



ORGANIZATION OF NEWS OMBUDSMEN
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**Witness statement to the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices
and ethics of the press
on behalf of the Organization of News Ombudsmen**

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This witness statement is submitted in response to the Inquiry's request of 8 November 2011, following the submission of a paper on the work of the Organization of News Ombudsmen, dated 27 October 2011.

We hope to assist the Inquiry when it addresses Part 1 paragraph 2 of its Terms of Reference: “To make recommendations: a. for a new more effective policy and regulatory regime which supports the integrity and freedom of the press, the plurality of the media, and its independence, including from Government, while encouraging the highest ethical and professional standards.”

1. My background

I started in journalism at the age of 18 in 1973 on the Portsmouth News, a large regional evening newspaper, where I trained and worked successively as a reporter, feature writer, sub-editor and page designer. After periods as front-page sub and deputy features editor, I left to join the London Evening Standard in 1984 where I became deputy chief sub-editor a year later. I moved to the Observer as production editor in 1987, helping oversee the paper's move to computer technology and later became managing editor and assistant editor. I was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Middlesex in 1997 in recognition of a scheme I ran at the paper helping students gain places in colleges and universities. I was appointed readers' editor in 2001 and have been a member of the Organization of News Ombudsmen for 10 years, serving as a board member since 2005 and president 2008-2010.

2. The case for more ombudsmen

As we outlined in our paper for the Inquiry of 27 October 2011, the Organization of News Ombudsmen believes that newspapers should be encouraged 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.

During an address on the value of news ombudsmanship to the ONO conference at Harvard University in 2007, the editor of the Guardian, Alan Rusbridger, initially quoting the former *Washington Post* columnist David Broder, said:

“I would like to see us say over and over until the point has been made... that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we heard about in the past 24 hours...distorted despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you... to read it in about an hour. If we labelled the paper accurately then we would immediately add: But it's the best we could do under the circumstances, and we will be back tomorrow with a corrected updated version...”

“I first read that as a reporter in Washington in 1987 and it still strikes me as the best description of what a newspaper is. And is, even more so today. The greater the speed required of us in the digital world – and speed does matter, but never at the expense of accuracy or fairness or anything which would imperil trust – the more we should be honest about the tentative nature of what is possible.

“Journalism becomes a never-ending organic business of placing material in the public domain, of adding to it, clarifying it, correcting it, adding something here, subtracting something there, editing, contextualising, analysing, responding. Everything we do will be more contestable, more open to challenge and alternative interpretation.

“It throws up big questions about the nature of the record we thus create: not a file of once-a-day papers accessible in bound volumes in public libraries, but a record that is simultaneously permanent and, potentially, permanently-changing. How do you record and capture all those changes? When we publish something that’s wrong is it better invisibly to mend it so that the mistake is removed from the permanent record, or is it more important to record or capture the fact of the untrue publication as well as the correction or clarification?

“These are enormous conceptual shifts in what we do. They are difficult to work out, enormously difficult to manage and involving quite painful reengineering of traditional workforces and re-allocation of resources.”

Alan Rusbridger did not underestimate the significant cultural challenges that faced news organizations in adapting to an instantaneous global media domain, where publishing practices have been turned upside down. The digital news era means that audiences see a story as it unfolds. Invariably many of the big stories are published instantly and then are developed and verified as the information comes to hand.

Further, the reach and effectiveness of social media to spread information and to mobilise action, means equally that disinformation could be spread quickly. It is likely that the established news media will play an increasingly important role as the verifiers of fact and fiction in this instantaneous and reactive environment. Now, more than ever, context is paramount.

In such a world, the readers' need to trust in their news provider increases. Therefore the relationship between news organizations and the public requires more transparency than in previous times. Part of that mechanism requires appropriate forms of media accountability and timely forms of correction and redress. The appointment of an ombudsman or readers' editor is an important step in developing a more appropriate relationship between the news organization and the reader.

However, their introduction is often a challenge to businesses that can have a tendency to question themselves less than they question others. The ombudsman is a self-regulatory option that is cost effective and meets the increasing demands of the audience to have a channel through which their concerns may be addressed.

In his Orwell Lecture on 11 November 2011, Alan Rusbridger called for more readers' editors to be appointed.

“Many newspapers hate owning up to errors. Until recently there was an undoubtedly genuine feeling that if we confessed to our mistakes people would be less inclined to trust what we said. But the truth, as all honest journalists know, is that newspapers are full of errors. Not just errors, but crude over-simplifications, mistakes of emphasis, contestable interpretations and things which should simply have been phrased differently. It seems silly to pretend otherwise... And yet many newspapers do persist in pretending they are largely infallible.

“We decided to change all that back in 1997 when we appointed a readers' editor. We'd print their phone number in the paper every day and give them space independently to correct or clarify anything they felt we'd got wrong. To safeguard his or her position, I guaranteed in writing that I'd never interfere with anything they wrote and signed a contract saying they could only ever be sacked by the paper's owner, the Scott trust. In addition, I gave them a weekly column to address concerns raised by readers.

“A few years later I wrote that this was the single most liberating act of my editorship. It freed me from dealing with stroppy callers; it cut the legal bills; it enabled reporters to immediately have a means of clarifying or correcting their mistakes; and it gave readers the sort of complaints service they regard as commonplace in their dealings with any other organisation. Having a readers' editor had led to a much more acceptance of the nature of the task we're all engaged on at the Guardian.

“On a pragmatic level it seemed to have an air of inevitability. The Guardian is now read by more than 3 million people a day around the world: that's 3 million fact checkers – nearly all of them with access to social media networks on which they delight in pointing out things they disagree with or errors we've made. In addition, there are several media monitoring groups which scrutinize our content on a regular basis. In other words, if we get anything wrong, it will be exposed one way or another. Isn't it better to be seen to be doing it ourselves rather than to be evidently leaving material uncorrected while others do the job for us?

“But a better argument is that it's just right. If journalists get things wrong there's an obligation on us to do something about it. It should be baked into the idea of journalism that the search for truth is helped by allowing others to add to, or clarify, or respond to one version of events.

“And, precisely because it is, in human nature, so hard to admit error, it's generally better if someone other than the person ultimately responsible for the error, ie the editor, makes a dispassionate assessment...

“So a good starting point for Lord Justice Leveson would be to make it a condition of belonging to a voluntary regulation regime that any newspaper over a certain size – say, 100 editorial staff, should employ, on a properly independent basis, a readers' editor to correct and clarify material promptly and prominently – and to be able to demonstrate this to the regulator.

“That's a maximum of 1% of editorial cost going towards the business of liaising with the readers, hearing their concerns, allowing a response and, where necessary, correcting the record which now lives permanently online.”

3. How do ombudsmen work?

- Readers' editors listen to the audience and respond to their concerns through corrections, clarifications and a column, sometimes weekly, sometimes monthly, written either in response to correspondence that leads them to investigate or explain a story or a current issue that raises questions of ethical standards within the news media. The ONO website, www.newsombudsmen.org has a comprehensive archive of these columns stretching back 21 years.

- In this sense, ombudsmen also act as media educators. They can help readers become increasingly media literate, to negotiate and sort the reliable information from gossip or fake stories and photos, and to identify sources they can trust.

- The presence of a readers' editor also serves as a mechanism through which ethical issues can be raised directly in the newsrooms. It is ONO's experience that organizations that have ombudsmen become more attuned to ethical consideration of issues of media standards and practice. Often the question is no longer “Can we get away with it?” but “Should we cover it in this manner in the first place?” or “What is the most responsible way to do this?”

- Additionally, readers' editors around the world often help managements devise codes of ethical behaviour for journalists in their organization and community standards for those posting comments online.

3. The business case for readers' editors

In the current climate of distrust in the press, publishing without a sound ethical basis is an increasingly risky business model. A lack of ethical behaviour – even on a small scale – can result in reader boycotts and increase the risk of expensive libel cases.

Accountability is very cost-efficient. An independent readers' editor will often resolve complaints that might otherwise end up in court. The Guardian reported a 30% drop in traffic to the lawyers' office after the appointment of a readers' editor.

Credibility is vital to a newspaper's commercial success. Being open and accountable

increases and maintains that credibility.

Editors discover that they have more time to edit when they appoint a readers' editor. Their desks are cleared of complaints and angry calls are diverted.

Many of the most profitable companies in the 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.

4. The future

In addressing the way forward for regulation of the press in Britain, ONO urges the Leveson Inquiry to encourage the appointment of independent readers' editors, perhaps even as a condition of membership of a larger regulatory body for the major newspapers.

These readers' editors would 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 audience.

In making these appointments the industry would be sending a clear signal that it was serious about accountability and it would also largely be taking the responsibility of correction and clarification on itself, so reducing the workload on any second-tier body that may evolve in the future.

Complainants who could not find satisfaction at this first tier level would be free to take their case to the second tier body for investigation and possible binding adjudication.

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