Media Responses to Media Criticism

An Analysis of Response Practices
in the Weekly Swedish Podcast MattssonHelin

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Abstract

At the time of writing in June 2015, the top Swedish tabloid editors, Thomas Mattsson and Jan Helin, Editors-in-Chief for the competing news organisations, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, have produced 116 weekly issues of their joint podcast "MattssonHelin". An examination of 24 samples of the content regarding responses to media criticism shows that the responses can be categorised in eleven groups that range from total rejection to total acceptance. Our categorisation presents a complement to earlier research on media responses to criticism. The responses contain elements of paradigm repair for journalism (Berkowitz 2000) but also illuminate how the editors use the particular advantages of the podcast format to enhance their take on public media literacy. Their presence in this particular digital platform allows for long and nuanced discussions on journalistic practice in relation to media criticism, albeit on their own terms.

Keywords: media criticism, media accountability, response strategies, paradigm repair, image restoration theory, crisis communication

Introduction

Starting in April 2013, Thomas Mattsson and Jan Helin, the Editors-in-Chief of the competing national Swedish tabloids, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, made podcasts in which they discussed media development and media criticism.[1] That the two hitherto intense competitors sat down for amiable weekly chats, disclosing detailed views on media environment, media strategies and media futures, surprised many, both inside and outside of the media business and is also internationally an exceptional cooperation. The podcast, called MattssonHelin, soon became compulsory material for media analysts, media executives, editors, and media critics and has about 30,000 weekly listeners.

The print circulations of *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* are dwindling but their online presence has rocketed. The role of these tabloids in news ecology has shifted from being crusading tabloid entertainers to more information-bent context-providing news centres. For the last 60 years these two tabloids have been major targets of media criticism, and almost each year they have been at the top of the complaints lists of the Pressens Opin-

ionsnämnd (the Press Council). *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* constitute 1 per cent of the number of Swedish newspapers, but they accounted for about 20 per cent of the Press Council verdicts between 1970 and 2010 (Bergling et al. 2009).

Alongside criticism comes the question of responsiveness. Research on media accountability discusses media response to criticism in term of public responsibility, public relations and paradigm repair (von Krogh 2014). The aim of this paper is to study the kind of approaches and response patterns to media criticism that emerge in the practice of the MattssonHelin podcast. In what way do the top editors for example, use the podcast to inform, introduce nuances, explain, enter into dialogue, excuse themselves, and dismiss or take responsibility?

Research question 1:

What kinds of response patterns to media criticism emerge in the podcasts?

Do the editors respond and act in line with earlier established patterns (e.g. trivialising or marginalising in so-called paradigm repair)?

Research question 2:

Are there examples of paradigm repair in the podcasts?

The analysis is based on a qualitative analysis of material from nineteen strategically chosen pods out of the 116 issues of the podcast produced by the editors up to the time of writing this paper.

Media criticism

Media criticism can be defined in several ways but critiques of journalism are often the defining criteria. In a seminal article, James Carey (1974) defined three forms of journalism and press criticism: (1) criticism of standards of public or social responsibility, (2) scientific criticism, and (3) cultural criticism. As Carey (1974: 244) notes: "By cultural criticism I mean an on-going process of exchange, of debate between the press and its audience and, in particular, those among the audience most qualified by reason of motive and capacity to enter the critical arena".

Wendy Wyatt (2007) developed a normative theory of press criticism with a specific objective that was based on Carey's idea of cultural criticism and using Habermas' ideas of deliberative and discursive democracy (Habermas 1996). Wyatt envisioned a critical movement to bring change to the press and news media that involved journalists, critics and the audience. Berry and Theobald (2006) have also identified a radical mass media critique emerging in the 19th century and developing until today.

Of special interest for a responsible and responsive relationship between media and users of media is communicative critique (Fornäs 2013), a critique that is reflexive and open to influence from others (Svensson 2015). In this case the critic and the subject of the criticism enter into dialogue. Each party is prepared to reflect over their values, norms and forms of understanding and to change their position based on the outcome of the communication process. Responses that include listening to, interpreting or acting upon critique all incorporate communicative qualities.

von Krogh has defined media criticism as "criticism in a broad sense relating to media structure, conduct, performance, content, role and influence, formulated by individuals as well as by civil society organizations, corporations and governments" (von Krogh 2012: 15). He has further identified three forms of media criticism: *efficiency focussed*, *interest based*, and *cultural/philosophical* media criticism. The first aims to contribute to the media performance according to general criteria, the second aims to shape the media in accordance with the interests of a specific stakeholder, and the third is wider and aims to understand or profoundly change media or society (von Krogh 2014:148). Stiernstedt has also pointed out that media criticism is often public and that its basic aim is to change the media (Stiernstedt 2014: 8).

Media accountability is defined by von Krogh as:

> … the interactive process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account of (and sometimes a correction and/or excuse for) their activities to their stakeholders. The values and relative strength of the stakeholders vary over time and are affected by media systems and media technologies. (von Krogh 2012: 9)

Media accountability can also be understood in terms of two related concepts: transparency and responsiveness. Transparency refers to all measures taken by a media actor – before, during or after a publication process – to make known or visible relevant information about the media actor, the process or the media product (Heikkilä et al. 2014).

Responses to media criticism

Media responses to criticism have varied over time and across different media systems and different market positions (von Krogh 2014; Ward 2004). The intention and weight of the critique is significant. Expressions of what appears to be a general opinion are deemed important, whereas criticism in self-interest is often neglected "unless the critics represent significant size and power" (Marzolf 1991: 2).

Dutch studies of 328 Editor-in-Chief letters to the audience from five news organisations identify seven response types in top editors' reactions to criticism (Groenhart 2013; Groenhart & Bardoel 2011). Responses vary in a spectrum that ranges from counter-attacks to apologies, from denying to accepting media errors, and from denying to accepting responsibility for media misdemeanours. The studies build on image restoration theory (Benoit 1995; Benoit & Drew 1997) and crisis communication theory (Coombs 1998, 2006). These theories have developed over the last thirty years from case studies of how companies like Exxon and Texaco have handled stakeholder reactions in connection with apologia/apologies (Hearit 2006), crisis management and reputational repair. Various researchers have suggested different typologies ranging from 4 to 150 options depending on the level of abstraction involved. In 1995 Benoit settled for 14 options within five strategies: 1. *denial* (options – simple denial and shift blame to someone else), 2. *evade responsibility for event* (options – blame outside provocation, defeasibility in terms of information or control, unforeseen accident and emphasise good intentions), 3. *reduce offensiveness of event* (options – bolstering, minimisation, transcendence, attack accuser in order to shift the blame from actor to victim and offer compensation), 4. *corrective action*, or 5. *mortification* (Benoit & Drew 1997: 155-156).

Coombs sought "some underlying 'connection' between the strategies" (1998: 179) and selected a defensive-accommodative response continuum. Defensive strategies deny any existence of crisis and/or responsibility, whereas accommodative strategies accept crisis and/or responsibility. According to Coombs, the continuum ranges from attacking the accuser to delivering a full apology (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Crisis communication strategies defined*

1. Attack the accuser	Crisis manager confronts the person or group that claims a crisis exists. This may include a threat to use "force" (e.g. a lawsuit against the accuser.
2. Denial	Crisis manager states that no crisis exists. This may include explaining why there is no crisis.
3. Excuse	Crisis manager tries to minimise the organisation's responsibility for the crisis. This can include denying any intention to do harm, claiming the organisation had no control of the events that led to the crisis, or both.
4. Justification	Crisis manager tries to minimise the perceived damage associated with the crisis. This can include stating there was no serious damage or injuries or claiming that the victims deserved what they received.
5. Ingratiation	Actions are designed to make stakeholders like the organisation.
6. Corrective action	Crisis managers seek to repair the damage from the crisis, take steps to prevent a repeat of the crisis, or both.
7. Full apology	Crisis manager publicly states that the organisation takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks forgiveness for the crisis. Some compensation (e.g. money or aid) may be included with the apology.

Source: Coombs 1998: 180.

Coombs later (2006) simplified the strategies in the continuum and reduced them to three: deny, diminish, and deal. Either deny the problem in various ways, try to diminish the problem using various methods, or deal with the problem in part or in total. The accommodative-defensive continuum was described as "protecting victims versus self-interests" (Coombs 2010: 36). In yet another development of the model the strategies are grouped into four postures – denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering (Coombs 2012: 155).

Groenhart uses Coombs' (1998) continuum when analysing 328 published letters from top editors where they respond to criticism from the audience and explain their decisions (2013). Together with Bardoel he argues that modifications to the continuum are necessary (Groenhart & Bardoel 2011). They suggest that Coombs' most defensive strategy, *attack the accuser*, is too harsh – "usually editors do not literally attack their (potential) consumers" (ibid: 10) – and this is changed to the more neutral *rejection*. Coombs' *denial* is altered to *refutation* that leaves more room for nuance and argumentation if the critic appears to be serious and knowledgeable. The third of Coombs' strategies, *excuse*, is replaced by another term, *evasion*. Groenhart and Bardoel argue that excuse "may be a problematic term for it is easily associated with regret and apology" (ibid: 11). Finding excuses for not accepting responsibility is in effect evading responsibility, shifting it to other media, or stating that the public "should be able to bear the atrocious character of the news" (ibid.). The fourth strategy, *justification*, is left untouched. In the context of letters

to the audience this means that some problematic aspect of journalism is admitted but is acceptable, justified, for example, by the watchdog function of the media. Coombs' fifth strategy, *ingratiation*, is considered to be "out of place" (ibid: 14). Praising stakeholders is seen as an ingredient in many strategies, but is not a strategy in itself. Instead, Groenhart and Bardoel identify *mitigation* as their fifth strategy; admitting mistakes but softening them by referring to time pressure and other constraints, "making errors is framed as something inevitable" (ibid:12). The order of Coombs' last two strategies is reversed in the Dutch media-oriented version. The seventh strategy, *full apology*, becomes the sixth media strategy, albeit under the new label of *confession*. Coombs' sixth strategy, *corrective action*, becomes the most accommodative media strategy under the label *alteration*. Groenhart and Bardoel argue that this is the most fundamental strategy; not only apologising but also making actual changes due to the problem at hand. "Announcing change or amelioration underlines the organizational responsibility and suggests that the failure is not incidental and has a structural cause" (ibid: 13).

Groenhart and Bardoel (2011) summarise their media-oriented continuum in a figure that also illustrates six dichotomies that take account of degrees of criticism, responsibility, and blameworthiness (see Figure 1).

REJECTION	REFUTATION	EVASION	JUSTiFiCATION	MITIGATION	CONFESSION	ALTERATION
criticism is unresonable	criticism is reasonable					
criticism is wrong		criticism is right				
the medium is not responsible for cause of criticism			the medium is responsible			
the medium acted properly				the medium did not act properly		
the medium is not blameworthy for incidental behavior					blameworthy for behavior	
the medium is not blameworthy for structure						blameworthy for structure

Figure 1. *A defensive-accommodative continuum for news media accounts*

The first two types, rejection and refutation, do not accept the criticism as true. The last two types, confession and alteration, accept the criticism, admit responsibility, and accept blame. The three types in the middle – evasion, justification and mitigation – express acceptance of the criticism and responsibility in various degrees.

Parallel to the work of Coombs and that of Benoit, a focus on apologia and apologies has been developed and sustained by Hearit (2006) and used in a media context by Borden (2012). Apologia is a "speech of defence" or "a form of discourse in which individuals seek to clear their names" (Hearit & Hearit 2011: 66) and apologetic discourse deals with the problem of responsibility and guilt (p. 67). Press apologias are defined as "organized attempts to persuade stakeholders and press critics that news organizations or individual journalists can still be trusted despite serious shortcomings in their news processes or content" (Borden 2012: 16). The manner of communication and the content of the communication of the apologia are the two main dimensions studied (Borden 2012). The study of apologies is one element of apologia. Full apologies include acknowledgement of a problem, accepting responsibility for it, promising to not do it

again, and expressions of concern and regret, whereas a partial apology only expresses concern and regret (Coombs 2012: 156).

Several other studies stress the dual nature of media responses. On one hand editors wish to address and possibly control the critique in order to minimise negative PR-effects. On the other hand, if it is possible, they wish to gain quality and positive PR-effects in the process (Nemeth 2000, 2003; von Krogh & Nord 2010).

A special kind of response to huge media scandals, such as the coverage of the life and death of Princess Diana and the Jayson Blair affair at the *New York Times*, has been called paradigm repair (Berkowitz 2000; Hindman 2005). These are scandals that media representatives perceive to be of a system-threatening nature and therefore need persuasive responses.

The paradigm repair research refers to Thomas Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1970/2009) where he distinguishes between "normal science" and scientific revolutions. Under periods of "normal science" the world is described and understood according to known and shared facts and theories, an accepted paradigm. Minor new revelations that do not fit the paradigm can, up to a point, be handled as exceptions or anomalies, this is a phase that Kuhn calls paradigm repair. When there are too many exceptions or when they are too serious, a scientific revolution occurs and a new paradigm is established. The analogies to the repair phase are of interest to media researchers dealing with media scandals that might challenge the existing "media paradigm". These researchers observe how journalists might differentiate between "real journalism" and diluted forms of journalism.

> In times of crises when journalistic paradigms are challenged, abused or misused, journalists re-present these paradigms anew to readers and audiences, in an attempt to re-acquaint these news consumers with what journalism really is and what role it plays in society. This is done by drawing expressed or implied boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable, legal and illegal, ethical and unethical journalistic practice. (Berkowitz & Eko 2007: 782-783)

Different strategies have been studied, such as justification, contextualisation, emphasising good intentions, denials, claiming that problems have already been solved, or blaming factors outside of journalism. According to Steiner and colleagues, "If 'renegades' can be identified, journalists can blame the greed, stupidity, laziness, or pathology of individual reporters, editors, publishers or entire organizations, as not merely deviant but 'exceptional'" (Steiner et al. 2013: 706). A relentless search for others to blame is manifest in studies of media responses to criticism over the O. J. Simpson trial and the death of Princess Diana (Hindman 2003). External factors are preferred, such as O. J. Simpson and Princess Diana themselves, or the appetite for scandals within sections of the public, but when internal factors are unavoidable these are found at the bottom of the food chain, such as paparazzi photographers and sensationalist tabloids. The Dutch study confirms this pattern and uses the term "significant others" when blame is attributed to factors other than the media organisation itself (Groenhart & Bardoel 2011).

Other researchers emphasise that if responsibility is to be avoided then it is crucial to frame the origin of the problem as exogenous (Olsson et al. 2015). Paradigm repair and crisis communication theory share a number of elements with regard to damage control and possible positive PR effects.

Method

In order to analyse response patterns to media criticism in the MattssonHelin podcasts, we choose to select a strategic sample of the hitherto 116 aired issues[2]. This was considered to a large enough sample to provide a varied and multifaceted material, yet small enough for two people to transcribe in the setting of this article.

The podcast is available at iTunes and directly on the web (www.mattssonhelin.libsyn.com). One of us has listened to each issue of the podcast from its beginning and has continuously kept brief notes on the presence of matters relating to media criticism. Updating and broadening these notes, we selected 24 segments[3] in 19 issues from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the period April 2013 to June 2015.[4]

The segments deal with the reasons given for the podcast and with various kinds of media criticism from media researchers, media professionals, and the general public. Segments are taken from ordinary weekly issues and from four specialised thematic issues that discuss statements/critiques from the Swedish Press Council for 2013 (# 36), controversial journalistic methods such as undercover reporting and phone-hacking (one issue about Sweden, # 68, and one about the U.K., # 69), and media criticism regarding a recent murder case in Sweden (# 115). The chosen segments do not cover all aspects of media criticism that are discussed by the two top editors, Mattsson and Helin, but they do deal with examples of the major aspects that we found in our broad overview.

The total length of time of the 24 segments is 4 hours and 5 minutes, and approximately 43,000 words have been transcribed. The total time of the 19 issues of the podcast that are used is 19 hours and 33 minutes, which means that 21 per cent of the content of these issues has been transcribed. Many of the issues transcribed are much more directed towards media criticism than the average issue, which roughly might contain 10-15 per cent media criticism.[5]

The arduous transcription work had a positive side effect: a close contact with the words spoken and the atmosphere created in the various issues of the podcast. This was beneficial in the next phase – a qualitative content analysis of the transcribed segments – where we identified emerging themes, compared the views expressed in different settings, and going back and forth from overviews of the text to close readings.

The method is inspired by reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009) and focuses on the empirical and interpretative levels. This means that our contribution is primarily concerned with developing concepts rather than a full theory (see Altheide & Schneider 2013). The analysis was carried out in two stages. First, we approached the material with an open mind, searching for categories and patterns relevant for media criticism response. Several close readings of the transcripts enhanced our understanding of the texts to identify the most salient responses to criticism. The established categories and patterns were then compared with earlier research findings on response to criticism from studies of media accountability, crisis communication, image restoration and paradigm repair. Our findings were compared and contrasted to models from this research in order to corroborate, complement or contradict earlier studies. In this part of the analysis the model developed by Groenhart and Bardoel was the major one used. This was because the model is based on earlier studies of crisis communication but has been adapted to take account of the results from studies on media and journalism accountability. Since our study is closely connected to accountability issues this was the most relevant model with which to compare and contrast our results. And since Groenhart

and Bardoel depart from Coombs´ seven step model, we have also decided to use this version of Coombs' model for our comparisons.

For the article, the authors have translated quotes from the podcast from Swedish into English.

Findings

Views on journalism, a craft to be mastered

When the two editors evaluate media errors and media criticism in the podcast, an underlying theme emerges in their discussions concerning journalism. Journalism is viewed as a craft with a particular set of professional knowledge, experience, and skills. When these skills are mastered, the reporting and presenting of open, as well as hidden, information goes well. Thus, errors are often looked upon as results of bad craftsmanship. In a reply to a listener's critique of excessive and misleading headlines in the tabloid press, the editors differentiate between the characteristics of the genre and the craftsmanship.

> We really want to tell a story and tell as much as possible. If we are a bit too aggravated at times I mean that this is part of the tabloid quality to attract attention and to be sharp and explicit in our headlines. On the other hand I think it is just bad craftsmanship if you feel that the headline is not covered in the text. That cannot be excused by referring to the genre or to tabloids. That is sort of bad craftsmanship. (Helin, podcast # 3, May 2013)

In a comment on an article by a business administration scholar that criticised journalists for using quotes out of context, misleading information, biased information, leading questions, and lack of self reflection, it is stated that such activities are not defined as journalism.

> The issues that are listed in that article deal with instances when journalism fails, when the craft is not well performed. (Helin, podcast # 103, March 2015)

According to Mattsson and Helin, mastering the craft includes knowledge of how journalism is produced and what professional assessments, including concerns for personal integrity, are taken into consideration prior to publication. This gives media professionals a special ability to evaluate external opinions on media content and conduct. Professional knowledge of high quality, prize-winning Swedish journalism is, for example, used to refute media criticism:

> … when you as a professional craftsman can ascertain its extremely high quality in television, radio and newspapers in Sweden, and when I then take part in a debate about trivialisation, shallowness and spin in the media – then I know as a professional that that is not the case. You may have different views on what is good and what is bad, but that critique is plain wrong. (Mattsson, podcast #106, April 2015)

And media professionalism is used to refute accusations of politicising the news.

> … when you as a professional news reporter know how the news gathering functions, how front pages are designed, how priorities are made in digital publishing – then I think you can dismiss this kind of political critique. (Mattsson, # 89, December 2014)

The editors fear that the general public might not understand all the work and effort that precedes decisions to publish controversial material. One example is the decision of *Expressen* and its editor, Thomas Mattsson, to publish a two-year old video showing one of Sweden's leading male actors using cocaine when socialising with criminals. The actor's history of drug abuse is known, he has received medical treatment for his addiction and *Expressen's* decision was criticised as an unjustified invasion of his privacy. The Swedish Press Council later endorsed the critique. However, Mattsson argued that the film was justified since it was embedded in a series of serious articles that aimed to show the dangers of drug abuse. A large number of experienced professionals had worked on the project for several months. A vast material was then scaled down for publication, for example, omitting potentially harmful details, and a professional proportionality assessment was performed.

> There you evaluate public interest, press ethics, news value, danger of harmful publicity, and other factors in relation to each other. (…) So these things you have taken into account in advance of the publication if you are a responsible newsroom with many able professionals. (Mattsson, podcast # 67, July 2014)

A proportionality assessment is seen as a key element in professional craftsmanship. It is also important in the network of professional newsrooms, an ecosystem of news, where stories and data are republished continuously.

In a recent murder case, the newspaper, *Göteborgs-Posten*, published secret military facts concerning the father of the murder victim. *Göteborgs-Posten* and other newspapers that published this story were groundlessly criticised according to Mattsson.

> Of course *Göteborgs-Posten* made a proportionality assessment about the father's military service, considering it so relevant in this context that it should be revealed even if it is deemed secret. (Mattsson, podcast # 115, June 2015)

This underlying perception of journalism is relevant to the understanding of how media flaws are perceived.

Views on media errors

Although some media malpractices seem to be viewed merely as bad craftsmanship and not real journalism, the editors also differentiate between various kinds of media errors. Three broad groups can be discerned: non-deliberate errors, deliberate offences in good faith, and deliberate offences in bath faith.

NON-DELIBERATE ERRORS. A common word when media errors are mentioned in the podcast is mistakes. These are seldom analysed as to why they occur, but references are made to pressures of around-the-clock publication and to a lack of clear routines.

One example is a publication in *Expressen* that had received criticism from the Press Council. A school principal had been prosecuted for the rape of a pupil. *Expressen* did not name the school or the principal, but was criticised for publishing a picture on the Internet of another "typical" school, which turned out to be identifiable. *Expressen* withdrew the picture from the article and issued an apology to the principal of the school in the picture.

> One should not, and that is a lesson shared by many journalists, but you still some-times use archived photos for news articles anyhow. (…) This was unfortunate and, in sum, badly performed by us at *Expressen*. (Mattsson, # 36, December 2013)

Carelessness is a word used in this context and *Aftonbladet's* Jan Helin declares a "Vision Zero" regarding Press Council criticisms in this field.

> The Vision Zero concerns negligence, simply mistakes that you regret and did not think through[6]. (Helin, # 36, December 2013)

DELIBERATE OFFENCES IN GOOD FAITH. This is mainly a group of cases where the editors are bent on testing the limits of the established code of media ethics. They argue that media ethics are volatile and change over time, sometimes due to newsrooms that find the guidelines obsolete and wish to cover new territory.

One example is a Press Council criticism of both newspapers for having published the fact that the Swedish Queen had filed a complaint to the Press Council concerning the publication of a satirical art photo in which she was unfavourably depicted. The papers were not criticised for publishing the picture but for revealing the complaint – information that is usually kept secret in order to avoid inflicting more harm on the complainant. Both editors published the story, fully aware they were going to be criticised, and argued for amendments to the guidelines since there is a difference between people in power seeking public attention and the ordinary citizen needing protection.

Deliberate offences in good faith may also, according to the editors, result from proportionality assessments where the potential positive outcome in terms of news value substantially exceeds the negative consequences of, for example, trespassing, driving too fast, or purchasing illegal weapons in order to show flaws in weapon control.

DELIBERATE OFFENCES IN BAD FAITH. In the issues of the podcast that were studied, this group mainly contains examples from newsrooms outside of Sweden. The editors mention fake stories at the *New York Times*, bad sourcing at the *BBC*, and illegal credit card reporting at *Se og Hør* in Denmark. However, most of the discussions in this area deal with the *News of the World* and the phone-hacking scandal.

> What the *News of the World* did was completely shameless. They did not do all the things they have been accused of, but what they did was completely shameless. (Mattsson, # 69, August 2014)

> … when you start using extremely unconventional methods without a clear and legitimate journalistic purpose in the public interest, then it can go as bad as it did for the *News of the World*. (Helin, # 69, August 2014)

The editors dismiss commercial motives behind the sleazy actions of the *News of the World*-employees. They argue that since organisations like *BBC* and the *New York Times* have also erred, the reason for such behaviour must be found elsewhere. They settle on factors such as morality, age, and the experience of the individual reporter, plus influence from the culture of the newsroom.

> Journalists are ambitious and aspiring, you want the story, you want the scoop, it is an important driving force that can make you cut a corner or two. (…) No organisation is immune to this since the driving forces are more complex than just selling newspapers. (Helin, # 69, August 2014)

The editors are somewhat ambivalent regarding the importance of the "shameless" activities. Thomas Mattsson argues that it was not necessary to close down the *News of the World* since the bad practice only originated from a few reporters and some ex-editors. He suggests that other forces were at play to bring the paper down, since it was already known that most London newspapers also used the services of private detectives.

Jan Helin states that the Swedish news coverage of Swedish royalties was moving in the same direction as the *News of the World* some 6 to 7 years ago. The Swedish development was halted, whereas the British activities continued, leading to a "journalistic meltdown".

Views on media criticism

Using the three forms of media criticism mentioned earlier – efficiency focussed, interest based, and cultural/philosophical media criticism – it is clear that the first of these forms is dominant in the podcast discussions. The interest-based critique is also present, but the third form is very rarely on the agenda.

The two top editors prefer constructive and knowledgeable efficiency-based criticism, as many editors do (von Krogh & Nord 2010). They are appalled by ignorant Twitter attacks that are mixed with hatred, whether they are focussed on efficiency or self-interest. Furthermore, they despise what they label perfunctory and prejudiced critique, especially from an academic background.

Obvious examples of the first form of media criticism are the Press Council verdicts. Both editors praise the Council and the efforts that surround it. They are active in keeping the voluntary institution up to date and use plenty of podcast time to inform the listeners about the workings of the Council.

> I believe that the voluntary system is beneficial in giving vindication to the claimant and helping us editors and newsroom leaders to distinguish patterns that we can learn from. (Mattsson, # 36, December 2013)

There is a tendency in the discussions to dismiss interest-based criticism or to label critique as interest-based. In one example the editors label a media critic as a representative of the Journalists' Union, despite the fact that he left the board of the union 15 years ago. Another example deals with a listeners' criticism that the news is politicised. Jan Helin declares that there is a rock solid wall between opinionated texts on the editorial pages and independently framed news articles. He pushes the question back to the listener:

> My view is that the person who criticises this is on the opposite side of the political spectrum in regard to the matter at hand, and therefore finds the article in itself to be politicised. (Helin, # 89, December 2014)

In June 2015, a young woman was murdered in the Swedish countryside. The police accused (falsely, it was later revealed) reporters of behaving intrusively towards the woman's family. This caused a storm of media critique on Twitter.

> How can people attack newspapers, radio and television on such a flawed and insufficient factual basis? (…) I believe we can see two kinds of media criticism here. One concerns anonymous racist elements that grab every opportunity to loathe and hate the media. (…) Another concerns people who are not racist and

> not anonymous, but who have prejudices about how the media works. (…) A deep
> lack of knowledge is revealed. (Mattsson, # 115, June 2015)

Media research is sometimes referred to in passing, for example, to support arguments in on-going discussions. But in some of the very first issues of the podcast Mattsson and Helin revealed a deep distaste for research where they consider the results to be "tendentious and unfounded" (Helin, #2, April 2013). They focus on two female researchers, one of whom is described as "infamous as a media critic" (Mattsson, #2, April 2013) and the other as "a so called expert", inclined to submit routine criticism based on prejudices (Mattsson, #4, May 2013).

The initial enthusiasm for scrutinising academic media critics – it was even suggested as a theme for the podcast – did not last long. However, the interest in media criticism endured.

Responses to media criticism in action

We have identified eleven different ways of reacting to the media criticism in the podcast. These were generated through a close reading of the selected issues or the relevant segments of these issues.

A first response is to *attack* the media critic with fierce critique. The criticism of a media scholar, prepared in advance of producing this issue of the podcast, is one example (#2, April 2013). Mattsson and Helin are also appalled about the lack of knowledge and lack of evidence in the social media critique of the media in the case of the murdered young woman (#115 and #116, June 2015). In these cases they become harsh critics of media critics.

A second response pattern is to *dismiss* the critique. In this case the media critic is seen as totally wrong and for that reason the editors do not need to engage with the critique.

The dismissal can be grounded in a reinterpretation of the case, for example by focussing on the context, the aim of the critic, or the political tendency of the media critic. A dismissal can also occur on quite general grounds. When commenting on an opinion piece on media ethics written by a professor of business administration, Mattsson asks:

> Is this something we should embrace? Or is it just a perfunctory critique from an establishment opinion leader who doesn't relate the least to how media are consumed? Or is there something here that we should discuss? (Mattsson, #103, March 2015)

Helin agrees that there might be something to discuss, newsrooms do make mistakes, but then seems to dismiss the idea:

> First, I think it is important to understand that there is a difference between science and journalism. They are different, it is two different methods. (…) Then I think that he generalises and says that all journalism works in this way. I won't buy that entirely. (Helin, #103, March 2015)

A third response is to *contest* the critique. This contestation can be done in several ways, for example by developing an argument or reinterpreting the case. Compared to attack and dismissal, contestation is more open and develops an argument against the criticism. Such arguments are made either in a factual or a bantering/ironic style.

Contestation of the criticism is closely linked to the fourth and fifth responses: *nuancing* and *ameliorating* criticism. When the criticism is nuanced, the editors bring in new aspects or give them greater precision and in this way a more nuanced understanding is advanced. When criticism is ameliorated it is toned down, making a claim that the situation is not as bad as the critic suggests. Offering radically alternative interpretations – counter images – are also used.

A sixth response is *thankful denial*. In such cases the criticism is not accepted but the actors see a general relevance in it. The criticised issue is not seen as a responsibility of the editors, but they approve of it being identified as a problem.

A seventh response is *ambivalence*, where an actor responds in an incoherent way – partially accepting and partially denying – depending on circumstances. This is obviously an ambivalent position of the criticised actor, somewhere between dismissal and acceptance. In our material, Helin criticised reporting on his wages and benefits, but at the same time admitted that this kind of reporting had merits and should be carried out.

An eight response is to *discuss* or suggest the discussion of an issue. This kind of openness is not linked to holding a specific opinion or acting in a specific way. Being transparent and encouraging a discussion is, in itself, perceived as the solution to the problem, and therefore discussion can be seen as both a response type and a strategy. Of course, discussion is an important ingredient in other response strategies, such as contestation, but there it is the means to and end rather than an end in itself.

The ninth response we found in the material is an *acceptance* of the criticism. In these cases the editors confess that they did wrong or that significant malpractice took place. In one example the editors accepted the need to be cautious in every single case when publishing overviews of several cases. As seen earlier, malpractice can be based on negligence or can occur in good/bad faith.

Response number ten not only accepts the criticism but also adds an *apology*. Such apologies are offered with different levels of sincerity and depth. To apologise publicly is literally called to "do a poodle" in Swedish – to bend down like a dog and wilfully accept the humiliation of being wrong. The editors often routinely use the expression "doing a poodle" and in most cases this merely means admitting a factual error.

The final response identified is *action change* in terms of practices or policies. In this kind of reaction, the media, the newsroom or the journalist change their routines and ways of acting. This is not only listening to criticism or entering into a discussion with the critics, or even agreeing and apologising to them. It also comprises an actual change of modes of action or editorial processes. An example of this is when the editors report on new procedures for handling archive images.

One additional observation is that the podcast generally, and also when it addresses questions of media criticism, is to a large extent informative. When the editors discuss the verdicts from Pressens Opinionsnämnd 2013 they use almost half of the issue to describe the self-regulatory system and how it works. This is in line with their ambition to inform and spread knowledge about the media, an intention presented in the first issue of the podcast. There is an ambition to educate and inform media users. When criticising the critics – laypeople or academics – this is highlighted as an important aspect of the podcast.

Contrary to sound bite journalism, the editors claim to contribute to a more nuanced media discussion, sometimes with a satirical twist.

> We are still quite reliable suppliers of this analytical discussion form, far away from the morning paper finery, the quarrel of the cultural pages and from the fuss of the editorials. (Mattsson, # 113, June 2015)

This will be discussed in the next section and will also be addressed in the conclusions.

Discussion – response patterns and paradigm repair

Our first research question asks: What kinds of response patterns to media criticism emerge in the podcasts? Our findings corroborate essential aspects of the models developed by Groenhart and Bardoel (2011) and Coombs (1998). We found the same kind of continuum, ranging from harsh attack and dismissal to alteration of action or structures of editorial processes, as that found by Coombs (1998, 2007), but we also found a transition area in that continuum, represented by our two categories of ambivalence and discussion (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Comparing response strategy categories*

Categories	MattsonHelin pod (von Krogh/Svensson)	Groenhart/Bardoel	Coombs
1	Attack	-	Attacking the accuser
2	Dismiss	Rejection	Denial
3, 4, 5	Contestation Nuancing Ameliorating	Refutation	-
6	Thankful denial	Evasion	Excuse
7	Ambivalence	-	-
8	Discussion	-	-
9	Acceptance	Justification	Justification
4,5	(Nuancing Ameliorating)	Mitigation	Ingratiation Bolstering
10	Apology	Confession	Corrective action
11	Action change	Alteration	Full apology and mortification

According to Groenhart and Bardoel, attack is a response not used by editors, but we found an example of this in our material: an *attack* aimed at established media researchers. It might be the case that the podcast genre offers the editors a wider scope of responses compared to answering letters to the editor, thus making *attack* an option. The media format in use and the relation to the critic seem to matter when this strategy is decided upon.

The response of *dismissal* corresponds to refutation and denial in the earlier models and in this dimension our findings are in accordance with both models. With this response strategy the editors distance themselves from the critique, claiming that it is not relevant. In our study we also found different ways, or styles, to *contest* the critique. According to Bardoel and Groenhart, this response strategy resembles refutation but in our findings we also see it connected to rhetoric and arguments that *nuance* and *amelio-*

rate. For this reason, the refutation response may be separated into different response strategies or divided into sub-categories. Comparing our findings with Groenhart and Barodel we also see the relevance of nuance and amelioration in relation to the strategy of mitigation and that of bolstering in Coombs' model.

The strategy, *thankful denial*, resembles evasion and excuse. In this case the editors admit a general relevance of the critique, but they decline to take responsibility for the issue (evade) or they try to minimise the organisational responsibility (excuse).

By introducing *ambivalence* as a response we want to highlight that the defensive-accommodative continuum running along the axis rejection-alteration, can also contain contradictions and a blending of defence/accommodation, rejection/alteration. This can be seen as a transition area between the two poles of the model. In this area there are competing ideas and views on how to deal with the criticism. This can be a genuine conflict of interests and ideas or it might have a strategic dimension to it.

The identification of *discussion* as a special response type is a new contribution in this study and there are two main reasons for its inclusion. First, it has an important place in the discourse of the editors and their calls for discussion and debate. Second, it is merited by the general importance they, and we, place on openness and transparency as ways of approaching media and their own roles as media managers. This is also an important aspect of communicative criticism for entering into dialogue with adversaries. Their transparency regarding views on journalism, faults and criticism are realised through their conversation. They also claim that they need to discuss issues with guests. Inviting guests, deliberating on issues and being influenced shows the relevance of a communicative approach towards criticism. At the same time, this proposed discussion does not guarantee a commitment to a solution to the problem.

With regard to the response of *acceptance*, our findings corroborate the justification response used by both Bardoel/Gronehart and Coombs. We did not find response strategies that focused on mitigation, ingratiation or bolstering in our study, but *nuancing* and *amelioration* are both relevant in this respect, here in a situation where the editors accept the criticism.

Groenhart and Bardoel use the term "confessing", and this term can be linked to two of the responses we found – *acceptance* and *apology*. Apology is also of specific relevance given the role it was assigned in earlier research on crisis response strategies (Coombs 2012), in more recent research on corporate apologia (Hearit 2006), and in press apologia (Borden 2012). Coombs reminds us that the apology is of specific importance and that it has both legal and managerial implications (Coombs 2012: 156). A closer study of the press apology or the mediated apology would be of relevance. The apologies used in the studied material have a special quality, expressed as "doing a poodle", which makes it relevant to study apologising as a separate kind of response.

The relevance of *action change* as a response strategy is strengthened in this study. Our term corroborates what Groenhart and Bardoel call alteration and Coombs referred to as corrective action.

Our second research question asks: Are there examples of paradigm repair in the podcasts? Our findings add support to earlier research by Berkowitz (2000), Steiner et al. (2013) and Groenhart (2013). The editors' responses to criticism contain elements of paradigm repair. They try to marginalise journalistic malpractice by defining such practice as situated outside of professional journalism, as bad craftsmanship. In the

British context of phone hacking and the *News of the World*, they condemn the practice as shameless, performed by only a few reporters and former editors. When later in the discussion further examples are highlighted, the focus shifts to the morale of individual reporters in relation to newsroom culture. In their reaction to academic and lay critique on social media they strongly defend the journalistic paradigm that the tabloids represent, and Mattsson particularly emphasises the good journalistic work done in relation to faults and errors, often labelled as mistakes. Both claim that tabloid journalism has developed recently and now represents a much more sound and ethical kind of journalism than previously.

The editors' approach to criticism can be seen as efficiency focussed, the criteria to be used in the discussions are internal to media or pertain to the role of media in culture and society. The predominance of this kind of critique might be linked to the editors' view that Swedish journalism and tabloids are performing quite well – better than before and very good compared to their counterparts in other countries.

Conclusions

To a great extent our findings corroborate earlier research about response strategies and paradigm repair. However, we have, as an addition pointed out the existence of ambiguous and incoherent responses that merit greater attention in future research. We have also argued that prescribing *discussion* in itself can be seen as a response strategy. These two responses are further part of a "grey zone" or transitory area in the accommodative-defensive continuum. This is the main contribution of this study.

Listening to the editors' conversations offers transparency and insight into how they are thinking – at least how they talk in public about how they think. The establishment of the pod is an enhancement of their role as the editors of two of Sweden's largest news media organisations, tabloids with 5 million readers on the Internet and in print. Through them they have a strong voice and the podcast, with around 30 000 listeners, makes the impact of that voice stronger. The podcast becomes a public relation tool, it adds to the brands of *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, and also to their personal brands.

Being transparent and adding transparency to their news organisations and to themselves is stated as one of the main motives for the podcast (#1, April 2013). In the digital media landscape, and in the digital society, transparency is viewed as a core value – described as a necessity to respond to the demands from customers, citizens and media users. But is it enough to be transparent? Is transparency a means for something more important, such as accountability and change? MattssonHelin strikes a balance between transparency and accountability in their podcast, but that balance is not set in stone. Media accountability is a process, subject to change after input from media criticism as well as media response. Media podcasts in relation to media accountability merit further research.

Notes

1. The podcast MattssonHelin was published weekly from April 2013 to January 2016. Jan Helin then left Aftonbladet for the public service broadcaster, Sveriges Television, and the podcast was put on hold. The 147th issue of the podcast was published in July 2016 and the 148th in November 2016.
2. An issue of the podcast is the audio content uploaded on a specific date and given a specific number in numerical order.

3. A segment is a portion of an issue of the podcast that deals with one theme or subject, often surrounded by a few bars of music or a jingle.
4. The issues selected are #1, 2, 3, 4, 26, 36, 67, 68, 69, 89, 100, 101, 103, 105, 106, 108, 113, 115, and 116.
5. The average podcast also contains information and discussion on topics such as media news of the week, career news about reporters, editors and publishers, and trends in journalism, advertising, marketing, business models and consumer data analysis/management.
6. In 2013 *Expressen* was criticised by the Press Council in four cases, and *Aftonbladet* in three. In December 2014/January 2015, Mattsson and Helin announced a scrutiny of the Press Council verdicts for 2014, but such a podcast has not yet materialised in late June 2015 when this paper was written. *Expressen* received criticism in one, and *Aftonbladet* in seven cases by the Council during 2014 (www.po.se).

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