

What's a newspaper ombudsman? Notes on a cross-cultural debate

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The Swedish term *ombudsman* first appears officially in 1809 as a ministerial function of controlling the public power and listening to the citizens' appeal against government (Mendes, 2009). Before that, however, there had been public *listeners*: In ancient Rome, the Tribune of the Pleb listened to citizen complaints. In 1999, the worldwide Organization of Newspaper Ombudsmen (ONO) admitted that, contrary popular belief and its own public statements up to that point, newspaper ombudsmanship had been in place in Japan beginning in 1922—almost a half century before the first modern newspaper ombudsman was appointed in Louisville, Kentucky, USA. Additionally, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* set up a staff committee in 1938 to monitor quality and became a kind of “collective ombudsman” in 1951 that continues its work today. Yet other scholars contend that the first ombudsman program in place among newspapers was the “Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play,” which was established in 1913 at *The New York World*. Former *Shimbun* ombudsman Takeshi Maezawa (1999), though, has questioned whether *Kijishinsa-iinkai* or *Kijishinsa-shitsu* [“internal committee for newspaper contents evaluation] at Japanese newspapers were ever the equivalent to newspaper ombudsmanship as conceived and practiced in the U.S. This article comprises research notes toward determining where press criticism by the press itself may have originated in the ombudsmanship concept.

Origins

The newspaper ombudsman concept first appears in academic literature in Kansas State University (USA) journalism professor Nelson Antrim Crawford's 1924 book, *The Ethics of Journalism*. Crawford quoted a proposal in the July 1919 issue of *The Arbitrator* magazine for a “public literary defender.” The prescription by the magazine's editor, Edward Paul, seems prescient of the calls a half-century later for newspaper ombudsmen as press critics. Crawford wrote:

[T]here would be reserved in every paper a column for a public literary defender “elected by the people, who could give due importance to buried news and supply the point of view frequently omitted.” With this system in vogue, asserted the editor of *The Arbitrator*, the paper responsible for the plan, “it would be possible to retain the freedom of the press. For there should be no objection to the appearance of any startling opinions of the editor, provide the correct ideas were given equal prominence in the same paper. If the policy of the paper was to oppose the conscription of men or of wealth, every issue could also contain the reason why such opinions were untenable and objectionable in the eyes of the government official answerable to the people.” (p. 135) Crawford, an influential pioneer journalism educator who believed that “under the most widely social interpretation of [a newspaper's] function, it is not [a public forum],” labeled the proposal for a public literary defender “absurd” (p. 136).

Yet, similar ventures were launched. A list of American newspaper “firsts” noted that in 1927, Fred Pownall of the *Des Moines Register Tribune* in Des Moines, Iowa, USA, had similar responsibilities to those of the modern ombudsman (Wilson,

1990, p. 21). John Hohenberg (1978), the noted journalism professor at Columbia University in New York City, New York, USA, recalled there being a sort of ombudsman in place at sister New York newspapers at about that time.

I remember that Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and *Evening World* had a similar operation at about the time I became a New York newspaperman in 1924. Then, the Ombudsman, only he wasn't called that, had a small office near the entrance to the World's awesome city room, where the city editor sat on a raised dais and surveyed his realm like a little king. It was obvious that the city editor had power, the Ombudsman did not. But he tried.

Whenever anybody wrote, telephoned, or appeared in person to complain about the *World* newspapers, the case immediately was shunted to the genteel functionary in the small, little noticed outer office. He was, as *World* staff people recalled, an elderly gentleman, quietly and conservatively dressed, who received callers with exquisite courtesy. He would listen gravely, take notes, and give assurance that "something would be done." But that early Ombudsman's corrective actions were rare. He served mainly as a buffer and was not encouraged to be an activist. (p. 268)

One-time American newspaper editor Loren Ghiglione (1979) fixed an even earlier date of origin for the newspaper ombudsman position: "At the [*New York*] *World*, for instance, Ralph Pulitzer established a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play in 1913" (p. 25), which was headed by Isaac D. White (Cunningham, 1991).

Modern ombudsmen

Ben Bagdikian (1967) was the first to suggest an ombudsman for American newspapers. In an article critical of the trend in newspaper mergers and chain ownership, Bagdikian wrote: "Some brave owner someday will provide for a community ombudsman on his paper's board, maybe a non-voting one, to be present, to speak, to provide a symbol and, with luck, exert public interest in the ultimate fate of the American newspaper" (p. 145).

The concept was picked up and expanded and strengthened in an essay by Abe Raskin (1967) a few months later. Raskin ascribed to the hypothetical position the duty of published newspaper criticism, within a "Department of Internal Criticism" (p. 78). Raskin wrote: "The department head ought to be given enough independence in the paper to serve as an ombudsman for the readers, armed with authority to get something done about valid performance of all the paper's service to the community, particularly the patrol it keeps on the frontiers of thought and action" (p. 78).

Raskin's (1967) piece struck a chord with Norman Isaacs, editor of the newspapers in Louisville, Kentucky. Little more than a week after the article appeared, he appointed Herchenroeder the first North American newspaper ombudsman, ever. Herchenroeder, Isaacs, and publisher-owner Barry Bingham sketched out the details for the job of ombudsman, outlining the attendant rules, roles, and responsibilities. This work would be especially important because the *Courier-Journal* blueprint would help to establish the foundation for a half-century of ombudsmen at other newspapers to come. It was decided that Herchenroeder would field and investigate reader calls and complaints and initiate corrections and clarifications that appeared in the newspaper under the heading "Beg Your Pardon" (Isaacs, 1986). That column had appeared

previously, but under the ombudsman program, it was given a fixed, daily position in the newspaper.

In terms of reader access and the handling of complaints and corrections, the *Courier-Journal* set the pace for the American newspaper ombudsman.

... visitors from newspapers all over the country interested in observing this oddity of editorial management. They came looking to observe, for guidance and for a "where do I begin" lesson in ombudsmanship with hopes for starting a similar version on their own papers. Some followed through; others did not.

(Mogavero, 1980, p. 3)

One of those early visitors to observe the Louisville ombudsman at work was the *Washington Post*. The editors at the *Post* liked the ombudsman idea but thought they could improve on the Louisville model by adding the responsibility of writing a regular critic's column (Hamilton, 1974). Thus, the *Post* became the second U.S. newspaper to appoint an ombudsman, in 1970, and the *St. Petersburg Times* followed, in December that year.

According to Baydar et al (2011), many newspapers in the United States and Europe followed suit in the Seventies and Eighties, though the *New York Times* did not do so until 2010 (The Editors, 2010). These included *Le Monde* in France; *El Pais* and *La Vanguardia* in Spain; *Volkskrant* in the Netherlands; *Folha de Sao Paulo* in Brazil; the *Guardian* and *Observer* in the U.K.; *O Publico* in Portugal, *Maariv* in Israel, *Politiken* in Denmark; the *Toronto Sun* in Canada; *Milliyet* and *Sabah* in Turkey; and the *Hindu* in India.

The controversy

In 1999, a controversy arose over whether the first newspaper ombudsman was hired in Louisville in 1967 or whether that had happened decades earlier in Japan. The Organization of Newspaper Ombudsmen (ONO) itself initiated the confusion by correcting what it deemed had been an error printed in a 1993 brochure (Maezawa, 1999). The first brochure had called newspaper ombudsmanship an American phenomenon, with the *Courier-Journal* and the *Times* in Louisville to appoint the first in the U.S. and the *Toronto Star* the first in Canada, in 1972. The 1999 update of the ONO brochure noted the *New York World's* establishment in July 1913 of a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play and added that in 1922, the *Asahi Shimbun* announced the formation of an ombudsman committee to deal with the growing problem of mistakes and belated apologies in the paper. The *Shimbun* credited the *World* with coming up with the idea (Raymond, 1999).

Then, in 1938, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* established its own ombudsman committee, called the Committee of Newspaper Contents Inspectors, to improve the quality of the newspaper after its reporting had led to a "number of lawsuits" (p. 70). According to Raymond's (1999) report, the staff began by comparing each day's edition with competing dailies. In 1951, it began inviting readers to contact it with complaints or comments.

Linda Raymond (1999), then the ombudsman for the Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal*, wrote a column titled, "We Were Wrong," in which she said, "For 32 years, The Courier-Journal has taken pride in the belief that it appointed the first newspaper ombudsman and launched the international newspaper ombudsman movement.

We were wrong. We didn't know that the concept had already been operating for many years in Japan..."

Arthur C. Nauman (1999), then treasurer of the Organization of Newspaper Ombudsmen (ONO), acknowledged the faulty assumption that newspaper ombudsmanship had started in the United States.

So we all violated a cardinal rule of journalism: don't assume anything.

However, in spite of Linda's candid admission, the question, "What is the origin of ombudsmanship?" has never actually been answered. We are faced with another difficult question, "Can we consider newspaper-contents checking systems in Japan as an ombudsmanship equivalent to that in America?"

Takeshi Maezawa (2003), who was a senior member of the *Yomiuri Shimbun's* Committee of Newspaper Contents Inspectors from 1981 to 1991, and ombudsman for the English-language edition from 1987 to 1993, has written extensively about media accountability systems (MAS) in Japan. He noted that "Japanese media have enjoyed total press freedom since the end of World War II: the Allied Forces¹ and the new Constitution prohibited any restriction on free speech" (p. 293). Yet, citizens' criticism of the media—for being too "intimate with the government" and for "unethical conduct" in their newsgathering—led to "a demand for the creation of self-regulation and accountability systems."

Maezawa (2003) described *Kijishinsa-iinkai* or *Kijishinsa-shitsu* as the most common system for enforcing ethical standards in the Japanese press. It is, however, a wholly internal system of accountability in its outcomes or results. *Kijishinsa-iinkai* helps ensure quality by educating a company's journalists, from bottom to top. But this accountability is internal, with no direct accountability to readers. Thus, Maezawa questioned whether it was accurate to label the Japanese MAS ombudsmanship.

The major reason why they don't, and shouldn't, name their checking MAS an ombudsman system is their lack of openness towards readers and their lack of independence from their superiors. "The news media ... refuse to disclose information, which they must if readers are to trust them [. . .] No bylines, no responses to readers: that all shows their lack of accountability." ... it would be next to impossible for the members of this system independently to investigate their colleagues, critically to evaluate the contents of articles by them and to submit a candid opinion to their superiors. It is far from easy in any journalistic environment, but remember that these people are average employees in a Japanese company... (p. 299)

Conclusion

Where does the truth lie? Which country can rightfully claim having employed the first newspaper ombudsman? And even within each of the two countries' MAS, which was—and is, today—more faithful to the letter and spirit of the definition of the original term *ombudsman*? Among scholars, Nemeth (2003) concluded that the *Post* "presented the most appealing model if one valued the role of accountability" and that "its conceptualization of the ombudsman position remains unique" (p. 141). Future research investigating the semantic and systemic roots of newspaper ombudsmanship at the *Asahi Shimbun*, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *The New York World*, the two Louisville,

¹ Maezawa also noted, however, that the Allied Occupation never permitted criticism of the atomic bombing or of the military occupation itself.

Kentucky, USA, newspapers and *Washington Post* newspapers is in order. How the newspapers' editors presented their idea and how each implemented it may aid in progress toward an answer.

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