Media Accountability on Digital Platforms:  
The Role of Audience  

Bhanu Bhakta Acharya  
Researcher  
University of Ottawa  
Email ID: bacha036@uottawa.ca  

Scholars contend that media accountability to the public and professional stakeholders has been improving in recent years because of the increased use of digital platforms, such as online news portals, blogs and social media outlets. By reviewing media accountability literature, this article presents an overview of media accountability on digital platforms by incorporating various aspects, such as concept, evolution, current practices, key challenges and role of audiences to make media accountable to the public. Even though digital platforms provide for several strengths in making news media accountable to the public (such as immediacy, transparency, global access and interactivity), at the same time there are a number of challenges, which cast doubt on the notion that these platforms provide improved accountability. This article, therefore, explores the role of audiences in addressing these challenges and making media accountable in accordance with professional standards and interests of the general public. Today, media audiences, in the form of citizen journalists, actively participate on digital platforms through various news media tools, and help make online media accountable to public and professional stakeholders.  

Keywords: Accountability, audience, digital platforms, interactivity, online media, responsibility  

INTRODUCTION  
Accountability to public and professional stakeholders is one of the most widely discussed ethical standards in journalism. Many journalism institutions, including the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ), the American Society of News Editors (ASNE), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ) have recognized accountability as one of the fundamental standards of professional journalism. These institutions broadly outline the scope of media accountability, including a consistent range of practices: making public interest the first priority, encouraging the public to express grievances, exposing unethical practices in journalism and media institutions, maintaining the fairness and reliability of reporting, addressing errors promptly and transparently and getting permission where applicable and/or possible when reporting on human subjects. The birth of the Internet and the growth of online news media have attracted the attention of scholars worldwide to the issue of accountability on digital platforms. Since the Internet offers affordable new venues, such as blogs, micro-blogs, and discussion forums, for public discourse on journalistic performance, a number of media scholars have been generally optimistic, emphasizing the substantial strengths of the Internet in terms of maintaining media accountability (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001; Fengler, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkila, Domingo, Glowacki, Kus, & Baisnée, 2012; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Krogh, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; Plaisance, 2000; Singer, 2005; Ward, 2010). For instance, audiences largely ignored by traditional media in the past, have their own digital platforms today for expressing their concerns. In addition, audiences can take part in news production as contributors as well as gatekeepers. Therefore, it can be argued that news media tend to be more accountable to professional and public stakeholders on digital platforms owing to constant monitoring by global audiences. Though online media have been around for over two decades, they are still a new phenomenon
among journalistic professionals worldwide due to rapid technological change and development, as all forms of mass media converge onto multimedia platforms. Even though these digital platforms have many features, such as universal accessibility, interactivity and public participation, that can be useful for upholding public accountability, they are not free from professional challenges, such as weak gatekeeping, hasty information updates and post-publication content moderation (Babcock, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkila, Domingo, Glowacki, Kus, & Baisnée, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Such challenges may call journalistic performance into question with regard to upholding and maintaining accountability to public and professional stakeholders on digital platforms.

It is a well-known fact that journalistic media have been changing for many decades – from the telegraph in the mid-nineteenth century to the Internet in the late twentieth century. Scholars (such as Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Krogh, 2012) contend that journalism's ethical standards remain largely unchanged in the face of shifting work practices. According to these scholars, responsibility and accountability of the press in the digital age has not lessened, but rather has increased in order to serve the public’s purposes. Moreover, the traditional concept of accountability has come into academic debate, while applying the notion in the context of digital media and online journalism, the issue being whether or not digital platforms contribute to the enhancement of accountability by news media and journalists to professional and public stakeholders.

To contribute to the conceptual clarity in a technologically-changing context, it is, therefore, important to conduct a comprehensive review of available scholarly literature on the subject of accountability of news media on digital platforms. Keeping in mind the following key questions: (a) What is the current understanding of media accountability on digital platforms; and (b) What is the role of audiences to make media accountable, this article reviews the existing scholarly literature on media and journalism with regard to media accountability on digital platforms, presents an overview of media accountability, identifies key challenges and explores the role of audiences as citizen journalists, who are actively participating in digital platforms to make online news media accountable to professional and public stakeholders.

**METHODOLOGY**

This article reviews scholarly literature on media accountability for a period of three decades, ranging from the mid-1980s to the present. During the mid-1980s, the concept of accountability with regard to professional journalism was widely discussed and the term "accountability" was introduced in the domain of news media for the first time as an important element of code of ethics (Dennis, Gillmor, & Glasser, 1989).

The applied review methodology, a research method used for this study, is a focused literature review intended to identify various scientific articles on the media accountability theme. For this purpose, the Morisset Library, the largest library at the University of Ottawa, was scanned to explore the literature of the specified period, on the theme of media accountability.

On the basis of content on media accountability, 34 pieces of literature (14 journal articles, 16 books and 4 empirical research studies) were selected. In addition, six ethics guidelines of various professional journalists' associations (such as American News Editors Association, Canadian Association of Journalists and International Federation of Journalists) and some relevant scholarly works on past media accountability were also referred to, where applicable, to cross-examine the argument in the selected literature. This kind of literature review, according to Torraco (2005), addresses new or emerging topics that would benefit from a holistic conceptualization and synthesis of literature on the topic to date. Media accountability on digital platforms is an emerging topic that is attracting the interest of various scholars throughout the world, and this sort of comprehensive literature review on the topic is more likely to lead to a concrete conceptualization of media accountability.
CONCEPT AND SCOPE

Media accountability is a kind of social control over media content, responding to media's perceived obligations to society, such as providing quality information, supporting democratic systems of governance, respecting human rights and avoiding/minimizing harm to society. Media accountability also responds to a common belief that media outlets should be held accountable to public and professional stakeholders for the quality of their performance (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Fengler, Eberwein, & Leppik-Bork, 2011; McQuail, 2005).

Defining the concept of media accountability, McQuail (2005) writes that it incorporates "all the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication" (p. 207). Different media scholars have defined the concept of media accountability in their own ways, but all have explained that it involves the performance of the professional/moral obligations of news media. For Plaisance (2000), media accountability refers to the "manifestation of claims to responsibility" (p. 258). For McIntyre (1987), it is an "umbrella term for all of the ways for enforcing the moral obligations" that a media outlet needs to fulfill (p. 151). For Painter and Hodges (2012), it is "a process by which media could or should be expected or obliged to report a truthful and complex account of the news to their constituents" (p. 4). Finally, for Glasser (2009), media accountability refers to "the willingness of the media to answer for what they do by their acts of publication, including what they do to society at large, and [...] the feasibility of securing accountability where there is unwillingness” (p. 132). Several scholars (Friend & Singer, 2007; McQuail, 2003; Painter & Hodges, 2012; Plaisance, 2000) agree that accountability plays a critical role in the overall functioning of the news media.

The SPJ has developed benchmarks of accountability for professional journalists. According to the SPJ (1996), journalists should "encourage the public to express its grievances against the news media, admit mistakes and correct them promptly, expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media, and abide by the same high standards to which they hold others”. In addition, scholars (Friend & Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) affirm that journalistic accountability can be ensured by a range of practices, including the publication of letters to the editor, accessibility to concerned audience members, the archiving of past news stories for future reference and sincere efforts to inform the public about news corrections. In addition, Painter and Hodges (2012) propose various ways of making media accountable to the public in a democratic society, such as developing and implementing codes of ethics, developing autonomous press councils or ombudsmen, fostering media criticism through free and independent op-ed pages and encouraging citizen journalism initiatives.

Moreover, maintaining conceptual clarity between "responsibility" and "accountability" is very important to this study, as these terms are often used synonymously, but are different in their essence. Responsibility is a duty to discharge functional and moral obligations, whereas accountability is the readiness to give an explanation or justification to concerned stakeholders for one's acts, judgment or intentions (McQuail, 2005). In other words, responsibility is something that journalists take on themselves, but accountability is what others require of journalists. Whereas responsibility defines proper conduct, accountability compels one to apply it in practice. Hodges (1986) notes that:

[T]he issue of responsibility is the following: to what social needs should we expect journalists to respond? The issue of accountability is as follows: how might society call on journalists to account for their performance of the responsibility given them. Responsibility has to do with defining proper conduct, accountability with compelling it. (p.14, as cited in McQuail, 1997, p. 515)
According to McQuail (1997), responsibility refers to "those obligations, which are attributed to the media that they should respond to public expectations related to social needs"; however, accountability, for McQuail, refers to "the process in which media are called to account for meeting their obligations" (p. 515).

This section has analyzed the concept and scope of accountability and also reviewed academic interpretations of the two terms, that is, accountability and responsibility, in order to distinguish them from each other. This discussion shows that responsibility is a conceptual understanding, whereas accountability is to implement that understanding into journalistic practice.

**EVOLUTION OF MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY**

Industrialization, technological innovations, democratization and increased literacy in the nineteenth century contributed to an expansion of mass newspapers in the Western world. Media outlets were considered defenders of democracy and information trustees with "a moral claim to autonomy and non-interference by government" (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009, p.55). However, the growing size of media outlets, particularly in Europe and the U.S., was often characterized by market monopoly, low-quality journalism and various negative consequences of unbridled media power (Krogh, 2012). Near the end of the nineteenth century, the yellow journalism scandal in the U.S. stunned the entire journalism profession, increasing concerns about ethical standards and professional practices among journalists. In response, voices began to emerge regarding the media's responsibility to serve the public interest.

In 1910, the first journalistic code of ethics was drafted and adopted in Kansas, a U.S. state, by the Kansas Editorial Association. Following this trend, journalists and media institutions in other American states, including Missouri, South Dakota, Oregon and Washington, also gradually began to draft and endorse state-wide codes (Christians, 1989). The most famous and widely applied code of ethics of that time was the Canons of Journalism, prepared and endorsed by ASNE in 1922. The Canons were followed as a standard of journalistic ethics by many other journalism institutions, including the SPJ. During the late 1920s, a fierce debate arose among media professionals in regard to the enforcement provisions of the codes, without which, some said, the whole enterprise would be a "mockery". At the same time, an opposing perspective was gaining momentum, focusing on the idea that enforceable measures could create censorship that may "violate the free press doctrine" (Christians, 1989, p. 37). This debate had two significant consequences: first, no further media ethics codes were developed for almost five decades; second, the existing codes were used as showy tusks lacking any real professional obligations (Christians, 1989). In the meantime, government functionaries were gradually becoming active in curbing the unbridled freedom of mass media on the grounds of public interest. Amid such tensions between free media advocates and responsible media proponents, the Hutchins Commission submitted a report in 1947 entitled *A Free and Responsible Press*, which created a paradigm shift for journalism ethics, moving away from the libertarian concept of freedom of the press and toward communitarianism. Later, in 1956, the concepts of social responsibility and public accountability were theorized by three University of Illinois scholars in a seminal work entitled *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). In 1973, after two and a half decades, the SPJ revised its codes of ethics, clearly incorporating in them the term "accountability" and stating that "journalists should be accountable to the public for their reports and the public should be encouraged to voice its grievances against the media. Open dialogue with our readers, viewers, and listeners should be fostered" (SPJ, 1973, Art.V(5)). In 1988, a public forum on "Media Freedom and Accountability" was organized at Columbia University in New York "to examine the problems of media freedom and accountability" (Dennis, Gillmor, & Glasser, 1989, p. viii). Several other similar public discussions have been organized in different parts of the world in the past two decades and many scholars (Babcock, 2012; Dennis, Gillmor,
& Glasser, 1989; McQuail, 2003) have written books and research articles on media freedom and accountability. Such meetings and works of research have firmly and internationally established the notion of media accountability.

In addition, after years of research and discussions with many professionals and scholars, the CCJ developed nine guiding principles of journalism that are simultaneously professional and ethical. The second principle, "journalism's first loyalty is to citizens," integrates media accountability, with the term "citizens" indicating media audiences of all types (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 52). The CAJ has developed guidelines for ethical journalism that describe the accountability of news media comprehensively. The guidelines express commitments to fairness and reliability of reporting and to prioritizing service to the public interest. They clearly distinguish between news and opinions, discourage reporting in disguise and prohibit image altering and the deviation of visuals, which can distort context. The guidelines encourage the prompt, transparent correction of errors, the acquisition of permission whenever possible in reporting and the maintenance of digital archives with full content (CAJ, 2011). This section has presented a brief description of the evolution of the concept of media accountability and the tension between the free press and responsible press. Moreover, some scholars (Friend & Singer, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) contend that the Internet has facilitated the growth of the media accountability concept and that online media are able to practice accountability more fully than traditional media outlets. Pursuing these ideas, the next section describes accountability practices on digital platforms and the challenges to media accountability with regard to public and professional stakeholders.

MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Friend and Singer (2007) argue that, as a newly developed genre, online journalism currently lacks ethical guidelines adequate for addressing the challenges created by digital platforms. Meanwhile, the application of traditional ethical practices to online journalism has been shown to be debatable, as some journalists argue that the Internet is a fundamentally different medium (Ward, 2010; Ward & Wasserman, 2012), while others argue that journalism transcends technological barriers and that the same standards are ubiquitous regardless of the medium (Joseph, 2011; Reuters, 2013). In response to the question of whether journalistic ethics change in the context of online journalism, many scholars and professional institutions have said "No". The ethical guidelines of the CAJ (2011) clearly indicate that "ethical practice does not change with the medium" (para 9). Reuters (2013) states that "Internet reporting is nothing more than applying the principles of sound journalism to the sometimes unusual situations thrown up in the virtual world. The same standards of sourcing, identification and verification apply" (para 1). For Hohman (2011) and Whitehouse (2010), traditional ethics rules prevail in online journalism. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) have expressed similar thoughts, stating that "journalism's function is not fundamentally changed by the digital age. The techniques may be different, but the underlying principles are the same" (p. 26).

Some scholars argue that new digital technologies enabled by the Internet may significantly enhance the range of attempts to foster public accountability through online interaction with users. Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) find that Internet-based media platforms, such as websites, blogs, social media, are more favorable to public accountability than are traditional media formats and that this trend has increased over time. The two-way interactivity of online platforms has changed the role of journalists from that of a lecturer role to that of a forum leader, argue Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007). For instance, the New York Times newspaper corrected misspelt surname of Solomon Northup on March 4, 2014, in a memoir entitled "12 years a slave", originally published 161 years ago (on January 20, 1853). When a Twitter user pointed out the misspellings in the newspaper's archive, the newspaper made the correction immediately, believing that the article has become "more complete and authentic" than before (visit New York Times correction page: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/04/pageoneplu
s/corrections-march-4-2014.html). Scholars, therefore, have reached the conclusion that online journalism has fostered accountability and transparency more easily than its traditional counterparts (Singer, 2005; Lasorsa, Lewis & Hilton, 2012; Porlezza, 2012).

In a seminal research study, Jane Singer (2005) examines the blog platform as adopted by political journalists in traditional mainstream media, and finds that journalists who blog usually challenge the "professional norms" that frame journalists as "non-partisan gatekeeper[s] of information important to the public", but that blogging journalists are nonetheless more "transparent and accountable" than journalists in traditional media, including radio, television and newspapers, as blogs are in a highly interactive and participatory format (p. 147). According to Singer, though the blog confronts traditional journalistic roles such as "gatekeeping" and "non-partisanship", the format at the same time has encouraged journalist bloggers to uphold accountability and transparency by using hyperlinks to sources and related materials.

An empirical study on micro-blogging by Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012) examines how mainstream journalists who micro-blog (this format boomed with the rise of Twitter) negotiate their professional norms and practices in a new media format. Like Singer's (2005) study, their study finds that journalists behave more transparently and accountably in new media forms by responding to reader queries, participating in issue-related discussions, providing further information and linking to internal and external websites. They write that "although the process of referencing original source material has not always been easily facilitated in traditional media formats […] the hyperlinks that are endemic to blogging and micro-blogging present an opportunity for journalists to be more transparent, and thus more accountable" to the public (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012, p. 24). Similarly, their study also finds that "big" media journalists, termed "elite-journalists" by the authors, participate less in discussion, rarely reply to audience questions and usually do not provide external links. Their official websites are generally less accountable and transparent to general audiences than those of their counterparts in smaller media outlets.

Despite these positive developments in accountability on online media platforms, certain features of digital platforms, such as speedy updates, the lack of deadlines, the absence of space/time limits, and the participation of citizen journalists in news content, have added their own challenges. For instance, many online media organizations archive content selectively, while some do not keep online archives at all. This trend has encouraged online media to compromise on issues of accountability and transparency. Similarly, limitations on staff in newsrooms, and their responsibility to perform multiple roles from reporter to editor, publisher and promoter, have also weakened journalistic accountability (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Furthermore, traditional principles of journalism, such as accuracy, balance, credibility, information verification, gatekeeping and accountability have been challenged on digital platforms in a number of ways.

**Poor gatekeeping:** Gatekeeping is a process by which information is filtered for dissemination by means of a variety of news media outlets in accordance with a set of criteria determined by a number of factors. Gatekeeping mechanism in journalism is for internal quality control and the upholding of professional practices. In traditional media, editors and subeditors read, edit, re-write and verify information to ensure that its quality meets the media outlet’s standards before it is published. However, the evolution of technologies and social norms has made it difficult to define online journalism in traditional ways. On the one hand, the role of online-only journalists consists largely of "information-gathering […] or] compiling stories originally written for someone else" (Singer, 2003, p. 149). On the other hand, newsgathering and publishing systems are easily available to the public. A popular practice among journalists has been growing in social media outlets, especially in Twitter. This practice involves breaking information
in real time or before the news story is published in respective media. The motivation factors for such newsbreaks, which largely avoid the gatekeeping function, are growing competition, visibility and technological affordability (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). Therefore, the gatekeeping function is gradually losing its significance.

Many scholars agree that information verification is a challenging job in an online context (Friend & Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Ward, 2010). New media technology and the growing trend toward the production of speedy information have weakened long-developed information verification practices. Online information verification has to be very fast and there is intense competition to break stories immediately, much more than to get the stories right through careful scrutiny. In such situations, journalists treat facts as a "commodity[ies]" that are easily retrieved, redesigned and targeted to a specific audience, and spend more time trying to find new information "to add to the existing news, usually interpretation, rather than trying to independently discover and verify news facts" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 86). Journalists seek particular information relevant to their stories from Internet sources, immediately synthesizing the information into their existing news stories or using the information to twist the story into new angles and disseminate the new angles as updated information. This trend, resulting from new information technologies, has made journalists passive information receivers rather than active gatherers.

**Lack of professional knowledge:** The majority of online media employees come from diverse backgrounds outside of the journalism profession. Even for those trained in journalism, academic curricula specific to online journalism are quite rare in higher education (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Friend & Singer, 2007). Therefore, only a few journalists are familiar with online tools from an academic perspective before they enter the profession, regardless of whether they study journalism. Employees in the digital realm are likely to be ill-equipped, either journalistically or technically. According to Friend and Singer (2007), online employees generally fall into the former category. They are not well trained in re-writing, editing and updating websites, in information search strategies or in the creation of multimedia products. Instead of journalistic knowledge and skills, they have technical knowledge and organizational skills.

Singer (2003) argues that many online journalists, in order to elude commercial pressures, blur the boundary between news and advertisements by writing advertorials or adding pop-up advertising windows that readers face when looking for other information. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) express their worries regarding the watchdog function of journalism, which they say has been seriously threatened by a new kind of corporate conglomerate. Their research findings indicate that digital platforms are widely used to "distort, mislead, and overwhelm the function of a free press" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; p. 166), and that new technologies have contributed to superficial reporting that relies merely on chat box gossip.

**Crowdsourcing and content moderation:** The Internet is a popular platform for online journalists, not only to promote their stories, but also to collect information through various social media outlets, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Media institutions and journalists use crowdsourcing to collect information at their ease without spending much money or time in the field. The main attraction of crowdsourcing so far is the high proportion of audience members who are ready to contribute information at any time, regardless of proper acknowledgment. The authenticity of information gathered through mass intelligence is under question because nobody takes responsibility for authenticating or verifying the collected information. In addition, privacy is frequently violated online through the unconsented use of unverified information originally posted on audience members' Facebook or Twitter pages. Whitehouse (2010) contends that privacy should not be invaded even though crowdsourcing tools are
easily available and there is no existing legal sanction against such practices.

Content moderation has been widely practiced in traditional media outlets to ensure quality by maintaining professional norms, such as truth seeking, harm minimization, independence and accountability (SPJ, 1996). It is expected that media organizations and journalists use content moderation both to admit mistakes and correct them promptly during the journalistic process, and to invite readers to discuss their grievances about journalists’ conduct. However, news media have been found modifying content without informing the public for the protection of the media’s business interests and for hiding or erasing any controversial issues or unprofessional performance that may damage the media’s reputation (Acharya, 2014). Hence, the content moderation feature has allowed media and journalists to correct their past mistakes without proper accreditation and to remove audiences’ critical comments.

Indifference to audience feedback: Having unlimited space available on the web and the growing involvement of the audience are some of the accountability indicators for digital platforms. These two factors cause online news media to invite audience members to comment on stories so that media can be monitored and questioned if they are not accountable to the public. However, this theoretical notion is not adequately practiced even in the well-reputed media outlets of developed countries. In Canada, for example, the national public broadcaster sometimes prevents online readers from commenting on news stories that the broadcaster feels is controversial. A story entitled "3 UK schoolgirls suspected of joining ISIS in Syria", published on February 21, 2015, was closed within 24 hours of being posted on the CBC’s official website (visit www.cbc.ca/news/world/3-uk-schoolgirls-suspected-of-joining-isis-in-syria-1.2966087). In the context of a developing country like Nepal, it was found that critical comments were prevented or significantly altered before publication, or removed from news portals to avoid criticism (Acharya, 2014).

Most journalistic ethical codes (e.g., SPJ, 1996; CAJ, 2011) clearly state that news sources should be fully identified when possible. Failing this being done, reasons for anonymity should be explained clearly in the story. Many audience members signing in with pseudonyms, react to articles with obscene language, abuse and speculative content, which is published without, or with very little, moderation. However, the media may have a different policy for receiving feedback in its traditional media outlets, particularly in newspapers, and may reject feedback submitted under pseudonyms, or which fails standards of language quality and content worthiness. Cenite and Zhang (2012) opine that the same editorial standards should apply in their entirety for feedback content moderation, since "light or absent moderation has a price" (p. 43).

Post-deletion or "unpublishing": Traditional news media are increasingly adopting online editions, which have advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, online content can allow readers to recall past events and make them immediately available. On the other hand, our lives are documented and published online and this information remains ‘just a click away’ in perpetuity. Many media organizations have been facing grievances from those requesting to have online content removed for various reasons, including the publication of incorrect or incomplete information, misleading or outdated content, source remorse or even false allegations (CAJ, 2010; English, Currie & Link, 2010). Many people also ask Google to "unpublish" information that affects their professional lives, but Google cannot automatically remove anything unless information is removed from the source site (Moskwa, 2009). Recognizing the growing concerns of the public in this regard, many online news organizations have started to develop internal policies for deleting or moderating defamatory comments that readers have posted about an article, though removing entire articles is unlikely due to the lack of clear policies (CAJ, 2010; English, 2009). Even though online archiving systems may continuously victimize people (for instance, when an old, unproved allegation continues to circulate on the Internet, creating a biased perception of the accused), there is a serious
ethical dilemma regarding whether or not it is fair to remove a story from online archives or whether it should be left intact. How should online media respond to unpublishing requests while upholding journalistic principles and best practices? In this respect, digital platforms have created a serious ethical dilemma in journalism.

This section has identified strengths of and opportunities on digital platforms (due to the platforms' unique features, such as interactivity, transparency, accessibility and immediacy) with regard to ensuring and enhancing journalistic accountability to public and professional stakeholders. In addition, this section has also discussed the new challenges created by the use of digital platforms for the maintenance of journalistic values and the upholding of accountability practices. In considering these challenges, the following section argues that the audience can fix these challenges and make news media on digital platforms accountable to their professional obligations and to the public.

ROLE OF AUDIENCE

In a parliamentary democratic system, the ministerial cabinet is accountable to the parliament, the parliament is accountable to the people, and other constitutional bodies are accountable to specified agencies. In the context of journalism, Solzhenitsyn (1978) asks, "[B]y what law has it [journalism] been elected and to whom is it responsible?" (as cited in Christians, 1989, p.36). In a similar tone, British journalist Toby Webb, founder and managing director of London's Ethical Corporation, asks, "[W]ho holds these 'watchdogs' [media] accountable?" (Webb, 2009). These are serious questions about ongoing arbitrary media practices, and the exact answer is not easy to pinpoint. However, based on the opinions and arguments of different media scholars, the potential "parliament" that can hold journalists and media institutions accountable can be the public or audience. Painter and Hodges (2012) contend that media institutions may have multiple constituents to whom they are supposed to be accountable, but that "their main constituents are the public and political society" (p. 1).

Active, conscious audiences can have an important role in making media accountable to professional and public stakeholders. This notion applies to a greater extent in the online context, since every audience member can be a potential citizen journalist, and since digital platforms empower and encourage audiences to apply technological tools to create immediate pressure on columnists, newsrooms and press councils. Cenite and Zhang (2012) explain that "online tools enable new opportunities for audiences to hold media practitioners accountable and for journalists to fulfill their obligations to be accountable to audiences" (p. 37). Before the digital journalism era, letters to the editor were the main source of public involvement, but these were filtered through a tough gatekeeping mechanism, which meant that publishers' interests could be safeguarded and a favorable image could be selected. Ward and Wasserman (2012) argue that letters to the editor "are a limited mechanism for public input into mainstream press content" (p. 25). At present, audiences using digital platforms are not only information recipients, but they also actively interact, debate, create, communicate and share information.

Moreover, digital access by large audiences allows the audiences to play an influential role in making media accountable by monitoring and critiquing whether media content follows ethical standards and journalistic values, and honors audience interests. For instance, Britain's Press Complaint Commission (PCC) received more than 25,000 complaints – a record number – after Daily Mail columnist Jan Moir wrote an article about Stephen Gately's death describing the events surrounding his death as "sleazy" and "less than respectable" (Robinson, 2010). The article, published on 16 October 2009 - six days after Gately's death - provoked outrage, with many readers expressing their anger through various social media outlets, including Facebook and Twitter. Referring to the PCC code of ethics, the complainants claimed that the Daily Mail had broken the PCC's code of conduct.
on three fronts, arguing that the article was inaccurate, intruded into private grief and contained homophobic remarks. The deluge of comments and complaints from audiences worldwide pressured the PCC to investigate the issue and the journalists to rethink their professional obligations. Hence, it can be argued that the more access audiences have to online media content, the more effectively they can act as citizen journalists, assessing the suitability of media content and providing critical feedback to improve the quality of media performance.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

As several aforementioned scholars argue, media accountability can be governed by the same traditional codes of ethics on digital platforms as in traditional media, despite unique characteristics, such as immediacy, interactivity, transparency and global access. Since the unique characteristics of online platforms (such as crowdsourcing, post-publication correction, post deletion) can also lead to various challenges, the role of audiences seems more important on digital platforms because active and conscious audiences can fix these challenges and bring media and journalists back on their professional track.

Even though the role of audiences in making media responsible and accountable to the public for their actions and performance is important in any media format (traditional or new), a continuous interactive relationship between audiences and journalists on digital platforms is very important in that this relationship encourages journalists to correct their mistakes and to respect the interests of the public. Today, audiences are highly involved in the use of media accountability instruments (such as online news portals, media blogs and various social media platforms) helping to make media more accountable to the professional and public stakeholders. The role of audiences is broader on digital platforms than in traditional media because the former incorporate non-traditional features to keep audiences actively watching the watchdogs. The non-traditional features of digital platforms can, for instance, help online media audiences to access content from anywhere on the planet and to remain updated at any time. This allows audience unlimited time and space to comment on particular issues, and to effectively engage with news content through online media's interactivity and multimedia format. In other words, today's audiences, for media and journalists, are like the parliament to which a democratic government remains accountable. Various digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, can empower audiences to react, question and ask for further clarification if they disagree with media information, thereby obliging newsmakers to be accountable for their products. Audiences, engaged in collaborative content production with professional journalists, can verify and corroborate information and thereby urge media performance that is accountable to public and professional stakeholders. It is obvious that the role of audiences can create a constant pressure on journalists and media institutions to respect the interests of the general public and to be accountable to them.

Hence, the role of audiences is important to the monitoring of journalists' performance, encouraging the latter to maintain a high level of accountability in the digital realm. Moreover, if more people have access to online media, they will be able to constantly monitor online news portals in order to corroborate information, and can create pressure on journalists to be accountable to their professional and public stakeholders. A research finding indicates that a reduction of the digital divide and a rise in media literacy may significantly encourage audiences to join digital platforms and watch the watchdogs (Acharya, 2014). In addition, strong and effective monitoring bodies, such as press councils or ombudsmen, are required to safeguard audience interests in cases where media houses and journalists ignore public interests and deviate from the professional track in order to emphasize political or market interests. Media can fulfill public expectations by publishing true, complete and reliable information, encouraging the general public to constantly monitor media content and providing platforms to allow audiences to express diverse opinions, including critical ones. Meaningful audience participation audience can be ensured if media houses and monitoring agencies create an environment in which audiences can participate in:
(a) criticizing the practices of journalists and media, (b) discussing ethical principles, and (c) modifying or updating the principles of ethics.

To sum up, it has been ascertained in this article that accountability is a crucial aspect of professional journalism in any media format - from print to online. Maintaining accountability on digital platforms is more convenient than doing so on traditional media platforms for the following reasons: digital platforms are accessible to global audiences; the platforms can publish information immediately; news presentation in multimedia format can be more attractive to a wide audience; and the interactive features of the platforms encourage the audience's participation. The platforms, however, have also created new challenges to the maintenance of journalistic values and the upholding of accountability practices. These challenges include speedy updates, the growing insignificance of gatekeeping, crowdsourcing, post-publication correction, post-deletion and increased plagiarism. In responding to these challenges, media audiences have a more significant role on digital platforms because of the availability of new media tools, which are easy to use, accessible and effective. As the first loyalty of professional journalists or media institutions should be towards their audience and the general public, a continuous interactive relationship between media and society, therefore, can help build media that are robustly accountable to professional and public stakeholders.

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