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Ombudsman and active readers. Interaction and journalistic quality

Dolors Palau-Sampio [CV] [ID] [ORCID] School of Philology, Translation and Communication.
Universitat de València, UV / University of Valencia, Spain / dolors.palau@uv.es

Juan Francisco Gutiérrez-Lozano [CV] [ID] [ORCID] School of Communication Sciences.
Universidad de Málaga, UMA / University of Malaga, Spain / jfg@uma.es

Josep Lluís Gómez-Mompart [ID] School of Philology, Translation and Communication.
Universitat de València, UV / University of Valencia, Spain / josep.ll.gomez@uv.es

Abstract

Introduction: This article examines the role of the *ombudsman* in ensuring journalistic quality and in handling complaints from active readers. **Method:** The study is based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of about two hundred articles published in nine international newspapers of recognised trajectory. **Results and conclusions:** There is a variety of work styles among ombudsmen, based on the issues they address the most, the way they collect readers’ complaints, and the way they frame their answers to active readers. The *ombudsman* acts more as a diplomatic figure that moderates the debate and becomes a valid interlocutor for readers than as a role capable of guaranteeing the effective compliance with journalistic quality criteria and of questioning the editorial decisions of news media.

Keywords

Quality; *ombudsman*; international press; credibility; active readers.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
(PhD in Communication from the University of London, UK)

1. Introduction

The figure of the *ombudsman* [1] represents a mechanism for the self-regulation of the news media and responds to the will of transparency and the goal of quality assurance of the information products that are offered to readers. The *ombudsman* is the explicit embodiment of the medium's assumption of public accountability and constitutes an instrument to promote trust and credibility. It is not a coincidence that its implementation, in two newspapers of Louisville (Kentucky, USA) -*The Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*- in 1967, was the response to a moment of crisis of trust in the media. Since then -but especially after the 1980's- the presence of the so-called *news ombudsman* has extended across diverse latitudes. Although the term enjoys wide recognition, its denomination has been adapted to different languages, sometimes with certain nuances about its role: *defensor del lector* (Spain), *public editor reader's representative*, *reader advocate*, *public editor* and *listening post editor* (English-speaking countries), *médiateur* (France and Belgium), *ouvidor* (Brazil), *provedor* (Portugal), *difensore civico* and *avvocato dei lettori* (Italy), *Leseranwalt* (Germany), *Læsernes Redaktør* (Denmark), *leserombudet* (Norway), and *Lezersredacteur* (the Netherlands), among others (Elia, 2007: 33-34).

The reader advocate is present in the most important media around the world, but it is not a universal figure. In fact, this figure does not exist in some prestigious international media, because in some occasions its work becomes uncomfortable (Glasser, 1999; Aznar, 1999; Evers *et al.*, 2010) or expendable in a context of economic crisis, as it happened in *The Washington Post*, despite the commitment to honest and quality journalism is an investment in the future (White, 2015). On other occasions, although the position remains, the figure is subjected to certain discontinuity, particularly during times of changes of ownership, of the person in charge of this position and even changes in the medium's management team.

The Organization of News Ombudsmen (ONO) has 56 regular members from 24 countries. This entity states that the duty of news *ombudsmen* and *ombudswomen* or readers' representatives is to receive and investigate complaints from newspaper readers or television viewers about the accuracy, fairness, balance and good taste in news coverage, and to recommend appropriate remedies or responses to correct or clarify news reports. Some authors who have explored the role of the *ombudsman* agree on the diversity of his tasks: receive complaints, investigate them and respond to newspaper readers or viewers, but also to mediate the dissemination of journalistic work, correct errors, publish the findings of the most significant cases, and in generic terms, act as a supervisor of the self-regulation of journalists (Bertrand 2000; Bernier, 2003; Goulet, 2004; Evers *et al.*, 2010).

Beyond the general framework of activity, the figure of the *ombudsman* is not governed by homogeneous patterns. As the ONO points out, "Not two ombudsmen work exactly alike". The definition and channels of action are influenced by numerous factors, from the characteristics of the medium to the personality of the person who occupies the position, hence the importance of analysing this figure and the development of his activity in order to generate specific knowledge about it.

2. State of the art review: the *ombudsman* as quality assurance

The role of the *ombudsman*, as a mediator between the newsroom and readers, is directly linked to the improvement of the quality of the medium. News companies implement this figure to collect

complaints from their audience, channel them to the appropriate professionals and to get these complaints handled by an accredited spokesman (Evers *et al.*, 2010; Elia, 2007; Maciá, 2014). This position is not exactly comfortable, since the *ombudsman* works in the bosom of the editorial structure, trying to maintain his independence from the members of the editorial team while developing a double function. On the one hand, to promote self-regulation, and on the other, to act as a critic of what has been published (Elia, 2007), both by own initiative or upon the request of readers.

In recent decades several studies have looked at the role of the *ombudsman*, mainly as one of the mechanisms of self-regulation and social responsibility (Aznar, 1999; Eberwein *et al.*, 2011; Maciá-Barber, 2014; Fengler, 2015) and, to a lesser extent, to describe his role in certain countries or media companies, as in the case of Canada, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland (Goulet, 2004; Van Dalen and Deuze, 2006; Agnès, 2008; Béal, 2008; Quixadá, 2010; Bernier, 2011), and to link the role of the *ombudsman* to the improvement of the standards of quality (Elia, 2007) based on a general review of his tasks. However, there are much less studies that analyse the interaction with readers (Nemeth and Sanders, 1999; Nolan and Marjoribanks, 2011; Evers, 2012).

The existence of the *ombudsman* “does not determine the ethical commitment of a media company”, even though “it is a factor that can contribute to it” (Several authors, 2013). The degree of customisation of this figure, as well as the elements that strengthen its credibility (work standards, codes of ethics of the medium, prestigious professional experience of the person responsible, etc.) render it a visible guarantor of the pursuit of journalistic quality or, at least, a symbolic actor of fundamental relevance to such claim (Several authors, 2013). The media that have incorporated an *ombudsman* pursue, in addition to improve quality standards, to increase the awareness of their news professionals about the responsibility of their work, to increase access to readers and to increase their credibility, to manage the complaint process internally and to avoid unnecessary and costly lawsuits (ONO).

Different authors have suggested the duality of a function that can be seen as genuinely linked to social responsibility, in the sense of the *ombudsman* as a critical voice (*public accountability*), or a kind of public relations (Roosevelt and Glasser, 1987). The function of the *ombudsman* has also been influenced by the contributions of Van Dalen and Deuze (2006), who identified the dichotomy between “reader’s advocates” and “newspapers’ ambassadors”, and by Evers (2012), who contrasted it with the figure of the *watchdog* and the *lightning rod*. In fact, his mission is not limited exclusively to the ethical sphere but it has a strategic dimension, linked to the management of business risks - a newspaper like *The New York Times* introduced the figure of the *public editor* after the plagiarism and fabrication scandal of journalist Jayson Blair-, to ensure credibility (Nolan and Marjoribanks, 2011). Evers points out that when we talk about issues of quality “professional ethics inevitably is a stake, as the concept of ‘journalistic quality’ contains several normative notions as well: reliability, credibility, accuracy and responsibility” (2012: 226). The correlation between quality and credibility has been highlighted by various researchers (Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Schatz and Schulz, 1992; Russ-Mohl, 1994; Metzger *et al.*, 2003; Maier, 2005) and their effects have been confirmed by recent studies from the Pew Research Center, which highlights that the media is not an exception in the equation that links quality loss and reader *desertion* (Enda and Mitchell, 2013).

Taking into account the globalising character of a complex concept as quality, understood as an “expression of different processes for obtaining and managing information, as a result of the

application of standards of impartiality and balance, contrast and plurality”, in addition to the requirement of variety and originality, research, deepening and independence (Gómez Mompert and Palau-Sampio, 2013: 35), we cannot establish a radical distinction between the informative product and the production circumstances which made it possible. In this sense, some studies have clearly identified the negative effects of certain formulas aimed at increasing profitability of the digital editions of important media, in the context of the search for a business model (O’Donnell and McKnight, 2012; Ramírez de la Piscina *et al.*, 2014; Palau-Sampio, 2016). To these signs of the increasing devaluation of quality we have to add the negative perception of news professionals - a 2014 survey revealed that 81% of Spanish journalists perceive a widespread loss of the capital values of the profession (Gómez, Gutiérrez & Palau, 2015) - and the insufficient trust of readers in the press - the 2012 Eurobarometer revealed, among other international indicators, that only 40% of the EU citizens trust the press (Several authors, 2012).

In this context, the figure of the *ombudsman* becomes the first recipient of complaints and criticism from readers, and at the same time, the authorised channel to highlight certain issues, i.e., to give them visibility in the public debate and offer means of resolution. The analysis of the activity of ombudsmen allows us to learn first-hand about the issues that concern the active readers of the international press the most and to establish who the media respond to their requests and complaints.

3. Hypotheses and methods

This research combines quantitative and qualitative methods to identify issues brought up by readers and to code the features of the texts published by the *ombudsman* of nine international newspapers of renowned trajectory from eight countries, based on the complaints and suggestions of their active readers, in a sample of articles published from January 2014 to December 2015. Taking into account the varied periodicity of the publications, we decided to choose the first monthly article that appeared in each newspaper. However, some periods of inactivity in the service, either for vacations or the rotation of people in the position, left the final sample of articles in about two hundred (N=197). The following table shows the media and ombudsmen and ombudswomen included in the sample:

Table 1. Media and readers’ representatives

Media	Figure and year of creation	Person in charge	Publication frequency
<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>Public Editor</i> (2003)	Margaret Sullivan (2012-2016)	Fortnightly /Variable
<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Reader’s editor</i> (1997)	Chris Elliott (2010-2016)	Weekly
<i>A Folha de São Paulo</i>	<i>Ombudsman</i> (1989)	Suzana Singer (April 2010-April 2014) Vera Guimarães Martins (May 2014-2016)	Weekly
<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>Médiateur</i> (1994)	Pascal Galinier (2011-2015, Sep.) Franck Nouchi (October 2015)	Variable
<i>El País</i>	Defensor del lector (1985)	Tomás Delclós (2012-2014); Lola Galán (2014-)	Variable
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Defensor del lector (1993)	Josep Roviroso (2010-2015)	Fortnightly

<i>Toronto Star</i>	<i>Public Editor</i> (1972)	Kathy English (2007-)	Variable
<i>O Público</i>	<i>Provedor do leitor</i> (1997)	José Paquete de Oliveira (2013-2016) [2]	Weekly
<i>Tribune de Genève-Tamedia</i> [3]	<i>Médiateur</i> (1998)	Daniel Cornu (1998)	Fortnightly

Source: Authors' own creation

The research is based on the following research hypotheses and questions:

H1: The figure of the *ombudsman* or reader advocate aims to ensure the quality of the publication, so that his work focuses on issues directly related to it. It derives in the following research question:

PI1: What topics are of concern the model readers – based on their activity and critiques - and are chosen by the *ombudsman* as representative?

H2: The performance of the ombudsmen and the sample of readers shows, on the one hand, certain mutual complicity since both subjects pursue the journalistic quality of the medium. However, the ombudsmen have a degree of important singularity, which will be analysed based on the following research questions:

RQ2: Who proposes the issues addressed in columns (readers or the *ombudsman*), and how are they identified in the text?

RQ3: How do the readers (re)presented by the *ombudsman* show their interest and concern for errors and deviations from good information?

RQ4: What sources are consulted by the *ombudsman* to back up his response to controversial issues?

RQ5: Which style of action is adopted by the *ombudsman* to handle complaints?

H3. *Ombudsmen* maintain an equidistant position regarding the publishing company and readers, but they never call into question the editorial line of the medium or openly criticise substantive aspects of it.

The following aspects will be considered to respond the research questions and test the hypotheses:

Table 2. Categories of analysis

Categories	Options
Issues addressed	Errors and formal aspects / content or editorial line / sources of information / ethical issues / participation and quality / Other
Proposal of themes, identification of the reader and channelling of the complaint	<i>Ombudsman</i> / Readers Identifies / do not identifies the reader

	Direct quotation / allusion / mixed / other (<i>ombudsman</i> raises the question)
Sources consulted by the <i>ombudsman</i> to resolve complaints	Journalists and managerial positions / external experts (scholars and researchers) / citations of authority and legal and deontological texts / mixed / None
Image of the model reader based on the complaints	Inquisitive / responsible, with own judgement / Punctilious / relies on the authority of the <i>ombudsman</i> / Other
Complaint resolution style	Explanatory / conciliator / self-oriented
Final conclusion of the <i>ombudsman</i>	Openly criticises the medium / Recognises the error and the need for amendment / States his desire for improvement in the future / Offers an open reflection / Defends the performance of the medium and his fellow professionals.

Source: Authors' own creation

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Issues and quality

Based on the quality variables identified in previous works (Gómez Mompart, Gutiérrez Lozano and Palau-Sampio, 2013, 2015), concerning the selection of issues by the media, the management of information, treatment and writing, we identified six areas of analysis directly related to quality:

Table 3. General categories of issues addressed by ombudsmen

Issues	Description
Errors and formal aspects	Care taken in the treatment of data to prevent factual errors. Inaccuracies that distort the news report. Dismissal of necessary or important details.
Content / Editorial aspects	Relating to the appropriateness in the treatment of the coverage of a particular topic, as well as issues related to proportional representation. Tendentious misrepresentations. Tendency to androcentrism.
Information sources	Anonymity and identification of the sources included in news reports. No consideration of all sources.
Ethical issues	Derived from the treatment of sensitive topics such as suicide, presumption of innocence, privacy, right to oblivion. Inappropriate use of sensitive photos. Intrusion of advertising in news content. Informative subjectivism.
Participation and quality	Referring to the contribution of readers' comments in online editions and enrichment or impoverishment of the debate.
Others	Issues not included in the previous sections.

Source: Authors' own creation

The results of the analysis indicate that the issues related are the priority of the ombudsmen, although the degree of attention to the other issues varies substantially, both in global terms and across media. The issues related to content and editorial aspects are addressed in almost one third of the analysed columns and are the preferred subject in newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *A Folha de São Paulo*, *The New York Times* and the Portuguese *O Público*. This trend is especially strong in the French newspaper -present in six of every ten articles-, which addresses issues such as the treatment of the election campaign and the crisis generated by changes in the management of the newspaper. Most readers' complaints that are commented by the two *ombudswomen of A Folha de São Paulo* are also related to the treatment of content, based on its framing – hardly neutral information that favours one particular candidate, as in “Apuração por telefone sem fio” (02.11.2014)-, because it dismisses certain questions or gives too little or too much attention to certain events (10 of 24 columns). The exposure of the complaints and criticisms sent to the *Provedor do Leitor* of *O Público* leads to controversies, sometimes bitter, between readers and journalists, in relation to the founding principles of the newspaper and issues that affect contents or their treatment. In *The New York Times* the complaints related to the editorial treatment (9 of 24) include protests about the unbalanced profiles offered on a police officer and a black teenager in articles that narrated the death of the latter by the former in Ferguson (“Meant as portraits, Seen as Hagiography”, 06.09.2014) and about the excessively elitist content offered by the newspaper (08.11.2014).

Errors and ethical or formal aspects represent, respectively, nearly a fifth of all the issues addressed. The first constitute the main theme in *The Guardian*, which dedicated a dozen of articles to the discussion of complaints about numerical and interpretation errors in a study, derived from the confusion of homophones terms and about the *Americanization* of English. Although to a lesser extent, *La Vanguardia* and *Toronto Star* also bet on these issues. In the case of the newspaper edited in Barcelona, one third of the analysed columns focus on errors and inconsistencies – for example, in the pixilation or not of a photo of police officers in the same issue, claiming that they used the criteria of the agency that provided the material. Josep Rovirosa recognises (“La calidad periodística”, 11.05.2014) that many readers denounce the loss of journalistic quality in recent years [4]. Of the 21 complaints received by the ombudswoman of the Canadian newspaper, more than one quarter are related to the practice of transcribing offensive words in full, which is considered outdated by the audience (14.04.2014); the inaccuracy about the name of the first Chief of Police of Toronto (24.04.2015); and the confusion about two citizens with the same name, but one which is guilty of fraud (“The unfortunate incident of two men with the same name”, 08.06.2015); and even errors in published puzzles (“Crossword lovers cross with Star”, 06.11.2015).

Ethical issues are a priority to the *médiateur* of *La Tribune de Genève-Tamedia*, with nine of the analysed articles addressing the dissemination of images of criminal acts, the limits of satire, the identification of people involved in a crime, the right to oblivion, the collusion between politicians and journalists and news on suicides. These issues are also a priority in *El País* –in six of 20 columns- together with issues related to content and editorial aspects, dealing with the shortage of women in opinion texts and informational pieces (“Mujeres invisibles”, 23.02.2014); articles and reports framing negatively institutions such as universities (“Críticas (de ida y vuelta) a la Universidad”, 14.12.2014) and trade unions; as well as readers' criticisms to news reports about the leaders of Podemos (“¿Ansía Iglesias un programa de televisión? Polémica por un titular alusivo a unas declaraciones del líder de Podemos”, 02.11.2014; and “Las lecciones del ‘caso Monedero’. Aluvión de críticas a la noticia sobre el currículo del “número tres” de Podemos”, 01/02/2015) and the positive treatment of the monarchy, through avoidance of themes (“Quejas por la falta de

información sobre la manifestación organizada coincidiendo con la visita de los Reyes a Oviedo”, 02.11.2014) and the lack of clarity in a headline about a survey on the acceptance of the soon-to-be King Felipe VI and the call for a referendum on the model of government (“La interpretación de los datos”, 15.06.2014).

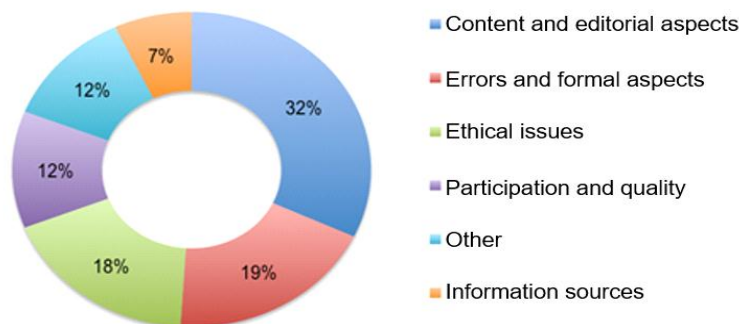
The quality of the participation of readers in the online editions is the fourth most discussed issue, based on the number of complaints received and the reflections of the *ombudsman*. Although this issue is less important than other issues in quantitative terms, it is a recurring subject in all newspapers - with the exception of *A Folha de São Paulo*. It is striking, however, that an issue as critical as information sources and their implications is the central topic of only 7% of the analysed columns. Of the news media included in the sample, *The New York Times* the most sensitive towards these issues.

Table 4. Issues addressed in columns

Media	Errors & formal aspects	Content/ Editorial aspects	Information sources	Ethical issues	Participation and quality	Other	Total articles
<i>The New York Times</i>	4	9	3	4	4	0	24
<i>The Guardian</i>	10	3	2	4	3	2	24
<i>A Folha de São Paulo</i>	5	10	1	4	0	4	24
<i>Le Monde</i>	0	11	1	0	2	4	18
<i>El País</i>	3	6	0	6	3	2	20
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	6	4	1	3	2	2	18
<i>Toronto Star</i>	6	4	2	3	3	3	21
<i>O Público</i>	2	10	1	3	4	4	24
<i>Tribune de Genève</i> Tamedia	1	6	2	9	3	3	24
TOTAL	37	63	13	36	24	24	197

Source: Authors’ own creation

Figure 1. Distribution by issues addressed



Source: Authors’ own creation

4.2. Handling of complaints

The handling of complaints by the sample of *ombudsmen* responds to different strategies, ranging from the origin of the issues covered to the identification or not of readers and the direct or indirect reference to their words. Although readers' suggestions have a substantial weight, it is important to note that the *ombudsman* have some autonomy to choose the issues to be addressed, which are the main subject of a quarter of all the analysed columns. In this sense, the *médiateur* of Tamedia imposes his agenda in two-thirds of the articles, as it also the case of *Toronto Star*, where the ombudswoman, perhaps because she has her own section about corrections, bets above all on free forums on ethical issues and the challenges of news-making, with reference to internal sources and international codes and media. In *La Vanguardia* and *Le Monde* the presence of readers as promoters of the interventions of their ombudsmen is a priority.

El País and *The New York Times* regularly identify readers - often including direct quotations of their complaints – with names, surnames and, sometimes, origin information, and depending on the issues treated, information about their direct relation to the issue of the complaint. In particular, there is a remarkable professional identification of readers in many examples, which introduces an element of prestige associated with the qualified profile of their audiences. This occurs in *El País* in cases about critical news about trade unions, political parties and educational institutions such as universities (“Críticas (de ida y vuelta) a la Universidad”, 14.12.2014).

When it comes to introducing readers, *Le Monde* chooses to include name and town in a systematic way, in addition to their quotes, which is common also in *The Guardian* and *La Vanguardia*. However, the *ombudsmen* of Tamedia, *O Público* and *A Folha de São Paulo*, identify and quote the senders only in exception cases. In the case of the Portuguese newspaper, it talks about ‘public’ readers in two cases: the Secretary of State of Public Administration (02.04.2014) and a group of unidentified politicians (02.03.2015). On one occasion, Minister Edinho Silva is the one who writes to the *ombudsman* Vera Guimarães of *A Folha São Paulo* (03.07.2015), to accuse the newspaper of “excluding and omitting words and altering facts”.

Table 5. Origin and identification of complaints

Media	Issues proposed by		Identified presence of readers		Type of reference to the complaints or suggestions in the text			Other
	Ombudsman	Readers	Yes	No	Indirect	Direct quote	Mixed	Ombudsman raises the issue
<i>The New York Times</i>	5	19	17	7	2	8	9	5
<i>The Guardian</i>	6	18	4	20	1	16	1	6
<i>A Folha de São Paulo</i>	2	22	5	19	13	5	4	2
<i>Le Monde</i>	2	16	16	2	-	16	-	2
<i>El País</i>	3	17	16	4	-	11	6	3
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	-	18	18	-	-	14	4	-
<i>Toronto Star</i>	14	7	5	16	-	5	2	14
<i>O Público</i>	3	21	5	19	15	5	1	3

<i>Tribune de Genève</i> <i>Tamedia</i>	15	9	2	22	4	5	-	15
TOTAL	50	147	88	109	35	85	27	50

Source: Authors' own creation

The sources used by *ombudsmen* to explain their responses differ greatly. While *The Guardian* and *A Folha* opt to consult government officials and journalists from the medium - and to a lesser extent opt to resolve the complaints without to resort to them-, the *médiateur* of Tamedia turns to sources of authority, and legal and ethical texts to support his argument, except in a minority of cases in which he does not uses them. *Le Monde*, for its part, has adopted a mixed formula that takes into account journalists from the same medium and, to a lesser extent, agents of authority. The combination of different sources occurs in a minority of cases in the three aforementioned newspapers. *La Vanguardia* is similar in its use of sources, although includes a greater number of external experts than members of the newspaper's staff, contrary to what happens in *O Público*. *The New York Times* offers more contrasting of sources and institutions of authority in the professional or institutional fields, depending on the issue, with the opinions of readers and the authors of the news pieces (in almost all the columns), while *El País* offers more contrasting of the opinions of the audience and the authors of the news or the management team (in this line, for example, its Deputy director, David Alandete is questioned by the *ombudsman* in four of the 20 columns). As mentioned, the commitment to freer forums in *Toronto Star* generates a predominant space of reflection on open issues, with variety of sources, mostly external, to document the coverage of the covered issues.

Table 6. Sources consulted for the resolution of complaints

	Journalists & senior management positions	External experts	Citations of authority and legal and ethical texts	Mixed	None
<i>The New York Times</i>	13	-	1	10	-
<i>The Guardian</i>	16	-	-	4	4
<i>A Folha de São Paulo</i>	13	-	3	-	8
<i>Le Monde</i>	8	-	5	4	1
<i>El País</i>	12	-	4	3	1
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	4	10	-	1	3
<i>Toronto Star</i>	5	-	5	9	2
<i>O Público</i>	9	5	2	1	7
<i>Tribune de Genève</i> <i>Tamedia</i>	-	-	16	4	4
TOTAL	80	15	36	36	30

Source: Authors' own creation

The information included by the *ombudsmen* in their columns to describe active readers is limited to identification data (ID, city of origin) and quotations of their letters. While this information is limited by the filter they impose, it allows readers to distinguish some features of the type of reader that is presented, either directly – the way the complaint is pronounced - or indirectly – the way the

complaint is presented. The issues raised by the *ombudsman* have been classified, due to the absence of more references to readers, under the category “other”. Corrections were also classified in the same section.

The most common profile is that of the responsible reader and with own judgement, which is reflected in almost a third of the columns of the *ombudsmen*, followed by the inquisitive reader - presented in a fifth of the columns -, the punctilious reader – present in 13% of the cases. The least common profile is the reader that trusts in the authority of the *ombudsman* to consult or ask for advice (7%).

Le Monde offers the clearest example of a responsible reader, largely sponsored by the model of citation of diverse senders who share different views and shades. It reflects a demanding reader who wants quality and, although sometimes also shows a certain inquisitive or punctilious attitude in the same text, it emphasises the critical character. *A Folha de São Paulo* tends to present the reader as a person with own judgement, perfectionist not only in the use of language, but also in the criticism of the abuse of “off the record” quotes (02.03.2014) and, very exceptionally, as an extremely obsessive receiver with the so-called political drift of the newspaper. This is the case of a reader who accuses the newspaper of “politicising the horoscope” during the election period, to which the *ombudsman* responds, after being sarcastic about the matter, that this angry criticism “só revela o grau de irracionalidade e conflagração política” (01.06.2014).

In *La Vanguardia* and *O Público* there is a predominant presence of the active reader with own judgement. However, there is also an important presence of the punctilious reader, who in the case of the newspaper edited in Barcelona criticises the lack of sensitivity in an obituary titled “La juez que se dejó a un preso olvidado en la prisión” (14.09.2014). The reader who relies on the authority of the *ombudsman* is also present in these newspapers as well as in *A Folha de São Paulo* and the columns of the *médiateur* of Tamedia. Although to a lesser extent, the *provedor* of *O Público* presents an inquisitive reader, who accuses the medium of disseminating rumours instead of fact-based news (06.10.2014), which is contrast with the reader that praises the newspaper for its critical treatment of the Portuguese football team in the World Cup (03.07.2014). Based on the quoting of readers’ questions and complaints, newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *El País* present a reader who is inquisitive towards the news coverage, and in particular towards the editorial criteria that justify the publication of texts, opinions and photographs. Less extensive exposure is given to opinions that go against the criteria of the newsroom. And although there is no presence of congratulations or prising towards the intermediation of the *ombudsman*, the latter does sometimes thanks the positive messages he gets from the audience.

The Guardian offers a more open panoramic view, which features a reader with own judgement, but also gives important weight to the punctilious reader, who demands greater attention to avoid factual mistakes and, although to a lesser extent. Also remarkable is the inquisitorial model, with references to readers who are able to reply with several emails (21.12.2014) or threaten to start a campaign against the newspaper (15.05.2015). The formula of the *médiateur* of Tamedia and the *public editor* of *Toronto Star* only provides details to identify the attitude of readers in a third of the columns. These newspapers depict readers who range from trust in the authority, through ethical questions; the inquisitive reader, who questions the potential conflicts of interest or asks compulsively for a rectification; and the responsible reader, who presents proposals of homogenisation, for example, in the identification of people involved in crimes. The ombudswoman of the *Toronto Star* stands in an

intermediary position that underlines her institutional role, even through forums that propose “games” related to the handling of complaints in the department of corrections, such as “When you where the editor” (10.01.2014) and “Are you smarter than a Star journalist” (04.09.2015). At the same time, it shows its support in favour of the punctilious reader when it criticises, for example, errors in the design of crosswords included in the print edition (“Crossword lovers cross with Star”), and states that “Whatever production issues need to be resolved, the Star cannot let down any of its readers on any of its platforms” (06.11.2015).

Table 7. Type of reader, based on the complaints addressed

	Inquisitive	Responsible, with own judgement	Punctilious	Trusting of the authority of the ombudsman	Other
<i>The New York Times</i>	10	5	2	-	7
<i>The Guardian</i>	3	8	6	-	7
<i>A Folha de São Paulo</i>	2	11	5	3	3
<i>Le Monde</i>	-	16	-	-	2
<i>El País</i>	9	4	4	-	3
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	1	9	4	4	-
<i>Toronto Star</i>	5	2	-	-	14
<i>O Público</i>	4	7	4	4	5
<i>Tribune de Genève Tamedia</i>	4	3	-	2	15
TOTAL	38	65	25	13	56

Source: Authors’ own creation

Taking into account the previous issues, we proceeded to classify the argumentative styles of the *ombudsmen* by establishing a relationship between the proposal of issues and their inclusion in the column of the readers’ advocate, the sources used to answer and the type of reader that is targeted. Based on the previous variables we identified three styles of performance: 1) explanatory: looks for answers from journalists and officials to address the complaint; 2) conciliator: presents different positions among readers and the consulted sources to show the different points of view in the debate; and 3) self-oriented: develops a wide reflection on the subject including various citations of authority, in the style of an opinion article.

The most widespread model is the explanatory one, which can be identified in newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *A Folha de São Paulo*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia*. Their proposals of issues tend to come mostly from readers’ complaints and requests, which are largely addressed by consulting officials and journalists who are competent in the subject matter. The performance of the *ombudsmen* of *Le Monde* and *Toronto Star* would be classified as conciliatory, which advocates more for the in-depth reflection on the issues, which are often raised by readers, in the first case, either by inserting their opinions of those of other sources, as it occurs mostly in the Canadian newspaper, and which serve to enrich the debate. Finally, the performance of the *ombudsmen* of *O Público* and *La Tribune de Genève-Tamedia* can be classified as self-oriented, based on the character of persons in charge, both longstanding and prestigious professionals, with

teaching experience, advocating for columns that enjoy great autonomy to propose issues and to introduce citations of authority and personal reflections, similarly to opinion texts.

Table 8. Performance style

Explanatory	Conciliator	Personalistic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The New York Times</i> • <i>The Guardian</i> • <i>A Folha de Sao Paulo</i> • <i>El País</i> • <i>La Vanguardia</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Le Monde</i> • <i>Toronto Star</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>O Público</i> • <i>La Tribune de Genève-Tamedia</i>

Source: Authors' own creation

4.3. Resolution models

The third hypothesis proposes that the *ombudsman* maintains an equidistant position regarding the publishing company and readers, but never calls into question the editorial line of the medium or openly criticises substantive aspects of it. Based on the analysis of responses, we have classified the balance offered by each of the ombudsmen into the following categories: 1) openly criticises the performance of the medium; 2) recognises the error and the need for amendment; 3) states his desire for improvement in the future; 4) Offers an open reflection; 5) defends the performance of the medium and his fellow professionals.

Table 9. Type of conclusión

Media	Openly criticises the performance	Recognises the error and the need for amendment	States his desire for improvement in the future	Offers an open reflection	Defends the medium and fellow professionals
<i>The New York Times</i>	5	8	-	6	5
<i>The Guardian</i>	-	2	6	7	9
<i>A Folha de São Paulo</i>	1	2	5	2	14
<i>Le Monde</i>	-		2	16	-
<i>El País</i>	1	8	4	4	3
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	3	3	9	-	3
<i>Toronto Star</i>	3	-	5	4	9
<i>O Público</i>	4	-	-	11	9
<i>Tribune de Genève Tamedia</i>	-		-	20	4
TOTAL	17	23	31	70	56

Source: Authors' own creation

The analysis reveals that the columns written by the *ombudsmen* are far from being a direct attack against the performance of their respective media, no matter how critical the intervention of readers is. Chris Elliot, in *The Guardian*, combines explicit defence of the actions of the medium – “I can’t find any evidence that the negative pieces outnumber the positive pieces by as much as ‘five to one’ (...) Anyway (...) *The Guardian* should not be a fanzine for any side” (6.07.2015) and “The reader is right that the MDGs came in 2001 (...) But that does not reach the threshold of a ‘significant’ error as set out in the editorial code (...). I reject the complaint (5.10.2015)-; with the expression of a desire for future improvement – “Hopefully we can encourage a smoother journey in 2015” (4.01.2015) and “Now both stories will be amended, footnoted and to correction published. We hope we won’t have to do it again” (1.11.2015)-; and the option of issuing open reflections: “The issue is simple: trust. It is important that journalists adhere as closely to the guidelines as possible if we are to retain the credibility that gives us such domain authority, even if we are occasionally a little late to the party” (6.7.2015). Two of the articles recognise the error and the need for amendment but do not delve into the production mistakes that caused them and point to an incorrect review and verification of data.

The mediators of *Le Monde* neither present a belligerent attitude, despite the fact that some readers questioned the treatment of political issues and the instability of the newspaper’s management. The *médiateur* until October 2015, Pascal Galinier, opted for open reflections – based on the principle that says the reader has the last word: “Le médiateur s’autoriserait-il à invoquer Shakespeare: ‘Beaucoup de bruit pour rien’? A l’interrogatif, cela va sans dire... Car la réponse appartient aux lecteurs. Comme toujours” (17.11.2014) - at the end of articles that emulate a debate among readers, which chains short quotes with the response of members of the editorial staff and their intervention, introducing rhetorical questions or transition phrases. His successor maintains the discursive style, but with conclusions that point to future improvements: “Sans trop tarder, une clarification, d’ordre éditorial s’entend, sera nécessaire” (20.11.2015) and the announcement of the organisation of forums with readers who want to know about the coverage of the election campaign (21.12. 2015).

The model of the *médiateur* of *La Tribune de Genève*-Tamedia, Daniel Cornu, tends inevitably to open reflections, not only because he bets on addressing issues that come, in few times, from readers’ complaints and, therefore, do not affect the media group - some columns refer to the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*- but also because when it does so, it opts for a general consideration: “Tout en précisant qu’une déclaration officielle, en soi, n’exempte pas le journaliste d’une réflexion éthique en situation et au regard des normes déontologiques de son métier” (3.03.2014). A fraction of his interventions constitutes a defence of the medium’s journalists – “Les rédactions lémaniques de Tamedia y sont exposées autant que d’autres. Malgré cela, le médiateur n’en voit aucune qui ne s’efforce à un équilibre raisonnable, acceptable par l’ensemble des lecteurs” (4.08.2014) - or his own honour - “Une caution? Pour le coup, c’est l’entendement du médiateur qui se trouve dépassé” (2.7.2015).

Like the previous two, the *provider* of *O Público* tends to prioritise the in-depth reflection in most of his columns, but also to defend the actions of the medium, regardless of some criticism that considers these actions to be weak or unjustified. He agrees that some aspects can be improved, but openly disagrees on the few cases in which there is clear a criticism against the newspaper, like when he affirms that the newspaper should have the freedom to cover the victory of Syriza in Greece over the hospital emergencies in Portugal with the balance that the newsroom considers to be professionally appropriate (16.02.2015).

The readers' advocate of *La Vanguardia* is characterised for its accommodationist style, which aims to have an impact on the improvement of quality and rarely comes to objectively and directly criticise the newspaper, except when, for example, a researcher complains his biomedical discovery has been trivialised (09.11.2014). The advocate has no problem, when he sees appropriate, to recognise errors and, consequently, to accept his obligation to rectify them, also in the digital edition, in which –he explains– there is no errata sheet (12.10.2014).

The two *ombudsmen* of *A Folha de São Paulo* show a conciliatory attitude in general terms, but without renouncing to the defence of the actions of their medium, even when a mistake is acknowledged and the need for amendment is accepted and when they receive open and strong criticism. Thus, for example, Vera Guimarães, after pointing out that the politics editor has recognised that it is an error to use put inverted commas around the term “jovens liberais” - although without the intention of disqualifying the people affected by it - explains that they have received threats on social networks and concludes that: “Presionar o jornal é regra do jogo democrático. Ameaçar a integridade do profissional é coisa de fascista, não de liberal” (01.02.2015). The same *ombudswoman* defends the “a soberania do direito de opinião” from the anger of the Jewish community towards an opinion column by Ricardo Melo, who claims that “Israel es una aberración; los judíos no” and advocates for the construction of a single State, where Arabs and Jews live together in harmony. On another occasion (01.03.2015), under the title “Teoria conspiratória nº 8.667”, Vera Guimarães states that: “Una das partes mais difíceis da função de *ombudsman* é separar o joio do trigo nas mensagens que recebe. Por joio entendam-se as reclamações dos militantes a soldo. O trigo são os leitores reais”.

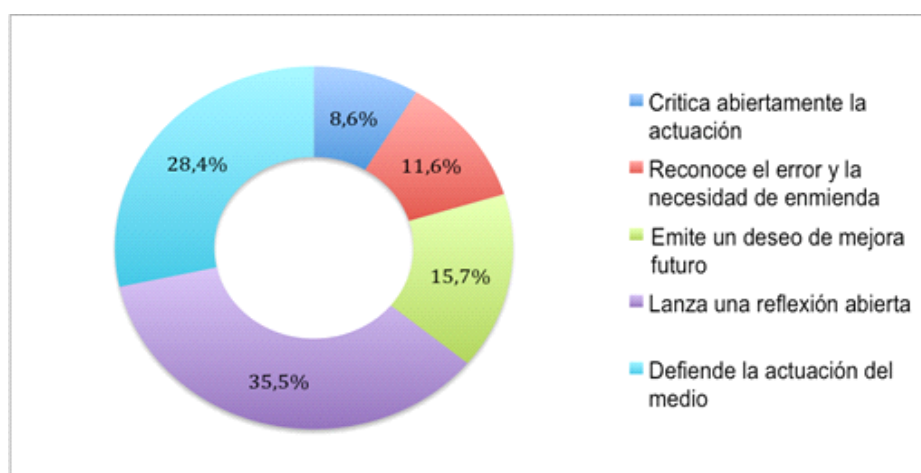
The modes of resolution adopted by the *ombudswoman* of the *Toronto Star* highlight her role as a defender of journalism, not so much because she aligns herself with the allegations of the medium's journalists (there presence of issues raised by readers her is lower than in other media) but because the conciliatory content of her editorials tries to strengthen the role played by the medium and its newsroom and to open avenues of improvement based on the reflection on sensitive issues. This does not prevent the *ombudswoman* from censuring the newspaper in some cases, like in an example of racial discrimination (“Hurtful stereotypes don't belong in Toronto Star”, 08.05.2015). In her work as mediator she even closes ranks with the newspaper's decision of deleting comments in its online edition, trying not to scare away readers from her column when responding to the complaints raised: “The Star well understands this and has made clear that shutting down comments on website articles, it is no shutting out conversation and reader engagement” (18.12.2015).

According to this study, the two newspapers that, in quantitative terms, embrace criticism and the accept the need for amendment the most are *The New York Times* and *El País*. However, the *ombudsman* of the American newspaper reflects more strength in some of its criticisms, like when he censors the confusion between news and opinions (“An Uneasy Mix of News and Opinion”, 10.01.2015), or when he defines the limits of the agenda of the newspaper: “The upscale doughnut and the penthouse apartment –lofty as they may be- have nothing to do with The Time's highest purpose” (08.11.2014).

In the case of *El País*, the most explicit criticism responds to an omission in a news report on a demonstration which took place on the occasion of the Prince of Asturias Awards: “Fue un error de valoración el no hacer referencia a la tradicional manifestación que acompaña a los premios (...) Efectivamente, las agencias, y otros medios, sí informaron de la concentración” (02.11.2014). The

rest of the times, the *ombudsman* tries to explain the production process that led to a particular edition, without questioning the medium’s editorial criteria. This occurs on several occasions when the *ombudsman* addresses complaints about news concerning the Podemos political party. The *ombudsman* of *El País* analyses, in a case by case basis, the complaints about the party and its leaders, and even amends a specific coverage (for example, when the resume of Podemos’s leader, Juan Carlos Monedero, is questioned: “Llevar el tema a portada era muy arriesgado. La única forma de atenuar el error hubiera sido publicar adecuadamente la puntualización y la carta de la Universidad de Puebla. Lamentablemente, no se hizo”, 01.02.2015). However, the *ombudsman* does not offer in-depth explanations about the editorial line of the newspaper.

Figure 2. Type of resolutions adopted by ombudsmen



Source: Authors’ own creation

In contrast, *The New York Times* adopts a different position. Its ombudswoman addresses, in two editorials, the recurrent scandal caused by Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server during her time as Secretary of State. The ombudswoman expresses her agreement with readers’ open complaints against the newspaper’s critical position to cover this issue. She even warns on two occasions of the need for vigilance and amendment: “There are lessons to be learned from this episode. As *The Times* continues to cover Mrs. Clinton into 2016, it will be dealing with dozens of dust-ups like this one (...). Attacks on the reporting will come no matter what. “But *The Times* can do itself - and its readers - a lot of good by making sure that every story is airtight: solidly sourced, written with particular clarity and impartiality, and edited with a prosecutorial eye” (07.03.2015). Despite the warning, readers’ criticism increased, so that another editorial (“The Tortured Tale of Hillary Clinton and *The Times*”, 01.08.2015) insisted on her stance, defending her work as the readers’ advocate: “Times readers (and on their behalf, I, too) will be watching and evaluating that over the next months. No one should expect a free ride for Mrs. Clinton. But she certainly deserves a fair shake”.

5. Conclusions

The figure of the *ombudsman* constitutes one of the tools for social responsibility available to the press, hence its importance as an instrument to ensure transparency, independence and quality of contents. However, it is far from being universal or immune to business uncertainty. The importance

of the *ombudsman* has been reflected in various publications, however, there is limited work on the real interaction between the *ombudsman* and the active readers. The development of this work involves assuming the limitation of access, exclusively, to complaints that the *ombudsman* decides to make public in his columns and to the particular way of doing it.

The findings of this study highlight the centrality of journalistic quality in the debate, but also the diplomacy with which many of the issues are addressed, more with an attitude of defence or justification than with a real will to get to the bottom and admit the causes of failures or errors in news coverage to readers. In this sense, although the content and editorial aspects and the ethical issues account for half of the questions addressed by ombudsmen, the most dominant complaint resolution models moderate the response of the *ombudsman* to the criticisms that may question the editorial principles of the medium.

However, the image of the active readers outlined by the readers' advocates is far from being mostly hostile to the medium. There is a predominance of the reader with own judgement, i.e. a reader who provides complementary views that enrich the debate, against the inquisitive reader, who demands explanations with rudeness, and the punctilious and extremely perfectionist reader, particularly in formal issues and aspects related to written expression. The role played by the *ombudsman* faces limitations imposed by his unusual position between the newsroom and readers, its trust-based position in the management team, with the ability to ask for explanations to journalists and editorial positions, and to guide models of responsibility. The skills of the *ombudsman* are more in the field of volunteerism than on real action, since he has no punitive powers. This circumstance is also evident in the styles of performance, which make the explanatory model the most frequently used, and to a lesser extent the conciliatory and self-oriented styles.

Facing the development of future research, a longitudinal study or comparison of the work of various *ombudsman* in a same way could contribute to deepen the knowledge of this figure.

6. Notes

1. *Ombudsman* is a Scandinavian term that resulted from the fusion of the words *ombud* (representative) and *man* (person). It first appeared in Sweden's 1809 constitution to refer –in a country exhausted by war and bad crops – to the people's advocate, appointed by the Parliament to guarantee the General and individual rights (Nilsson, 1986) call.
2. Died on 11 June 2016.
3. The *médiateur* of *Tribune de Genève* is responsible for this task in all the French-language newspapers of the Tamedia Group.
4. Precisely during his deposition, he reviewed the book edited by the authors of this article (Gómez Mompart, Gutiérrez Lozano, Palau Sampio, 2013), emphasising the difficulties to achieve professional excellence and highlighting the complexity of its definition, but also recognising - quoting the researchers- that any journalist can easily intuit when and why a news report or the treatment of a subject has or not journalistic quality.

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"https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/bb96db02-76b5-4ae8-a8d2-7ba24feb3f8c/etd_pdf/6a3822bc9c8e59845ee9045917d23729/quixad-newspaperombudsmanshipincanadatheriseandfall.pdf" [ombudsman](#) [HYPERLINK](#)
"https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/bb96db02-76b5-4ae8-a8d2-7ba24feb3f8c/etd_pdf/6a3822bc9c8e59845ee9045917d23729/quixad-newspaperombudsmanshipincanadatheriseandfall.pdf" [shipincanadatheriseandfall.pdf](#)

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