



ORGANIZATION OF NEWS OMBUDSMEN
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Submission to the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press

27 October 2011

The President and Board of the Organization of News Ombudsmen are grateful for the opportunity to submit a short paper to the inquiry on the work undertaken by journalists around the world to promote self-regulation.

We believe that our experiences will help the inquiry when it considers the future shape of self-regulation in Britain. In particular, we hope that we can help address aspects of paragraphs 6 and 7 of your “key questions” document.

Our members operate in newspapers, television, radio and the internet. For the purposes of this paper we will concentrate on those who work in print and online. This is a general outline of the role: the Guardian's readers' editor, Chris Elliott, is submitting evidence to the Inquiry on the day-to-day operation of the job. We hope this paper will complement that evidence.

More information, including details of ONO's executive body and an archive of ombudsmen's columns, can be found on our website www.newsombudsmen.org

The job

What is a news ombudsman?

A news ombudsman receives and investigates complaints from readers about accuracy, fairness, balance and taste in news coverage. He or she recommends appropriate remedies or responses to correct or clarify news content, both in print and online.

Why should a newspaper have an ombudsman?

- To improve the quality of news reporting by monitoring accuracy, fairness and balance.
- To help the paper become more accessible and accountable to readers and thus to become more credible.
- To increase the awareness of its journalists about the public's concerns.
- To encourage and foster ethical behaviour.
- To save time for busy editors by channelling complaints and other inquiries to one responsible individual.
- To resolve some complaints that might otherwise go to law.

How do news ombudsmen work?

No two ombudsmen work exactly alike. But typically, they deal with questions of accuracy, fairness and balance in news reporting, photography and graphic material, both in print and online. They investigate and reply to comments and complaints. They obtain explanations from editors and other journalists for readers. Most run corrections in print and online and many write regular columns that deal with issues of broad public interest or with specific grievances. These columns may criticise, explain or praise.

Crucially, they operate from a position of independence within the newsroom, with the understanding, sometimes contractual, that they have the freedom to operate in the best interests of the readers.

How does the public benefit?

An ombudsman helps to explain the news-gathering process. Having a contact person can help overcome the belief that news media are aloof, arrogant or insensitive to concerns of the public and generally inaccessible.

Who pays?

Most ombudsmen are selected from within the senior staff of the newspaper. A few are on fixed-term contracts. In any case, they typically have deep experience in journalism and are chosen because they have the ability to relate easily and undefensively to readers.

Is this a new idea?

The Asahi Shimbun in Tokyo established a committee in 1922 to receive and investigate reader complaints. Another mass circulation Tokyo paper, the Yomiuri

Shimbun, set up a staff committee in 1938 to monitor the paper's quality. The first newspaper ombudsman in the US was appointed in June 1967 in Louisville, Kentucky. News ombudsmen today are found in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia (see Global spread, below).

Are they always called “ombudsmen?”

No. Some newspapers use titles such as “readers' editors” “readers’ representative,” “readers’ advocate,” or “public editor.”

What is the Organization of News Ombudsmen (ONO)?

Formed in 1980, ONO is a nonprofit corporation with an international membership of active and associate members. It maintains contact with news ombudsmen worldwide, and organises annual conferences to discuss news practices and a wide range of issues connected with ombudsman work.

Global spread

News ombudsmen operate in newspapers, broadcasting and online in Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, France, India, Kenya, Mexico, Portugal, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

They can be found, for instance, at the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Guardian, the Toronto Star, Folha de S. Paulo, Politiken, El Pais, Die Burger, Nairobi Star, the Hindu and the Sydney Morning Herald.

Britain

We have two members in Britain: Chris Elliott, readers' editor at the Guardian, and Stephen Pritchard, readers' editor at the Observer. It is perhaps indicative of the defensive culture prevalent in the British press that other newspapers have chosen not to appoint readers' editors. At the time of writing, the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday have begun to run corrections; they advertise the presence of readers' editors but so far we have been unable to establish under what terms those individuals have been employed. We look forward to hearing from them.

We believe that the British press needs more independent ombudsmen. As Will Moy, director of fullfact.org, said at the Leveson Inquiry seminar on self-regulation on 12 October: "We see potential for indirect regulation via readers' editors". He believed they provided "a fairly quick, cheap and informal first-tier system, where newspapers bear more of the costs of their own complaints".

ONO believes that the Inquiry should consider encouraging newspapers in Britain to appoint independent readers' editors to act as a fast, first-tier form of regulation, with a Press Complaints body acting as a second tier.

Their appointment would send a strong signal that the British media are taking

accountability and ethical behaviour seriously. It would offer a fast form of redress for complainants and – with the establishment of regular columns on journalism – introduce more of the public to the practice of news-gathering.

And there is a business case for ethical behaviour. Publishing without sound ethics is an increasingly risky business model. In an extreme situation you can end up like the News of the World. But a lack of ethical behaviour – even on a small scale – can these days result in boycott campaigns and increase the risk of very costly libel cases.

Effective self-regulation will in most cases be very cost-efficient and will resolve many cases that might otherwise end up in court.

Many of the most profitable companies in this world see Corporate Social Responsibility as a cornerstone in how they work and expand. Newspapers should see it the same way. Unethical behaviour can produce a profitable publication but it's an increasingly risky business-model. The alternatives look more promising – for investors, readers and society.

Newspaper websites reach vast audiences who have a right to expect accurate and fair reporting. With the permanent nature of the web, correcting the record is even more important. Equally, in the interests of true transparency, it is important that those corrections are properly annotated. A figure who stands apart from the day-to-day gathering of news – a readers' editor – is best suited to that role.

The Organization of News Ombudsmen has recently published a handbook entitled: The Modern News Ombudsman: A user's guide. Written by ONO's Executive Director, Professor Jeffrey Dvorkin, it explains how the job works and why it is beneficial to a media organization. We attach a copy to this email.

Contacts

The Organization of News Ombudsmen stands ready to assist the Inquiry in any way it requires.

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