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# Credibility and the Media as a Political Institution

Mark Blach-Ørsten & Rasmus Burkal

## Abstract

Credibility is frequently represented as both an ideal goal for journalism as a profession and as an integral part of the news industry's survival strategy. Yet there is no widely accepted operationalization of the concept of credibility. In the current article, we present the results of a study of credibility in Danish news media. Credibility is defined at an institutional level by two dimensions: A) the accuracy and reliability of the news stories featured in leading Danish news media, and B) journalists' knowledge and understanding of the Danish code of press ethics. The results show that sources only find objective errors in 14.1% of the news stories, which is a lower figure than most other studies report. The results also show that Danish journalists find bad press ethics to be an increasing problem and attribute this problem to increased pressure in the newsroom.

**Keywords:** credibility, new institutionalism, Denmark, press ethics, accuracy, news media

## Introduction

For the first time in 23 years, the Danish code of press ethics, known as 'the general guidelines for press ethics', were updated and revised in May 2013. This revision followed an almost three-year-long debate on press ethics in Denmark. The debate on ethics was ignited by a couple of highly debated journalistic scandals that hit the Danish media from 2010 and onwards (Blach-Ørsten 2013a). Most spectacular was the case of Jan Lindholt Mikkelsen who, on January 4, 2010, found himself named and pictured on the front page of a leading Danish tabloid in association with the horrible murder of a young girl. He was later cleared of all charges. By putting Lindholt Mikkelsen on the front page, the tabloid was not in direct violation of the Danish code of press ethics, because his lawyer had not demanded that his case be handled behind closed doors as is the usual custom in high-profile criminal proceedings in Denmark. However, other news media outlets and many politicians felt that the tabloid had gone too far. The episode ignited a sharp debate between media, politicians and the public, where both the politicians and the public expressed a deep concern that, in light of increased competition, ethics in Danish news media was slipping. But other than a few spectacular cases, neither the public nor politicians could come up with proof to back up the statement that press ethics in Denmark was generally slipping.

The study presented here tries to answer the question of the status of journalistic ethics in Danish media by looking at the concept of media credibility from a new angle.

The article proceeds in several steps. We will start with an introduction to the Danish media system and a review of the literature on credibility. Then, by linking the debate on credibility to the theory of the news media as a political institution, we will suggest a new way to define and operationalize the concept of credibility. The result of the Danish study will then be presented, and finally it will be argued that the question of credibility needs to be addressed just as vigorously as the question of media economics has been, and that credibility needs to be at the forefront of any new business model suggested for the news media.

## **The Danish Media System – A Brief Introduction**

Blach-Ørsten (2013b) gives the following overview of the Danish media system based on Daniel C. Hallin's and Paolo Mancini's (2004) comparative analysis of Western media systems. Denmark is placed in the "Democratic Corporatist" model as one of the European countries characterized by early development of a large newspaper industry, active state involvement in the media sector, and an early focus on press freedom. Danish newspapers have historically been strongly linked to the political parties that grew out of the shift from absolutism to parliamentary democracy in the late nineteenth century. Today, the three most important nationally distributed broadsheet newspapers are all principally committed to impartial news coverage, but also retain their distinct ideological editorial profiles. Since the 1990s, print circulation, readership and advertising revenues have all dropped dramatically as the traditional paid broadsheet and tabloid newspapers faced challenges from newly launched free dailies and with the rise of digital media (Lund, Willig and Blach-Ørsten 2009; Esmark and Ørsten 2008; Willig 2011). Thus far, the turbulence of recent years has led to a relatively minor reduction in the size of the newsrooms of the major Danish newspapers as well as a shift in focus from print to online, where all legacy titles continue to reach large audiences.

In terms of broadcast media, 1959 saw the creation of Denmark's Radio (DR) as a national integrated public service provider funded by a license fee levied on all receivers. In the early 1980s, TV 2 was launched as a competing, advertising-funded, state-owned public service broadcaster. With the development of satellite and cable television and the further liberalization of broadcast regulation, several more commercial radio and television stations have entered the Danish market, but they do not play a significant role in terms of news provision. Like the major newspapers, the two main broadcasters strive for impartial news coverage, and though the possibility that their journalism may be biased in one direction or another is a recurrent theme in the public debate, empirical research has repeatedly found that political journalism remains by and large politically neutral (Albæk et al. 2010; Esmark and Ørsten 2008). Still the Danish media system, like the other systems in Hallin's and Mancini's model, is facing changes on many fronts, among which the most relevant for the present purposes are (Blach-Ørsten 2013b):

- Economic factors, including commercial news organizations engaged in an evermore intense competition for attention and advertising
- Public service providers who need large audiences to justify their existence change the demands of news production.

- Technological factors, including technological convergence on digital platforms meaning that previously separate media like newspapers, broadcasters, and new stand-alone websites now compete head-to-head and can monitor each other's news output in real-time.

Indeed, the debate on credibility in Denmark frequently cited changes in news media economics and the introduction of new technology as the major reason for credibility taking a backseat to competition in today's journalism.

## **An Overview of the Study of Credibility**

The concept of credibility is frequently represented as both an ideal goal for journalism as a profession (Vultree 2010) and as an integral part of the news industry's survival strategy (Meyer 2004). Yet there is no widely accepted operationalization of the concept. According to Reich (2011) and Elliot (1997), modern credibility studies began in the 1940s in communication studies. Credibility in the context of journalism is less well studied (Reich 2011), but at least three principal debates on journalism and credibility can be outlined from a literature review (Reich 2011; Kiouisis 2009; Vultree 2010): The question of source credibility, the question of medium credibility and the more general question of the relationship between credibility and press ethics.

Source credibility has focused on how different communications characteristics can influence the perception of a message. This may be studied from an audience perspective or from a journalistic perspective. Medium credibility, on the other hand, focuses on the credibility of the channel through which the message is delivered, rather than the sources of the message (Kiouisis 2009). Both types of credibility studies have, however, been criticized for methodological problems in the design of factor analyses intended to measure credibility and for not being clear in the operationalization of the concept of credibility (Kiouisis 2011). For instance, a common operationalization of credibility includes the following dimensions (Thorson, Vraga and Ekdale 2010: 292): "trustworthiness and expertise, fairness, bias, incompleteness, concern of community, separation of opinion and fact, and accuracy", but fails to specify, or further operationalize, each of these equally elusive concepts.

To a lesser degree the concept of credibility has also been debated in studies on journalism ethics (Elliot 1997; Vultree 2010). In these studies, a journalistic code of ethics is sometimes seen as being necessary in order to secure the credibility of the medium. At other times, credibility is just more or less assumed to be part of the journalistic craft and moral framework of journalism, and can as such not be written down as part of a journalistic code of ethics (Vultree 2010). In Scandinavia, common ethical guidelines for journalists are linked both to journalism as a profession and to the institutionalization of the news media as a political institution (Allern 2001). As outlined in the above section on the corporatist democratic model, news media in this media system are seen as especially important to democracy, and with this privileged role comes certain obligations that are to be met by journalists and news organization. These obligations are outlined in ethical guidelines for journalists.

In Scandinavia, the debate on media credibility was at its height in the 1970s (Elliot 1997). Göran Hermerén (1978) and Peter Arvidson (1977) both argued for a concept of

credibility that would be more precise than a factor analysis of what the public perceived as credible information. Hermerén argued for more objective criteria for measuring credibility, in line with Westerståhl's (1974) research on criteria for objectivity, and both argued that credibility concerns the way news media present reality in news stories, and how this reality is perceived. This is the line of research that will be explored and expanded in the next section.

## **Institutional Credibility**

As shown above, the study of credibility was born out of research in communications and has yet to be linked to more contemporary theory on the study of journalism's role in society. In the study of journalistic ethics, credibility is sometimes seen as an integral part this system of ethics and sometimes not. To develop a more contemporary and theoretically based concept of credibility, we suggest that the concept of credibility be linked to the general debate and research on the media as a political institution. Today many scholars view the news media as a political institution in its own right (Cook 1998; Sparrow 1999; Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011). Although the news media do not constitute a formal political institution like the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government, the metaphor of the "fourth estate" suggests how they can be seen as an intermediary political institution akin to political parties and interest groups, a phenomenon that needs to be understood both as a disparate collection of individual organizations and as sharing certain social logics. Cook (1998, p. 64) states the following about the institutionalist perspective on news media:

Despite different technologies, deadlines and audiences are structured similarly in [news organizations'] internal organization, the way they interact with sources, the formats they use, and in the content they provide (...). This transorganizational agreement on news process and content suggest that we should think of the news media not as a set of diverse organizations, or even a batch of individual institutions, but collectively as a single social institution.

In Scandinavia as well the media are often viewed from this perspective. Allern and Blach-Ørsten (2011) argue that news organizations may be characterized as custodians or patrons of journalism and news as a societal institution. As others scholars, like Sparrow (1999), have pointed out, this is not their only role. In many cases the news media are also market-driven organizations and linked to the economic institutions of society. But what distinguishes news media from other media, and news enterprises from other enterprises, is their role as representatives of journalism and news as an institution (Allern 2001). The ideals that see journalism as having a societal mission of vital importance to democracy are especially strong in the democratic corporatist model. Thus the role of journalism in this media system is to provide information about public affairs, to scrutinize the wielders of power, and to raise public debate (Allern 2001, Blach-Ørsten and Allern 2011). By virtue of these historical ideas and ideological myths, media companies have legitimized themselves as institutions essential to the function of democratic societies. Politicians in the democratic corporatist model have supported this line of thought via both direct and indirect media subsidies (Allern 2001). Another characteristic of journalism as an institution is "the news paradigm" or 'news regime' (Ryfe 2006): A common understanding of

certain basic news rules concerning genre, news values, tacit procedures and conventions regarding what journalism must observe, report and how it should be presented.

However, a central point in institutional studies of the news media is that even though the media can be seen as a political institution, they are a more volatile political institution than the formal political institutions in a society. Indeed Cook (1998) points out that the news media have more in common with two other political institutions – the political parties and the interest group system – than with the constitutional branches of the legislature, executive and judiciary. A central reason for the news media's more volatile institutional status is linked to the fact that journalism is a weak profession. As Kaplan writes (2006: 177):

No specialized technical knowledge, no formal credentialed training, no esoteric occupational language, nor the creation of a self-evidently, socially useful product – none of these shield journalism from external criticism.

Skovsgaard and Bro (2011: 322) argue along the same lines when they write:

The consequence of this absence of an abstract knowledge and strong structures for inclusion and exclusion is that the journalistic profession becomes more vulnerable and its legitimacy less stable compared to other professions.

Even Schudson (1978) remarked that journalism is an uninsulated profession, and paraphrasing that we argue that the news media constitute an uninsulated political institution. Journalism's, and thus the news media's, protection from criticism, and claim of autonomy, comes largely from the institutional myth of the fourth estate and lofty ideals concerning journalism and democracy, as pointed out by Allern (2001) and Allern and Blach-Ørsten (2011). But myth and ideals are no longer strong enough to alone support the media's credibility as an institution. Besides the volatile state of journalism as a profession other changes in society are affecting the contextual conditions of journalism. As mentioned earlier in the present article, changes in the news media's economy are one change, but Skovsgaard and Bro (2011) cite two other major changes and challenges. The first change is fueled by technological innovation, and could be described as the rise of amateurism. News media and social media are changing in such a way that private citizens can now produce and publish their own news or share news with others via social networks, perhaps constantly reducing the role journalism plays in people's lives. Another change is the professionalization of communication in political parties, authorities, companies and organizations, all of which are now able to produce, publish and distribute their own news made by their own journalists and to reach audiences by themselves. Thus, just as the political parties and the interest group organizations have been affected by changes in society and have lost some of their former status and stability, so has journalism become a more blurred, criticized and fragile institution due to changes in economics, technology, politics and media use.

Though it does point out that the news media's status as a political institution is fragile, institutional theory on the news media does not concern itself directly with the question of credibility, but instead with the legitimacy of the news media, and yet again the question of professionalism, or lack thereof, becomes central. Cook (1998: 77) writes that journalism is not much of a profession compared to the 'old' professions such as law and medicine, and indeed:

Journalism professionalism is not inherent in the formal structures or in particular individual attitudes but is instead performed as part of daily work. Indeed such performances may become ever more central, precisely because the journalistic profession is so poorly demarcated.

Skovsgaard and Bro (2011) also focus on daily practices when they write that journalists, to a much greater degree than doctors and lawyers, have to negotiate and reinforce their legitimacy through their daily work. And Sjøvaag (2011) simply states that journalism is only as legitimate as its daily work practices are. This was also the case in the journalistic scandals that led to a new code of press ethics in Denmark. In each scandal, it was the work practices behind the story that were criticized. Building on this point of view, we argue that the media as an institution in the Danish society enjoy some level of credibility (as do other institutions), but that this credibility to an increasing degree is linked, not to institutional myth or democratic ideals, but to the daily work practices within the media, making these daily work practices central to the concept of institutional credibility.

The daily practice of news making can be described, using institutional theory, as a news regime defined as a common understanding and relatively stable set of rules, procedures and resources for the production of news (Ryfe 2006, Blach-Ørsten 2013b). Thus, the credibility of journalism as an institution is located in the daily practices of producing the news by following the rules laid out in the news regime. Ryfe (2006) defines the current news regime as the modern and professional news regime, as opposed to the 'partisan news regime' of the party press, and describes the routines of the modern news regime as talking to credible sources, gathering facts and writing balanced stories. A code of press ethics may be seen as the legal underpinning of such a news regime and indeed the Danish code of ethics, among other things, states that the information presented in a news story should strive to be accurate and balanced. With this in mind, we can return to the problem of developing a new way of operationalizing the concept of credibility at an institutional level.

As should be clear from the above discussion, daily journalistic practice is at the center of an institutional concept of credibility. In some ways, this returns the focus to the Scandinavian credibility debate of the 1970s, which shared a similar focus on media content. However, in the present article, media content is defined as the result of the journalistic practices of producing news, gathering facts, talking to credible sources and producing balanced stories that adhere to a code of press ethics. Instead of focusing on the relationship between news content and the audience, as both older and newer studies of credibility have done, the present study suggests a new focus on news sources and journalists themselves. From an institutional perspective, the interaction between sources and journalists are central because most sources in the news are elite sources, and as elites they represent the other powerful institutions in society, such as political and financial institutions. Thus, the elite sources' perceptions of news and their interaction with journalists can also be seen as a mirror of the interaction between the media as an institution and other institutions in society. Meyer (2004) argues along the same lines in his attempt to put the accuracy of news reports at the center of the debate on credibility. Building on Lazarfeld's theory of the Two-Step Flow, Meyer (2004: 96-97) argues that elite sources are a much more important measure of credibility than audience

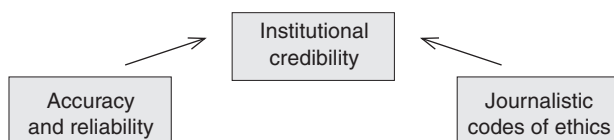


perception: “Newspapers with a high density of errors have the least trusting sources, and their skepticism filters down to the population. If this seems strange, remember that sources tend to be the elites.”

In the present study, credibility is defined by two dimensions: a) the daily practice of gathering facts by talking to news sources and b) the daily practice of producing news stories in Danish newsrooms under the guidance of a code of press ethics. While point a) switches focus from the general audience to the elite news sources, point b) adds a new focus on the journalists themselves and their perception of their daily practices. In Denmark, the existence of a general code of press ethics, as well as the existence of an independent press council that may demand that news media rectify an error in a story, is seen as an institutional arrangement (Andersen 2006), i.e. the code of press ethics addresses the media’s role as an institution, and not as individual private business enterprises, and because of this institutional role the media, like other institutions, should have a set of guidelines for how this institutional role should be performed.

The concept of credibility used here can thus be described by the figure below.

**Figure 1. Model of Institutional Credibility**



To examine the daily practice of talking to news sources, we were inspired by the accuracy and reliability studies conducted by Maier (2007) and Proleza et al. (2012). We therefore used a source-survey method and sent a questionnaire to news sources asking them, among other things, to identify errors, if any, in news reports. To examine journalists’ relation to the Danish code of press ethics, we sent a survey to 350 journalists working in the same media that we sampled our sources from, and asked them about their daily practices and the Danish code of press ethics.

## The Study

The study is based on two surveys. The source survey was sent to sources who had participated in news articles and news reports in week 46 2011 in national broadsheet newspapers and online newspapers (*Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken*), local newspapers (*Folketidende* and *Nordvestnyt*) and national television (DR and TV 2). The questionnaire was distributed to 906 sources in the period 13th-21st February 2012. When the collection of responses was completed 13th March 2012, 596 sources had responded, of whom 95 percent had answered all the questions in the questionnaire. Altogether, this gives a response rate of 66 percent. 547 sources confirmed that they had been interviewed by a journalist from the media, in which the article or feature was published.

Our analysis is based on the responses of these 547 sources. The 547 sources break down as follows: 57% from national newspapers, 19% from regional newspapers, 17% from national TV and 7% from the national newspaper’s online papers. At the same



time we sent a survey to 350 journalists working in the same media that we sampled our sources from, and asked them about the Danish code of press ethics. Seventy percent of the journalists responded to the questionnaire on press ethics. Most responses came from journalists working at the national newspapers and national television stations, as only a few of the journalists working in local media responded to our survey.

Findings

Daily News Performance

The first rule in the Danish code of press ethics underlines that the information presented in a news story should be factually correct. Table 1 shows that 14.1% of the sources find some kind of factual errors in the news story. However, there are differences across media platforms. More sources in television than in newspapers find factual errors, while the fewest errors are found online. But our sample of sources in online media is also the smallest (n= 50), so this result should at this point be considered exploratory.

Table 1. Factual Errors

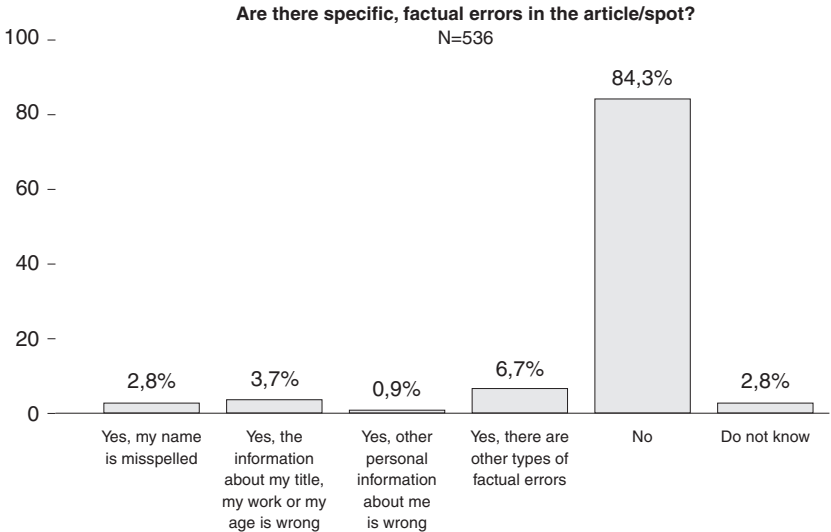
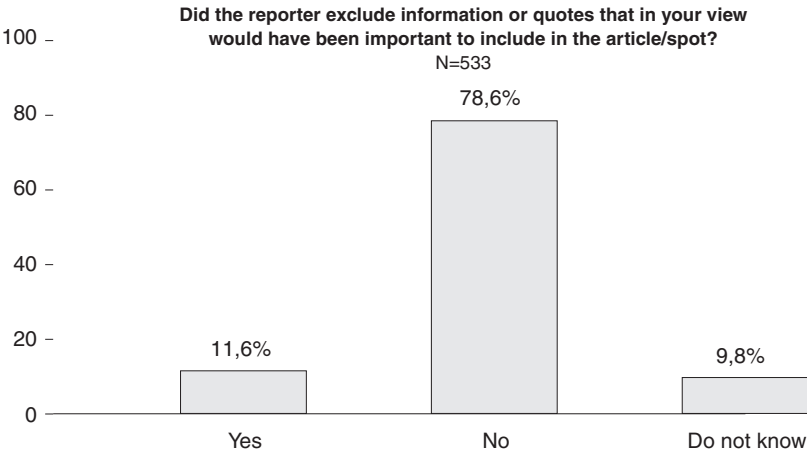


Table 2 shows the subjective errors and again only a small proportion of sources, 11.6 %, reported finding subjective errors, and again sources in television found more errors than sources in newspapers both online and offline (table not shown).

We also asked sources to evaluate the news item in which they appeared as sources on a general level. Here more than 60% of all sources across all platforms answered that they fully or partially agreed that the news item in its entirety was ‘good journalism’ (table not shown).

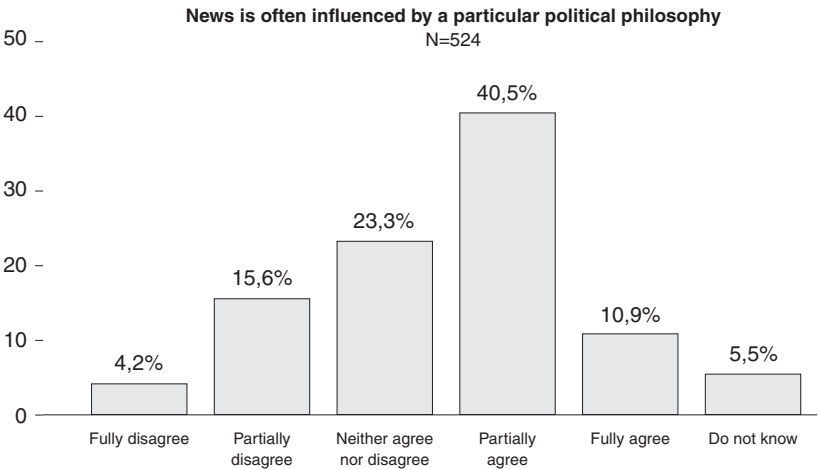
Based on the answers mentioned above, one might think that sources have almost nothing negative to say about the media in Denmark. But even though sources only found a relative small percentage of errors, either objective or subjective, and in general agreed that the news item in which they appeared was ‘good journalism’, when asked about the media’s performance on a general level they still expressed a rather high degree of

**Table 2.** *Subjective Errors*



skepticism toward the media. When asked the general question about the reliability of Danish news media, 50.2 % partially agreed that the news media was in general reliable. Only 7.6 % fully agreed (table not included). As shown in Table 3, it is the question of possible political bias in the media that concerns the news sources. Historically, Danish newspapers were party papers, but the party press died out by the 1970s, and television in Denmark is public service and thus bound by law to be impartial and balanced. Still more than 50% of sources agree or partially agree that the news media are politically biased.

**Table 3.** *Bias in the News*



*Daily Practice of Press Ethics*

A code of press ethics may be seen as a rule book on how to do ‘good journalism’ within a specific news regime. In Denmark, we have had general guiding rules since the 1950s. These rules were revised in 1991 and again in May 2013. These questions concern the code of ethics that was in effect until May 2013.

Table 4 shows that most journalists are well aware of the code of ethics, but that journalists working in local newspapers are somewhat less aware of it. But this may also be due to the fact that fewer journalists from the local papers answered the survey, so, again, this result should only be viewed as exploratory. And due to the small n, the same applies to answers from journalists working online.

**Table 4.** *Familiarity with Press Ethics*

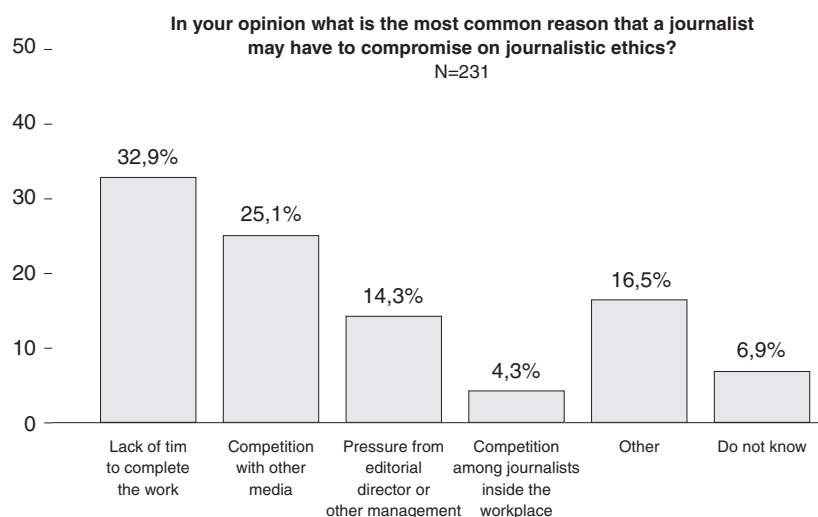
Are you familiar with the guiding rules for the ethics of journalism?					
	Broadsheet newspapers	Local newspapers	Online newspapers	Public service television	Mean
Yes	94.2%	81.8%	91.3%	90.9%	90.5%
No	2.9%	13.6%	4.3%	3.0%	3.6%
Do not know	2.9%	4.5%	4.3%	6.1%	5.9%
N=	126	22	23	60	231

Table 5 displays the results based on our questions to journalists about how often they found examples of the code of press ethics being broken at the media establishments where they work. There are some differences across media, but in general journalists found that the code of ethics was broken both on a weekly and on a monthly basis.

**Table 5.** *Examples of Bad Journalistic Ethics*

At my work, I find examples of bad journalistic ethics...					
	Broadsheet newspapers	Local newspapers	Online newspapers	Public service television	Mean
Daily	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%	0.7%
Weekly	15.4%	13.6%	8.7%	12.1%	12.5%
Monthly	27.9%	31.8%	26.1%	37.9%	31.1%
Semiannually	31.7%	22.7%	26.1%	28.8%	28.6%
Annually	8.7%	13.6%	26.1%	16.7%	14.3%
Never	5.8%	4.5%	4.3%	0.0%	3.9%
Do not know	9.6%	13.6%	8.7%	3.0%	8.9%
N=	126	22	23	60	231

Finally, see Table 6 below, we also asked journalists to list the reasons that might cause a journalist in the newsroom to pay less regard to the general code of press ethics. The results show that work pressure, competition with other media and pressure from editors were some of the main reasons given to explain why journalists might ignore ethics in their work. The answers were the same across all platforms.

**Table 6. Reasons to Compromise on Ethics**

## Discussion

To sum up, the present study shows that, when it comes to the daily and most basic of journalistic practices, i.e., talking to sources and producing stories, the sources find relatively few errors, whether objective and subjective. We use the term “relatively” because other studies using the source-survey method have reported a much higher percentage of objective errors. Porlezza, Maier and Russ-Mohl (2012) found factual inaccuracy in 60% of Swiss newspapers and 48% of US papers. However, Porlezza, Maier and Russ-Mohl also mention an Irish study that found objective errors in only 3.4% of the news items investigated and a study of news agencies that found only 10% inaccuracy. Thus, an error rate of 14.1% would seem to be on the lower end of the scale. Why Danish media differ from US media is difficult to determine, but in Denmark many reporters send quotes to their sources to get them cleared for any factual mistakes, such as mistakes in names, titles and use of figures. And indeed, in the study by Porlezza, Maier and Russ-Mohl (2012), it is factual mistakes such as incorrect names, or dates, that make up the bulk of the objective errors.

But though the sources found relatively few objective errors, they still, on a general level, displayed mistrust in the media in the sense that many of them found the media to be politically biased. From inside the newsroom, journalists themselves found some reason to worry about the state of press ethics, and many cited work pressure in the newsroom as a possible reason for compromising on ethics. Thus while both sources and journalists found only some reason for concern, what most clearly stands out from the study is the fact the sources on a general level suspected the media of being politically biased. There may be historical reasons for this, as the Danish party press, compared to the American party press, only died out recently, and political parallelism is a defining feature of the democratic and corporate media system. But Danish television is obliged by law to produce news that is impartial and unbiased and has never been affiliated with any political party.

But skepticism and mistrust regarding sources, which according to Meyer (2004) trickles down to the general audience, may also have to do with the fact that journalistic

practices largely remain hidden from outside scrutiny. Therefore, it is possible for the sources in our survey to judge the news stories – where they themselves appear as sources, and thus have been at least partly involved in producing – as being examples of good journalism, while at the same time, on a general level, remain skeptical of (all) other news stories. As Kovach and Rosenstiel wrote in *The Elements of Journalism* on good journalism practices:

*The willingness of the journalist to be transparent about what he or she has done is at the heart of establishing that the journalist is concerned with the truth.... Too much journalism fails to say anything about methods, motives, and sources.*

Returning to the question of institutional credibility, the study has shown that the daily practice of journalism in Denmark can be described by the sources that appear in the news as good journalism. Journalists are generally aware of the code of ethics and sources generally find few objective and subjective errors. Nevertheless, journalists fear that increasing work pressure in the newsroom jeopardizes ethical journalism, and sources in general are concerned about media manipulation.

## Conclusion

We can conclude that the status of the news media's credibility at an institutional level is sound, but threatened by a general distrust on the part of sources and a general worry among journalists. All this leads back to Cook's quote about the daily performance of journalism and how "*such performances may become ever more central.*" If practices in the newsroom became more transparent, sources and other users of the news would be able to decide for themselves, on much more substantial grounds, whether or not a news item should be considered good journalism. This would make it possible for skeptical sources to test their skepticism against the work of the journalist. At the same time, a more transparent newsroom might make it more difficult to increase the pressure on journalists to produce more instead of better stories, because stories produced with too few sources, or stories based solely on media subsidies would be very hard for editors to justify to an audience, especially an audience whose 'willingness-to-pay' is more and more central to the survival of the news media. Further research should focus on ways to open up the newsroom and thus make the daily performance of good journalism more transparent to a larger audience.

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