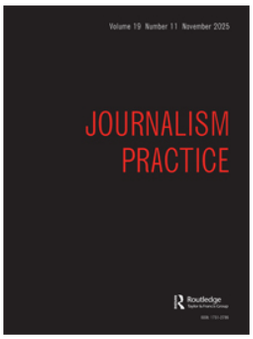

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Addressing the "Error of our Ways" in Metajournalistic Discourse: Accountability and the Rise of Ombudsmen

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ABSTRACT

At key moments, when journalism's credibility is under attack, industry-based defenses of truth, rooted in performances of accountability, often mobilize around new practices. This paper considers one such moment, looking at metajournalistic discourse surrounding the emergence of the ombuds role in U.S. journalism, when key ideals around the value of truth and its production were made practicable and intelligible as part of a broader defense of the institution of journalism. As the ombuds office became a normalized fixture throughout the twentieth century, key ideas augmenting the value of truth were put into practice: transparency, accountability, and audience perspective. As the field of journalism faces normative challenges around the proliferation of misinformation, as well as contemporary debates about journalism's changing relationship to its audiences, the ombuds role demonstrates a preference for self-regulation implicit in journalism's professional culture.

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Introduction

"There is a disturbing skepticism among large groups of readers, including many of the best educated and the most intellectually alive, about whether what they read in the newspapers is either true or relevant," the *New York Times*' assistant editor of the editorial page and renowned labor reporter Raskin (1967) wrote as he considered an emerging "credibility gap" that "separate[d] the press and the people" (269). Loss of faith in the news, however, was not a new phenomenon. Six decades prior, Raskin's predecessor, *New York Times* publisher Adolph Ochs, had diagnosed "a fake news epidemic that threatened to undermine American democracy" (Creech and Roessner 2019, 263), part of his campaign to resurrect the nation's paper of record (Talese 2013). To address that eras' crisis in trust, Ochs prescribed a method of detached, objective journalism, which had emerged unevenly in tandem with subjectivity in the previous century, as an answer to the sensationalism common in newspapers at the time (Campbell 2006; Dicken-Garzia 1989). Though separated by decades, these words echo our current moment, and show how concerns about American journalism's credibility are recurrent, as are defenses of that credibility.

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Despite the efforts of Ochs and peers, such as *New York World* publisher Ralph Pulitzer, to remake the profession around the values of independence, impartiality, and accuracy —as well as to institute internal departments to monitor reader complaints and correct errors—concerns about the field of journalism lingered. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, wartime propaganda accompanied public outcry and calls for legislation to combat the misinformation that saturated the news wires (Fondren 2023; Nord 2008). Though the American press would enjoy a somewhat hegemonic role in the decades following WWII, by the mid-1960s and into the 1970s, amid conflict in Southeast Asia, a widening credibility gap would prompt Raskin to pen a scathing critique of the press that echoed the trust-busting tones proclaimed by muckraker Will Irwin a half century earlier (Hudson 1970).

We turn to this moment because it evinces a sentiment that is not unlike contemporary debates about the veracity and quality of news. In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, media historians have considered the history of so-called fake news, finding that as generations of reporters have bemoaned a crisis of fakery, a robust, public defense of journalistic practice produced in response to these moments is an important part of journalism's professional culture, clarifying its role in democratic society (Creech and Roessner 2019; Finneman and Thomas 2018; Tucher 2022). We continue the project of revisiting this history by turning to American journalism's mid-twentieth century, late high-modern era, a time characterized by a culture of certainty rooted in the methods of positivist epistemology (Anderson 2018; Hallin 1992). Specifically, we consider the rise of ombudsmen, which can be understood as an industry-wide response to crises in truth and credibility specific to that moment. The establishment of public editor roles and ombuds offices was often debated across the pages of the nation's top newspapers, coalescing into a field of metajournalistic discourse focused on the ideal ways to preserve audience trust amid growing critique (Carlson 2016).

Raskin's (1967) refrain of "What is wrong with American newspapers," is typical of an industry well acquainted with crisis, seeking practicable solutions to the existential problems news elites define (Roessner et al. 2013). That Raskin's sentiment echoes his predecessors evidences the reflexive and at time insular nature of normative discourse in the field, and makes clear the value in bringing history to bear on understanding the way journalistic values cohere over time via discourse (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Irwin 1911; Ochs 1896). Through a discourse analysis of approximately 200 pieces of news analysis, commentary, editorials, correspondence, letters to the editor, and op-eds published in the era's top-circulating newspapers (e.g., the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* the *Washington Post*, and the *Boston Globe*) during the "long decade" of the 1970s (1960–1981), this study examines how journalist's seeking to understand "the error of our ways" posited the ombuds role as a practicable solution, and in so doing, gave rise to a nascent ethic of transparency and means for performing accountability, while ultimately preserving the authority to determine which critiques were legitimate (Seib 1979b, A23). As the current era sees normative contests in the field, evidenced by the spread of audience-centric and engaged practices (Robinson, Orozco, and Darr 2025; Wenzel 2020), an elite insularity rooted in appeals to journalism's timeless values persists (Creech and Buozis 2025). Turning to the discourse surrounding rise of the ombuds shows how navigating the

tension between critique, accountability, and autonomy is a persistent feature of journalism's professional culture.

Origins of the Ombudsman

As era commentary acknowledged, "long before the word [ombudsman] was imported from Sweden," newspaper publishers and editors heeded Ochs' and Pulitzer's calls for internal monitors of fairness and accuracy (Weaver 1970, B6). Journalists, such as Scripps-Howard's Louis Azrael and *Los Angeles Times'* Matt Weinstock, served as nascent ombuds, "resolv[ing] reader complaints" (Spry 1981, A1) and "right[ing] wrongs that otherwise would have gone unrighted," often by taking reader complaint to newsroom leaders and reporting the response (Weaver 1970, B6). Amid "the reformist atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s" (Lerner 2019, 21), calls for the institutionalization of the office of the ombudsman as a special administrator to "curb abuses of public power," surfaced often in letters to the editor (Curb on Abuses of Public Power 1964, E11). Though some readers asserted that ombuds were unnecessary in a democracy with "a free press" (No ombudsman for us 1965, 20), notable media critics and editors pushed for change as criticism grew. Across the industry, calls for new, more transparent and authoritative forms of interpretative and precision journalism were proffered as ways to recover lost credibility amid increased competition from broadcasters (Heflin 2010; Lerner 2019; Pressman 2018). Partly because the 1947 Hutchins Commission concluded self-regulation was the most appropriate means for a free press to serve its public obligations, industry consensus grew around the establishment of the ombudsman as a self-regulatory response to calls for reform (Bates 2020; Nemeth 2003).

Twenty years after the Hutchins Commission noted a tendency among the press to ignore "the errors and misrepresentations, the lies and scandals, of which its members are guilty" (Commision on the Freedom of the Press 1947, 42), Ben Bagdikian critiqued newspaper publishers in *Esquire* for "riding a tide complacent in their monopoly status without making basic reforms that … readers deserve" (Bagdikian 1967, 134). The industry's tilt toward self-regulated social responsibility was not monolithic, as commission members debated the proper relationship between news organizations and their audiences, but an elitist orientation toward public responsibility and accountability has been one enduring legacy (Bates 2020; Simpson 1995). As Bertrand (2000) argues, the adoption of ombuds offices provided a means for news organizations to engage in meaningful internal regulation, and thus preserve news organizations' independence as they credibly staved off threats of external regulation.

The public discourse around ombuds was marked by commentators who sought ways to make news organizations' commitments to public accountability actionable (Bertrand 2000). As Bagdikian (1967) wrote, "some brave owners someday will provide for a community ombudsman on his paper's board, maybe a non-voting one, to be present, to speak, to provide a symbol and, with luck, exert public interest in the ultimate fate of the American newspaper," adding that "disclosure of financial interests, a greater openness in making of policy, a place for public representation could do for newspapers what it did for the Stock Exchange post-Crash: restore public confidence in the men who stand behind pieces of paper" (134). In many ways, calls for ombuds were a call for transparency about news processes, which was seen as one way to

respond to the expectations of a new generation of readers (Heflin 2010; Lerner 2019; Pressman 2018). Many ombuds, in their early columns, made explicit the assumption that readers needed to know more about news organizations' practices, philosophies, and operations so they could trust the paper and these new public editors (Nemeth 2003; Raskin 1967; Simmons 1973).

Later, cued by Bagdikian and citing the Hutchins Report's warning of unaccountable press giants that "can play up or down the news and its significance, foster and feed emotions, create complacent fictions and blind spots, misuse the great words and uphold empty slogans," Raskin (1967) urged for "Departments of Internal Criticism to check on the fairness and adequacy of coverage and comment" (254). This was a key moment were the idea of ombuds was made explicit in way that could be formalized across America's newsrooms:

> The department head ought to be given enough independence in the paper to serve as an *ombudsman* for the readers, armed with authority to get something done about valid complaints and to propose methods for more effective performance of all the paper's services to the community. (254)

Letters to the editor scarcely constituted a sufficient solution, he contended, suggesting a model first adopted in Sweden and later Japan (Nemeth 2003).

Over the next decade, more than three dozen news organizations, amid critiques of systemic racism cited in the 1968 Kerner Commission and accusations of liberal news bias from the Nixon Administration, launched their own ombuds desks (Ferrucci 2019; Nemeth 2003). Still, some prominent newspapers resisted, preferring instead to continue to rely on internally managed critiques, sequestering criticism of their organizations to editorial pages and journalism reviews (Friendly 1984; Maynard 1973a). Eventually, *The New York Times* would institute an op-ed page in 1970, providing a forum for critiques to appear in the paper, based upon the advice of Raskin (Pressman 2018). At the *Washington Post*, assistant managing editor for foreign news, Phil Fossie (1968), authored several memos to editor Ben Bradlee and publisher Katherine Graham in November 1968, arguing that the paper needed some form of ombuds, whether a citizens committee, outside critic, or internal watchdog. Though Fosie would ultimately endorse an outside critic savvy to internal dynamics, he remained concerned that the legitimacy of the ombuds in the eyes of the newspaper staff would be key to the program's success.

As Ferrucci (2019) has noted, newspapers hired ombudsmen for various reasons over the twentieth century, and the job was different from organization to organization, but all seemed to share a common purpose: functioning as watchdog, management liaison, public representative, and reputation manager. As Ettema and Glaser (1987) show, the ambiguity of the ombuds role ultimately contributed to a sense of conflicted mission among public editors who reported feeling torn between obligations to readers and their obligations to the reputational interests of their news organizations. Nonetheless, public debates about the necessity of ombuds and the ways they should work are an important form of metajournalistic discourse because they are moments where various actors in the field debate the best ways to make the industry's values practicable and intelligible to readers. Turning to the early years of the ombuds role as a field of discourse, we can better understand how the ombudsman made tangible an idealized relationship between news organizations and their audiences, often around fluid and ambiguous defenses of journalism's overriding value.

Metajournalistic Discourse, Accountability, and Critique Across Journalism History

The field of American journalism often wrestles with its values in public, as evidenced by the canon of press criticism published across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schudson 2018). Engaging with criticism, and shaping practices and professional ethos in response, is a hallmark of American journalism's high modern era, which saw the emergence of credibility based on distance, objectivity, and accuracy (Hallin 1992). Invoking these values in the face of criticism and crisis has long been foundational to journalism's discursive cohesion, especially around truth and credibility (Zelizer 1993; 2004). As Waisbord (2018) has argued, defenses of journalism exist, in part, as a strategic synthesis of the political, economic, social, and cultural conditions under which journalistic authority is produced. Thus, journalism's public authority is in part a strategic construction, contingent upon news organizations' relationships to audiences, institutions of democratic governance, markets, and changing technologies (Carlson 2017).

Metajournalistic discourse, then, is the space where these debates and strategic articulations of authority occur (Carlson 2016; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). The turn to metajournalistic discourse is part of a broader uptake of field theory and the discursive approach to understanding how institutions exert influence in the field. Ideas, debates, and articulations of ideals reveal arrangements of power, priority, and practice while allowing the field to maintain coherence across time as it adapts to change (Ryfe 2016; Vos 2019). An emphasis on metajournalistic discourse reveals the ways in which "social patterns … identifiable across organizations," emerge and then "extend over space and endure over time" (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 120). Prevailing values, and the arguments surrounding those values, are a key site to trace change in the field over time, as Vos and Craft (2017) show with the emergence of transparency in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Though these debates are often most visible around certain "critical incidents," which tend to instigate a flurry of reflection, critique, and public writing about journalism, the persistence of certain values and ideals evidences the ongoing work that goes into maintaining journalism's ideological coherence (Thomas et al. 2020, 244). Though ombuds exemplify the primary legitimacy of internal critics, the relationship between critics and the broader field remains in flux, especially as the digital media era has seen both outsiders (Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012) and audiences (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016) claim authority to proffer legitimate critiques. Understanding the position a critique emerges from, and the conditions that grant it legitimacy, further demonstrates the capacity of metajournalistic discourse to organize the broader field.

Turning to historical moments when key values were debated offers an important means to better understand how "the connections we see in our current era and the past are either the working out of particular power relations, or the temporary alignment of fragile, provisional values" (Anderson 2017, 78). Analysis of historical materials as discursive objects affords a perspective on understanding how certain seemingly stable values are contingent upon the historical conditions they emerged within (Buozis 2023). This is especially true when journalism's relationship to the public is challenged, and journalists often appeal to their democratic function as one means of defending their authority (Vos and Thomas 2018). Though memory looms large in scholarly approaches to journalism's discursive history (Kitch 2008), turning to the historical

record as a "forum where people reveal the process of deliberation and exhortation that undergird the deployment of practices" demonstrates how ideals and values are contested and debated by journalism's most prominent voices in public, in real time, and often in argumentative reaction to one another (Roessner et al. 2013, 268).

Methodology

This study considers how public engagement with, and negotiation of, journalism's high modern values characterized the emergence of the ombudsman role, setting the terms for understanding the role as an outgrowth of journalism's epistemic stability and institutional authority. Calls for fairness, accuracy, and adequacy of news coverage and comment reverberated throughout the course of the mid-twentieth century, from Ralph Pulitzer to *New York Times* editorial page editor A.H. Raskin, demonstrating a recurrent public reckoning with the value of truth, with the ombuds embodying accountability to those values. We focused on the late twentieth century as a distinct moment when American print journalism, though grappling with stiff competition from broadcast media, was at its most economically secure, and its professional storms, despite waves of political attack, most seemingly stable (Hallin 1992). Seeking to trace how the debate unfolded across news analysis, commentary, correspondence, letters to the editor, and op-eds published in major U.S. dailies in the mid-twentieth century, we gathered materials from the ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Based upon a close reading of secondary sources, the following search terms were reviewed: "solution, fake news," "truth, accuracy, fairness, and credibility," and "ombudsman" and the term "ombudsman and news," were selected, filtered by publication type (front page, editorial, commentary, letters to the editor) and date range (01/01/1960–12/31/1981) and sorted from oldest to newest. After culling the corpus for more extensive pieces of more than 400 words, we were left with 204 texts to analyze.

We approached the materials through the lens of critical discourse and textual analysis, taking up Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach, which "attempts to integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded" (65). Such an approach allows the researcher to connect historically situated texts to ongoing debates and ideals, demonstrating continuity and change with contemporary concerns, in a sense acknowledging the historical rhymes and the ways in which past and present conditions structure future prospects (Williams 1963). The discourse-historical approach draws attention to the ideals, statements, arguments, and topics that organize a field of discourse over time, while attending to the contextual specificity that demonstrates how these ideals take form amid specific historical conditions (Reisgl 2014). In this case, attention to accountability, specifically the ways in which responsibilities to the broader public, are articulated within the discourse in a way that shows how professional cultures intuit and respond to challenge.

Introducing the Ombudsman and Performing Accountability

Though certain articles in the corpus presented high-minded appeals to journalists' public responsibility, the introduction of the ombudsman and explanation of the role

supplanted these appeals as ombuds were quickly framed as the newsroom staffers charged with accountability. Amid increasing attacks from the Richard M. Nixon Administration (Pressman 2018), and in the aftermath of the Kerner Commission Report in the late 1960s (English 2020), major national newspapers, such as the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*, instituted ombudsman roles in the seventies (Whipple 1975), while other prominent newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* relied upon op-ed pages, reader representatives, or reporters on media criticism beats (Lauer 1989). As Zagoria (1986) acknowledged, the ombudsman, typically senior editors, operated in different manners in each newspaper organization, but did engage in some common activities, including managing reader complaints over inaccuracy or unfairness through investigations resolved through internal memoranda or regular external columns, such as the *Washington Post*'s ombudsman's mailbag column. In the corpus, significant space is given over to explaining to audiences how the ombuds role might work, giving practical form to how accountability might be exercised.

Shortly after former *Washington Post* national correspondent and co-director of Columbia University's minority training program Robert Maynard (1972) stepped in as the newspaper's third ombudsman after the brief and tumultuous tenures of Richard Harwood (1970–1971) and Bagdikian (1971–1972), he acknowledged that, expecting concerns over the presidential election, Vietnam, and Watergate, he had not been fully prepared for the range of critique that greeted him before "the maintenance people even found the time to put my name on the door" (A22). Bagdikian, who publicly critiqued the *Post*'s coverage of race and Vietnam and encouraged economic boycotts of the newspaper, fled the role after only eleven months (Press: Exit the Ombudsman 1972). Bagdikian's tenure was colored by battles between himself and editor Ben Bradlee, and Bagdikian later acknowledged that he regarded his loyalty to the readers, not management. It was a rare moment that made clear the muddied lines of accountability inherent in the ombuds' role.

Yet, before Maynard even had the chance to name his column, a stream of reader critiques and court cases that threatened industry shield laws compelled him to frame his work as a public engagement with the values that defined American journalism. "So a man comes to work on the problem of trying to watch the curves for the reader," Maynard (1972) wrote, "only to find himself wondering what is becoming of the basis of the mandate under which the free press has been operating for a little less than 200 years" (A28). Pondering this state of affairs, Maynard responded to a letter from Bethesda resident Lois Smallwood that expressed profound concern that the free press of the early 1970s was in a state of free fall. "There is little doubt now that the freedom of the press will become more and more of an issue," the letter writer wrote, "[and] that the press will turn to public opinion for support against any onslaught, perhaps only to find that no real public support exists" (A28). After considering the letter, Maynard had linked it with the words of other readers and news criticism that came across his desk into a "curriculum of meaning" (Nord 2008) about his new role as an ombudsman. "An ombudsman's role is a curious one," he wrote.

> He tries to see the newspaper through the reader's eyes, and yet sees his reader's concerns from an inside vantage point. I know that I can send off a few fierce memos that may take care of the concerns of the thoughtful colonel, but I begin this adventure wondering where I can find the answers that will reassure troubled Lois Smallwood. (Maynard 1972, A28)

The moment is an important one because Smallwood's words stand as synecdoche for the broader news reading public, diagnosing an apparent crisis that Maynard had now taken on as his responsibility. In these words, Smallwood embodies the specter of a public to whom the press owed a sense of accountability, and by quoting from her in his first column, Maynard's text rhetorically personified the ideals the paper's journalism would be held against. Populist on its surface and in its construction, quoting an exemplar letter also allowed Maynard to subtly define the mission of his own tenure as an ombuds.

In a later column critiquing the failures of a passive press at a "military-managed event" in late February, Maynard (1973a, A26) soon found himself the target of criticism when readers such as Henry T. Simmons (1973) of Washington criticized Maynard for "simply attack[ing] the credibility of others" (A15). Maynard (1973a) used the flood of mail and calls as an opportunity to reiterate the press' responsibility to approach staged media event's with more than passive observation ("long experience has taught me to suspect public relations men who envelop their clients to the point where reporters can't speak with them directly and spontaneously"), to apologize when his "rhetorical flourish … overstepped the limits of the known facts," and to reiterate that his column would operate as a "curriculum of meaning" to in relation to the controversy of the day, in this case a prisoner of war story and the numerous letters to the editor that accompanied it (A26). Stridently justifying industry criticism as a necessary public responsibility carried by the ombudsman, he contended that "There might be less demand for a press council if media outlets became less timid about commenting on each other's efforts" (A26). In this moment, the core practices of the ombudsman begin to gel, with Maynard performing a simultaneous deference to and autonomy from reader criticism, using the column to critique, but to also educate the public in the ways news should work. From this point forward, Maynard's columns reveal an internal critique operating as a proxy voice for the public, but also correcting readers' evident misperceptions.

Other media outlets took note of the *Post*'s ombudsman experiment, and the *Boston Globe*'s first ombudsman Charles Whipple (1976), the former editor of the opinion page, shared his perspective "In This Corner," when necessarily correcting "errors of judgment" on the part of the *Globe*'s staff writers, who in April 1976 offered racialized coverage of a beating in Roxbury (A21). Even newspapers without ombudsman roles, such as *The Los Angeles Times*, increasingly published letters to the editor offering "reporting critique[s]," such as one from Abraham Eldin (1979), which acknowledged that "news reporting has to be factual" not "fallacious" before sharing broader concerns (A2). In the end, as the *Washington Post*'s fourth ombudsman Charles B. Seib (1979a) noted at the end of his five-year contract, the ombudsman's role was to provide a solution to the "paradox of the unwatched watchdog" and to address "the conspiracy theory of journalism," the "tradition of aloofness" from customers and the "totally unjustified posture of infallibility that encourages such suspicions" (A21).

On occasion, readers were cued to write words of praise, celebrating the valuable contributions of the ombudsman. In December 1979, for instance, the departure of Seib prompted one reader, Marcus Cohn (1979) of Washington, to write:

> Mr. Seib was a credit to the print media. He was neither its uncritical lover nor unloving critic. He was its critical lover. He was dedicated to making the newspaper an institution that is

> sensitive to the needs and frustrations of its readers and thus giving it a heart, a spirit, a soul that it might otherwise not have had. (A18)

Cohn did acknowledge one minor concern—the unknown frequency with which Seib communicated reader concerns to executive editor Ben Bradlee and publisher Katharine Graham. Cohn's concern was notable for its applicability to the wider industry—though readers engaged regularly with ombuds, they were often kept in the dark about how their critiques were made manifest in the newsrooms.

Industry Critique, Failures, and Common Ideals

In the uncertain days surrounding the Watergate break-in, a handful of reporters, editors, and publishers "put their necks on the line, under heavy political pressure and threat of administration retaliation," wrote political correspondent David Broder (1973), more than twelve months before Nixon resigned (A22). Citing Bagdikian and Maynard in urging vigilance amid "an orgy of self-congratulation," Broder cautioned fellow journalists that "We ain't as good as the returns make us look either" (A22). His words are notable for the way they take a story of national importance, whose historic significance was starting to become apparent, as an opportunity to catalog all ways news organizations often failed to live up to the ideals espoused around the Watergate reporting. It is a moment of contextualized accountability:

> Yes, the reporting of the Watergate story has been a classic piece of investigative journalism, pursued with a doggedness and self-discipline that make us all proud to call reporters such as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein colleagues … . But most of us were spectators in that process, and we're coattailing now on the courage that they showed and the commendation that they have earned. (A22)

Broder acknowledged the concern of his own ombudsman, that journalists failed in helping readers understand the significance of the political crime, before sharing actionable steps for political correspondents to take—including reforming campaign journalism and additional transparency with readers—so that more political journalists might live up to the example set by the Watergate reporting. "It's not enough in this era, for example, for the paper that has been the flagship of American journalism to proclaim that it's publishing all the news that is fit to print," Broder wrote, before launching into a critique of his peers:

> Far better it would be if we said publicly what we know to be the case: that every day, we print a partial, incomplete version of certain selected things we have learned, some of them inevitably erroneous, all of them inevitably distorted by the need to abridge and by the forces of our own preconceptions and prejudices. (A22)

The column reveals one of the key functions of the internalized criticism of the ombuds' role. As many of the shortcomings of reporting, especially political reporting, began to aggregate, they lent evidence to a growing critique that particular aspects of journalistic practice were in need of reform. To acknowledge these shortcomings may not have been radical, but they were novel, in that the authority connoted by the published article would be contextualized as incomplete, born out by a process riven with flaws that those in the industry tacitly agreed about, but which the public had little insight into. He grappled with industry constraints that all journalists encountered—

from source selection and space limitations to news judgement and individual subjectivity—in their effort to offer a truthful account, but were hesitant to share with the public lest they further tarnish their credibility.

In the months preceding and then immediately following Broder's column, Maynard (1973b, 1973c) offered his own cautions around the investigative reporting surrounding the Watergate break-in case, acknowledging the emerging adversarial relationship between the government and the press, wariness around unattributed information, and concerns over lack of objectivity and fairness in his regular Ombudsman's Mailbag column. Within that space and cued by reader concerns, he acknowledged mistakes, even over mundane subject/verb agreement, but at the risk of further offending some readers, he supported the prevailing "simple fact … the body of investigative reporting on this subject in the Washington Post remains to be successfully challenged in any of its major particulars by the White House" (1973b, A30). Like Broder, Maynard (1973c) also took away two lessons in the aftermath of Watergate: (1) "a free press must be prepared to take a lot of abuse from politicians when the going gets rough" and (2) "it is important to be mindful of the need for zeal to be tempered with judgment, now that so many disclosures are tumbling all around town" (A30). Writing in the in the thick of it, Maynard and Broder had arrived at a conclusion echoed in some readers' letters, that words of caution were needed for a press that some claimed was in its finest hour.

Their colleagues—primarily Whipple (1977) at the *Globe* and Bill Green (1981) at the *Post*—also used the example of Watergate to offer sage words of caution, many unheeded, in the coming years. For instance, in June 1977, Whipple urged for restraint in coverage of incidents of domestic terrorism, mainly the kidnappings and flight hijackings of the era, noting that news outlets should set "limits on overplay" (18). Urging moderation, Whipple cautioned colleagues to restrain the impulse to sensationalize violence in the hopes of pursuing a big story: "The question is not whether such a story should be printed, but where and how great a length, for that is where the line must be drawn between legitimate reporting and sensationalizing" (18). Likewise, when met with news of award-winning fabrication at his own newspaper, Janet Cooke's "Jimmy's World" story of an eight-year-old heroin addict, Green (1981) started by lamenting the shadow that had fallen on "the proud house of the Watergate investigations" (A1). Green interviewed forty staff members during his investigation and acknowledged the hard truth that Janet Cooke should not be scapegoated for "her hoax," but that "The fabrication of Janet Cooke's story eluded all The Post's filters that are set up to challenge every detail in every news story the paper publishes" concluding that "Editors abandoned their professional skepticism … . The Post didn't work hard enough" (A1). A stark embarrassment for the *Post*, the moment is also notable for the way, just eight years later, it uses the memory of Watergate as exemplary moment to judge the current press against. At the same time, it reveals a key aspect of ombuds' critique, diagnosing industry-wide practices as failing to adhere to an implicit common ideal, but also appealing to shame and the sense that news professionals should know better, rather than cede accountability or oversight to those outside the industry.

Enduring Insularity

As ombudsmen at national newspapers acknowledged, despite the hard work of their colleagues, news organizations were struggling to regain trust amid the credibility crisis of the seventies. On the nation's bicentennial, staff of the *Christian Science Monitor* considered the press's responsibility to adhere to the three Rs: "responsibility–to the truth, responsiveness–to the public, [and] resistance–to the latter-day efforts at official restraint threatening previous gains for freedom" (A Free People's Press 1976, 28). Citing Jefferson's warning that "the press is impotent when it abandons itself to falsehood," the editorial noted that though the ultimate responsibility to the truth and to "bolster[ing] credibility by getting the facts right in their fair and accurate contexts" rested with reporters and editors, *Christian Science Monitor* staff noted the potential of the ombudsman to be responsive to the public (28). It is important to note that in this instance, the definition of ombudsman was still loose, standing for house critic or reader advocates, as well as the National News Council, an organization that ultimately failed due to a "general lack of news media acceptance of the concept," largely due to reticence to cede critical authority to an organization outside the industry (Friendly 1984, B18).

Despite calls for some form of reader representation and externalized accountability, organizations largely preferred to keep their critics inhouse. At the Washington Journalism Center's annual Frank E. Gannett Lecture 1981, *Washington Post* ombudsman Robert J. McCloskey (1981), a former U.S. diplomat, noted with pithy "the daily media turned a blind eye and a deaf ear" (18). Though the American Society of Newspaper Editors recently had commissioned a guidebook on ethics and more than twenty major dailies had appointed an ombudsman over the preceding decade, skepticism remained, much as it had fifty years prior, when as McCloskey pointed out, Walter Lippmann warned that the lack of independent and publicly accountable press criticism "deprives the press itself of the benefits of the very principle of which the press is in relation to everything else, the chief exponent" (18). Here, McCloskey gives words to a paradox at the core of the ombudsman's role, performing a form of criticism that appears independent, but is never wholly apart from the organizations that would be held accountable. In a survey of ombudsman, Ettema and Glaser (1987) found this ambiguity of allegiance to be a defining characteristic of the ombuds, with many of their participants wondering if a commitment to their colleagues and organizations potentially imperiled the ombuds' independence.

Despite this innate contradiction, the prominence of the ombuds would grow as a solution to journalism's credibility crisis. Over the next quarter century, the Organization of News Ombudsmen would be established and approximately thirty ombudsmen at major media outlets would serve as watchdogs of the watchdogs. But, amid the industry's financial crisis during the 2008 Recession, many newspapers, including the *New York Times*—who finally added a public editor role in the wake of Jayson Blair's plagiarism in 2003—and the *Washington Post* eliminated the position, replacing the ombudsman with a reader's representative, reader comments, or the disaggregated critique of social media (Ferrucci 2019). That the diminishment of the ombudsmen and public editors would be seen as a cost-cutting measure gave further credence to the perception that the public editor role had come to operate as a luxury, public-relations role at a time when public trust in the press was at an all-time low (Ettema and Glasser 1987).

However, the demand for ombudsmen or public editors remains, even though they only number a half dozen or so presently (Ferrucci 2019). The external commentary and critique of bloggers and social media users has proven to be less legitimate in the eyes of those inside newsrooms, and thus easier to ignore (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016; Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012). Ombuds roles are often celebrated for an expertise that allows them to do something that readers alone cannot—understand, acknowledge, and contextualize audience concerns over journalistic practice and translate those concerns to management in order to change practices in ways that buttress news credibility. Calls for hiring ombudsmen and public editors as key vectors for media accountability have only increased in recent years, with greater attention to the inequities of race (English 2020; Free Press 2020). "When a news organization commits to an independent public editor, it makes a strong statement about its commitment to trustworthy journalism," English (2020) wrote, noting the traditional value of ombudsmen in ensuring accuracy and fairness, and calling for "our 'journalistic imagination' to envision a greater role for the public editor in holding journalists to account for diverse, inclusive journalism that is aligned with its moral mission for equality in a liberal democracy" (45). Still, the hope evident in such formulations belies a legacy of elitism that bedeviled the growth of the ombudsman as a response to criticism. It is an approach to accountability in general that has characterized the news industry into the twenty-first century, as news organizations predicate much of their authority on their responsibility to certain enduring values, but also attempt to preserve the autonomy to adjudicate just when news practitioners fall short of those values (Creech and Buozis 2025). Turning to the long 1970s makes this implicit paradox explicit, and shows just how unresolved it is.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis answers a call to bring theory to bear on the perspective of history, and to bring the insight of history deeper into theorizing about the field of journalism (Vos 2024). With regards to metajournalistic discourse, the perspective of history shows how debates over certain practices are only ever contingently settled, and that certain issues recur as conditions change. To return to Raskin (1967),

> The problem of how to tell news meaningfully–how to provide perspective without blotting out the line between fact and opinion–remains an ill-solved one. And unless it is solved, newspapers will lose both their best people and readers. There never was a time when good newspapers have been more needed; there never has been a time when it has been so hard to make them as good as they must be. (254)

The first step in making newspapers as "good as they must be" is to acknowledge the "error of our ways," namely "the pose of infallibility the press tries to maintain" (254).

All of which demonstrates that journalism's relationship to accountability is historically contingent. Though there is a tendency to look back upon journalism in the 1970s nostalgically, the preceding analysis shows how the ombudsman was itself an imperfect solution to an ongoing credibility problem. The institutionalization of the ombuds preserved the legitimacy of self-regulation, while stifling a more robust public engagement with emerging values and changing practices, such as transparency and interpretative journalism. As Nelson (2021) demonstrates, the calls for increased accountability embodied in

moments such as the rise of ombuds are part of a broader and longer movement from elite distance to a more engaged relationship with audiences, though this shift is often met with resistance within journalism's professional culture. The rise of ombuds marks the emergence of a nascent and fitfully deployed transparency ethos and the broader practices that would come to constitute accountability (Vos and Craft 2017).

As a historical case, the ombuds stands as an important moment in the ongoing project of explaining and publicly defending journalism's values, making intelligible to audiences the practices and ethics that guide journalistic work. The emergence of ombuds provides insight into processes that had been largely invisible to audiences, while at the same time, the role paradoxically embodies the news industry's capacity to largely regulate and manage itself. As an organ of the organization acting as an audience representative, enacting an abiding accountability to journalism's enduring values through acts of critique, ombuds embody one of the key tensions in American journalism's democratic function that persists to this day: How might the field maintain its democratic accountability to a broad and diverse populace while maintaining professional independence and organizational autonomy (McDevitt 2020)? When considered in this way, practicable defenses of journalistic practice can be seen as a negotiation between professional autonomy and obligations to the public. The fact that the ombudsman role persisted for as long as it did—from the late 1970s until the most prominent news organizations ended their public editor roles in favor of the dispersed critique of social media beginning in the early 2010s—and in conjunction with American journalism's most broadly profitable period indicates that the implicit elitism and sense of self-defined social responsibility were in part borne from an industry that could afford to declare what the ideal relationship between journalism and the public ought to be.

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