

Ethics cannot be outsourced

Why having an external news ombudsman may not work



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How effective is the office of the news ombudsman in this age of polarisation? Are news ombudsmen inherently liberal? Are they fair to conservative views? Some readers saw a liberal bias in my handling of complaints relating to a report in this newspaper on the food served by The Akshaya Patra Foundation. The Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors and the Columbia Journalism Review (CJR) in New York discussed these contentious issues at length recently.

Growing distance

It was a distinguished panel. Todd Gitlin, Professor and Chair of the Ph.D. programme at the Columbia Journalism School, articulated the liberal view. John Carney from *Breitbart News*, a right-wing news and opinion website, sought more space for conservative voices. Mr. Gitlin argued that workers today spend all their time in soul-crushing conditions and therefore need stimulation. Their need for sensation is fulfilled by various media, which have fostered a society of disposable emotions and short attention spans. Such a society, he said, threatens to make democracy a sideshow. Mr. Carney said that liberals due to their biases refuse to grant a fair space for conservative viewpoints on a range of issues. Kelly McBride, the Craig Newmark Journalism Ethics Chair at The Poynter Institute, was brought in as a neutral voice. The issue was not resolved, but the discussion helped in realising the growing distance between the two strands of thought and the strain of this on the information ecology.

Is there a takeaway for a Readers' Editor from such an interminable debate? How do we look at publications that are removing the position of Readers' Editor? Is it possible to externalise this role? In the eyes of CJR, Public Editors and ombudsmen have historically stood as critical advocates for consumers of news, identifying blind spots that outlets can't see themselves and operating as collectors of critical opinion when decisions go awry. CJR argued that the flameout of Public Editors in the U.S., which reached a point of despair in 2017 when *The New York Times* sent its last Public Editor packing, is the most visible sign of the growing distance between news organisations and the people they

serve. To restore a sense of fairness, and to handle difficulties in journalism in an election cycle when issues are going to be contentious, and voices partisan and vicious, the journalism magazine has appointed four new public editors, for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, and MSNBC.

A delicate balance

While I understand the reasons that prompted CJR to have four public editors for these major U.S. media outlets, I am not sure whether it will be effective. A news ombudsman is given unbridled access to the process of news-gathering. Post-publication of a story, he or she discusses with the Editor the thought process behind the decision to publish that story. Ombudsmen, editors and reporters share the ethical framework of journalism. I am not sure what the level of access the CJR-nominated Public Editors will have to the reporting and the editing teams of

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their respective news organisations. Further, to have a Public Editor is to have a self-regulation mechanism; hence, it would be better for publications to nominate a designated person with clearly formulated terms of reference, rather than have an external body. The relationship between the news ombudsman and the Editor is rather nuanced and I am not sure whether an external ombudsman can maintain that delicate balance.

As a journalist, I was not only inspired but also shaped by George Orwell's writings. Some of the phrases he used helped me understand the misuse of language in our political landscape: Newspeak, Big Brother, the Thought Police, the Two Minutes Hate, doublethink, unperson, memory hole, and the Ministry of Truth. However, as a Readers' Editor, I realise that my job should exhibit a certain level of restraint. It should not hamper the free flow of information and the blooming of diverse and contrarian ideas. A good copy editor helps the text gain its full glow without drawing any attention to the act of editing. A news ombudsman performs a similar task for journalistic ethics.