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The ombudsman’s role
in the eyes of the newsroom

- Results of a survey among Portuguese journalists

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Abstract:

Created just a few decades ago, the role of the press ombudsman is played in rather different ways according to the specific contexts in which he works and to the concrete persons who interpret the job.

The multiplicity of definitions of the ombudsman's main functions allows, nevertheless, some consensus about the fact that he has some influence both outside and inside the newspaper. His relationship with the readers is, of course, a very important part of his work, perhaps the most important one (in some countries he is even called "the readers' representative" or "the readers' advocate"); but the impact of his inquiries and statements inside the newsroom shouldn't be forgotten too, since it is a relevant way of calling the attention to problems that the fast day-to-day routines tend sometimes to forget.

Our study, based on a survey among Portuguese journalists - more specifically, among the journalists of the three Portuguese daily newspapers with an ombudsman -, focuses on the

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"internal role" of the press ombudsman, that is to say, how he interacts with the newsroom and how the newsroom regards him and deals with him.

The results of this survey suggest that the journalists working in these newspapers have, generally, a very positive feeling about the ombudsman's job, even if they don't always agree with his judgements or if they are criticized by him.

The fact that he regularly brings to internal debate and reflection some important ethical and professional issues, together with a broad feed-back from the readers' viewpoints, makes him a relevant agent of professional education - not at school but in the newspaper itself, and always with real cases as starting points -, helping journalists to develop a more careful and critical approach to their daily work.

Besides that, the results of the survey suggest that the journalists themselves are conscious of the importance of the ombudsman's "internal role", emphasizing his contribution to a more careful reporting, together with a more transparent and accountable attitude of the newspaper towards its readers.

Key words: *ombudsman, journalists, ethics, professional education*

1. Background

Created only a few years ago¹, the press ombudsman or news ombudsman — whom the Portuguese media call “Provedor do Leitor” — is still looking for a clearer and more consensual definition of his role, his functions, his meaning.

This role is played in rather different ways according to the general context in which it is carried out — the present ombudsman of the Spanish newspaper “La Vanguardia” (Barcelona), Josep María Casasús, sustains that substantial differences can be found between American ombudsmen, on one hand, and European ombudsmen, on the other (Casasús, 2000) —, but, more than that, according to the specific newspapers with such a job and to the concrete persons who interpret it. Some surveys made within the international organization which associates most of the press ombudsmen (the ONO — Organization of News Ombudsmen), as well as some research made by media specialists among the ombudsmen themselves, all seem to point to the same conclusion: that “the role of ombudsman cannot be unambiguously defined even by those who occupy the role” (Ettema and Glasser, 1987:12). If we extend the survey to all the partners anyhow touched by this job — readers, journalists, newspapers’ editors and publishers —, much wider is the variety of perceptions and opinions about what exactly is (or should be) and what exactly does (or should do) a press ombudsman².

Either for the advocates or for the opponents of this institution, either for the more enthusiastic or the more skeptical about its present and potential future, there seem to be five particular items of discussion about the press ombudsman: his **independence**, his **autonomy**, his main **role** among a set of possibilities, his **power(s)** and, finally, his degree of **utility and effectiveness** for the various actors involved in the process of gathering, producing, publishing and receiving news.

1.1. Independence

The ‘presumption of independence’ appears to be an essential requirement for the external credibility of someone who, being commissioned to criticize the newspaper in its

own pages, and doing so specially in the name of the readers, cannot be suspected of acting just as one among other organization's employees — that is to say, someone submitted to the newsroom's chain of command, or to the company's commercial strategies or industrial constraints. We know, nevertheless, that the ombudsmen, at least in formal terms, are in fact employees of the media organization, being chosen, appointed and paid by its editor and publisher. Besides that, in some situations the ombudsman comes directly from within the group of the newspaper's journalists.

We can wonder if this apparent contradiction is irremediable, holding the ombudsman hostage of a double and eventually conflicting *duty of loyalty*— both to the readers (outside) and to the newspaper (inside) —, making him “[suffer] the unease of every ‘go-between’, to whom usually is reserved the fate of being on bad terms both with God and the Devil” (Mesquita, 1998a: 17). Or does it happen that, in spite of this, people called to fill such a position “believe, perhaps naively, in the possibility of harmonizing loyalty towards the organization, the journalists and the readers” (*ib.*: 26)?

Although the experiences seem to be rather different worldwide, at least in the Portuguese case we can notice a strong will to be cautious about this — and to give the public some guarantees, beginning at the formal level, in order to safeguard the ‘presumption of independence’: the *statute*, or *chart of rights and duties* of the press ombudsman, which is a document publicly known (and by so can be regarded as a kind of contract between the newspaper and the readers) defines certain basic principles of his work, asserting for instance that he is “an independent entity whose mission is to ensure the defense of the readers’ rights”³ or that “the ombudsman will carry out his job with complete autonomy and independence towards any other organ of the newspaper or of the company”⁴ — and even defining a limited term (two or three years, in the above mentioned cases) for the ombudsman’s commission, during which he cannot be removed from the job.

On the other hand, the direct observation of these ombudsmanship experiences in Portugal, as well as the reports made by some of its protagonists, undoubtedly suggest that, in spite of incidental tensions and difficulties, it has been possible to act with real independence in face of the newspaper’s and company’s powers — actually, for the benefit of their own image in the public opinion...

According to some opinions, this ‘presumption of independence’ is clearly enhanced when the newspaper decides to appoint an ombudsman from outside its own newsroom. The advantages of this option seem obvious, though there are some disadvantages to consider: a weaker knowledge of the way of working, and of the specific culture of the organization you are going to deal with, can bear mutual misunderstandings or tensions in the newsroom, making dialogue more difficult and limiting (if not jeopardizing) the effectiveness of the ombudsman’s role. This is said assuming (as we will see below) that the ombudsman always tries to have some influence both *inside* and *outside* the newspaper.

1.2. Autonomy

Somehow related to the question of independence, the question of the ombudsman’s autonomy leads us to other domains, more vague but by no means less sensitive. What it’s all about is to know if, apart from his good will and his genuine effort of reflexive distance towards the universe he intends to analyze and criticize, an ombudsman (coming from the journalistic milieu, as it happens in most cases) has *subjective conditions* to do it.

We face here, as Christopher Meyers points out in a recent article, the difficulty of ombudsmen usually being “seasoned journalists, deeply enmeshed in the profession’s ethos” (Meyers, 2000: 253). And the question is if a deep knowledge of the practices and of the professional values of journalism, although advisable for this task, doesn’t bring together, in

such situations, a real incapacity to break up with them when it is the case. That's why Meyers suggests that the most adequate profile for the ombudsman's job is that of someone who has been a journalist, yes, but who has "resigned at a relatively young age to pursue a different career path" (*ib.*: 254), for instance in the academic field; that should be the way for the ombudsman to have, regarding journalism, both "an insider's understanding and an outsider's critical eye" (*ib.*: 254).

The same concern is expressed by Theodore Glasser when he says that ombudsmen, often with a years-long experience in the newsroom, "tend to explain, and after all to justify, rather than question and criticize, the traditions and values of journalism in the big media" (Glasser, 1999: 282). Although he admits that ombudsmen use their public columns "to reproach their newspapers if they violate the principles of professional journalism", Glasser sticks at his doubts: "But their comment usually aims at the judgement error of an individual. They implicitly accept and quote the institutional standards and the newsroom values (on which professional rules are based); they seldom question them" (*ib.*: 283).

We would, so, remain captive of a system that reproduces and justifies itself, occasionally 'changing some details so that everything remains unchanged'. And, as James Carey — still quoted by Glasser (*ib.*: 283) — said years ago, "we don't want the press to educate us about the press (...)".

We acknowledge the relevancy of this dilemma (which means a permanent challenge for any press ombudsman who comes to this position directly from the active journalism) but still we find it difficult to make final judgements about it.

On one hand, the actual experiences we have been studying, as far as press ombudsmanship is concerned, show some evidence of a real ability for ombudsmen to regard the media system "from the outside" and to criticize it — and, by doing so, helping readers to understand it better, to put it in perspective, to 'dismount' and somehow demystify it, to achieve some critical distance towards it. This doesn't only help *the reader* in his/her relationship with the newspaper, but it helps *the act of reading* too, since one of ombudsman's tasks is precisely to "analyze and criticize aspects of the media functioning and discourse that can have an influence upon their receivers" (Mesquita, 1998a: 10).

On the other hand, the ombudsman doesn't keep (and he shouldn't keep anyway) the monopoly of media criticism. He is one of the possible (and desirable) mechanisms to provide media accountability, but mustn't overlap others or prevent their development⁵. And if, in order to fulfil his specific function both as outsider and insider critic, the ombudsman has some obvious advantages by having been more or less closely enmeshed in active journalism (which grants him a professional recognition and moral authority in the newsroom that would be much more difficult for a total outsider), maybe this is a fair price to pay for the sake of his work's effectiveness. Actually, the ombudsman's credibility near the journalists seems to be a basic condition for him to succeed in his work (Langlois and Sauvageau, 1989).

Along with the ombudsman, other mechanisms for journalism criticism and self-regulation should be created and stimulated, either from the newspapers' side or from the readers' side, in order to enlarge the set of efforts to make a more accountable press and a better, more demanding, reading ability — for which a systematic and in-depth critic of the 'journalistic reason' itself is, of course, a major contribution.

1.3. Role

The fact that the ombudsman position has so different names according to the countries where he exists (from the original Swedish "*ombudsman*" to the French "*médiateur*" [mediator], the Spanish "*defensor del lector*" [readers' defender, protector], the American "*readers' representative*", "*readers' advocate*" or the English "*readers' editor*") is,

in itself, an eloquent sign of the fact that rather different roles are committed, directly or indirectly, to this job. That is to say, it is regarded with rather different expectations too.

According to Daniel Cornu, “the ombudsman or ‘*médiateur*’ represents an intermediate instance between the traditional regulation organs and the individual consciousness” (Cornu, 1997: 25). The word ‘intermediate’ seems to adjust especially well to the definition (whatever it may be) of the ombudsman’s role. With more or less variations, ombudsmen seem to look for, and find, their role always *somewhere between two poles*, the ones more contentious, the others more complementary: between the readers’ pole and the journalists’ pole (or making themselves the ‘bridge’ that links them and favouring a two-way communication); between the pole of exposition/ condemnation of the newspapers’ mistakes and the pole of explanation (no to say justification) of the constraints that might be at its origin; between the pole of the ‘public relations practitioner’ and the ‘press critic’ one.

Among the several possible instruments intended to fulfil and reinforce the social responsibility of the media⁶, some voices consider ombudsmen as “specially interesting because they have the potential to provide both internal and external accountability” (Pritchard, 1993: 78). His role, actually, focuses both on the inside (the newsroom, the newspaper) and on the outside (the readers, the public in general). Regarding the seven specific functions attributed to the ombudsman by Mesquita — a. *critical and symbolical*; b. *mediative*; c. *corrective*; d. *persuasive*; e. *pedagogical*; f. *dissuasive*; g. *civic* (Mesquita, 1998a: 16/17) —, it looks clear that some of them emphasize the ombudsman’s ‘external role’ (the *critical and symbolical*, the *civic*), and others his ‘internal role’ (the *corrective*, the *persuasive*, the *dissuasive*), while some of them share both spheres, namely the *pedagogical* and the *mediative* functions, this last one intending precisely to put them in contact and interaction.

The question raised here and there is if some of these intervention levels don’t have to do more with a *public relations* practice than with a *press criticism* purpose — the only one that, according to these more skeptical voices, should be expected from a genuine news ombudsman in his original conception (Ettema and Glasser, 1987). In a survey carried out by Ettema and Glasser among American ombudsmen, they concluded that “ombudsmen’s own conceptions of their role, their orientations and their attitudes provide an ambiguous answer to the question of whether ombudsmen are press critics or public relations practitioners” (*ib.*: 11). Actually, some activities usually related to the public relations practice are considered very important to the ombudsmen’s function but, when asked directly, they don’t recognize them as such. “The ombudsmen seem able to embrace several conflicting orientations”, insist Ettema and Glasser (*ib.*: 11), referring not only to this permanent dilemma but also to its roots: the potential conflict of the ombudsman’s loyalties, either to the newspaper or to the readers.

We can take for granted that, to some extent, the ombudsman’s position obliges him to combine and to balance these two loyalties, feeling himself somehow the “*servant of two masters*”, as those authors refer. But, recalling our own experience as ombudsman in a Portuguese daily, as well as other ombudsman’s work and evidence, we don’t think they find it difficult or impossible to recognize it. On the contrary, the lucid awareness of these constraints and the need to find a balanced view to deal with them in the day-to-day work — not raising too high expectations about the importance of his role, but not just giving up because of its obvious and unavoidable limitations — seems to be a very important condition for him to effectively perform this task. The challenge is, after all, to find a way of living with this insoluble dilemma coming from the fact that the newspaper’s editors, on the one hand, “reject a ‘strong’ ombudsman who would speak on behalf of the readers because on anticipated morale problems in the organization” but, on the other hand, “also reject a ‘weak’

ombudsman who would speak on behalf of the organization because that would be ‘mere public relations’” (*ib.*: 5).

Placed on this contradiction, and perfectly conscious of it, ombudsmen try then to do their work and to have some influence both outdoors and indoors. It doesn't seem too strange that some of their activities may play a role near to the public relations purposes, in the sense that they ‘open the windows’ of a traditionally closed institution (as the journalistic organizations always used to be), making it more transparent in the eyes of the readers, and simultaneously more aware of what its public thinks about it. And transparency in journalism, it must be underlined, is not only a question of public relations, marketing or corporate image; it's a question of ethics too: as Stephen J. Ward puts it, “the buzz word in journalistic ethics is ‘transparency’” (Ward, 2001).

If the ombudsman doesn't go beyond some ‘public relations practice’, we could question the interest of investing in such an institution as an accountability and self-regulation mechanism; but if we expect him to be nothing else than a ‘press critic’ (that is to say, giving away his role as a mediator between the readers and the newsroom), we could lose something relevant too. Other “media accountability systems”, apart from the ombudsman, can carry out that mission without the mediation concern and purpose.

1.4. Power

As the first Portuguese press ombudsman, Mário Mesquita, uses to say, the major power of an ombudsman is the “power of influence and of speech” (Mesquita, 1998a: 15) — a symbolic power that shouldn't be depreciated, since it is performed in a public way, in the very pages of the newspaper, and as a result of its voluntary choice. Still, not everybody finds this power strong enough, because it doesn't go together with any formal authority for a concrete intervention in the newspaper's regular work; this would explain, they say, the fact that the ombudsman doesn't show much practical efficacy, and the fact that many readers apparently don't find it very useful to appeal to his services.

That seems to be the case of Christopher Meyers, whose study (referred behind) insists not only in the advantage for an ombudsman to be someone with a deep and subtle knowledge of the professional journalistic *ethos* without being directly immersed in it, but also in the need to grant him a stronger authority, together with real powers to interfere in the newspaper and in the journalists' work. According to his opinion, press, in the context of seeking “to re-establish public trust” avoiding “the path of greater external regulation”, is urged to “develop more credible self-policing” (Meyers, 2000: 251).

The danger of transforming the ombudsman in some kind of “ethics cop” (a danger acknowledged by Meyers himself – cf. *ib.*: 252), though may seem popular to a more primary, or punitive, conception of this function by the readers, brings, in our understanding, some serious menaces to a job whose main advantages and particularities remain in its *mediative* and *pedagogical* profile. Besides, those conceptions could open the way to power overlaps and conflicts inside the newsroom. That seems difficult to accept and deal with, because the ombudsman should neither take the place of the formal authority of those who have the responsibility to run the newspaper, nor duplicate jurisdictions in this area, nor even take the place of the ethical consciousness of the journalists. Besides this, such a scenario risked to be not very effective in the long run, because it would destroy more than build ‘bridges’ between the main actors of the information process, reinforcing the defensive reactions of a professional group (the journalists) traditionally so inclined to be closed.

In this context, some newspapers question the utility of an ombudsman (we shouldn't forget that such job adds a new salary to the company's payroll...), suggesting instead that the real ombudsman, the real “readers' advocate”, should be the editor himself, followed by his

nearest staff. This idea, endorsed apparently for the sake of more effectiveness, bears two problems.

On the *principles level*, and even if we admit that an ombudsman is not totally immune to the professional *ethos*, it seems obvious that the newspapers' editor, as first responsible for the editorial choices, is in a much weaker condition to look at the newspaper in a neutral, critical, independent way. He lives completely enmeshed in the professional practices and values, as well as in the multiple constraints of the journalistic work which help so often to understand (but not necessarily to forgive) certain mistakes, judgement errors or ethical weaknesses.

On the *practical level*, this would be a completely useless alternative. It's not just a coincidence that most complaints received by the press ombudsmen (at least in the Portuguese case) stress the difficulty of readers to have access to someone responsible in the newspaper — or the pure lack of answer, when the contact is made by letter or e-mail. That doesn't happen necessarily because of unwillingness to listen to the readers and to speak with them (a task that an ombudsman carries out by definition), but because of the obvious time pressures of the daily routine in a newsroom.

We think that this “power of influence and of speech” is a fairly reasonable power, especially in a domain where the practical results of this work are not easily measurable. The ‘power to recommend’, and to do it publicly — allowing readers to scrutinize later to what extent those recommendations have, or have not, been followed — is not a minor power too, in the context of this effort to increase the critical capacity of readers to read their newspaper. As Langlois and Sauvageau also put it, the ombudsmen's visibility, “specially when they write a public column in the newspaper”, is their “main trump card” (Langlois and Sauvageau, 1989: 209).

1.5. Utility / Effectiveness

We could, finally, ask ourselves if an ombudsman with so limited *real* powers can still be of some use to a self-regulation purpose and to a more demanding readers/ newspapers relationship.

The study by David Pritchard about the ombudsman's impact in the journalists' professional attitudes refers to other studies in the same area (led by Neil Nemeth, by David Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit, by Simon Langlois and Florian Sauvageau — cf. Pritchard, 1993: 80), which suggest that the simple existence of an ombudsman makes the journalists more careful in their work. And this *dissuasive function* can act in two ways, one more ‘positive’ and one more ‘negative’: “Newspapers that designate a staff member to be an ombudsman may have organizational cultures that foster careful work; journalists may be socialized into the organizational culture. Alternatively, journalists at newspapers with ombudsmen may fear the possible consequences of an ombudsman's scrutiny, such as black marks in their personnel files or public criticism” (Pritchard, 1993: 81, note 15).

It must be said that, after his own survey (comparing opinions from newspapers with and without an ombudsman), Pritchard concluded that the presence of this entity doesn't lead, by itself, to substantial differences in the way journalists behave in some controversial matters, for instance those concerning newsgathering techniques. Nevertheless, he also concluded that journalists working in newspapers with an ombudsman had “a more positive view of their newspaper's performance” (*ib.*: 85).

This result seems to endorse an opinion that we share too: more than creating a culture of professional high standards of fairness and accuracy, as well as ethical concern, in newspapers where it wouldn't exist, the ombudsman appears as a consequence of it, in newspapers where that concern already somehow exists. And he feeds it, he develops it, he

gives it new ways of expression, either through the contributions he gets (and shares) from people outside the journalistic *ethos*, or through his own critical and qualified contribution, made possible by his reasonably independent point of observation. As Pritchard says, quoting Weaver and Wilhoit study in this matter, “newsroom learning” seems to be “by far the most important influence in shaping journalists’ ideas about journalism ethics” (*ib.*: 86).

If it is so, and we think it is, then we should probably review the proper means and criteria of ‘measuring’ the ombudsman’s effectiveness. If he is, as the former Portuguese ombudsman Jorge Wemans suggests, the “crystallizer of a debate and of an attention already existent, and desired”, in the newsroom (Wemans, 1999: 20); if, as another Portuguese former ombudsman, Mário Mesquita, claims, “the ombudsman’s role can only be entirely played if there is a minimum agreement about the ethical principles between the internal hierarchy, the journalists and the ombudsman itself” (Mesquita, 1998b: 84), then his essential utility consists precisely in giving substance and strength to this reality. And, because he has a broader sphere of influence both inside the newsroom and outside, near the readers — developing their capacity of civic participation, because he gives them critical information about the information process itself —, then it shouldn’t be a waste of time or of money. Of course the media organizations have some benefits in terms of image (“ethics sells”, as Victoria Camps reminds us); but journalists and readers can benefit as well.

The results of the survey presented below seem to confirm this perspective. Even if he doesn’t cause immediate and visible changes in the newspaper, even if he doesn’t has the power to do it, the ombudsman is still regarded by the majority of journalists not only as useful but also as effective, naturally within the limited boundaries of his status and proceedings. He may not create an ambience of attention, fairness, ethical concern and self-criticism capacity in the newsroom, precisely because it already somehow pre-exists; but he brings a *supplement* of stimulus to that attention, to that concern, to the desire of critical and self-critical ability, permanently refreshing them — with the precious contribution of readers.

2. Purpose of the study

Assuming that an important part of the ombudsman’s work echoes *inside* the newspaper, we tried to find out how journalists regard this institution — considered in general terms, as far as the function is concerned, but also in particular terms, as far as the real experience of journalists dealing with an ombudsman in their own newspaper is concerned.

We face here an accountability mechanism that clearly belongs to the domain of the journalistic self-regulation, and as such divides the opinions: not few professionals would prefer to keep only for internal meetings the discussion of issues sometimes very sensitive (as Donald Mogavero puts it, media industry in one “where internal criticism, at least on a formal basis, is a rather rare commodity” – Mogavero, 1982: 552), while others find it useful and necessary to share them with the readers, opening an opportunity for some interactions and improvements.

In the sequence of our own experience, during two years, as ombudsman in the Portuguese daily “Público”, we made an opinion survey among journalists, to try to understand how they regard this entity, how important they consider it, how they deal with it, where do they ‘place’ it in the logic of the media organization, how effective do they judge it, which role do they (or would they like to) grant it in this effort to achieve a broader and more systematic reflection about the journalistic work, as well as the ethical demands that go with it.

By doing this, we also tried to understand to what extent, and in what mood, the existence of an ombudsman somehow contributes to a sort of on-going professional education of the journalists, bringing to the newsroom and to their routine work a permanent demand both of individual reflection and of collective debate about professional and ethical issues. A better knowledge and concern about the way journalists' work is received and interpreted by the readers can, we argue, help to enhance a professional consciousness of the information responsibilities — and can move journalists to the urge of a more transparent attitude towards the public. That's what accountability is about, after all.

3. Methodology

The study was based on a survey addressed to all the full-time journalists working in the three Portuguese dailies where there was an ombudsman at the time (June/July 2001): “Público”, “Diário de Notícias” and “Jornal de Notícias” (below designed by the letters A, B and C, randomly attributed).

In order to preserve anonymity, the questionnaires were sent by mail to each journalist, together with an answer envelope, already stamped and addressed to Universidade do Minho, where we work.

A first version of the questionnaire was pre-tested by seven journalists of different characteristics (sex, age, academic degrees, years of experience, professional status) and revised subsequently.

The inquiry *consisted* of 25 close-ended questions, the journalists being requested to choose one of several possibilities presented (in some cases, they were asked to choose more than one, numbering them in order of importance on a 3-point scale). Apart from that, several questions gave the inquired the opportunity to explain and/or comment their choices, or even to add new items to those suggested. A last question was open-ended and gave the opportunity for some comments about the subject — 25% of the inquired did it.

A set of questions referred to the actual experience of the journalist in “his/her” newspaper and with “his/her” ombudsman, while another set asked his/her opinion, in more general terms, about the “ombudsman as an institution”.

A couple of identification elements was required from the respondents — newspaper, gender, age, academic degrees, specialized studies in media or communication areas, years of professional experience, kind of professional experience, professional status —, in order to allow us, without breaking the pre-defined condition of anonymity, to compare the results within some sub-categories.

Data were analyzed using the SPSS program, version 10.0.

4. The sample

A total of 457 questionnaires were sent, from which 252 answers were received — two of them invalidated, because they were blank. The study was based, so, on 250 valid questionnaires, corresponding to a rate of 55% of the universe to be inquired — which seems to us a very reasonable and representative sample.

Using the identification items which were known in what concerns all the inquired journalists (newspaper, gender and hierarchical position), we could compare the percentages of sent and received questionnaires, concluding that the sample to analyze was fairly balanced

in proportional terms, as far as the three newspapers were concerned, as well as gender and hierarchical position (Table 1).

TABLE 1 – The sample

	SENT questionnaires	RECEIVED questionnaires
TOTAL of questionnaires	457	252 (*)
<i>In percentage (%)</i>	100%	55%
Newspaper A	29%	25%
Newspaper B	40%	45%
Newspaper C	30%	26%
Without identification	-	4%
Male journalists	64%	54%
Female journalists	36%	34%
Without identification	-	12%
Journalists with a leading position	16%	23%
Journalists with no leading position	84%	77%

(*) Two (2) were blank, reason why they were considered NOT VALID,

In absolute terms, and regarding the distribution by newspaper, we received 62 inquiries from newspaper A (25% of the total), 113 from newspaper B (45%) and 66 from newspaper C, while 9 (4%) preferred not to identify themselves.

Regarding gender, the answers were divided into 135 from male journalists (54% of the total) and 86 (35%) from female journalists, while 29 (11%) preferred not to give this information.

As for age, the most represented in the 250 inquiries received is the group “26-35 years”, with 86 inquiries (34% of the total). Next come the groups “36-45 years” (73 answers – 29%), “46-55 years” (39 answers – 16%), “up to 25 years” (31 answers – 12%) and “more than 55 years” (20 answers – 8%).

In what concerns academic degrees, the majority of the respondents (66%) had obtained some kind of degree from a high school; 23% had some high school unfinished studies, and 11% had only secondary level studies.

A total of 126 respondents (about 50%) reported to have made some kind of specific studies in the media or communication areas (some of them without achieving graduation). Regarding professional experience, most of the respondents (75%) have always worked in the press, only 25% having had some previous experience in radio and/or TV. As for the length of time of that experience, 29% of the respondents have become journalists “between 11 and 15 years ago”, 26% “more than 20 years ago”, 22% “less than 5 years ago”, 15% “between 5 and 10 years ago”, and 8% “between 16 and 20 years ago”. This means that 63% have been journalists for more than 10 years.

5. Some results

According to the specific purpose of this paper, we'll show some of the results of the survey that more directly refer to the internal role of the ombudsman, and to the way how

journalists seem to take some advantages, in terms of professional education, from his regular work.

5.1. Frequency of reading and degree of agreement

The first evidence shown by the inquiry is that the overwhelming majority (98%) of the respondents agrees with the existence of an ombudsman in their own newspaper, while a similar number (94%) speaks in favour of the appointment of ombudsmen in all Portuguese newspapers. The percentage is lower (90%) when it comes to favour the existence of ombudsmen in broadcasting companies: among the comments made to this question, some of the inquired were “in favour” because an ombudsman is “even more necessary” in television than in the press, while others were “against”, explaining that such a job “doesn’t make any sense” in media with such a “commercial logic” as the Portuguese TV channels show nowadays.

The fact that so many voices stand up for an ombudsman doesn’t mean that they always agree with his opinions or judgements. Among the respondents, 76% said they regularly read the ombudsman’s weekly column (39% read it “always” and 37% “almost always”, while 18% read it “from time to time” and 4% “seldom”), but the degree of agreement varies: 22% said they “usually agree” with the ombudsman’s judgements, 38% “often agree”, 32% “agree some times, disagree some other times”, 3% “often disagree” and 2% “almost always disagree”.

Both the frequency of reading of the ombudsman’s column and the degree of agreement with his opinions seem to change a little accordingly either to the age or to the years of professional experience of the inquired journalists. Apparently, young journalists read that column less frequently than the global average (in the group “up to 25 years”, those who say they read their ombudsman “always” or “almost always” are 68%, percentage which goes down to 64% in the group “26-35 years”; on the contrary, among the older journalists, the percentages go up to 85% in the groups “36-45 years” and “46-55 years”, reaching the 90% in the group “more than 55 years”)⁷.

Some evidence of a similar trend is to be found in what concerns the degree of agreement: in the whole, 60% of the respondents said they agree “usually” or “very often” with the ombudsman, but that percentage decreases to 55% in the group “up to 25 years”, and in the group “26-35 years”. Inversely, it goes up to 61% in the group “36-45 years”, and reaches 80% in the “46-55 years”. In the two younger groups, the favourite answer to this question (with percentages of 39 or 40%) goes to “sometimes I agree, sometimes I don’t” (Table 2).

TABLE 2 – Degree of agreement / age

Age	Usually agree	Agree very often	Sometimes yes, sometimes no	Often disagree	Almost never agree
Up to 25 years	19 %	36 %	39 %	7 %	---
26-35 years	14 %	36 %	40 %	5 %	2 %
36-45 years	27 %	34 %	32 %	3 %	1 %
46-55 years	31 %	49 %	18 %	---	---
More than 55	30 %	45 %	25 %	---	---

If we match these data with the extent of professional experience (which, as a rule, is proportional to age), the conclusions are similar. The respondents with less than 10 years' experience in the profession read the ombudsman "always" or "almost always" in 63% of the cases — remember that the average for the total of respondents was 76% —, number that goes up to 80% among those who became journalists "11 to 15 years ago", and up to 89% in those who have been working in this job for 16 to 20 years (Table 3).

Likewise, as far as the degree of agreement with the ombudsman's judgements is concerned: the average percentage of 60% who "usually" or "often" agree goes down to 50% among those who have been journalists for less than 5 years, and down to 43% in the group "between 5-10 years"; here, too, the most common answer is "sometimes agree, sometimes not". Inversely, the percentage of those who agree more often goes up to 65% in the respondents with 11 to 15 years' experience in the profession, reaching the 79% in those with 16 to 20 years' experience (Table 4).

TABLE 3 – Frequency of reading / professional experience

<i>Professional experience</i>	Always read	Read very often	Read from time to time	Seldom read	Never read
Less than 5 years	27 %	36 %	25 %	11 %	2 %
5-10 years	18 %	45 %	29 %	3 %	3 %
11-15 years	48 %	32 %	19 %	1 %	---
16-20 years	42 %	47 %	5 %	5 %	---
More than 20	52 %	36 %	8 %	3 %	2 %

TABLE 4 – Degree of agreement/ professional experience

<i>Professional experience</i>	Usually agree	Often agree	Sometimes yes, sometimes no	Often disagree	Almost never agree
Less than 5 years	20 %	30 %	43 %	4 %	2 %
5-10 years	11 %	32 %	40 %	11 %	3 %
11-15 years	25 %	40 %	34 %	---	---
16-20 years	42 %	37 %	16 %	5 %	---
More than 20 years	23 %	48 %	22 %	2 %	3 %

In what concerns the professional status of the inquired journalists, the results suggest that there is a greater tendency for those placed in leading positions in the newsroom to read the ombudsman's column and to agree with it, rather than for those who don't supervise other journalists.

5.2. Utility and effectiveness of the ombudsman

A set of questions was designed to understand how useful and effective the ombudsman's job is regarded by the journalists. With respect to this, most of the respondents consider "useful" (61%) or even "very useful" (17%) the existence of an ombudsman in their own

newspaper, considering that an ombudsman could also be “useful” (66%) or “very useful” (13%) in the Portuguese press as a whole; 17% find this job “of little use” or even “useless” (2%) in their own newspaper, and “of little use” (16%) in the Portuguese press as a whole.

Admitting some degree of utility in the ombudsman’s job — which is the opinion of almost 80% of the respondents —, the next question would be “to whom” that utility was more notorious. “To the readers”, said 86% of the respondents; “to the journalists”, said 84%. The next figures were much lower than these: “to the newspaper’s image”, said 49%; “to the newspaper’s management, responded 37%; “to the public in general”, said 16%. The journalists inquired were asked to choose up to three items in this question, numbering them by decreasing order of importance (1st, 2nd, 3rd). The percentages mentioned behind refer to the sum of citations made, apart from its classification. But the results are similar if we look at the choices in detail (Table 5).

TABLE 5 – Utility of the ombudsman to whom?

More notorious utility:	1st place	2nd place	3rd place	Without order
To the READERS	55 %	19 %	7 %	6 %
To the JOURNALISTS	21 %	42 %	17 %	4 %
To the NEWSPAPER’S IMAGE	10 %	10 %	26 %	4 %
To the NEWSPAPER’S MANAGEMENT	1 %	12 %	21 %	3 %
To the PUBLIC	2 %	4 %	10 %	2 %

It should be noticed that, though globally in the second position, the option “[more notorious utility] to the journalists” was chosen in the first place by more than 20% of the respondents.

Asked more specifically if the ombudsman’s work had had some real efficacy in each of the newspapers surveyed, the journalists answered generally in a positive way: 59% considered their ombudsman’s work as “effective”, and 6% even evaluated it as “very effective”; on the opposite side, 28% considered that work “little effective” in their newspaper and 5% “not effective at all” (5% didn’t answer).

Furthermore, we intended to understand what that effectiveness meant in more concrete terms. A set of possibilities was given in the questionnaire, asking the journalists to choose up to three. The ombudsman’s effectiveness is notorious in “more openness and transparency [of the newspaper] towards its readers”, answered 77% of the respondents; the second selected item (67%) was “more attention of the journalists in their daily routines”; with 48% of the choices came then the item “more internal debate about the problems of making the newspaper”. With fewer citations followed the items “better image for the newspaper/ for the company” (31%) and, finally, “concrete changes in the newspaper” (7%).

Apart from the sum of citations, its distribution according to the importance given to each one shows the same proportional results: the item “more openness and transparency towards the readers” was the most chosen in the first place, the item “more attention of the journalists in their daily routines” being the most cited in the second place, and the item “more internal debate” the most chosen in the third place.

A similar question was asked to the 34% of the respondents who considered the ombudsman’s work “little effective” or “not effective at all”, trying to understand the reasons

of that ineffectiveness. From the six hypotheses proposed, the most quoted (52%) was the fact that the ombudsman “has no real power to make changes [in the newspaper]”, followed by the fact that “the newspaper’s routines are very strong” (47%). The circumstance that “the newspaper’s executives ignore the ombudsman’s recommendations” was the reason pointed by 39% of the respondents to explain the alleged ineffectiveness, while 32% cited the fact that “[journalists] don’t acknowledge professional authority / qualification to the ombudsman”, and 25% chose the item “the ethical concerns don’t fit to the market logic”.

5.3. Definition of the ombudsman

In order to find a general definition of the ombudsman’s role, the questionnaire proposed several items, asking the respondents to choose up to three, by decreasing order of importance. The results are very similar to those we found when the utility and effectiveness of the ombudsman were questioned: the highest importance was attached to the ombudsman’s role as an element of liaison between the newspaper and its readers (82% of the choices), immediately followed by his role as a stimulus for the journalists’ self-reflection (78% of the choices).

Like in previous questions, these percentages refer to the sum of all citations (either in first, second or third place), but the results don’t change when we look at the choices in its order of importance (Table 6).

TABLE 6 – Definition of the ombudsman

<i>General definition of the ombudsman:</i>	1st place	2nd place	3rd place	Without order
A marketing device	6 %	2 %	5 %	1 %
A public relations service	6 %	11 %	8 %	---
A negative way of self-criticism	---	1 %	2 %	---
An element of liaison with the readers	50%	16 %	16 %	6 %
A stimulus to journalists’ self-reflection	14 %	40 %	24 %	3 %
A useful instrument of self-regulation	17 %	19 %	34 %	3 %

5.4. Praises and criticisms

Finally, we asked the journalists to choose, from a given set of suggestions, the main praises and the main criticisms they made to the press ombudsman, both in their specific newspaper and in general terms.

In what concerns the motives for a positive feeling about this institution, the different items had a fairly close amount of responses. The most referred (apart from being classified in first, second or third position) was that “ombudsmen are ‘an open door’ of the newspaper towards its readers”, with 60% of the quotations. Close behind, with 59%, was the item “ombudsmen remember ethical values that often seem forgotten”. Another praise of the ombudsmen’s “internal function” came next, with 54% of the responses: “They foster the critical and self-critical capacity among journalists”. With a reasonable number of citations, although below 50%, came the other items suggested: “Ombudsmen help newspapers to

correct their errors and to improve their service” (46%), they “allow the public to know better how journalism works” (42%) and “they make newspapers more careful in their daily work” (35%).

As far as critics are concerned, the respondents were generally benevolent to the ombudsman, with high percentages of them (between 52% and 96%, according to the items) opting not to subscribe any of the six hypotheses suggested. Still, the major critic (48% of the citations) was that ombudsmen “are too moralistic in their judgements”. The following items were: “They care too much about technical questions (lapses, bad grammar, small mistakes, etc.)” (42%); “They tend to be too aggressive towards the journalists” (34%); “They are not independent, because they too are employees of the newspapers they analyze/criticize” (26%); “They are not very sensitive to the market logic” (18%); “They tend to be too aggressive towards the readers” (4%).

6. Final comments

The first results of this survey, although still being analyzed and co-related in more detail, seem to give us some evidence of the following aspects:

- The overwhelming majority of Portuguese journalists working in newspapers with an ombudsman not only agrees with, and supports, his existence, but also acknowledge a great utility and a reasonable effectiveness to the role played by that self-regulating institution. There are slight differences of opinion among the journalists according to the concrete newspaper where they work, which confirms the idea that the perception of the ombudsman's role and performance are influenced both by the specific organizational cultures and by the actual person who carries out this job⁸

- Although the journalists consider that the greatest utility of an ombudsman lies in his contribution to a more open and transparent attitude of the newspaper towards the readers, they also attach almost the same importance to his influence towards the newsroom itself;

- Even if the ombudsman's work seems almost never to cause concrete and visible changes in the newspaper, his contribution to stimulate the internal debate, to enhance the journalists' self-critical capacity and to permanently remind the ethical values and professional principles, are pointed by most journalists as very relevant — and should have some effect in the way they behave themselves professionally;

- Sensitiveness to the ombudsman's institution, characteristics and role seem to vary according to the different newspapers where the position is to be found, which apparently confirms the idea (suggested by other studies on press ombudsmanship – cf. the ones of Langlois and Sauvageau, and of Mogavero) that the particular organizational cultures of the newsroom have a great influence on the newspaper's routines and ethical concerns — and, therefore, naturally influence the way how the ombudsman regards himself and is regarded by the journalists;

- Some differences are also to be found in the journalists' sensitiveness to this subject when we look at their age and years of professional experience: there is some evidence of younger journalists being rather more skeptical towards the ombudsman's role (or towards his/her concrete proceedings), which opens an interesting field for further research.

Regarding more specifically what concerns the ombudsman's “formative” or “educative” function in the newsroom (that is to say, his contribution to some kind of informal on-going professional education, particularly on ethical issues), we could say it is rather clearly

suggested by the opinions of the respondents to this survey. The fact that they attach great importance to the ombudsman's "internal function" can, of course, be nothing more than words, with little effect on the day-to-day practices. Still, the fact that this attention and care exist (at least among the Portuguese journalists, with such a recent, and maybe 'naïve', experience of contact with this institution), shows some good feelings and perhaps an increasing commitment to make their work more accountable. New experiences with other ombudsmen, in these or other newspapers (as well as in broadcasting organizations, e.g. TV channels) will confirm it — or not.

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NOTES

¹ The first press ombudsmen appeared in the USA in the 1960’s (although there is some evidence of previous, still not regular, experiences in the first decades of the 20th century — see Ettema and Glasser, 1987:3), and not before 1997 as far as Portugal is concerned.

² See, for instance, besides the already quoted study by Ettema and Glasser, studies made by Starck and Eisele (1999) among American press ombudsmen and their editors, by Mogavero (1982) also among the ombudsmen in the USA, by Hartung, Jacoby and Dozier (1988) among newspapers’ readers, by Pritchard (1993) among journalists, and by Langlois and Sauvageau (1989) among the journalists of two different Canadian newspapers

³ Statute of the ombudsman of the Portuguese daily “Diário de Notícias”, quoted by Mesquita (1998a: 217)

⁴ Statute of the ombudsman of the Portuguese daily “Público”, quoted by Wemans (1999: 195).

⁵ Claude-Jean Bertrand refers to this set of instruments as “the arsenal of democracy”, assuming that there is no democracy without a free press and, to keep this freedom, the active contribution of the readers is necessary too; the counterpart is that media get used to be accountable to that same public (cf. Bertrand, 1999).

⁶ The so-called M*A*S* (Media Accountability Systems), according to the expression used by Claude-Jean Bertrand (and corresponding to the French M*A*R*S* - Moyens d’Assurer la Responsabilité Sociale des media).

⁷ It’s interesting to notice that David Pritchard found rather similar conclusions in another study among the journalists, trying to understand, for example, how their attitude about newsgathering techniques changed if there was an ombudsman in the newspaper. “The younger the journalist (...), the more likely he or she was to say that controversial newsgathering tactics may be justified” (Pritchard, 1993: 84).

⁸ A similar conclusion is referred by Langlois and Sauvageau in their study comparing these questions in two different Canadian newspapers: “The journalists of the two newspapers have opposed opinions about the ombudsman’s utility for their work” (Langlois and Sauvageau, 1989: 196).
