

Evaluating public accountability

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Accountability: not always a blessing

Accountability is one of those golden concepts that no one can be against. Everyone intuitively agrees that public authorities should be render account publicly for the way they use their mandates and spend public money. The power of government needs to be checked routinely if we don't want to wake up in an authoritarian regime one day. Accountability, defined here as 'the relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor can be sanctioned' (Bovens, 2005), is there to force power to speak the truth. And since we know that power corrupts its holders and unchecked power corrupts more, the more accountability there is the better – or so it seems.

If accountability of and in government is what we want, it appears that we can look at the future with some confidence. In recent years, there has been a drive in many Western democracies to strengthen existing accountability arrangements and to design and add new ones. Not only has there been considerable growth in the number and scope of accountability arrangements, but also a cumulation of these arrangements. There has been a general trend towards 'jurification' of government, including the growth of legal accountability mechanisms. Various parliaments have been striving to enhance their capability to hold ministers and governments accountable, e.g. by strengthening their own staffing, by 'rediscovering' hitherto neglected control mechanisms or by adopting new ones. For example, after a pause of many decades the Dutch parliament has returned to frequent and intensive use of its right to conduct formal inquiries where it may subpoena witnesses and hear them under oath. In addition, it has extended its budget right to instigate an annual 'accountability day' where the government is obliged to report and justify the extent to which each individual budget line item has been spent effectively. Likewise, there has been a drive to separate policymaking, policy implementation and oversight functions within the Dutch state bureaucracy, resulting in a marked growth, in numbers and stature, of 'watchdog' agencies within the executive branch. Thirdly, many service-delivery agencies at all layers of government have attempts to institutionalise forms of direct accountability to their clients.

The ideas and impulses for increased control and accountability mechanisms have come partly from outside the realm of national government. Idea brokers in the 'new public management' mould, such as the OECD, have been instrumental in spreading the gospel

about benchmarking, monitoring, accreditation, and planning and control cycles (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000; Peters and Pierre, 2001). Some of these phenomena would not technically qualify as accountability in terms of the definition cited above, but their intended impact upon public policymakers and bodies is highly similar: forcing them to describe and justify what they do, how and why they do it.

In this paper we ask whether this extension and intensification of accountability(-like) arrangements achieves its presumed aim of enhancing 'good governance'. We shall argue that whilst we should count our blessings and cherish their positive impact, we should not turn a blind eye to possible unintended, negative effects of the new, 'beefed-up' public accountability regimes that are growing in and around contemporary governments. Underneath this lies the more fundamental question of the evaluation of accountability arrangements: by which criteria can we evaluate their performance, and how can we trace flaws and vulnerabilities in their design and operation?

We begin by noting the groundswell of criticism against what some say is the growing 'accountability craze.' Public office-holders routinely complain that the current accumulation of accountability arrangements has left many public authorities with an accountability regime (i.e. the sum of all accountability arrangements and relationships that it is required to honor) that defeats any reasonable purpose. Having put this claim into context, we differentiate between two ideal-typical accountability failures: deficits and overloads. In search of an Archimedean point by which to judge of and when these can be said to exist, we advance three different theoretical perspectives on public accountability: democratic, constitutional and cybernetic. We show how these different 'logics' of accountability predispose towards different evaluations of alleged accountability deficits and overloads. Taken together and in full recognition of the tensions between them, these three criteria sets provide an 'accountability equalizer', i.e. an assessment tool for both existing and proposed accountability mechanisms and regimes. We demonstrate the diagnostic potential of this tool in two brief case studies and conclude by reflecting upon the possibilities for its wider application.

Accountability: a growing curse?

The cliché tells us that one can have too much of a good thing. Quite a few public administrators agree that this is an apt way of characterizing current trends in the world of oversight and accountability in the public sector. They complain about accountability overload. They refer to the increasingly dense web of material and procedural law specifying criteria for administrative conduct, which has opened the door to the growth of judicial control practices that are minute, time-consuming and paralytic in their effects. They bemoan the expansive and activist role conception entertained by courts of audit, many of which have evolved from traditional 'accountants' to fully-fledged 'evaluators' that superimpose their rather rationalistic, mechanistic ideas about public policy design and implementation on a world of administrative practice that is far more complex, murky, political and uncertainty-ridden. By employing rather myopic standards, audit offices are wont to find many instances of ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Furthermore, by widely publicising their mostly negative findings auditors not only provide journalists and parliamentary critics with cheap shots at ministers and bureaucrats, but also fuel public cynicism about government in general, the argument continues. Let us take this line of criticism at face value for a moment, and dissect its various components.

Firstly, from the public administrator's point of view, the sheer *frequency* of accountability routines can be seen as too high. Some have quipped that they spend half their time explaining to all sorts of accountability forums what they intend to be doing, and the other explaining to them why they did not get around to doing all these things. Adding new layers to the already voluminous cakes of accountability requirements brings little gains to the public interest and only adds rep tape. University administrators in various countries have, for example, complained bitterly about the never-ending wave of assessment exercises, as each entails different, partly overlapping, reporting requirements and generates its own 'circus' of preparatory meetings, dialogues with the accountors, responses to their draft reports, publicity 'fallouts' and 'follow-up' rituals. All that eats away at time available to scholars for their primary duties in teaching and research.

The *nature* of the evaluation criteria and rules of interaction entailed in various accountability arrangements is another source of irritation. Administrators deplore the uncertainty and costs associated with being forced to respond to unclear, unrealistic, impractical or ever-changing

standards and rules of the game. We have already mentioned administrative critiques of the modus operandi of courts of audit . Likewise, the perceived volatility and the opportunism of political accountability forums in particular are seen as a major cost factor by ministers and top civil servants ('t Hart and Wille, forthcoming). Often with little or no prior notice, they are required to appear in parliament to talk about what they feel are matters of 'detail' or mere 'incidents' in individual cases. They are obliged to answer hundreds of not thousands of written parliamentary questions each year, and they spend sometimes up to half of a normal employee's working week debating all these matters with parliament. This is especially the case for ministers and bureaucrats responsible for media-sensitive, politically controversial policy domains such as criminal justice, health and social policy.

One might dismiss these complaints by arguing that administrators getting nervous and irritated with accountability forums is the best possible indicator of the latter's effectiveness. It means that they really 'bite.' But some of these obviously self-interested and biased criticisms have been echoed more and more by presumably impartial scholars. The notion that accountability obligations have progressed well beyond the point of diminishing returns has been put forward by various scholars. Behn (2001: 11-13) talks about the 'accountability dilemma' that he feels is growing upon contemporary policy makers. Halachmi (2002a and b) and Dubnick (2003: 31) remind us of the salience of the accountability paradox, which holds that more accountability does not necessarily produce better government. Accountability overkill discourages innovative and entrepreneurial behaviour in public managers (Anechiarico & Jacobs 1996; Power, 1997). Others signal nothing less than an 'accountability trap': as administrators are being measured up more frequently and intensely, they get better in meeting the requirements posed by their accountability forums, but not necessarily performing better in the real world of policymaking and public service delivery (Meyer and Shaugnessy, 1993; Van Thiel and Leeuw, 2003). De Bruin (2000) demonstrates in great detail the various means by which a host of contemporary assessment and control mechanisms gets subverted by strategic managerial behaviour. Others have developed entire catalogues of flaws that may prejudice the design and viability of accountability arrangements - including tunnel vision, ritualisation, mutual stereotyping, defensive routines, and hostile behaviour – that serve to both hollow out and harden what was supposed to be a reflective discursive encounter between accountor and accountee (for this terminology, see Pollitt, 2003: 89).

We do not seek to judge the relative merits of these various claims, which are bound to be highly contingent upon domain-specific historical paths, cultural norms and institutional power constellations. But if we take them at face value for analytical purposes, we deduce an ideal-type of *accountability overload*. This state looms when public office-holders or agencies are confronted with an accountability regime that a. imposes extraordinarily high demands on their limited time and energy; b. contains a comparatively large number of mutually contradictory evaluation criteria; c. contains performance standards that extend way beyond both their own and comparable authorities' good practices; d. contains performance standards that are particularly conducive to goal displacement or subversive behaviour. The more of these four characteristics a given accountability regime can be said to possess, the higher the likelihood that it defeats its purposes.

All this talk about accountability costs and overload should not blind us to the other end of the imaginary scale: the *accountability deficit*. Historically, this has been the bigger concern. Generations of constitutional and political theorists have fired away at it over the centuries. It refers to a condition where those who govern us are not sufficiently hemmed in by requirements to explain their conduct publicly - to legal, professional, administrative, social or political forums who have some sort of power to sanction them. According to various scholars, accountability deficits can be found in various pockets of the public sector, particularly in newly emerging theatres and practices of 'governance.' These include multilateral and multi-level governance practices such as the European Union, where a whole chorus of scholars has lamented existing, and growing, accountability gaps (Bergman and Damgaard, 2000; Schmitter, 2000; Arnall & Wincott 2002; Harlow 2002; Curtin, 2004; Fisher 2004). Likewise, various types of 'hybrid' organisations fusing private and public tasks and forms have been taken to task on the issue of accountability deficits (Edeling et al, 2004). For example, Koppell (2003: 120) argues that although 'an appearance and infrastructure of control' may exist with regard to them government-sponsored enterprises defacto have 'the resources, ability and position effectively to control their own controllers.'

As stated, these two ideal-types are the end of a continuum. Presumably in an established democracy with a viable Rechtsstaat institutions and a well-developed public sector professionalism, most public authorities will be embedded in accountability regimes that avoid both these extremes. But in times of internationalisation, deregulation of public service delivery and more generally institutional innovations in public governance, some of these

accountability regimes may be hollowed out or expanding at a more than incremental pace, and new ones may be created from scratch. In such a context, arguably one that applies to a number of public policy sectors today, the risk of accountability deficits and overloads is all but hypothetical, and periodic careful assessment of possible unintended effects and dysfunctions of new or evolving accountability regimes would be appropriate. But how precisely do we establish whether these different sorts of inadequacies do exist?

Evaluating accountability: in search of criteria

The problem with all the various claims about the proportion of benign and pathological effects of public accountability arrangements is that few if any of the parties to the debate specify which standards they employ. The key question is obviously what the actual effects are of the various types of accountability and how to judge these effects. For an institutionalised ideal that is so broadly supported and applied, there are very few references to be found in the literature that could lead to such an evaluation being performed, let alone any reports on systematic comparative research conducted in this area. Authors such as Van Twist (1999), Behn (2001), Halachmi (2002b) and Mulgan (2003) offer discussions of the many dilemmas and design problems in the structure of accountability arrangements, but the underlying normative questions – what is the purpose of public accountability in a constitutional democratic state and what are the evaluation principles for accountability arrangements ensuing from this? – tend to be glossed over in these contributions.

So why is public accountability important, and how can we determine when it is at risk? In the academic literature and in policy documents about public accountability, three answers recur, albeit implicitly, time and again. Public accountability is important to provide a democratic means to monitor and control government conduct, for preventing monopolies and abuses of power, and to enhance the learning capacity and effectiveness of public administration (Aucoin & Heintzman 2000). Each of these three answers springs from a distinct perspective on the rationale of public accountability, and consequently contains the roots for a distinct set of criteria for evaluating it.

The democratic perspective: responsiveness to citizens and their representatives

Public accountability is extremely important from a democratic perspective, as it makes it possible to call to account in a democratic fashion those holding public office (March and Olsen 1995: 141-181; Mulgan 2003). This idea harks back to Rousseau and Weber, and has been theoretically defined using the principal-agent model, according to which a modern representative democracy can be described as a concatenation of principal-agent relationships (Strom 2000; Strom 2003; Lupia 2003). The people, who are the primary principals in a democracy, have transferred their sovereignty to popular representatives, who, in turn, have transferred the drafting and enforcement of laws and policy to the government. Ministers subsequently entrust policy implementation to their ministries, who proceed to delegate parts of these tasks to more or less independent bodies and institutions. Public servants at the end of this chain of delegation end up spending billions in taxpayers' money, using their discretionary powers to, among many other things, furnish licences and subsidies, distribute benefits, impose fines, prosecute people, and keep them locked up.

Each principal in the chain of delegation seeks to monitor the execution of the delegated public tasks by calling the agent to account. At the end of the accountability chain are the citizens, who pass judgement on the conduct of the government and who indicate their displeasure by voting for other popular representatives. Hence public accountability is an essential precondition for the democratic process to work, as it provides citizens and their representatives with the information needed for judging the propriety and effectiveness of government conduct (Przeworski, Stokes and Manin 1999).

The constitutional perspective: prevention of corruption and abuse of power.

A second classic mode of thought about public accountability is found in the liberal tradition of Locke, Montesquieu and the American Federalists (O'Donnell 1999). The main concern underlying this perspective is that of preventing tyranny by absolute rulers, presumptuous elected leaders or by an expansive and 'privatised' executive power. The remedy against an overbearing or improper government is the organisation of institutional countervailing powers. Other public institutions, such as an independent judicial power or a court of audit are to act as such, complementary to the voter, parliament, and political watchdogs. They are to be given the power to request that account be rendered over particular forms or aspects of executive behaviour. In this perspective, good governance arises from a dynamic equilibrium between the various powers of the state (Witteveen 1991; Fisher 2004: 506-507).

The cybernetic perspective: enhancing governmental learning

In the third, cybernetic, perspective the chief purpose of accountability is entirely different again. Accountability is seen as a tool to maintain and strengthen a government's learning capacity (Van den Berg 1999: 40; Aucoin and Heintzman 2000: 52-54). There is a long cybernetic tradition in political science and related fields which befits this idea. At its heart is the question of the extent to which political systems are capable of dealing adequately with changes in environment and with feedback about their own performance (Deutsch 1963; Easton 1965; Luhmann 1966). Lindblom (1965) referred to the 'intelligence of democracy': the superiority of the pluralist democracy to that of other political systems lies in the greater number of incentives it contains to encourage intelligence and learning in the process of policymaking.

In this vein, cybernetic thinkers argue that accountability forces administrators to pause, think and devise connections between the past, present and future of their policies and organisations ('t Hart, 2001). The very need to render account forces them to produce and consider 'feedback' about their own performance. The possibility of sanctions in the event of errors and shortcomings motivates them to search for more intelligent ways of making and executing policies. Moreover, the public nature of the accountability process teaches others in similar positions what is expected of them, what works and what doesn't. Parliamentary inquiries, for example – especially when broadcast on TV – may cast long shadows, far beyond the concrete at hand, and can induce many more administrators than those under scrutiny to rethink and adjust their policies. Public accountability mechanisms therefore induce openness and reflexivity in political and administrative systems that might otherwise be primarily inward-looking. Easton referred to this as being oriented toward 'withinputs' instead of 'inputs' and toward 'feedback' from the environment, while Luhmann's disciples talk about 'autopoiesis' to mean the same thing (In 't Veld et.al. 1991). In the learning approach, therefore, accountability is an essential part of what Argyris and Schon (1978) call 'deutero learning:' an institutionalised capacity to learn.

Evaluating accountability: Three cuts

The three perspectives outlined above offer more systematic frameworks to evaluate the effects of accountability arrangements.¹ For each perspective we shall briefly sketch the

central ideas, dominant evaluation principle, and a few concrete questions to be used in an evaluation exercise.

The key concern of the *democratic perspective* is whether the accountability arrangement adds to the possibilities open to voter, parliament or other representative bodies to control the executive power. Thus viewed, the main criterion is that accountability arrangements should yield relevant information about the conduct of the government. The major test for an accountability arrangement is whether it helps to overcome deeply ingrained agency problems, such as moral hazard (Strom 2003). It should provide democratically legitimised principals (political or otherwise) with correct, timely and relevant information about the behaviour of their agents. This can only happen if it is designed and operated in such a way as to offer sufficient incentives to agents to succumb, preferably even commit themselves, to the oversight exercised by the principal(s) represented in the accountability forum in question.

Figure 1. Evaluating accountability: a democratic perspective

<i>Democratic perspective: accountability and popular control</i>
<p><i>Central idea</i> Accountability offers actors with democratic legitimacy possibilities to steer and control public administration.</p>
<p><i>Central evaluation criterion</i> The degree to which accountability arrangements or regimes directly or indirectly contribute to the possibilities for actors with democratic legitimacy to monitor, evaluate and adjust the propriety and effectiveness of government conduct.</p>
<p><i>Concrete evaluation questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. To what extent does an accountability arrangement provide information to democratically legitimised actors about the conduct and of public executives and bodies, and about the social consequences of that conduct? b. To what extent does the accountability arrangement itself allow for the adjustment of the conduct of public executives and bodies in the direction desired by the actors with democratic legitimacy? c. Do the accountability arrangements offer enough incentives to executives (i.e., agents) to commit themselves to the agenda's of their democratically elected principals?

From a *constitutional perspective*, the key question is whether the arrangement contributes to the prevention of corruption and the abuse of powers. This requires that public accountability forums be tangible and powerful in order to be able to withstand both the inherent tendency of those in public office to evade or subvert external control and the autonomous expansionism of bureaucracy. The major issue from this perspective is whether accountability arrangements offer enough incentives for officials and agencies to refrain from abuse of authority.

Accountability forums should have enough investigative powers to reveal corruption or mismanagement, and their available sanctions should be strong enough to send shock waves throughout the system and make potential transgressors think twice before going out on a limb.

Figure 2. Evaluating accountability: a constitutional perspective

<i>Constitutional perspective: accountability and equilibrium of power</i>
<p><i>Central idea</i> Accountability is essential in order to withstand the ever-present tendency toward power concentration in the executive branch.</p>
<p><i>Central evaluation criterion</i> The extent to which accountability forums are able to contribute to the prevention of corruption and the abuse of powers.</p>
<p><i>Concrete evaluation questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Does the accountability forum have enough investigative powers and information-processing capacity to reveal corruption or mismanagement? b. Does the accountability forum have incentives to engage in proactive and alert account holding? c. Do the relevant public executives and bodies sufficiently strong incentives to engage in proactive and sincere account giving? d. Are the available sanctions strong enough to have preventive effects? e. Does the accountability arrangement help to discourage corruption and improper administrative conduct?

The *cybernetic perspective* judges accountability arrangements and related transparency mechanisms to be successful if they generate sufficient and adequate feedback information, and stimulate both accountees and accountors to reflect and to debate about the significance of this information, both separately and in dialogue with one another (Van der Knaap 1995). The crucial questions from this perspective are whether the accountability arrangements offer high-quality feedback, but also the right incentives to officials and agencies to reconsider the values and assumptions that underlie their policies, procedures and organisations. If accountability is to produce reflection and learning, it has to be non-gratuitous but at the same time relatively 'safe' for all parties concerned, so as to minimize the chances of defensive routines taking over the process (Argyris and Schön, 1978).

Figure 3. Evaluating accountability: a cybernetic perspective

<i>Learning perspective: accountability and reflective governance</i>
<p><i>Central idea</i> Accountability is an essential condition for learning by public executives and bodies.</p>

Central evaluation criterion

The degree to which an accountability arrangement stimulate public executives and bodies to achieve a higher awareness of the environment, better self-reflection and the ability to adapt their ideas and conduct accordingly.

Concrete evaluation questions

a. Does the accountability arrangement produce information about administrative behaviour as well as about its historic, cognitive, normative and organisational foundations?

a. Does the accountability arrangement provide a setting and a set of interaction routines that stimulates reflection among both accountees and accountors?

c. Does the accountability arrangement stimulate the accountability forums and the administrative actors to (supervising) the institutionalisation and dissemination of lessons learned?

The existence of these various perspectives makes the evaluation of accountability arrangements a somewhat equivocal exercise, since they need not always point in the same direction. What is considered beneficial from one perspective, may very well be judged detrimental from another perspective. For example, judicial review of laws and regulations may be considered an adequate form of public accountability from a constitutional perspective, and at the same time as inappropriate form a democratic perspective, because it suffers from what Bickell (1962) has called ‘the counter majoritarian difficulty’: it limits the exercise of popular sovereignty through the legislative branch. Similarly, overly rigorous democratic control may backfire when it generates ‘rule-obsessed organizations [that] turn the timid into cowards and the bold into outlaws’ (Zegans, quoted in Behn 2001: 30). Too much emphasis on administrative integrity and corruption control, which would be considered beneficial from a constitutional perspective, could lead to a proceduralism that seriously hampers the reflexivity, and hence also the efficiency and effectiveness, of public organisations (Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996). In short, like most other social phenomena, accountability is multi-faceted, and can hardly be meaningfully evaluated by means of a single criterion.

The accountability equalizer: An evaluation toolkit

Clearly, some form of multi-criteria evaluation is called for, notwithstanding the inherent problems of such a method, such as unconscious and manipulated bias in the selection, operationalisation, and weighting of criteria (Bovens and ‘t Hart, 1996; Buckley, 1988). Since some of these difficulties are quite fundamental, the best we can do is simply to

acknowledge them and be transparent about the analytical choices made in developing one’s evaluation tools, and that is what we seek to do here too.

We proceed as follows. First we disaggregate ‘accountability’ into its three constituent parts, then we derive and operationalise evaluation criteria for each part using each of the three perspectives presented above, and thirdly we discuss a possible way of combining these into what we shall refer to as an accountability ‘equalizer.’ We conclude this article by contemplating various possible uses of this analytical tool.

Three components are essential for an accountability relationship between an actor and a forum to be operative: the actor should be obliged to *inform* the forum about his conduct; there should be an opportunity for the forum to *debate* with the actor about his conduct and an opportunity for the actor to explain and justify his conduct in the course of this debate; and both parties to the relationship should know that the forum or some third party is able to not only pass judgement but also *sanction* the actor. In any given accountability relationship or arrangements, each of these critical components designed in and safeguarded to a particular degree. Moreover, each of the three normative perspectives on accountability implies a different set of concerns regarding each of these components, as figure 4 illustrates.

Figure 4. Accountability components: evaluation criteria

<u>Perspectives:</u> <u>Components:</u>	<i>Democratic</i>	<i>Constitutional</i>	<i>Cybernetic</i>
<i>Informing</i>	Active transparency norm for actor vis à vis democratically legitimised forum	Maximum investigative powers of the forum	Information gathering and provision routines that yield a speedy, accurate and ‘rich’ diagnosis of past performance and/or relevant benchmarks
<i>Debating</i>	Fully public exchanges between forum and actor	Non-negotiable obligation to respond to forum’s questions and remarks	Productive balance between ‘looking back and ‘looking forward’ in discussing the significance of the information provided.
<i>Sanctioning</i>	Ability of political principals (e.g. forum itself or forum’s principals) to modify the actor’s future’s position and/or	Forum should be able to exercise credible ‘deterrence’ vis à vis the actor.	Sufficiently ‘safe’ culture of sanctioning to minimize defensive, self-justificatory tendencies and

	incentive structures		maximize incentives to self-reflection and 'double loop learning'
<i>Cumulative effect</i>	Actor acceptance of principal's right to control its policies and performance	Actor awareness that powerful watchdog(s) observe its integrity and check its powers	Actor commitment to continuous improvement by self-reflection and dialogue with forum
<i>Accountability deficit</i>	Absent or gratuitous democratic accountability forums: executive 'drift'	Few and 'toothless' watchdogs: executive 'arrogance'	Biased, distorted or otherwise non-reflective accountability debates: executive 'myopia'
<i>Accountability overload</i>	Political micro-scrutiny of administrative behaviour: executive 'compliance'	Numerous and intimidating watchdogs: executive 'fear'	Energy-consuming, ineffectual, permanent self-reflection: executive 'debating society'

The figure shows clearly that the normative core of the three perspectives differs. Each represents a legitimate set of concerns regarding accountability, each has its own take on optimal as well as pathological (deficits and overloads) manifestations of public accountability. The big question is: how to utilise these perspectives in practice? As it stands now, each component of an accountability relationship or arrangement can be evaluated with reference to three rather different, partially contradictory criteria. There is normative tension here, particularly between the constitutional and the cybernetic perspective: the former is about curtailing executive power by building countervailing powers that are as strong as possible, the latter is about creating a 'safe' atmosphere conducive to broad-ranging re-examination of existing policies and practices. Assuming that each of these criteria sets is legitimate and relevant to any public accountability relationship or arrangement, which is to prevail where and when in judging its adequacy?

We believe that it is not very useful to frame the question in this fashion. Rather than pinning them by definition against one another, we propose to combine the three evaluation logics in an integrated accountability evaluation tool. For this we use the metaphor of the equalizer.² An equalizer is an electronic device that can enhance or diminish particular frequencies within a sound spectrum. It takes the shape of a panel with numerous switches, each referring to a particular frequency range. Depending on the kind of music to be amplified, and depending upon the preference of the listener, the configuration of the settings of all the switches can be

adapted. If we use this as an analogy, we recast the criteria sets of figure 4 in the characteristic panel switches format of the equalizer (see figure 5).

Democratic			Constitutional				Cybernetic			
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Info provision to forum	Behav. change towards forum's desires	<i>Actor committed to forum's agenda</i>	Forum power to investigate	Forum proactive control habits	Actor incentives for honest interaction with forum	Forum has credible sanctions	<i>Actor committed to proper adm conduct</i>	Both 1st and 2nd order info into the acc. debate	'Safe' rules of engagement actor-forum	<i>Actor committed to lesson-drawing and implementation</i>

Figure 5: The accountability equalizer

The accountability evaluation equalizer can be used in different ways. First of all, it can be used to capture the normative structure of an existing accountability relationship or arrangement at any given point in time. For example, figure 5 depicts our reading of the theory and practice of the accountability relationship between the Dutch cabinet and parliament.³ It shows clearly that the design and operation of this relationship are marked, not surprisingly, primarily by the democratic, to a lesser extent by the constitutional, and virtually not at all by the cybernetic accountability logic.

Secondly, it allows us to study the evolution of these normative structures over time, for example by applying the equalizer to different 'states' of an accountability relationship or arrangement, for example prior to and following major institutional crises and/or institutional reforms. For example, we could study the evolution of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency's and the Central Intelligence Agency's accountability arrangements in the years prior to and following major crises (Katrina for FEMA; 911 for CIA) and scandals (the Chili coup and other allegations against the CIA which led to and surfaced in the

Congressional investigations of the mid-seventies, followed by major changes in its governance). We would no doubt be able to document in rather precise fashion how the overall accountability climate surrounding the CIA evolved from one bordering on the executive arrogance pathologies noted in figure 4 (made possible by the high-trust, low-scrutiny attitude of Congress and other watchdogs in the early Cold War period) to one of low-trust and high-scrutiny following the post-scandal and post-911 reforms. FEMA in turn went from comparatively low salience, relative obscurity and equivocality in the eyes of oversight bodies to high visibility, low-confidence and, quite possibly, an accountability regime conducive to the executive compliance/fear pathologies noted in figure 4.

Likewise, if we would apply the equalizer to the Dutch cabinet-parliament relationship in a time-series analysis of 'accountability snapshots' taken in, say, 1840, 1870, 1900, 1930, 1960 and 1990, we would be able to trace the gradual 'beefing up' of key preconditions and practices of both democratic and constitutional accountability: constitutional reforms of 1848 reduced the role of the King and enhanced the stature, but also the accountability of government vis à vis parliament. Later on, parliament's democratic profile was enhanced by a series of electoral reforms that made it into the fully representative body it is now.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a series of constitutional and procedural changes expanded the scope and depth of parliamentary scrutiny. On the other hand, the evolution of the 'politics of accommodation' between the various socio-political 'pillars' in Dutch society (Lijphart, 1968) meant that despite the increased structural potential for proactive and penetrating parliamentary oversight, the cultural practice increasingly became one of coalition-dominated 'monism' and 'osmosis' between coalition groups in parliament and their representatives in cabinet, precluding all too persistent parliamentary scrutiny and debate regarding government conduct in areas sensitive to one or all coalition parties (Van Schendelen, 1975; Andeweg and Irwin, 2002). Indeed, during the last twenty years, much criticism has been raised against the so-called 'sorry democracy,' where ministers called to account for sometimes highly problematic executive behaviour can get away making rather gratuitous apologies in the knowledge that the parliamentary majority of the day will not resort to any serious form of sanction (Van Thijn, 1996). In our terminology, although the Dutch parliament has a well-developed capacity to extract information from the executive, accountability debates often proceed in highly routinised, ritualistic fashion, and its formal powers of sanctions are effectively nullified by the perceived imperatives of political stability in its intricate web of multiparty coalitions.

Finally, the equalizer provides a parsimonious tool for those bent on actually evaluating accountability relationships and arrangements. It provides a coherent structure for more formal multi-criteria assessment. To return to our example one more time, we can calculate the average 'score' for the Dutch cabinet-parliament relationship on each of the three perspectives' criteria sets, or, alternatively, for each of the three constituent components of accountability (informing, debating, sanctioning). If we then assign weights to each of these criteria sets, it allows us to arrive at an overall, integrated 'accountability score,' and compare this to the scores of other cabinet-parliament relationships in democracies.⁴ This could also be used for benchmarking purposes, particularly with reference to the accountability arrangements of highly comparable executive agencies, such as police forces, prison services, health-care institutions and school systems.

Designing, justifying and evaluating different modes of organizing accountability is an old but persistent challenge to scholars and practitioners of public administration. Debates about it have often stayed at the lofty heights of political, constitutional and management theory. This article has sought to bring the matter down to earth. Not everyone will agree with our way of modelling the three normative strongholds of public accountability, and it remains up to future research to establish whether the accountability equalizer that we have derived from the three perspectives is a fungible tool. We hope that others will join us in such efforts. For now, at least the terms of the discussion have been clarified concisely, and a bridge has been constructed between theoretical reasoning and the need for practical judgement and action in this important sphere of governance.

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NOTES

¹ It should be noted that these three perspectives do not completely fill the normative space surrounding public accountability. From a broader regime perspective, public accountability regimes may be judged according to their effects upon the legitimacy of the political system at large. Such a macro perspective has become increasingly salient in recent years, as mass media, interest groups and citizens in many Western countries have become increasingly sceptical about the political class and public institutions in general (Elchardus and Smits 2002). Well-designed accountability mechanisms in which administrators are given the opportunity to explain and justify their intentions, and in which citizens and interest groups can pose questions and offer their opinion, can promote acceptance of government authority and the citizens' confidence in the government's administration (Aucoin and Heintzman 2000:49-52); ill-designed or badly managed ones, on the contrary, may serve to reinforce the idea that the responsiveness of public officials and agencies is a charade and popular control of government non-existent. Likewise, in the event case of major disasters, policy fiascos and scandals, processes of public account giving may also have an important ritual, purifying function - they can help to provide public *catharsis*. Public account giving can help to bring a tragic period to an end because it can offer a platform for the victims to voice their grievances, and for the real or reputed perpetrators to account for themselves and to justify or excuse their conduct. This can be an important secondary effect of parliamentary inquiries, official investigations, or public hearings in case of natural disasters, plane crashes, or railroad accidents. An example is the Hutton Inquiry into the death of David Kelly, which opened within weeks after his body was found. Also, post-dictatorial 'truth commissions' in South Africa and various Latin American countries, as well as various war crime tribunals are at

least partly meant to fulfil this function (Barkan, 2000; De Brito, Enriquez and Aguilar, 2001; Dubnick 2002: 15-16). Public processes of calling to account create the opportunity for penitence, reparation, and forgiveness and can thus provide social or political closure (Harlow 2002: 9).

² We borrow this idea from one of the second author's students (Peter Geluk), who proposed the equalizer metaphor in his 200 Leiden University MPA (Master of Public Administration) thesis about the dynamics of trust and distrust in the relationship between principals and agents in a policy sector.

³ The settings of the switches reflects the author's interpretation; other scholars of the Dutch political system may disagree with our reading of the Cabinet-Parliament relationship. In fact, this is one of the latent functions of the equalizer: by making explicit the criteria set and by the blunt instrument of the panel switches, it encourages a systematic inter-subjective comparison and debate among analysts, something that is conspicuously lacking in the current, highly conceptual, discursive and meandering accountability literature.

⁴ Cf. Lijphart's 1999 'strength of the executive' indicator in his seminal assessment of democracies' performance.