

## Media self-regulation: the case of media ombudsman

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## About speaker Tarmu Tammerk

- President of the Organization of News Ombudsmen (ONO), the worldwide body for media ombudsmen
- Ombudsman at Estonian Public Broadcasting
- Journalistic career of 20 years (editor-in-chief of newspapers; correspondent for news agencies; hosting radio programmes)
- Extensive involvement in media training (ethics, self-regulation, association-building)

## Levels of media self-regulation in Estonia

- Press Council – most media voluntarily adhere to its rulings
- Ombudsman - at public broadcasting company ERR
- In addition: media criticism (public discussion of ethics issues)
- Code of Journalism Ethics – basic document for measuring whether self-regulation is followed

## Interaction between ombudsman and press council

- Complaint is first handled by ombudsman of the particular media organization
- If not satisfied with the ombudsman's ruling, the complainant can go to the 2nd instance, the Press Council (like an appeal)

## Role of media ombudsmen

- act as mediators between individual media organization and the public
- should be independent from their media organization
- should be the audience's ears and eyes, while protecting journalistic independence against possible attacks
- they can use "soft sanctions"

## Media ombudsmen

- Ombudsmen are more useful in bigger media outlets, but can be applied everywhere
- Ombudsman role is especially important in public service media because of difficult relations between the government and the tax-payer financed media
- A world group called Organization of News Ombudsmen - [newsombudsmen.org](http://newsombudsmen.org)

## World experience

- Media ombudsman are known by different terms: ombudsman, readers' editor, viewers' and listeners' editor, public editor
- The concept started in newspapers, then spread to broadcasting
- The world organization is the Organization of News Ombudsmen (ONO). But there are separate smaller groups for German-, French- and Spanish-speaking ombudsmen

## Media ombudsman's duties

- To handle complaints and feedback from audience
- To observe whether the media organization follows the code of ethics
- To defend journalistic independence against attacks from political or business circles
- Ombudsman shall work publicly – his/her rulings are made public

## Ombudsman at Estonian public media ERR

- since 2007
- instituted by law on public broadcasting
- handles complaints by viewers and listeners of ERR broadcasts and readers of online services
- oversees the balance and impartiality of ERR (own initiative, not just acting on outside response)
- conducts ethics training

## Independence of media ombudsman

- At ERR, ombudsman is confirmed in office by Broadcasting Council (made up of political party representatives from parliament and independent media experts)
- Ombudsman is directly responsible to Broadcasting Council, not the acting management of ERR
- Ombudsman can be dismissed only by voting in the Broadcasting Council, to protect the ombudsman from revenge for criticism from the acting management of ERR

## Complaints to ERR ombudsman

- about political impartiality in news and current affairs (current affairs talk shows; hot political topics in news)
- interviewing manners (live)
- language (these are handed over to language coach)
- violence
- requests to delete online material (right to be forgotten)

## Statistics of ombudsman work

- ERR ombudsman receives an average of 40 instances of direct feedback a month (complaints, questions, opinions about ERR programmes and online articles)
- Out of the 40, about 5 cases a month are treated as full complaints, demanding more careful examination and research (talking to the journalist and the editor, corresponding with the complainant etc)

## Structure of press /media council

- It should include all key stakeholders: media and the public
- Usually the media (editors, journalists, media owners) are in the majority
- Press Council of Estonia: of 10 members, 6 are from the media, 4 from outside media (university professor, lawyer, judge etc)
- No government or state representative involved

## Effects of self-regulatory instruments

Ombudsmen and Press Councils:

- add to the public accountability and openness of the media organization
- lift off some political pressure
- increase public awareness of media ethics and of the media organization
- empower citizens (people can influence media content and their concerns about the media are better taken into account). Self-regulation is free for people (unlike courts, which are expensive)

## Effects of self-regulation, II

But the Press Councils and ombudsmen also:

- expose the media organization to more criticism ("another critic") – short-term problem
- the public will get used to the ombudsman role, and the existence of an in-house critic becomes an advantage in the longer term (in a year or two)

## Public trust in media in Estonia

- Trust in public broadcasting has been higher than trust in commercial media and newspapers
- At the end of 2014, trust in media:  
ERR (public media) 84% of the population  
commercial broadcasting under 60%  
printed press (which is private) 60%

## Concluding thoughts

- self-regulation will not solve all problems, it will help deal with them and consequently, minimize ethical mistakes
- self-regulation is a tool of raising media credibility

## Contact

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