking Belgium	French-speaking Belgium
Type of regulation	Self-regulation	Co-regulation
Status	Private	Official
Missions definition	Statutes	Law
Claims	Interested party	Anyone

society. Anyone can register a complaint related to the Belgian media in French or in German (German is the third official language in Belgium) (see Table 3.2).

Both institutions of self-regulation (*RvdJ* and *CDJ*) are highly appreciated by professional journalists as the results of a nationwide survey in 2013 demonstrate. A large majority of French-speaking journalists (65%) praise the *CDJ*, and almost a third of the respondents see the institution as highly important. The Flemish journalists are also positive about the *RvdJ*, but slightly more moderately.

The *AVBB* together with the *VVJ* and the *AJP* contribute to the work of the Commission for the evaluation of applications to be recognized as a professional journalist (ultimately, the title is given by the Ministry of Interior). They also ensure compliance with the ‘Code of Journalistic Principles’ which were already listed in 1982 and based on the Code of Bordeaux (1954) and the Declaration of Munich (1971).

Codes of ethics

Although Belgian newsrooms accepted the international codes of ethics, a specific national Code was approved in 1982 by all journalists’ associations in Belgium. This so-called *Code van Journalistieke Beginselen* has since been adapted and updated. In 1994, a new list of recommendations was added specifically for reporting news on ethical issues, as well as for reporting on crime-related issues.

In Flanders, the *Raad voor de Journalistiek* is the main self-regulation instrument. Its ethical framework was formalized in 2010 in the *Code van de Raad voor de Journalistiek*. The Code is intended as a guide to practice; it contains a total of 27 articles, and is supplemented by guidelines for specific cases and situations. The code is inspired by two older texts. The first is the declaration of the rights and duties of the journalist, which was adopted internationally in 1971 (also known as the Munich Declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists). The second is the code of journalistic principles, which was endorsed by the Belgian journalists’ association AVBB, the labour unions and the editors of newspapers and magazine press houses in 1982. In addition, a number of media brands have developed their own codes.

In French-speaking Belgium, the *Conseil de déontologie journalistique (CDJ)* established its own *Code de déontologie journalistique* in 2009, and it was updated in 2013. It consists of 28 articles organized into four sections (truth, independence, honesty and rights of the people). The *CDJ* adapts its code as the media and journalism landscapes change. They work closely together with their Flemish counterpart as well as with the regulator for audiovisual media, the *Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel (CSA)*. Together with the *CSA*, the *CDJ* publishes a report each year on the activities regarding complaints and specific cases with ethical characteristics.

Editorial statutes and newsroom ethics codes

In Belgium, there is no systematic tradition of editorial statutes. Following in the footsteps of newsrooms in France, a number of French-speaking outlets have organized ‘societies of journalists’ (*sociétés de rédacteurs* or *sociétés de journalistes*) that formally gather journalists from a specific medium to ensure the independence of journalists from pressures, primarily from their owners, but also from political and economic circles (see Table 3.3).

In some cases, newsrooms opted for a ‘foundation’ model that is set up to preserve, even in the long term, the ideological positioning of the medium. The oldest example in the Belgian market is the Council of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, established in 1955 (Prevenier, 2006; Musschoot, 2010) and inspired by the models of *The Guardian* and *Le Monde*. The former family owners of *Het Laatste Nieuws* wanted the Council to safeguard the liberal roots of the news brand for the future and, even today, new journalists have to subscribe to the ideological code before being accepted for a job at *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Each appointment of an editor-in-chief needs to be approved by the Council.

In the broadcast media, editorial statutes have become commonplace, encouraged by various laws. Although strongly linked with media policy measures, the editorial statute of the Flemish commercial broadcaster *VTM* is still in preparation. The public broadcaster *VRT* developed its newsroom statute in 1998 and it has been modified several times since then. The statute defines with precision which members of staff fall within its scope, which is very important in a media organization that employs many non-journalists. It guarantees newsroom autonomy and even judicial support in case external actors try to steer newsroom policy. The statute also supports individual journalists who might want to refuse specific journalistic tasks that do not coincide with their professional and ethical values. The autonomy of the newsroom management and of the editor-in-chief are also protected by the statute, with particular attention to the appointment and dismissal of key newsroom positions. The role of the *redactieraad* (newsroom council) is defined as an instrument of communication between the general management, the newsroom and the newsroom management. Despite carefully described procedures, statutes are not always enforced.

Ombudsmen

Today, only the quality daily *De Standaard* has a highly visible ombudsman function. Tom Naegels, a well-known author in Flanders, has been the ombudsman since 2009, and since then, he has written many columns in the newspaper and online on specific cases within that newspaper and more generally on the state of journalism from a broader perspective. His columns are reflective and, in some cases, are steered by questions and remarks from readers. He holds up a mirror for the journalists and manages to start conversations between the newsroom and the public. Often his columns result in a conversation on a topic in which members of the public, the ombudsman and journalists participate.

Correction boxes

As newspapers sometimes publish information that has to be corrected after publication, one would suspect that correction boxes would be a formal part of most news brands. However, this is only the case for *De Standaard*. The title publishes corrections daily, often just small errors in names and data. For other types of corrections of a more serious nature, the legislation on the ‘right of answer’ prevails, offering those who feel they have been treated unfairly by a story a

Table 3.3 Belgian media accountability instruments at the newsroom level

<i>Newsroom</i>	<i>Société des rédacteurs/ journalistes</i>	<i>Ethics code/charter</i>	<i>Ethics committee</i>	<i>Ombudsman/médiator</i>
<i>Le Soir</i>	Since 1983	Since 1989	No	No more
<i>La Libre</i>	Since 1972		No	No
<i>La Dernière Heure</i>	Since 1982 (with discontinuities)		No	No
<i>Sud Presse</i>	Inactive	Yes	No	No
<i>L'Avenir</i>	Since 1990; refounded in 2005	Since 2007	No	No
<i>L'Echo</i>	Since 2004	Since 2004	No	No
<i>Le Vif – L'Express</i>	Since 1988		No	No
<i>RTBF</i>	Since 1984; refounded in 2005	Since 1998	Since 2008	Yes
<i>RTL-TVi</i>	Jointly with Bel-RTL	Yes	No	No
<i>Bel-RTL</i>	Since 1996, later merged with that of RTL-TVi	Yes	No	No
<i>Belga (Press Agency)</i>	Since 1992		Yes	No
<i>De Morgen</i>	Since 1990	Yes	No	No more
<i>De Standaard</i>		Yes	No	Yes
<i>De Tijd</i>	Since 2005	Yes	No	No
<i>VTM</i>	In preparation	Yes	No	No
<i>VRT</i>	Since 1998	Yes	Yes	No
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	Council since 1955	Yes	No	No

procedure to complain and demand that their remarks be published with visibility equivalent to that of the original story.

In Belgium, there is very little research on the accuracy of the media. However, in 2013, accuracy in the quality newspaper *De Standaard* was investigated, in close collaboration with the ombudsman and the editor-in-chief (Verhoeven and Naegels, 2014).

Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor are a widely used feature in all types of print media, with dedicated sections in their pages and often with large extensions in their online operations. These letters to the editor sections are still considered a valuable feedback instrument for the newsrooms in Belgium. As research demonstrates (Raeymaeckers, 2005), elements from the letters section can be used as material for further reporting. However, the research into Flemish newsrooms demonstrated that the letters section was so successful that deliberation was needed for selection and for the content management (including editing) of those contributions. However, some of the editing practices altered the original line of argument, or worse, added arguments written by the newsroom staff into the original letters.

The letters to the editor sections have ongoing online discussions that are highly popular because of the possibilities for readers to comment. Since those online comment forums have sometimes provoked a lot of off-topic discussion, contained false allegations or rude language, and were often of doubtful quality, many media have experimented with formats that narrow the open access. The open conversations became more contained by editors who altered or even removed

reactions they judged as harmful. This constant editing and monitoring was time-consuming and also added extra verification costs, so after a period of time the features allowing the public to react were downsized considerably and now are more the exception than standard editorial procedure.

Regulators for audiovisual media

In 2005, the Flemish Parliament created the *Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media (VRM)*. This institution replaced and regrouped three institutions: the *Vlaams Commissariaat voor de Media*, the *Vlaamse Geschillenraad voor radio en televisie* and the *Vlaamse kijk- en luisteraad*. All competences of these institutions related to ethics were transferred to the *Raad voor de Journalistiek*. The *VRM* acts as a supervision institution for the media, but also has specific autonomy for judging impartiality in the media. It acts to protect the interests of minors and takes the necessary steps in cases of hate speech. Members of the public are allowed to file complaints regarding impartiality, but only if they can demonstrate a personal interest or personal damage in relation to the content they are complaining about.

The Flemish government establishes the mission statement of the *VRM* as well as the criteria and measurements to assess its performance. The *VRM* is sometimes asked to research certain topics to guide policy measures (e.g. advertising rules, product placement).

In the French-speaking part of Belgium, the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA)* primarily regulates radio and television, including cable operators. It issues licenses for radio broadcasting (spectrum allocation), and monitors and takes action if some actors hold 'significant positions' that can be considered a threat to pluralism. The *CSA* collaborates with the *CDJ* only to communicate the results of the procedures of the latter to the broader public.

Advertising

The *Raad voor de Reclame* or *Conseil de la Publicité* was founded in 1967 by the established advertisers, media and communication agencies in Belgium. It soon established a number of ethical guidelines, and in 1974 it created the Jury of Advertising Ethics (*Jury voor Eerlijke Praktijken inzake Reclame* or *Jury d'Éthique Publicitaire – JEP*). The *JEP* acts as an institution for self-regulation. It reformed itself in 2008 to include representatives from civil society.

The *JEP* bases its decisions on a complex combination of texts, from laws to codes, conventions and directives; in total, 17 texts are listed on the *JEP* website. Among those texts, the Consolidated International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Code of Advertising and Marketing Communication Practice is seen as particularly important.

Academic research

The Flemish Government created the *Steunpunt Media* for the period 2012–2015. It is a centre of expertise and a joint collaboration between teams of researchers in Flemish universities to study news ranging from production aspects to audience research. Media stakeholders can ask for specific research or specific handling of research data. The *Steunpunt Media* regularly publishes newsletters and archives both broadcast and print news.

Fonds Pascal Decroos

The *Pascal Decroos* Fund for Investigative Journalism is an independent non-profit organization that aims to stimulate investigative and quality journalism. The Fund awards grants to journalistic projects and young journalists who cannot find investors for their projects in the media

industry. The Fund is partly subsidized by the Flemish Government with an annual grant of €300,000, a form of direct subsidy to sustain journalism quality.

Media journalism and media criticism

The Belgian media are not very keen on criticism. In Flanders, *mediakritiek.be* was an influential online meeting point for media criticism and media professionals, opinion leaders and academics, but it had to close down in 2014 due to financial problems.

Innovative instruments of media accountability

We have referred to the tradition of essays and columns of the editors-in-chief, senior journalists and expert journalists. These columns appear in the traditional printed brands but are also prominent online and are often discussed even more broadly by postings and cross-postings on social media. Here we notice a rather top-down approach using a broad range of traditional, new and social media. On some occasions, chat sessions with the public on a specific theme can also be seen.

Conclusions

To conclude this chapter, we refer to the atypical structure of Belgium, which has policy granting authority at the national level for some measures (VAT, tax rates, etc.), while for the majority of media-related aspects, authority is at the regional level, thus dividing the measures to safeguard autonomy or diversity into a French-speaking and Dutch-speaking set of policy measures.

Key institutions for accountability aspects are the press councils: *Raad voor de Journalistiek* and *Conseil de déontologie journalistique*. Both institutions are highly regarded for their expertise and respected for the guidelines they offer and the decisions they take based upon complaints and questions. They are both examples of judgment by peers while the policy level is kept out of the organizations.

The different examples of individual media brands having their own ethical guidelines are, in the large majority, inspired by the codes of both institutions (*RvdJ* and *CDJ*).

Individual media brands having *Sociétés de rédacteurs* to safeguard newsroom autonomy were often created in the concentration process to defend the ideological branding of the titles; however, those institutions have been proven to have only very weak influence when confronted with challenges in newsrooms, especially with challenges to cost-cutting measures.

Regulatory bodies, like policy-makers, struggle to keep up with the disruption in media production, distribution and reception. The blurring lines between the different media forms, and between roles (audience, journalists, producers, etc.) are challenging the structure and logics of accountability and regulation.