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Media accountability systems in Poland

Review of the monograph: Urbaniak, P. (2024). *Systemy odpowiedzialności mediów w Polsce na tle systemów w innych krajach* [*Media accountability systems in Poland compared with those in other countries*]. University of Wrocław Press.

Contemporary media systems operate under dynamic conditions characterised by intensifying technological, political, and social change, which significantly reshapes both the scope and the nature of media responsibility. The gradual progress of digitalisation and technological development has brought about far-reaching changes, essentially transforming almost every area of life, including the ways in which information is transmitted and processed (Soczyński, 2018). In this context, publications that examine existing models of media responsibility by comparing them with regulations and practices adopted in other countries are particularly valuable for their cognitive contribution. Paweł Urbaniak's book *System odpowiedzialności mediów w Polsce na tle systemów w innych krajach* (*Media accountability systems in Poland compared with those in other countries*) fits within this research trend, offering a multifaceted comparative study based on rigorous scholarly apparatus and extensive source material. It is therefore worth emphasising that the Polish publishing market has been enriched by a highly valuable contribution to broadly understood media studies, one that also has an axiological dimension: it significantly advances reflection on the norms, values, and ethical aspects of media activity. Published in 2024 by the University of Wrocław Press, the monograph takes an interdisciplinary approach to the concept of the "media accountability system", integrating sociological, media-studies, and legal-institutional perspectives. The author raises questions that are central to contemporary media studies, including the scope of regulation, ethical standards, mechanisms of social control, and the practical consequences of existing norms. As a peer-reviewed study, it constitutes an important contribution to debate on the condition and future of media accountability systems, both in Poland and internationally.

The book's primary aim is to systematise and characterise knowledge about the media accountability system in Poland and to determine the extent of its impact on the national journalistic community. This holistic approach is especially valuable, as the issue has not yet been widely explored in Polish scholarship. The monograph reflects many years of study, reflection, and research, which gives it substantial scholarly value. Its structure combines a theoretical part (definitions, conceptual framework, and literature review), an empirical part (qualitative analysis), and synthetic conclusions concerning editorial practice and journalistic culture. Urbaniak begins by discussing the concept of media accountability and notes that scholars analysing various media systems and journalistic cultures have long pointed to the

unsatisfactory quality and ethics of contemporary media. He also considers the media-policy goals of democratic states, drawing on relevant scholarly positions. The author sets out to describe and organise the elements that constitute the media accountability system (including mechanisms of self-regulation, co-regulation, and formal regulation), with an emphasis on Poland and comparisons with solutions adopted elsewhere.

Urbaniak traces the historical development of media self-regulation tools in Europe, discussing the emergence of journalism education and the origins of self-regulatory arrangements in the international arena. He also mentions early attempts by the Polish journalistic community to define professional standards, including debates about licensed access to the journalism profession. In Chapter 3, the author focuses on the instruments of media accountability systems, providing a detailed classification of media self-regulation tools. He first examines preventive documents, considering journalistic codes of ethics in Poland and selected European countries, and discusses the effectiveness of ethical codes. He then analyses internal editorial documents, institutional prevention mechanisms, and entities established to provide criticism. In addition, he addresses internal editorial accountability, long-term prevention, permanent criticism, and ad hoc editorial measures. This analytical path reveals the diversity of solutions intended to safeguard ethical standards in the media, while also acknowledging the shortcomings as well as the strengths of particular approaches.

A crucial part of the monograph is Chapter 4, which presents extensive research results on media accountability systems. The research objectives are formulated as follows: (a) assessing the state of Polish journalism and Polish journalists; (b) assessing the strength of the influence of various regulatory and self-regulatory factors on journalists' behaviour in Poland; and (c) assessing the degree of institutionalisation of the Polish media accountability system and its specific elements at the community-wide and editorial levels (Urbaniak, 2024, p. 251).

Urbaniak writes: "The aim of the study was to assess the degree of institutionalisation of media self-regulation in Polish journalistic culture. The study aimed to gain knowledge about the extent to which self-regulatory tools are widespread in the Polish journalistic community and the impact of individual self-regulatory solutions. The study also sought to find answers to the question of the low effectiveness of both individual tools and media self-regulation in general" (Urbaniak, 2024, p. 251). The author defines his research aim

clearly, focusing on the degree of institutionalisation of media self-regulation in Polish journalistic culture. Notably, the study examines not only the prevalence of self-regulatory tools but also their real impact, and it attempts to explain why the system as a whole often proves ineffective. As a result, the publication offers a valuable diagnostic account of self-regulatory mechanisms in the Polish media.

The empirical material is based on an in-depth structured interview with questionnaire-like elements, entitled "Institutionalisation of media self-regulation tools in the opinion of Polish media employees". The study was conducted from June 2022 to September 2023 and comprised 110 interviews with Polish media employees (journalists, editors, and managers). This sampling strategy and the use of in-depth interviews provide robust qualitative material for analysing practices, attitudes, and perceptions related to accountability tools (e.g., codes of ethics, ethics councils, and legal regulations).

In this way, the book offers a rich picture of the subjective experiences of media actors, which usefully complements quantitative research in the field. At the same time, the monograph would benefit from a clearer description of sample selection procedures and the method used to analyse interview coding, which limits assessment of the representativeness and replicability of the results. The findings are presented transparently and address issues such as professionalism, journalistic ethics, media politicisation, the pauperisation of the journalistic community, economic pressures on editorial offices and journalists, as well as other challenges facing contemporary journalism in Poland. The author also discusses factors influencing journalists' behaviour, assesses the effectiveness of regulation and self-regulation, and describes forms of self-regulation within editorial offices. He notes additional internal editorial methods for improving the ethical quality of journalistic materials and strengthening journalists' accountability to various stakeholders. Urbaniak cites interesting—sometimes surprising, yet credible—assessments by journalism professionals. This authenticity is among the monograph's key cognitive strengths: it encourages further reflection and provides a useful reference point for subsequent media-studies research.

The question posed in the research—concerning the determinants of effective self-regulation in journalism—can be regarded as the core of the book's reflections. It is a question raised not only by journalists, but also by media scholars and media users more broadly. Urbaniak approaches it from multiple perspectives. He first reviews Polish self-regulation models and then

compares them with arrangements operating in other countries, including Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Particularly noteworthy is his own classification of self-regulatory tools and media accountability mechanisms across press, radio, television, and the internet, which enables a comparative view of complementary regulatory instruments. He also presents the social contexts of media self-regulation, combining a contemporary perspective with historical background. As he writes, "The description of self-regulatory solutions used in individual systems was intended, firstly, to demonstrate the wide range of possibilities available to journalistic communities creating their own media accountability systems and, secondly, to attempt to identify certain models—distinct ways of shaping media self-regulation in individual media systems" (Urbaniak, 2024, p. 251). The selected contexts are carefully justified and demonstrate the author's extensive expertise.

This peer-reviewed monograph may be regarded as a compendium in media studies, as it brings together current scholarly achievements related to media responsibility and supplements them with empirical research. Drawing on a broad range of sources, the author analyses the concept of media responsibility and engages with positions expressed by thinkers in media and journalism studies. In doing so, he examines types of media responsibility systems as well as key determinants of journalistic professionalism. The reader receives a publication that reflects careful and well-considered work, including a judicious selection of central issues and a clear synthesis of findings.

The author's language also deserves attention. Despite the importance and complexity of the subject, the text remains accessible and thus reads smoothly. The monograph offers three key contributions: (a) it integrates comparative discussion of media regulation with extensive empirical material from Poland; (b) it proposes an original typology of regulatory tools that may support further comparative research; and (c) it foregrounds the voices of media practitioners, which is less common in studies focused primarily on legal acts or regulatory theories.

Paweł Urbaniak's *System odpowiedzialności mediów w Polsce na tle systemów w innych krajach* [*Media accountability systems in Poland compared with those in other countries*] is a timely and valuable publication offering a systematic and empirically grounded overview of media accountability issues in Poland. The work's strengths include its empirical character (grounded in numerous interviews with practitioners), its comparative perspective (which situates the

Polish case within a broader international context), and its ethical dimension, emphasising the need for media responsibility towards society — an aspect of particular importance in the era of disinformation. The book will be of interest to media-studies scholars, sociologists, political scientists, ethicists, students of media studies, and journalists concerned with media regulation and ethics. It is well worth reading, as it provides a nuanced, evidence-based account of how Polish media operate in the context of responsibility and regulation, while also comparing these arrangements with models implemented elsewhere — an approach that may inspire reform or further reflection.

References

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