

Media accountability in the hands of the audience. Experiences from Sweden

KEY WORDS

Swedish media, Scandinavian media, International media, media regulation, *fake news*, professional journalism

ABSTRACT

The reports on public trust in media are the foundation for the article. While most of the countries struggle with the implosion of media credibility, the indicators of trust in Sweden remain stable. The aim of the article is to seek for mechanisms that support professional journalism with special focus on the role of the public. Public complaints to regulation and self-regulation institutions from 2016 are analysed. In-depth interviews with the representatives of MPRT and Pressombudsman helped to formulate the conclusions.

The credibility of information journalism, the phenomenon of *fake news* or hate speech are topics often appearing in discussions between publishers, public institutions, the third sector and the public. A particular challenge is to ensure universal access to reliable and verified information on internet portals and social media. The public is often confused: which information is solid and reliable? This is reflected in the indicators of trust in the media. Report makers even talk about its implosion¹.

The results of this year's Reuters Institute global survey were alarming. In the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (2017 edition) analysts directly linked the phenomenon of *fake news* with trust in the media. The contents defined as *fake news* have been divided into three categories: (1) content that is created to earn money or discredit someone; (2) content that is factual, but crafted to suit a given agenda; (3) content that people do not feel comfortable with or disagree with. Respondents of the RI survey were the least likely to say that they met with category 1 content, with the exception of the United States. Researchers also noted that the

¹ *Edelman Trust Barometer 2017*, ed. A. Harary et al., www.edelman.com/global-results [access: 29.11.2017].

media enjoy the greatest trust in Scandinavia and Northern Europe, and the lowest in Greece and South Korea².

The analysis of trust indicators and comparison of results from 2016-2017 may lead to interesting conclusions. According to the Reuters Institute's data, trust in the media has decreased in most of the countries surveyed. The exception are the Scandinavian countries and Brazil, where trust in the media is growing³.

Very similar results were obtained in this year's edition of the global Edelman Trust Barometer survey, monitoring social trust in authorities, business, NGOs and the media. In 2018, 22 of the 28 countries surveyed were classified as distrustful of the media", although the results from the 2018 edition are still more positive for journalists than a year ago when the worst results were recorded in the 17-year history of the survey⁴. In the latest edition, Edelman analysts observed an increase in trust in journalists, while trust in search engines and social media has decreased⁵.

Naturally, the question arose whether the results of global research are consistent with the research on trust in media carried out in Sweden. The most up-to-date data is provided by the SOM Institutet, a facility at Göteborgs Universitet. The latest publication of the institute, *Larmar och gör sig till*, is entirely devoted to social trust in Sweden. Trust in the media in Sweden has been analysed for over 30 years and it has not really changed during that time. The most reliable media are radio and television, in particular the public broadcaster. 54% of respondents declare a great trust in it, 34% of Swedes have moderate trust⁶. Newspapers are slightly worse – 29% of Swedes trust them strongly, 43% declare moderate trust. Importantly, Swedish radio and television is the third most trusted public institution in the country (after healthcare and higher education)⁷.

The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth analysis of the media ecosystem in Sweden, therefore the factors that directly or indirectly relate to such aspects as: freedom of speech, access to information, journalistic responsibility, journalistic culture and professionalism, media regulation system.

In normative theories, the Swedish media ecosystem is usually grouped together with other Scandinavian countries, and in some theories also with countries such as Germany,

² Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford 2017, p. 20.

³ Ibid, p. 20, cf. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2016, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford 2016, p. 25.

⁴ Edelman Trust Barometer 2017, op. cit., www.edelman.com/global-results [access: 29.11.2017].

⁵ Edelman Trust Barometer 2018, ed. T.E. Ries et al., pp. 16–20, <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer> [access: 18.05.2018].

⁶ *Larmar och gör sig till*, ed. U. Andersson, et al., Göteborg 2017, p. 19.

⁷ Ibid, p. 41.

Austria and the Benelux countries. In the repeatedly cited classification of Hallin and Mancini from 2004, Sweden was assigned to the model of democratic corporatism. Distinctive features are: high press reading rates, early mass press development, external media pluralism and historically strong links between political parties and the press (today disappearing), strong professionalization of the journalistic profession, institutionalised system of journalistic self-regulation, strong state interventionism while maintaining media autonomy, system of press subsidies and strong public broadcasters⁸.

Blum assigns Swedish media to the so-called North Atlantic public service model, emphasising the strong position of the public broadcaster⁹. Brüggermann and colleagues, remodelling the concept of Hallin and Mancini, assign the Swedish media to the North European cluster, paying attention to the high level of state interventionism, while maintaining full media autonomy¹⁰.

The creators of the theory of media systems often stress that the shape of the media ecosystem in Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries is strongly impacted by a welfare state, developed civil society, Protestant doctrine and the common pursuit of consensus¹¹.

Purpose, hypotheses and research questions

The purpose of this article is an attempt to find factors that may be positively influencing the stability of public trust in the media in Sweden.

Based on the literature in the field of media theory and literature on the specifics of media ecosystems in the Scandinavian markets (including the publication series of Nordic media research centre, Nordicom – Sveriges Mediebarometer, publications of the state regulatory authority Myndigheten för Press Radio and TV), the author accepts the hypothesis that one of the factors that can stabilize trust in the media is a professional, institutionalised system of regulation and self-regulation, which enables the public to actively participate in media regulation.

The article presents the following research questions:

Q1: What is the journalistic responsibility system in Sweden and how does the public participate in its functioning?

⁸ D. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Systemy medialne. Trzy modele mediów i polityki w ujęciu porównawczym* [Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics], translated by M. Lorek, Kraków 2007, p. 67.

⁹ Christians G. Clifford et al., *Normative theories of the media. Journalism in democratic societies*, Chicago 2009, pp. 3–36.

¹⁰ M. Brüggermann et al., *Hallin & Mancini revisited: Four empirical types of western media systems*, "Journal of Communication" 2014, vol. 64, pp. 1037–1065.

¹¹ D. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems...*, op. cit., p. 68.

Q2: What is the mechanism of public complaints submitted to journalistic responsibility institutions?

Q3: Are digital media also subjected to such regulations as they are constantly developing nowadays? Does this affect the number of complaints filed?

As Polish literature in media studies rarely addresses the subject of the journalistic responsibility system in the Scandinavian countries, the author decided to undertake direct cooperation with representatives of these institutions. In September 2017, as part of a research trip to Stockholm, the author carried out in-depth individual interviews with Ola Sivgardsson – Pressombudsman of Sweden and Maria Bergerlind Dierauer from Myndigheten för Press Radio och TV. Representatives of both institutions provided a lot of information about the characteristics of the journalistic responsibility system and the current challenges faced by media policy actors in Sweden. Both institutions have also agreed to share data from annual reports on complaints submitted by the public¹².

Media law and journalistic responsibility system in Sweden

Sweden was the first country in history to guarantee constitutional freedom of speech – in 2016 the 250th anniversary of this event was celebrated. Currently, two of the four constitutional laws are entirely devoted to media freedom. These are: *Freedom of Press Act of 1949 (Tryckfrihetsförordningen)* and *Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression of 1991 (Yttrandefrihetsgrundlagen)*. Freedom of speech and freedom to receive information are also guaranteed in chapter 2 of *The Instrument of Government (Regeringsformen)* of 1974. These acts provide for full freedom of expression, autonomy of media and the right to access information. *Freedom of Press Act* mainly concerns all printed media, while the *Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression* concerns audio-visual media and the Internet¹³.

In the global ranking of freedom of expression of the Reporters Without Borders Foundation, Sweden ranks second in 180 countries included (edition 2018)¹⁴.

¹² Interviews with O. Sivgardsson and M. Bergerlind Diaurer were carried out as part of the project “Effective fight with fake news - analysis of the use of regulation and self-regulation mechanisms by the public in Sweden”, co-financed by DSM for 2017. As part of the project, a research trip to Stockholm was carried out. Statistical material obtained in PO/PON and MPRT offices, available only in Swedish language, was translated by the author of the article in cooperation with a professional Swedish translator. The article uses fragments of interviews and the results of the analysis of annual reports. Full texts of interviews and analysis of quantitative materials will be published in the author’s dissertation.

¹³ *Svenska Grundlagarna*, www.riksdagen.se/sv/sa-funkar-riksdagen/demokrati/grundlagarna/ [access: 28.11.2017].

¹⁴ Reporters Without Borders 2018 Index, Sweden, rsf.org/en/sweden [access: 18.05.2018].

The Ministry of Culture is the authority responsible for shaping the media policy in Sweden. Importantly, since 2010, when audio-visual law was amended, the Ministry's competences were mostly transferred to an independent regulatory body.

Pursuant to the *Act on Radio and Television (Radio och TV lag* from 2010, as amended)¹⁵ the media regulatory body is Myndigheten för Press, Radio och TV (MPRT), which shapes audio-visual policy, manages the subsidy system, registration of broadcasters and public complaints. It also publishes reports on the media market in Sweden and media consumption and digitization. It is independent from political parties, strongly emphasising its autonomy and impartiality in terms of politics.

The regulatory system is supplemented by the governmental agenda Statens Medieråd – Media Council that cares for the youngest media users. SM employees classify films and series for appropriate age groups, conduct research on programmes for children and young people, analyse young people's behaviour on the web, develop materials in the field of media education, e.g. on propaganda or cybercrime. Currently, the *No hate* campaign is carried out to make people aware of the phenomenon of hate speech¹⁶.

Like in the other Scandinavian countries, there is an institutionalised system of self-regulatory journalism in Sweden, including the printed press, its online releases and *online-only* media, including blogs and vlogs. Almost 90% of Swedish journalists belong to professional associations¹⁷. The four largest ones: Journalistförbundet (Journalists' Trade Union), Sveriges Tidskrifter (Association of Press Publishers), TU Medier and Sverige (Association of Swedish Publishers) and Publicistklubben (Publicist Club) form the Pressens Samarbetsnämnd, which established and finances two major institutions of self-regulation the Swedish media: Press Council (Pressens Opinionsnämnd – PON) and Pressombudsmann office (PO). The self-discipline system is voluntary and has its own code of ethics (*Den journalistiska yrkersregler*)¹⁸.

The tasks and scope of competence of regulation and self-regulation bodies are different (see Table 1). The differences are based on the government character and operation under the statutory delegation in the case of MPRT and Statens Medieråd and the voluntary nature of participation in the PO/PON self-discipline system. State regulation mainly covers

¹⁵ *Radio och TV Lag*, SFS No. 2010:696, www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/radio--och-tv-lag-2010696_sfs-2010-696 [access: 28.11.2017].

¹⁶ Statens Medieråd, nohate.se [access: 29.11.2017].

¹⁷ B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Zmiany w mediach i dziennikarstwie w drugiej dekadzie XXI wieku [Changes in the media and journalism in the second decade of the 21st century]* [in:] *Zmiana w dziennikarstwie w Polsce, Rosji i Szwecji. Analiza porównawcza [Change in journalism in Poland, Russia and Sweden. Comparative analysis]*, ed. B. Dobek-Ostrowska, P. Barczyszyn, Wrocław 2016, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Yrkesetik Regler*, old.po.se/yrkesetik [access: 29.11.2017].

audio-visual media and to some extent the press (subsidies), while self-regulation can only cover the printed press, its online releases and *online-only* media.

Table 1. Basic areas of activity of regulation and self-regulation bodies in Sweden

	Regulation on behalf of the state	Self-regulation
Areas of activity	Audio-visual media, printed press, web-tv, web-radio	Press, online
Legal basis, codification of rules	Freedom of Press Act, Law on Freedom of Expression, Act on Radio and Television, as well as competition law, telecommunications law, juvenile protection law	The Code of Ethics of the Press, Radio and Television, internal codes of ethics of journalistic associations and individual media groups and editorial offices
Infrastructure regulation	Advanced (license system)	None
Personnel adjustment, e.g. supervisory boards	Limited (only in public media)	None
Funding regulation	Limited (only in public media)	None
Content regulation	Advanced (public complaints system, age classification of audio-visual and cinema content, regulation of content dedicated to minorities, facilities for the disabled, etc.)	Advanced (system of public complaints and decisions issued by Pressombudsman and Press Council)
Sanctions system	Advanced (correction order, financial penalties, license suspension) – obligatory	Limited (correction recommendation, administrative fees – optional)

Source: own study based on: *Radio och TV Lag*, SFS No. 2010:696, www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/radio--och-tv-lag-2010696_sfs-2010-696 [access: 29.11.2017]

Public complaints to the MPRT regulatory body

Under the MPRT regulatory system, the public may submit complaints to a special committee – Granskningsnämnden för Radio och TV. Importantly, only continuously broadcast electronic content is subject to regulation, i.e. programmes broadcast on TV, radio and on the Internet. The Council cannot process complaints about discontinuous content, even if it has been produced by a broadcaster subject to MPRT control, e.g. a public broadcaster. The applicable law, therefore, excludes the possibility of reporting content in the form of text on the websites of audio-visual broadcasters, infographics or podcasts¹⁹.

The regulation covers various types of audio-visual media: digital terrestrial television stations and radio stations, social radio stations (*närradio/community radio*), cable and

¹⁹ Myndigheten för Press Radio och TV, *Krav och regler för medierna*, www.mprt.se/sv/att-sanda/krav-och-regler/ [access: 29.11.2017].

satellite television, web-TV, television on demand, teletext. Most regulations concern the functioning of a public broadcaster, special restrictions also apply to TV4 commercial television.

The main areas that are regulated and at the same time are the basis for filing a public complaint are: impartiality, reliability, respect for privacy, right to correct and reply, violence and pornography, surreptitious advertising, sponsoring, product placement²⁰.

If we look at the statistics from the MPRT annual reports, we notice that from year to year, the public submits more and more complaints to the Granskningsnämnden (see Table 2). The largest increases are recorded in the category of television on demand. In other types of media, the results fluctuate and it is difficult to identify any trends.

It is worth adding, however, that since 2011 all public complaints submitted for the same program are included in the statistics as one complaint. According to MPRT data, in fact, increases in complaints are even higher, as in 2012 there were 2891 individual complaints, in 2013 this number was 2421, in 2014 – 2949, in 2015 – 2841, and in 2016 there were record-breaking 3534 public complaints²¹.

Table 2. Number of public complaints submitted to Granskningsnämnden för radio och tv in 2009–2016 (media types)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Public broadcaster (all media)	985	1085	1509	945	1096	1163	1222	1214
SVT (public TV)	634	717	998	573	690	718	757	794
SR (public radio)	334	329	495	362	388	430	452	402
UR (educational broadcaster)	17	39	28	10	18	15	13	18
TV 4 terrestrial	160	106	272	144	122	146	125	137
Other terrestrial channels	10	3	10	10	6	18	4	10
Analogue commercial radio	61	15	18	24	28	10	16	12
Social radio (närradio)	37	28	23	12	9	14	21	5
Cable TV	6	1	8	2	4	1	4	1
Satellite TV	27	11	2	0	1	2	7	3
Web-TV/Web-radio	8	2	6	2	2	12	15	10
Television on demand	N/A	N/A	9	15	10	4	2	28
Other jurisdiction (for foreign media)	N/A	12	32	32	26	30	27	49
Other	4	6	3	3	3	3	3	3

²⁰ Myndigheten för Press Radio och TV, *Media requirements and regulations*, www.mprt.se/en/broadcasting-radio-and-tv/requirements-and-regulations/ [access: 29.11.2017].

²¹ *Årsredovisning 2016*, Myndigheten För Press, Radio och TV, Stockholm 2017, p. 20.

Total	1294	1267	1895	1189	1307	1403	1446	1472
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N/A - not applicable, not regulated by MPRT.

Source: Myndigheten för Press Radio och TV, *Antal anmälningar*, www.mprt.se/sv/mer-om-media/mer-om-public-service/antal-granskade-program/ [access: 29.11.2017]

MPRT also provides statistics showing which areas are most often subject to complaints (see Table 3). Importantly, public statistics show only those cases on which decisions of the Council were issued, and not the areas of all complaints. In the last three years, the number of decisions motivated by the principle of impartiality and objectivity has slightly decreased. On the other hand, the areas in which the number of decisions of the Council is increasing, is advertising, sponsoring and proper marking of transmission.

Table 3. Areas of public complaints on which GPRT issued decisions in 2009-2016

Area	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Impartiality	8	6	7	16	13	8	9	8
Accuracy	12	7	14	15	13	9	10	8
Right to correct/reply	1	1	1	3	2	2	1	0
Right to privacy	5	5	5	8	8	6	5	7
Media impact	2	4	8	9	1	10	9	8
Violence and pornography	1	0	2	2	0	0	2	0
Surreptitious advertising	18	27	8	4	6	8	5	17
Rules on advertising	2	3	3	4	3	5	4	15
Rules on sponsoring	5	15	2	6	3	5	5	9
Marking of transmission	3	6	0	2	1	4	7	7

Source: Myndigheten för Press Radio och TV, *Antal anmälningar*, www.mprt.se/sv/mer-om-media/mer-om-public-service/antal-granskade-program/ [access: 28.11.2017]

Importantly, MPRT and the Granskningsnämnden Council act under the Radio and Television Act, therefore their decisions are legally binding. One can appeal against them and conduct parallel litigation. The Council may issue a correction order or impose a financial sanction. Financial sanctions can be as much as 10% of broadcaster's annual revenue. The highest form of punishment is the complete withdrawal of the broadcaster's license²².

Maria Bergerlind Diaurer from MPRT explains that the increase in the number of complaints may be related, among others, to the activity of the public in social media. MPRT

²² *Radio och TV Lag*, SFS No. 2010:696, www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/radio--och-tv-lag-2010696_sfs-2010-696 [access: 29.11.2017].

observed that the viewers urged each other on the internet to submit complaints on a selected program. Such practices have been used, e.g. by supporters of some political parties who complained about the lack of impartiality and reliability of the main media²³. Out of 1472 complaints registered in 2016, only 30 were brought at the initiative of MPRT – the rest was initiated by media users²⁴.

The SOM Institutet, previously quoted, carried out a survey in 2016 analysing the awareness of the existence of the Council. It shows that about 1/3 of Swedish adults heard about an institution like Granskingsnämnden för Radio och TV (they saw information about it in the press or on the internet), about 40% of the respondents saw or heard that a media group reported that it was covered by the Council's procedure. However, only 1% of the respondents stated that in the last year they filed a complaint to the Council²⁵.

According to Bergerling Diaurer, MPRT is not currently carrying out any educational or awareness campaigns about the existence of an institution. However, the public can read the current information on the MPRT website, and twice a month the institution provides press information in the press agencies and main media. Information on the possibility to file complaints is also available on the websites of some broadcasters²⁶.

Media users' activity in the journalistic self-regulation system

The regulation of the PO/PON self-discipline system covers printed press titles and their online releases, as well as *online-only* media, blogs and vlogs. In order to be regulated by Pressombudsmann and the Press Council, a notification should be sent. Titles belonging to these four associations are included in the system automatically. If a medium that does not have an equivalent in printing wants to belong to the system, it must be reported to MPRT as a database, and then be entered into the self-discipline system²⁷.

In the current term, since 2011, the function of Pressombudsman is performed by Ola Sivgardsson, a former journalist. The Press Council consists of 11 individuals. Four of them represent four journalistic associations that have established PO and PON offices. The next three people are representatives of the public delegated by the parliamentary Ombudsman.

These people enjoy social authority, but they are not journalists, they are e.g. writers, entrepreneurs. Four seats are reserved for judges who watch over formal aspects. They are

²³ Interview with M. Bergerlind Diaurer at Myndigheten för Press, Radio och TV in Stockholm in September 2017.

²⁴ *Årsredovisning 2016*, op. cit., p. 22.

²⁵ *Svenskarnas värdering av radio och tv*, ed. L. Annerstedt, et al., Göteborg 2016, p. 26.

²⁶ Interview with M. Bergerlind Diaurer, September 2017.

²⁷ Interview with O. Sivgardsson, September 2017.

usually the former judges of the Supreme Court of the Kingdom of Sweden. Importantly, the activity in the Press Council is voluntary and its members do not receive remuneration for it.

Complaints may be lodged by private persons or institutions, while private persons may appeal only to content that has affected them personally, and institutions may only submit materials if the publisher has not granted them the right to a reply. Complaints may only apply to materials that have been published no later than three months before the complaint is filed.

Pressombudsman has the authority to initiate proceedings on his/her own initiative, however, such situations are extremely rare. The current Pressombudsman explains that he avoids this situation, because then he would become a party to the case, which would be contrary to his overriding principle of impartiality²⁸.

Decisions are voluntary. Editorial offices that have been criticised by PO and PON are often urged to publish a correction or an apology. They are also required to pay an administrative fee, which is allocated to the operation of PO and PON offices. The fee amount depends on the size of the editorial office, however it happens that editorial offices voluntarily pay higher amounts. The fee does not go to the complainant, nor can it be transferred to charity.

Usually, the entire procedure – from the moment of receipt of the complaint to the PON's decision – lasts from several weeks to several months (usually not longer than a year). The duration of the process is determined primarily by the intensity of correspondence between the parties to the proceedings before the decision of the Pressombudsman.

²⁸ Ibid.

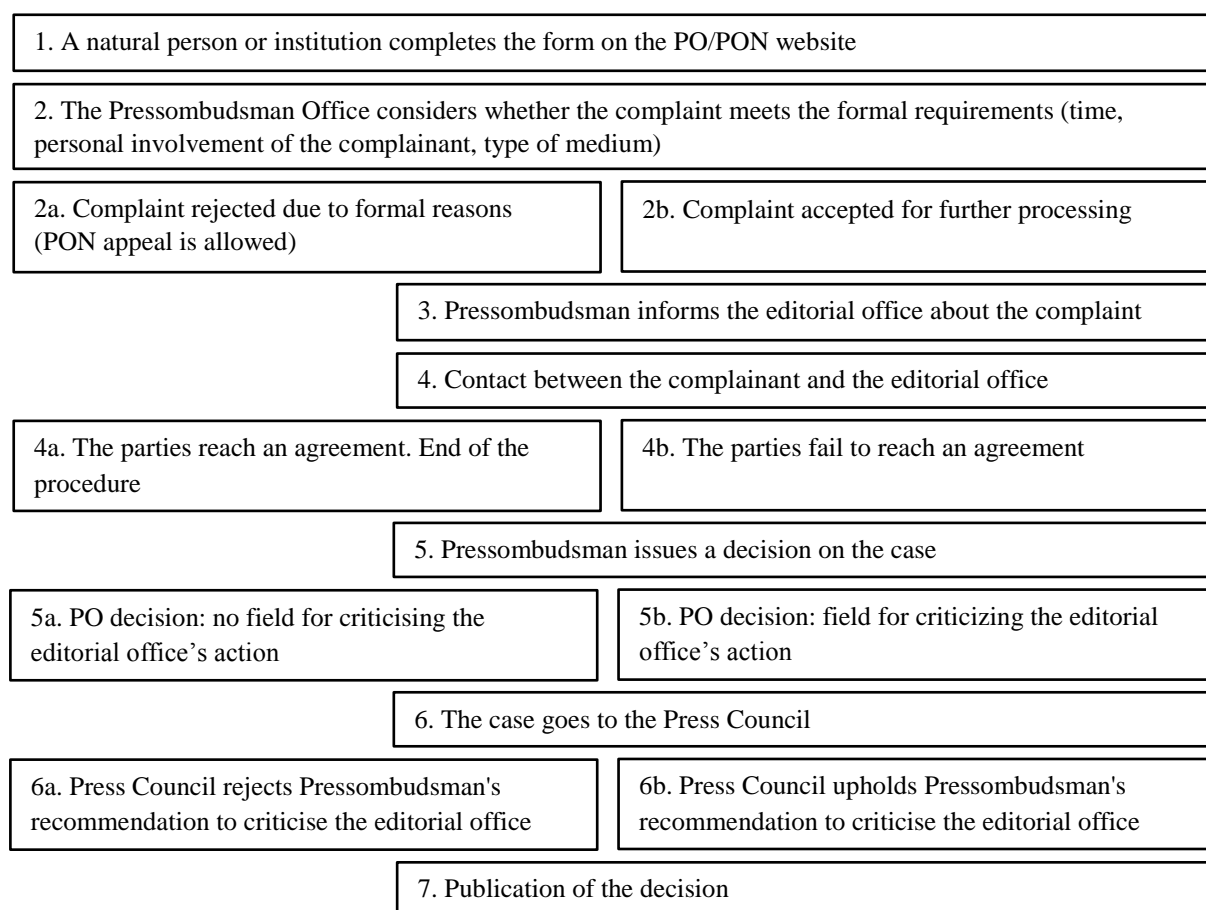


Fig. 1 The scheme of the public complaint in the PO/PON self-discipline system
 Source: own study based on an interview with Ola Sivgardsson, September 2017

As Sivgardsson points out, the Pressombudsman and Press Council institutions enjoy trust among the editorial staff and their decisions are respected and implemented. During the six-year term of the current Pressombudsman, the editors only refused to publish the correction once.

The statistics provided by Pressombudsman's office show that in recent years the number of complaints has increased, although the number of decisions has been decreasing (see Figures 2, 3). This is due to the fact that many complaints do not meet formal requirements, some cases are settled amicably, without referring the matter to PON.

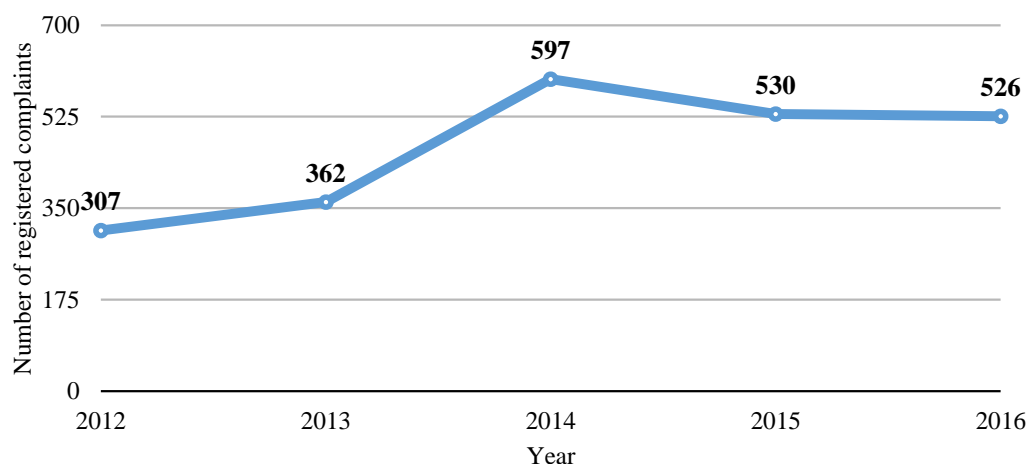


Fig. 2 Balance of complaints received by Pressombudsman in 2012-2016

Source: *Årsberättelser 2016*, Allemänhetens Pressombudsman (PO), Pressensopinionsnämns (PON), Stockholm 2017, pp. 3–7

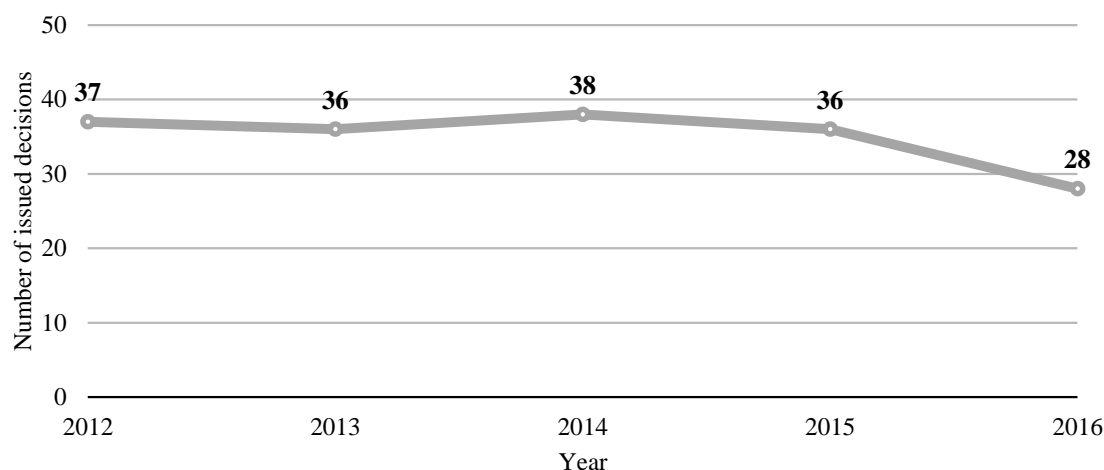


Fig. 3 Balance of decisions issued by the Swedish Press Council in 2012-2016

Source: *Årsberättelser 2016*, Allemänhetens Pressombudsman (PO), Pressensopinionsnämns (PON), Stockholm 2017, pp. 3–7

There are publicly known press and online titles against which complaints have been filed and decisions have been issued. As printed materials are, for the most part, also published on the Internet, it is not possible to assess how many complaints resulted from publications in print media, and how many from the online content. In 2016, only 2 out of 28 decisions of the Swedish Press Council clearly indicated that the judgments concerned material from websites. This does not mean, however, that the remaining ones were not available online.

Statistically, most complaints have been filed against two major dailies in Sweden - tabloids “Aftonbladet ”and “Expressen ”(see Table 4). While until 2015 the number of

complaints against these titles was comparable, in 2016 the number of complaints filed against “Expressen ”increased by almost 100%. The likely reason for this jump is the decision of the editor-in-chief of “Expressen ”to put a link to submit complaints to Pressombudsman under each article that appears on their website. This decision met with approval of the journalistic environment and was appreciated by associations and institutions of self-discipline, subsequent media groups intend to introduce similar solutions²⁹.

Table 4. The list of press titles against which the most complaints were submitted in 2016, along with the number of decisions issued

Place in the list	Press title	Number of complaints registered in 2016	Number of decisions issued in 2016
1.	“Expressen/GT/KvP”	95	2
2.	“Aftonbladet”	52	0
3.	“Vestmanlands Läns Tidning”	16	0
4.	“Dagens Nyheter”	14	0
5.	“Svenska Dagbladet”	11	1
6.	“Sydsvenskan”	11	0
7.	“Hallandsposten”	9	0
8.	“Helsingborg Dagbladet”	9	0
9.	“Uppsala Nya Tidning”	9	0
10.	“Göteborgs-Posten”	8	0

Source: *Årsberättelser 2016*, Allemänhetens Pressombudsman (PO), Pressensopinionsnämns (PON), Stockholm 2017, p. 5

The top of the ranking of the most frequently reported titles includes the two largest Swedish dailies, tabloids “Expressen ”and “Aftonbladet”. The list is complemented by other national titles (“Dagens Nyheter”, “Svenska Dagbladet”) as well as regional titles. However, the statistics show that the high number of complaints does not entail a high number of decisions issued by PO and PON. It is worth noting that in 2016 the title against which the most decisions were issued was “Hänt Extra ”– a periodical and gossip site³⁰.

Due to the protection of personal rights of complainants, information on the subject of complaints is not available. Only messages about those cases for which the decision of the Pressombudsman and the Press Council have been issued are made public. In contrast to

²⁹ *Årsberättelser 2016*, op. cit., p. 5.

³⁰ *Årsberättelser 2016*, op. cit., p. 5.

complaints filed to MPRT, they are not divided into categories, for example regarding the right to respond to criticism or privacy protection.

Based on data³¹ provided by PO and PON in the annual report for 2016, the author analysed the subject of complaints against which the Press Council issued decisions. In the PO/PON annual report, individual cases were divided into three categories: lack of good journalistic habits (1 case); violation of good journalistic habits (26); serious violation of journalistic habits (1)³².

Decisions and topics of the analysed cases were divided into eight categories, for which the following working definitions were adopted:

- Category 1. Impartiality: “presenting the reasons of all parties in the case”.
- Category 2. Journalistic diligence: “presenting the subject in accordance with the facts, reliable collection of information from possibly all available sources”.
- Category 3. Respect for privacy and good name: “protection of personal data and sensitive data, the disclosure of which could lead in particular to loss of reputation, public criticism”.
- Category 4. Respect and tolerance: “respect for rights based on nationality, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, sex”.
- Category 5. Separation of informative content from advertising content: “clear separation and designation of sponsored and advertising content among informational materials, designation of sponsored articles”.
- Category 6. Appropriate marking: “appropriate marking of drastic content, e.g. inappropriate for children”.
- Category 7. Right to reply: “possibility to refer to the theses contained in the press material” – this is the only category in which institutions can submit complaints.
- Category 8. Other: “other cases that cannot be classified in areas 1-7”.

These categories largely resemble the set of categories in force in audio-visual media regulations in Radio och TV lag and are consistent with the GPRT Council classification adopted in the issuing of decisions³³.

The analysis of the content of judgments of the Swedish Press Council shows that in 2016 the most common category of lack or violation of journalistic habits was the violation of privacy and reputation (16 cases), followed by failure to maintain journalistic diligence (9 cases) and the lack of reference to theses in the press material (8 cases). The principle of

³¹ Ibid, pp. 18-23.

³² The PO/PON report includes 28 decisions, but 25 press releases have been described for which the procedure was initiated.

³³ See: www.mpert.se/sv/att-sanda/krav-och-regler/ [access: 29.11.2017].

impartiality was abandoned once (see Figure 4). In some of the analysed cases, the contested material infringed more than one journalistic standard.

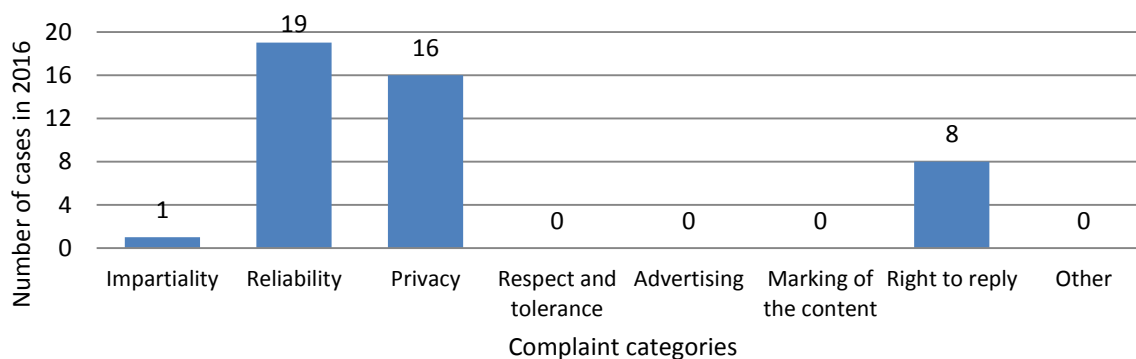


Fig. 4 Topics of press materials submitted to PO/PON in 2016, divided into categories
 Source: own development based on *Årsberättelser 2016*, Allemänhetens Pressombudsman (PO), Pressensopinionsnämns (PON), Stockholm 2017

Actions for media responsibility outside of public complaint systems

In recent years, many initiatives and tools have been created that support the building of reliable, trustworthy media in Sweden. These activities include government agencies, independent regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, journalists themselves, as well as the public. Many of these bodies serve to build professional information journalism on the internet and in social media and to prevent the spread of *fake news* and hate speech.

The core activity is media education. In 2017, the Swedish Minister for Education, Gustav Fridolin, announced that learning how to recognise false information will go to the primary school curriculum, along with the basics of computer programming³⁴.

A special educational program devoted to reliable information on the Internet is carried out by the University of Uppsala. As part of the *Nyhetsvärderaren* (“news verifier”) project, teenagers aged 13-18 learn how to recognise *fake news*. Researchers from Uppsala analyse whether young people are able to recognise false content and what they do with this knowledge. Up to 5000 teenagers will be involved in the project³⁵.

Special educational activities on *fake news* are even targeted at pre-schoolers. The “face” of the project was Bamse – a teddy bear from TV and comic stories, watched by several generations of growing-up Swedes. The special edition of the comic book “Bamse

³⁴ L. Roden, *Swedish kids to learn computer coding and how to spot fake news in primary school*, www.thelocal.se/20170313/swedish-kids-to-learn-computer-coding-and-how-to-spot-fake-news-in-primary-school [access: 29.11.2017].

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Björn ”from February 2017 was entirely devoted to the topic of credibility of information on the Internet³⁶.

Also the largest Swedish editorial offices undertake activities aimed at building reliable information media. One of the first initiatives was taken up by the two largest dailies in the country – “Aftonbladet ”and “Expressen ”– tabloids, and two titles against which most of the public complaints to Pressombudsmann are directed.

The editors of Aftonbladet decided to take an organic action. In September 2016, the radical right-wing portal Politisk Inkorrekt posted information that Sweden’s prime minister Stefan Löfven bought a swanky watch worth almost 300,000 crowns. In Sweden, “flaunting ” with one’s wealth is widely criticised. Moreover, according to the theory of intercultural communication, Sweden is a country in which the distance between the authorities and other social groups is shortened in the public sphere. That is why the Prime Minister suffered strong criticism. Journalists of “Aftobladet ”conducted an investigation, in a result of which they proved that the watch was a gift and was not so expensive. Journalists contacted almost all those who reacted to the false post of “Politisk Inkorrekt ”or shared it to friends and explained that it was *fake news*. The editorial staff of Aftonbladet had to allocate human and financial resources to the action, but it explained that it was their moral duty to protect the public from *fake news*³⁷. Moreover, Prime Minister Löfven gave the watch to an auction, the proceeds of which were given for charity.³⁸

The editorial office of “Expressen”, the second largest newspaper in Sweden, also a tabloid, which the public often complains about, went even further. Since 2016, under each article on the Expressen.se portal there is a link to a dedicated email address where readers can report fake data on the “Expressen ”website. Under each material there is also a direct link that allows to quickly fill out the complaint against this tabloid and send it to the Pressombudsmann. In a special tab dedicated to *fake news* and the possibility of sending a complaint there is also a letter from the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, Thomas Mattson, along with contact details. The letter reads: “Expressen’s ambitions are clear. As part of our

³⁶ L. Roden, *Why this Swedish comic hero is going to teach kids about fake news*, www.thelocal.se/20170116/why-this-swedish-comic-hero-is-going-to-teach-kids-about-fake-news-bamse [access: 29.11.2017].

³⁷ L. Southern, *How Sweden is fighting fake news*, digiday.com/uk/fake-news-in-sweden/ [access: 29.11.2017].

³⁸ V. Adolfsson, *Stefan Löfven säljer sin ”lyxklocka”*, www.aftonbladet.se/nojesbladet/a/z2wRq/stefan-lofven-saljer-sin-lyxklocka [access: 29.11.2017].

quality journalism policy, we only publish verified information. My first decision after taking the position of the editor-in-chief was to put space for correction on the website³⁹”.

The Pressombudsman, Ola Sivgardsson, speaks in a similar way, expressing approval for online media, which decide to join the system: “Today, there are 42 online-only titles in our system. Of course, this is only a small percent of thousands of websites and blogs, it is not possible to assess what percentage of all online media are those already included in the system. Those *online-only* titles, which are serious and want to create qualitative content, want to be a part of our system. This is very well received by journalists and publishers in Sweden, even those who are constantly criticised by us. (...) *Online-only* media join our system to show the public that they are honest and trustworthy. Our system is based on self-regulation. But to become self-regulated, you have to want it. We cannot force anyone to join us⁴⁰”.

The experience from Sweden shows that despite the lack of pan-European legislation and understanding between the owners of the largest social network sites and the authorities and publishers, mechanisms can be created that support a free and trustworthy journalistic environment. If the public has a set of tools, thanks to which it can independently ensure the credibility of content in the media, including the Internet, it will be more and more willing to use them. Respect is also aroused by the numerous activities of the editorial staff and authorities, whose aim is to build trust in the media.

Practices in Sweden can be a signpost for media policy actors and creators of initiatives aimed at building reliable media. In this case, the key was primarily the cooperation and involvement of all interested parties.

Conclusions

When preparing this article, one could ask – why analyse the media ecosystem, which is sometimes called the “laboratory of freedom of speech and journalistic responsibility”. The unprecedented autonomy of journalists, the high level of professionalism, the separation of the world of politics from the world of information media help to build social trust in the media. And yet it is impossible to overlook economic and cultural issues. Sweden is one of the richest countries in Europe, it has an extensive system of public services, which also resonate with the way in which the system of public media operation or subsidies for the press

³⁹ T. Mattsson, *Tycker du att vi har utsatt dig för en publicitetsskada?*, www.expressen.se/om-expressen/tycker-du-att-vi-har-utsatt-dig-for-en-publicitetsskada/ [access: 29.11.2017].

⁴⁰ Interview with O. Sivgardsson, September 2017.

was designed. We are also talking about a country that in the theories of intercultural and organisational communication (Fons Trompenaars and others) presents a high level of universalism, with a low distance of power. Such features make it easier to create codes of ethics, a sense of professional responsibility or independence from people at the height of their power.

The system of regulation and self-regulation of media analysed in the article shows in how many areas the public has the opportunity to report irregularities, being a “watchdog” for journalists. Both the audio-visual media regulation system and the self-discipline system record an increasing number of reported materials. This does not always translate into a higher number of council decisions. A positive phenomenon is the more frequent behaviour of the public saying “I check you” and the actions of publishers who make sure that editorial offices publish as few doubtfully professional materials as possible. There is also a growing number of editorial offices, especially of websites, which decide to join the self-regulation system for the common good to build responsible media in Sweden.

The challenge for regulation and self-regulation bodies is to keep pace with developing technologies. The audio-visual act from 2010 still has gaps, as it covers only the content that is broadcast in a continuous manner. This means that content published as a text, podcast or commentary cannot be questioned by either the Council or the public, and this creates a space for abuse. In turn, the challenge for the self-regulation system is to encourage influential environment of bloggers or vloggers to join the journalistic responsibility system.

The analysis of public participation in the media responsibility system presented in the article is primarily of quantitative nature. An interesting field for further research would be to follow a broader sample of the characteristics and subject of complaints. It is worth checking whether in recent years, with the development of technology, the subjects of complaints and type of most frequently reported media change.

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