



Ombudsman



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Mid-Year and Final Report to the Board

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In researching who is consuming CPB Ombudsman columns for this report, one thing became clear: The biggest consumers of the reports don't seem to be the general public. Instead, they are readers from the public media and general media worlds, especially those who reach the Ombudsman Reports via Twitter.

These readers showed a particular appetite, as measured by Twitter impressions, for columns that examined how public broadcasters could play a more pronounced role in the evolving news ecosystem. Consider the following reports, for instance.

- "Hitch Your Wagon to this Star," about how pubcasters might stake out a bigger role in Report for America, scored 5,238 impressions (which measures all the times a tweet has been seen).
- "Merging into the Future," about an imminent playbook for public stations interested in acquiring or merging with a local digital news site, scored 5,160 impressions.

For all of 2020, Ombudsman Reports in nine of the 12 months elicited more than 5,000 impressions, in total, and in some months it was as high as 8,000 to 10,000 impressions.

Other readers access the Ombudsman Reports from an email newsletter. Data here is good. The email "open rate" for last year was 39%, well above the average open rate of about 18% for email newsletters. The click-through rate was 14.4%, again well above the 2.5% average click-through rate.

Email subscribers are a small but growing number, making Twitter a more effective distribution platform. Subscriptions to the Ombudsman email newsletter have more than doubled since the start of my tenure on May 1, 2018 – increasing 105% to 458 subscribers.

The Ombudsman published 13 reports since July 1, 2020, continuing a pace of about two per month. But the Ombudsman received only 67 emails in the last six months, about 11 per month. Some were queries, seeking a response. Several leveled emotional charges of liberal bias against NPR or PBS, often as a general complaint without pointing to a specific program instance. Some of these reflected the polarized tenor of the times and were quite vitriolic, prompting a column about the acerbic nature of the comments, "Much Vitriol Aimed at 'PBS NewsHour' Newscasts."

That column actually elicited some complimentary emails about NPR and PBS programming from readers objecting to the

bias complaints.

As I have noted previously, CPB Ombudsman email volume is markedly less than the emails received by the NPR and PBS Public Editors, and not a very robust source of ideas for Ombudsman Reports.

Of note this period were instances where other people in the public media world gave additional “legs” to the Ombudsman Reports. These included mentions and a republishing of an entire column in former public radio executive Mike Marcotte’s blog.

In addition, CPB granted a request from the head of the University Station Alliance for permission to reprint any columns that would interest its members. “... I find so many of the things that you write to be of interest to university licensees,” said Virginia Dambach, executive director.

Since this my last report before my three-year term ends on April 30, I’d offer these observations from my tenure:

- The Ombudsman’s charter, last updated in February 2011, would benefit from a refresh. The Ombudsman is supposed to “confine its programming comments to content that has been broadcast to the public on-air or on-line.” Fewer viewers and listeners now consume programming via over-the-air broadcasts, and in terms of online content, sometimes there are issues involving not what programming has been produced – but what hasn’t, or what might be missing. Moreover, there are emerging ethical issues involving fundraising, sponsored content, partnerships, acquisitions and mergers, diversity, #MeToo and more that would benefit from Ombudsman input.
- Second, we are all living through a pronounced period of media disruption. It has affected legacy media, commercial television, and not-so-old digital startups, to date. It is easy to see where public broadcasting might be ripe for disruption, too, as the crisis over disappearing local news sets up competition for taxpayer and donor dollars. This Ombudsman worries whether there can emerge a robust-enough, can-do, entrepreneurial culture at many public broadcasters to counter the hidebound, cannot-do culture of those focused on the limits, instead of the possibilities, of their mandate.

It’s clear that many pubcasters, viewers and listeners want more. For instance, some news directors would like to see local-news blocks in the nightly “PBS NewsHour.” With a “NewsHour” clock that would allow stations to insert local TV segments, “stations who don’t have the resources for a whole local show, could sustain some regular local presence,” one West Coast station executive said.

Similarly, one viewer, while applauding the “NewsHour,” wishes “it had twice or triple the staff, and could encourage more regional public broadcasters (radio & TV) to increase (or even *have*!) their own thoughtful news staffs, programs & websites to feed into a true national report on ‘NewsHour.’”

I’ll close with an early thanks for the opportunity to serve in this role.

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