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**PRESIDENT'S
MESSAGE**
By Ian Mayes

The newsombudsman in an environment at risk

This presentation was given at ONO's 2009 conference in Washington, D.C.

By Jan van Groesen

Media-ombudsmen, The Netherlands

Contact ONO

c/o Gina Lubrano
Executive Secretary
P.O. Box 120191
San Diego, CA 92112
U.S.A.
(619) 293-1525

E-mail:

ono@uniontrib.com

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At the start of this conference it would be very easy to paint a gloomy picture of international journalism and the dark perspectives of the newsombudsman related to it. Because reality tells us a harsh story. It is the story that journalists have to adapt to a development in which the good old newspapers are overhauled by internet as the main source of news. According to a recent survey of Pew Research Center, television is the most popular source of information in the United States, but it is rapidly declining. 40 Percent of Americans are getting their news from the internet. Five years ago it was 20 percent. Newspapers are the main source of news for only 35 percent of the American population, against 50 percent in 2003.

In Europe and in other parts of the world the situation is somewhat different. Although the picture of newspapers having to struggle for survival is more or less identical, the closing down in this year alone of century-old newspapers like the Tucson Citizen, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the Rocky Mountains News in the United States, is not yet seen elsewhere. In my own country, The Netherlands, many local newspapers disappeared in the last two decades, not for financial reasons but as a consequence of multiple take-overs and mergers, initiated by megalomaniac publishers. And if Dutch newspapers are struggling for survival at this moment, it is partly because of the economic downturn and the dramatic loss of advertising revenues but primarily because of irresponsible behaviour and mismanagement by greedy owners who are not interested in making newspapers but only in making money.

It is obvious that an international newspaper crisis is at hand. Traditional massmedia like newspapers and magazines are gradually moved towards the fringes of the informationsystem. Through internet and digital media, citizens have access to all the information they need to make their own personal newspaper, a Daily Me . Such a development is endangering democracy, as New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently wrote, because individuals are not inclined to gather balanced news but only the information they want to consume. Sociologists have

pointed out that human beings, in general, are only opting for news that mirrors their expectations, thus neglecting other opinions. This social phenomenon may lead to a lack of mutual understanding, miscommunication, and eventually intolerance and polarisation. In other words, a democratic society cannot afford to lose newspapers as an important means of information. Because newspapers still are the only newsmedia offering the public at one time the badly needed broadscaled mosaic of newsheadings. Thomas Jefferson already highlighted this opinion by saying:” Were it left to me to decide whether we would have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government I should not hesitate to prefer the latter”.

Everywhere efforts are made to prevent newspapers from closing down. In some cases printed newspapers in financial trouble have been transformed into online newspapers like the Christian Science Monitor. In other cases publishers are setting up crossmedia activities, trying to get a foothold in the market of the audiovisual media. In The Netherlands all the national and local newspapers have set up online editions, next to their print-editions. It is a positive development but one insufficient to compete succesfully with search engines, community-sites and personalised newspapers. Therefore we should welcome initiatives in Europe and in the US that newspapers will be treated in the same way as public broadcasters. The upholding of newspapers in a democratic society is of public interest anyhow. So, turning newspapers into non-profit, endowed institutions, may be a solution. Because newspapers are institutions and without such an intervention any unruly government may well find inspiration by the absence of professional newspapers. I am not sure whether the plan of US senator Benjamin Cardin to create specific public newspapers will bring the solution because the independent position of the newspaper must be paramount.

As an important side-effect of the newspaper crisis there is an urgent need worldwide for redefining the role of journalism. Strengthening the quality of journalism and introducing large-scale initiatives of selfregulation are vital elements of this redefinition. The position of the newsombudsman has to play an important part because it is an instrument not only suited for print media, but for audiovisual and digital media as well. We have to rise to the challenges journalism is facing in this period of structural and economic crisis. About the difference between empirical reality and ratio the seventeenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon argued that human beings are not primarily made for collecting data or spinning webs, but for changing reality.

To establish the position of newsombudsmen, which has not yet gained ground on a global scale, we have to change reality. The instrument of the newsombudsman is under pressure for reasons I have already indicated. In a time of shrinking budgets, the revolutionary surge of digital media and the easiness of direct e-mailcontact between consumers and journalists, newsombudsmen are vulnerable targets for cost accounting managers. As Nancy Barnes, editor-in-chief of the Minneapolis’ Star Tribune, said: “ At a time when resources are tight, we have had to make some very difficult decisions about how every resource is being used. Right now, I believe we owe the readers more smart journalists reporting and editing the news than critiquing the

news”

In the US last year and this year at least 10 newsombudsmen lost their job. The same tendency can be registered in other parts of the world. And although some new ombudsmen positions were created, the total number of ombudsmen went down. It is a very positive development though that ONO has welcomed new members like Andrew Alexander of the Washington Post, Mara Gama of a big Brazilian internet company and Mark Prendergast of the Stars and Stripes. And one should not underestimate the interest the president of ONO has signalled in African countries where ONO has been asked to help establish ombudsmen in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

In The Netherlands, in order to outline the position of newsombudsmen, the Netherlands Media Ombudsman Foundation and Fontys University School of Journalism, started a research project on newsombudsmen which was completed very recently. Different from existing scientific data, our research was focussed specifically on the impact the work of newsombudsmen has on the journalistic output of their news organizations.

Our findings are mainly based on:

- an overview of the situation in The Netherlands: what newspapers and broadcasting organizations have an ombudsman and what is his position?
- international readings on the position of newsombudsmen worldwide. What are the different types of newsombudsmen, their duties and responsibilities, their accountability?
- a survey filled out by the participants of the ONO-conference, held in Stockholm in May 2008. Where do ombudsmen work, what is their background, do they have a column to vent their opinions and an official list of regulations and guidelines. What issues are mostly discussed, what are the main topics of their columns/contributions?
- a detailed analysis of 200 ombudsman-columns of the Volkskrant, a leading national Dutch newspaper, of 170 columns of the readers representative of the Rotterdams Dagblad, a local daily in the city of Rotterdam and of 57 columns of the NOS-ombudsman, the Dutch Public Broadcasting Company,
- And finally, and perhaps most importantly, do newsombudsmen really have the opportunity to speak out in an independent and critical way about the editorial output? What is their independent judgement of the journalistic processes and products?

The findings of our research and the methods the different newsombudsmen are using to make their case will be explained in detail by dr. Huub Evers. But the headlines of our findings are:

1. The newsombudsman is one of the most suitable instruments for selfregulation of the press and for maintaining a high-quality level of journalism.
2. The performance of the newsombudsman enhances the transparency and credibility of his news organization.

3. If there is a shift in the position of the newsombudsman from critic of the editorial output to PR-man or legal advisor , it is at the expense of selfregulation.
4. The recent development in the US and elsewhere that ombudsmen have seen their position being marginalised or even disappearing, is contrary to the universal call for more openness and transparency of the newsmedia and undermines the efforts to strengthen the credibility of the press.
5. Blogs, websites and social networks are positive instruments of communication but cannot be a substitute for responsible journalism and the role of newsombudsmen.
6. There are at least 6 different forms of newsombudsmen throughout the world. An example of the big diversity: from the 11 ombudsmen or readers representatives at Dutch newspapers there are at least two who have been forbidden to speak out publicly in a critical way about the journalistic production of their newspaper.
7. The newsombudsmen whose positions are completely independent belong to a very small minority.
8. There are a lot of advantages to have a newsombudsman from inside the newsorganization, but hiring someone from outside may strengthen his credibility and the ombudsmans image of independency.

Nowadays it is broadly recognised that the revolution in the mediaworld, prompted by the introduction of internet and digital media, has undermined the traditional forum of discipline and selfdiscipline. In the interactive domain the use of indecent language, of insulting, spitting and cursing, is spreading like a virus, inciting division and hatred in society. This may harm the values of a democratic society. The position of the newsombudsman is perfectly apt to fill this disciplinary gap.

Therefore we feel free to formulate some recommendations:

1. The ideal newsombudsman is a journalist or media-expert, not a legal adviser or PR-man, who has a full-time job, weighing the journalistic output in a critical way against the ethical standards of journalism
2. The newsombudsman, to take away the existing scepticism in society, has to be fully independent. He is not a member of the editorial staff and does not take part in editorial meetings or coverage planning meetings. He does not report to the editor-in-chief or the publisher. He shares his free judgement with the public.
3. The ethical standards of journalism used by the newsombudsmen for his judgement shall be made public. The same goes for the ombudsmans guidelines and regulations.
4. To promote uniformity in the position of newsombudsmen, the ethical code of the Organization of Newsombudsmen ONO has to be the basis of their activities.
5. ONO, in order to help the position of newsombudsmen gaining ground worldwide, must have the necessary means to carry out this valuable task.

Let me elaborate for a moment on this last point. Because here again we have to change reality. ONO is the only organization to promote and defend the interests of newsombudsmen worldwide. In view of the vulnerable position of newsombudsmen it is imperative that ONO raises the necessary funds to establish itself more and more as a professional organization, working to prevent the institute of the newsombudsman falling victim to the present economic recession. For those of us who are reluctant to accept funds from third parties I can tell you this. We, in the Netherlands, do have a deeprooted feeling of press freedom and of independency for journalism. I have been involved, at home and abroad, in journalistic projects funded by organizations like the Open Society Institute, Freedom House, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the European Commission and others. Never did I experience any effort from the funding organizations to intervene and to harm the independent character of the projects.

That is why I hope this conference will bring about the changes needed to give the instrument of newsombudsmen a better future.

Thank you.
