



Journalist Fellowship Paper

A Reckoning for Relevance: Redefining the Role of a Public Editor

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Introduction: A call to journalistic imagination

Help wanted: A Job Spec

We are seeking an individual with a strong journalistic ethical compass and understanding of anti-racist journalism and its moral mission to represent and reflect equal dignity for all.

The primary objective is to ensure the accountability and transparency of this news organisation through regular public reporting on our journalism and its impact on the multiple, diverse communities we seek to serve.

You will have proactive oversight responsibility for accuracy, fairness and the ethical professional standards of trustworthy journalism, including diverse and inclusive journalism of equality.



A reimagined job spec for the role of a Publics Editor. For a full job spec, see Addendum A on p48

This treatise on the role of the public editor is not a view from nowhere. As the longest serving public editor of the *Toronto Star* (the Canadian news organisation with the longest commitment to the role of public editor of any news organisation in North America), I bring an insider's perspective and personal viewpoint about the value, potential and possibilities of this accountability role.

It's a role that has long been considered an "endangered species" in journalism. According to the membership rolls of the Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors (ONO), which also represents public editors and readers' editors, there are now only about 60 people in the world serving in this unique journalistic oversight role.¹

¹ See ONO website for current membership: <https://www.newsombudsmen.org/regular-members/>

Throughout the 13 years in which I served as public editor of one of Canada's largest and oldest news organisations, the drumbeat of doom for this role loomed large.

In my first week on the job, at an ONO conference held at the Nieman Foundation's Walter Lippman House at Harvard University, speaker after speaker expressed concern for the future of public editors at a time of digital revolution and economic crisis in journalism. Then editor of the *Guardian* Alan Rusbridger, who had launched the readers' editor role in his newsroom in 1997, told us that many top editors were reluctant to create any sort of "independent court of appeal" for readers or anyone else who wanted to challenge or complain about journalism. Gina Lubrano, then executive director of ONO and ombudsman at the *San Diego Telegram* for 14 years, reported that 13 American news organisations had recently axed the job – significant given that ONO's global membership had rarely reached even 100 since the organisation was formed in 1980.

In the years that followed, as I wrestled with the complexities of the most challenging job I had ever done in journalism, there were many more reminders of the precarity of the public editor. "Special Report: Ranks of ombudsmen continue to thin", was the headline from *Editor&Publisher* in 2008.² An *Advertising Age* article that same year offered five reasons why the public editor/ombudsman was "a position whose time may have come and gone".³

In 2013, after the *Washington Post* eliminated its ombudsman position, media critic Jack Shafer responded with a widely circulated blog post entitled, "Does anyone care about the newspaper ombudsman?"⁴ In a 2010 Carleton University (Canada) Masters' thesis, Carolina Quixada questioned the future of the position at the *Star*, then the last remaining Canadian news organisation to employ a public editor.⁵ Her

² Strupp, J., 2008. *Special Report: Ranks of ombudsmen continue to thin*. Editor&Publisher. Retrieved and printed Sept. 26, 2008.

³ Dumenco, S., 2008. *Is the newspaper ombudsman more or less obsolete?* Advertising Age. Retrieved and printed March 24, 2008

⁴ Shafer, J., 2013. *Does anyone care about newspaper ombudsmen?* Retrieved and printed March 5, 2013 from <http://blogs.reuters.com/jackshafer/2013/03/04/does-anyone-care-about-newspaper-ombudsmen/>

⁵ Quixada, C., 2010. *Newspaper ombudsmanship in Canada The rise and fall of an accountability system*. Carleton University, Masters of Journalism thesis.

less-than-reassuring conclusion: The public editor job at the Star was seemingly guaranteed... “at least for the moment”.

Reader, I survived, and so did the public editor position at the *Star*... at least for the moment. In June 2020, when I opted to step down from the job after assessing, adjudicating and responding to more than 150,000 comments, concerns and complaints from *Star* readers, the news organisation appointed veteran political reporter [Bruce Campion-Smith](#) as public editor. He is the ninth journalist to serve in the role since 1972, when the *Star* became the first Canadian newspaper to appoint a journalist to “safeguard the fairness and accuracy of its news columns”.



*Kathy English and Public Editor Associate, Maithily Panchalingam.
December, 2016. (Toronto Star file photo)*

The role was first introduced to American newsrooms more than 50 years ago, at a time of eroding public confidence in journalism (what was then labelled a “credibility gap”), and amid widespread charges the press had failed to report fairly and accurately on the civil rights movement.

I have long been puzzled as to why the role of public editor failed to take stronger hold in journalism. Why is public-facing journalistic accountability and self regulation viewed with indifference at best, and disdain at worst? A 2008 report by the Danish Union of Journalists put it bluntly: “If it is such a good idea to have a news ombudsman, why are there only less than 100 news ombudsmen in the world?”⁶

Taking on a role that holds journalists to account for ethical standards, explains journalism to the public, and the public’s concerns to journalists always seemed important to me – essential even.

As [Bill Kovach](#), co-author of *The Elements of Journalism* and founding chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, told our 2007 ONO gathering: “The potential of the job you all do and its need within a democratic society could not be greater. Journalism is the only brand of information designed to help us as citizens in a democracy. Neither journalism, nor democracy, is going to survive this transition into a digital world of unlimited information unless journalists of this generation get it right.”

Journalism’s power – the right to report freely on and for the citizens of a democracy – demands journalistic responsibility. But who holds powerful journalists to account for ethical, accurate and fair journalism? Who ensures that journalists in your newsroom and community get it right and abide by journalism’s professional standards?

Journalism needs its public editors now, perhaps more than ever. Given the well-documented crises of trust in news and evolving disinformation strategies, it is time to reconsider the role and relevance of the independent public editor.⁷

I came to the Reuters Institute to make my case that the work of public editors is foundational to trustworthy journalism. A public editor working independently of a news

⁶ Orberg, E., 2008. *The Internal watchdog: Self-regulation in the media*, The Danish Union of Journalists. Retrieved from K. English own files.

⁷ Toff, B., 2020. What we think we know and what we want to know: perspectives on trust in news in a changing world. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/what-we-think-we-know-and-what-we-want-know-perspectives-trust-news-changing-world>> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

organisation's news leadership can hold newsrooms to public account for accurate, ethical journalism. They can engage with news audiences and provide a path to greater news literacy. They can defend journalism and journalists when public complaints are unfounded. Indeed, in a time when ethical journalism and public understanding of journalism would seem to matter to public trust in journalism, why wouldn't you consider a role that sends a clear public signal of your commitment to trustworthy journalism?

My journalism fellowship, guided by fellowship director Meera Selva, helped me see that my exploration of journalism's accountability role needed to go further. Our cohort was made up of six women from around the world, who had come together in Oxford in the midst of a global pandemic and who shared our knowledge and experiences of the largely patriarchal newsroom cultures we came from – common across continents.

Our group was diverse in ethnicity, race, religion, and age. We talked and walked (paying heed to social distancing requirements), listened and learned from one another in a collaborative environment of mutual respect unlike any newsroom I had ever worked in. We came to understand deeply that who has a voice in journalism, who has a seat at the table, and who needs to make space for others are questions that matter much to journalism's future. In this environment, I saw that any reconsideration of the public editor role in today's world demands exploring the potential and possibilities of a role that is accountable to all “journalism's multiple diverse publics.”⁸

It would demand asking uncomfortable questions about who serves in this role, given the data I collected for this project indicated that those in these oversight roles now are largely white, middle-aged and male – a status quo of journalistic authority holding legacy newsrooms to account for journalism's ethics and excellence. And, as a white, middle-aged woman who has long worked within and upheld journalism's status quo structure, I cannot personally elude the uncomfortable question posed by Canadian scholars Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young in their important 2020 work, *Reckoning*:

⁸ Callison, C. and Young, M., 2020. *Reckoning Journalism's Limits and Possibilities*. Oxford University Press, p.4.

Journalism's Limits and Possibilities: “Who gets to determine what good journalism is and when it is done right?”

We know journalism has failed dismally in representing and reflecting diverse publics. Whether that be in coverage of Indigenous peoples in Canada, African Americans in the United States, or Muslims in the United Kingdom, journalism has never lived up to its mission of providing accurate, fair and representative coverage of the diverse communities it seeks to serve.

As today’s journalists navigate a long overdue reckoning for racial equality and realignment of the largely white patriarchal structures that continue to dominate and define global media, can our “journalistic imagination” envision a greater role for a public editor?⁹ Would the public editor role be more relevant to journalism and the publics we serve if it evolved to encompass accountability for diversity and inclusion?

In this paper, I set out to imagine how the role could evolve in a way that makes public editors indispensable to the modern newsroom – newsrooms that truly pursue “equal dignity for all”.¹⁰ The paper includes a thorough investigation of the twin crises of diversity and flagging public trust in news, an in-depth look at the role of accountability in ethical journalism, a survey of Public Editors from the world’s leading newsrooms on these issues, and a proposal for the expansion of the role a public editor plays in the modern newsroom.

⁹ Ryfe, D., 2016. *Journalism and the Public*, Polity Press. Chapter 4. Ryfe tells us that “normative ideals” of what journalism “should be” can be infused with the “journalistic imagination” of what journalism could be: “What is it we can imagine journalism doing while still remaining within the realm of journalism?” he asks, inspiring my exploration of what it is we can imagine a public editor doing, while still remaining within the realm of this accountability and oversight role.

¹⁰ I am grateful to *Toronto Star* editor emeritus, Haroon Siddiqui for introducing the concept of journalism that stands for “equal dignity for all” to the *Star*. The former editorial page editor is a leader in Canadian journalism on the need for diversity and inclusion, having championed the value of “visible minorities” in journalism for many decades.

What does a public editor do?

Some colourful colloquialisms have been coined in attempts to sum up the job of a public editor: during my years I've heard the role described as the conscious of the newsroom, newsroom cop, newsroom coroner, newsroom scold, moral compass of the newsroom, the watchdog's watchdog, the designated soul searcher, a guidance counsellor, an in-house journalism professor, head prefect, honest broker, journalism's last line of defence, and the loneliest job in the newsroom.

The late and highly esteemed *New York Times* media critic, David Carr, once told me he regarded the role as “the Church Lady of journalism” – a reference to the smug, holier-than-thou, judgmental character played by comedian Dana Carvey on the American TV institution, *Saturday Night Live*.¹¹

As I told readers in a 2015 column, I strived to be neither newsroom scold, nor newsroom apologist, but rather a fair and independent broker of public complaints.¹² The public editor role at the *Toronto Star* is independent of the newsroom, reporting to the publisher. It entails responsibility for holding the newsroom to account for its journalistic standards, adjudicating public complaints about the *Star's* journalism, investigating claims of error brought forward by readers and news sources, and publishing necessary corrections on all platforms.

The position, as envisioned in 1972, was to serve as “the readers’ representative”. To that end, I sought to explain journalism to readers, and the concerns and complaints of readers to the *Star's* journalists at a time of immense change in journalism. The ethical issues and journalistic dilemmas I grappled with over 13 years could fill a journalism school textbook: accuracy and fairness, conflicts of interest, distinctions between fact and opinion, undercover reporting, photo ethics, fabrication and plagiarism.

¹¹ English, K., 2012. Opinion | David Carr: High priest of journalism's existential angst. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2012/09/21/david_carr_high_priest_of_journalisms_existent_jal_angst.html> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

¹² English, K., 2015. Opinion | So what does the public editor do?: English. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2015/07/31/so-what-does-the-public-editor-do-english.html> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

Given my tenure in a time of digital transformation, I grappled often with the ethical implications of new issues raised in journalism's uneasy "post-industrial" transformation. Issues such as how to handle online corrections, online comments' complaints, online harassment, social media policy, and the vexing questions raised by many public requests to remove – or "unpublish" – digital content. ¹⁵

The work was always challenging. It felt often like I was walking a tightrope between demanding readers and defensive journalists, a common metaphor in writings about the role. I traversed that tricky terrain by holding fast to what I believed to be true about ethical, responsible journalism. At times, I criticised the *Star's* journalism for falling short of the *Star's* standards, seeking to explain what had gone wrong and why. One such example of this occurred in 2015, resulting in what was the only *Star* public editor column ever to be published on Page One.

"*Public editor criticizes the Star's Gardasil story*" was the headline on [my column](#) expressing my judgement of the *Star's* alarmist investigation of the "dark side" of the Gardasil HPV vaccine. "The widespread criticism of the *Star's* story expressed by those within the medical, scientific and public health communities is fair and valid," I wrote. "In looking at all of this, I have to wonder why the *Star* published this at all [...] The *Star* fell short in not giving its readers public health information in a manner that meets the standards of responsibility expected in evidence-based science journalism."

Other times, when I judged reader complaints to be unfounded – and they often were – I defended the newsroom and its journalists from a sometimes hostile public, seeking to explain why I did not deem their work to have fallen short of the *Star's* standards.

While I am writing here about the public editor role and its potential to serve diverse publics, it should be noted that the role takes other titles around the world: news ombudsman, readers' editor or readers' advocate.

¹⁵ I wrote just over 400 public editor columns in this time documenting many of these issues. My column archive is published here: https://www.thestar.com/authors.english_kathy.html

Any references in the literature to “news ombudsman” is applicable to the more gender-neutral title, public editor. It must also be made clear that the role is done uniquely in each news organisation that has committed to this form of media self-regulation and public accountability. None of what I present here should be regarded as a judgement on how anyone else does this job within their news organisation.



Information about the Toronto Star's public editor's office published on thestar.com (Screenshot)

Most notably, differences in how the role is structured and carried out exist between public and private media and newspaper and broadcast outlets. Some organisations establish the role as a post-publication/broadcast means of public appeal and adjudication and others, such as the *Star*, include the public editor in discussions and debates about journalistic standards as they arise. There is no one way to be a public editor or news ombudsman, but just as global journalism shares “family resemblances”¹⁴ there are common values – independence, accountability and transparency – that have long provided the foundation of this oversight position and remain vital to its future potential and possibility for greater relevance.

¹⁴ Ryfe, D. p.159. The author contends that while journalism may not be practised in exactly the same manner throughout the world, it shares “family resemblances”. As he writes: journalism most everywhere contains, “a familiar set of preferred identities, practices and values. Everywhere, for example, journalists believe their primary purpose is to tell the truth and that they in some general sense represent the people (or the public).”

On trust: a survey

In preparing for this project, I circulated a questionnaire to ONO members around the world to determine wider perspectives on the role and greater understanding of the responsibilities of those doing the job.

My survey went to 65 ONO members in March 2020. I received 26 responses: 19 from those in the role, and seven from those who had served previously. Respondents represented current and past public editors, ombudsmen and readers' editors in North America, South America, Europe (largely north-Western Europe), Australia, and East and South Asia.

Collectively, they represent organisations including the *Guardian*, the BBC, NPR, the Associated Press, the *New York Times*, the *Hindu*, Canada's CBC and the *Globe and Mail*, Denmark's TV2 and Australia's ABC. Tellingly, these are all legacy news organisations that can afford this oversight role and have strong commitments to public accountability.

Also telling is the fact that ONO does not yet count any public editors for newer digital-only news organisations within its membership. I do not know of any such organisations that have appointed an individual to this accountability role.

As I had theorised in conceiving this project, the survey results indicate the work of public editors is aligned with key characteristics of trustworthy journalism as defined by various trust initiatives that emerged after Donald Trump was elected U.S. president in 2016.

Despite the fact that trust in news had been falling for years, the "post-truth" months after Trump's election evoked global journalistic soul-searching about why trust in journalism was at historic low levels and why journalism was seemingly out of touch with the public. Numerous new projects sprang up to tackle trust in journalism.¹⁵

¹⁵ See Bell, F., 2017. *Here's a list of initiatives that hope to fix trust in journalism and tackle "fake news."* Medium.com, <https://medium.com/@ferg/heres-a-list-of-initiatives-that-hope-to-fix-trust-in-journalism-and-tackle-fake-news-30689feb402>

I am most familiar with The Trust Project, founded by journalist Sally Lehrman, then of Santa Clara University in California. The project was initially funded by Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Google, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund and the Markkula Foundation.

As I told readers when the *Star* joined it in 2018, [The Trust Project](#) is a global consortium of news organisations committed to incorporating “Trust Indicators” into digital content.¹⁶ These indicators – which include easily visible corrections and ethics policies; labelling that distinguishes news from opinion, and journalism from advertising; and information about journalists’ backgrounds – are transparency and accountability standards intended to help readers recognise and assess trustworthy journalism.

As the editorial content lead for the *Star*’s participation in The Trust Project, I saw considerable overlap between those trust indicators and the work public editors do in upholding accuracy and verification standards, correcting errors, holding newsroom journalists to account for ethics policies, and explaining journalism to news audiences. It seemed to me that this new initiative to provide evidence of trustworthy journalism was, in large part, the work that our small corps of public editors and news ombudsmen scattered around the world had been doing for decades, even as our relevance within journalism was never fully appreciated.

While the role of public editors and news ombudsmen varies across news organisations and countries, we share some basic values and responsibilities. Through my survey, I sought to understand how those who do the job regard their roles and how they explain those roles to the public. Here are some responses that capture the core answers to the question, “How do you define to the public your role in your news organisation?”

- My favourite description is “conscience of the newsroom”. But I also try to make the point that it is a sign of how much the organisation wants to make sure we are being fair and accurate.

¹⁶ The Trust Project. 2021. Home | The Trust Project. [online] Available at: <<https://thetrustproject.org>> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

- As an ombudsman, I consider myself to be some kind of watchdog in the newsroom – explaining editorial standards to the public, but also judging whether these standards are being upheld and respected.
- The Public Editor’s office serves mainly as a liaison between the newsroom and its listeners. We investigate listener concerns and issues of journalistic ethics.
- Bridge between readers and media: to inform, answer complaints, deal with ethical issues. There’s also the element of teaching readers about how journalism works, to create greater transparency.
- I try to answer the question: what is right or wrong according to the ethics of journalism?

In most cases, the role has both outward and inward-facing responsibilities, with 73% reporting that ongoing newsroom training related to journalistic standards is part of their role. Despite the fact that these individuals cast judgement on the work of those within their news organisations, a large number – 83% – said they believe newsroom insiders deem their role critical.

All respondents said they had responsibility for upholding and explaining the ethics and standards codes of their news organisations, and 77% have been involved in initiatives to establish or update journalistic standards and ethics policies. Overall, 92% said they connect directly with the public in upholding and explaining those journalistic standards. They also communicate through columns, blogs and broadcasts. Just under half – 42% – said they use social media to communicate ethics and standards to news audiences.

In response to the question, “What do you see as your primary responsibility in the role?” these respondents cited fairness, accuracy, news corrections, accountability and transparency, and advocacy: “Be an advocate for the audience and also an advocate for journalism,” said one. In drilling down on the responsibilities of the role, a majority – 88% – play a role in correcting errors and ensuring the accuracy of all that is published and broadcast, with 38% reporting that corrections are a primary part of their job.

A majority – 77% – have been involved in initiatives to ensure their news organisation clearly distinguishes between news and opinion content and 88% have been called on to explain that distinction to news audiences.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of these respondents – 96% – regard their role as essential in ensuring and communicating the elements of trustworthy journalism. That same number also regard their role as critical in ensuring the transparency and accountability of their news organisation to news audiences.

Here is a selection of their perspectives on the link between their role and trustworthy journalism:

- I believe in it so strongly that it informs everything I do in this role. If we are not trustworthy, there's no reason for us to be doing this work.
- With honest reporting being under pressure from many sides, it is imperative that someone is there with the sole responsibility of safeguarding the credibility of reporting and carrying out media self-control.
- The public communicates to me that it wants more accountability and is grateful for me to explain and engage on issues of trust. And because they believe me to be independent when it comes from me it is trustworthy.
- We all naturally trust a person more for having the honesty to make mistakes. We also trust those who open themselves to criticism. It's no different for a news organisation. It holds institutions to account so it must also be accountable.
- To the extent that the audience accepts that I act in good faith as a completely independent arbiter, I have one of the few roles that allow for direct communication with news consumers about how trustworthy journalism works.
- It is not enough that you say you are doing trustworthy journalism. You have to do it. And if it is challenged, you have to answer for it. I am part of that process.

I also asked about the significant challenges of the role as it is defined within their own news organisation and threats to its future. Here is what some told me:

- It would be nice to have decision-making power rather than moral suasion as is currently the practice.
- It requires strong commitment to support the role of the inside critic. From time to time there would be pressure to limit the role.
- Helping to keep the organisation accurate, balanced, fair, non-partisan, complete, and helping to keep it true to its values in an era of misinformation and fraudulent news and partisan divides.
- Getting news organisations to recognise and embrace the role at a time when they feel under so much pressure from outside criticism, much of it uninformed and much of it driven by political and ideological, rather than journalistic or public service motives.
- Cynicism from the public. The daunting and intimidating role of social media which drowns out reasoned and open dialogue.
- The idea of ‘truth’ seems to be under threat- and mistrust in our profession is at an all-time high.

Who serves in this role judging journalism? As in past surveys of public editors and news ombudsmen, conducted since ONO was formed in 1980, these are dedicated journalists with extensive experience and admirable records of excellence.

Of the 26, 20 (77%) have more than 30 years of experience and another 4 (15%) between 20 and 30 years in journalism. That makes news ombudsmen and public editors largely “well-seasoned” journalists and predominantly middle aged and older. Ten of the 26 who responded to my survey are women – just under 40%. In ONO’s current published membership roll overall, 16 of 59 are female – 27%.

That number had risen steadily since my first ONO conference in 2007 when outgoing executive director Gina Lubrano told us that since the role’s inception, it had most often been assigned to an older male journalist doing his last job in journalism. The addition to ONO that year of three women then in their 40s: me, the *Guardian’s* then new readers’ editor, [Siobhain Butterworth](#), and CBC Radio-Canada’s new ombudsmen, [Julie Miville-Dechene](#) was apparently unprecedented – as the men in the room informed us.

While I did not ask about race or ethnicity, my experience within ONO since 2007 is that we remain largely a group of privileged white journalists. Indeed, the “class photo” from our 2019 annual conference, held at Columbia School of Journalism in New York, shows 33 white people in the group of 36 conference attendees.



Organisation of News Ombudsman Conference, Columbia School of Journalism, June, 2019 (K English files -newsombudsman.org)

Our online Zoom meetings to discuss ongoing ethical challenges in global journalism display boxes of mainly white faces. Clearly, there is little diversity within the ONO ranks. This raises the obvious rhetorical question: Are the world’s current public editors and news ombudsmen too old, too male and too white?

In 2021, as journalism strives to evolve to meet the long overdue need for greater diversity in newsroom staffing and content, that is a question that must be asked – especially of leadership.¹⁷ Certainly, the question of who sits in the seats of journalistic judgements, who holds journalists to public account, matters to the future of journalism.

¹⁷ Robertson, D., Selva, M. and Nielsen, P., 2021. *Race and leadership in the news media 2021: evidence from five markets*. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/race-and-leadership-news-media-2021-evidence-five-markets>> [Accessed 29 March 2021].

Diversity: a call to public accountability

For many decades, media organisations in the Global North – largely run by white men – have talked about the pressing need for representative newsrooms and coverage. But there has been minimal action or accountability attached to their words.

The findings of the 1968 Kerner Commission, a report of the U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, ring as true today as they did during that era of civil unrest and a resulting news credibility crisis.¹⁸ Criticising the media for contributing to racial misunderstanding in America through biased, unfair coverage in 1960, the commission said:

“Along with the country as a whole, the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men’s eyes and a white perspective. That is no longer good enough. The painful process of readjustment that is required of the news media must begin now.”

More than 52 years later, journalism has begun to navigate its long-overdue reckoning for racial equality, along with a realignment of the patriarchal structures that largely continue to define global media. As it does so, the public editor role could also evolve to provide for greater oversight and accountability in these areas.

Here, history provides some path to the future. As I learned in my research, the genesis of the role can be implicitly tied to the Kerner Commission’s call for more journalistic accountability for the portrayal of race relations in America. In the immediate wake of their report, the news industry in America looked to exhibit some measure of greater responsibility through the creation of press councils and news ombudsmen positions.

In 1972, the *Minneapolis Tribune* appointed veteran reporter Dick Cunningham as its first “readers’ representative”. Cunningham had reported extensively on civil rights strife in that midwestern U.S. city – the same city where a 46-year-old unarmed African American

¹⁸ The Kerner Report (1968), National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, p. 389.

man named George Floyd was killed in June 2020 during an arrest by a white police officer who pinned him to the ground with a knee on his neck for eight minutes.

In an interview in the late 1970s, Cunningham drew a direct line between the Kerner Commission and his appointment. The paper's editors realised they had been out of touch with "certain elements of the community", and looked to create a role that would "bring the criticism of the news into the newspaper," Cunningham said. "The Kerner Commission report seems to loom very big in this transition in the later '60s. It is the reason there is an ombudsman in the first place."¹⁹

So, too, did the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* appoint a "readers' advocate" in 1974 amid community concerns that the newspaper had treated the city's first Black mayor unfairly.²⁰

Some of those early news ombudsmen spoke out strongly on race issues, holding their newsrooms to account for what they assessed as deficiencies in reporting on the African American community. Ben Bagdikian, who became the *Washington Post's* second ombudsman in 1971, left the role within 11 months because of controversy stoked by his public criticism of the paper's coverage of race.²¹

In at least two documented instances, his criticism focused on the paper's relationship with its Black journalists and the larger Black community.²² These public statements raised the ire of *Post* editor Ben Bradlee, causing Bagdikian to abandon the ombudsman role before serving even a year. He later told journalists at the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University: "I was told that I was disloyal to the management, and I said, 'Well, as ombudsman I don't regard my loyalty as being to the management, but to the readers.'"

¹⁹ Mogavero, D. p.2., see footnote 13

²⁰ Nemeth.N. p.100., see footnote 15

²¹ Bagdikian had first raised the idea of a newspaper ombudsman in a March 1967 *Esquire* magazine article, entitled, *The American Daily is Dying on Your Doorstep*. He wrote: "Some brave owner 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 fate of the American newspaper." Cited in Mogavero,p.3.

²² Bagdikian, B. (1974).Confessions of an Ombudsman, Nieman Report, PDF retrieved, Nov.

2020,https://niemanreports.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Spring-and-Summer-1974_150.pdf

Robert Maynard, the *Post*'s third ombudsman who went on to become an important leader in latter-20th Century America's "press desegregation movement", called repeatedly for more inclusive journalism to bridge the chasm between Black and white America.²⁵ While serving as ombudsman, Maynard spoke out about the importance of a representative press in fulfilling democracy's ideals.



Robert C Maynard, undated. (Image supplied by The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education)

In a 1972 ombudsman column, "*Perspective: A Black Journalist looks at White Newsrooms*", he wrote about the pervasive whiteness of newsrooms that "can only suggest racism in the raw".²⁴ Maynard also used his ombudsman platform to call for structural change, specifically, more Black journalists in management. "In a society wracked by the problems of race, white hands dominate, and white hands control the final outcome of the product," he wrote, adding that this inequality "hinders the fulfillment of democracy."

²⁵ In a 1978 speech to the news industry. Robert Maynard stated, "We will not let you off the hook. We must desegregate this business." Maynard Institute, Mission and History.

<https://mije.org/about-us/mission-and-history.html>

²⁴ Maynard, Robert C. (1972) *Perspective: A Black Journalist Looks at White Newsrooms*. pp 144-46. *Of the Press, by the Press, for the Press, and Others, too*. The Washington Post Company.

Today, Maynard’s work continues through the [Maynard Institute](#), founded to lead the fight against systemic racism in newsrooms. Its clarion call comes from a speech Maynard made to the 1978 gathering of the American Society of Newspaper Editors: “Newsrooms have a responsibility to cure the legacy of racism.”²⁵

Sadly, newsrooms have failed to do so. The work of the institute goes on – as necessary now as when Maynard began speaking out from the ombudsman’s office about the failures of diversity and inclusion in journalism. In the autumn of 2020, the Institute launched Vision25: Building Racial Equity in Newsrooms, a collaborative initiative that seeks to build “actively anti-racist” newsrooms and advance racial equity in journalism.



CNN’s Reliable Sources host Brian Stelter discusses a New York Times report on diversity and inclusion, “A Call to Action: Building a culture that works for all of us” with NYT assistant managing editor Carolyn Ryan. Feb. 28, 2021. (Screen shot from broadcast)

Central to this vital goal are the values core to the work of public editors: accountability and transparency: “It’s critical to both journalists and the public that we not only share our commitment to diversity, but how we are measuring it,” the Vision25 announcement

²⁵ Maynard Institute website <https://mije.org/about-us/mission-and-history.html>

states in calling for the journalism industry to commit to public pledges of accountability and transparency to racial equity.²⁶

Accountability is essential to achieving diversity in news staffing and coverage, says [Federica Cherubini](#), the Reuters Institute's head of leadership development. "Driving change, when it comes to diversity, starts with gathering data. If problems are poorly documented, they are hard to analyse and address, and progress – or lack thereof – is impossible to measure," she said.

Cherubini did her Italian Master's studies thesis on the role of the news ombudsman and can envision a public editor playing a role in holding news organisations to account for diversity. And, we agree, if not the public editor, someone must do this accountability work if newsrooms are to evolve to finally represent the communities they seek to serve. [Alexandra Borchardt](#), the institute's former director of leadership programmes, now a consultant to the global news industry, tells news leaders that "diversity is not nice to have, it's essential". Digital transformation depends on diverse newsrooms, she says. Borchardt also sees metrics as key to making change happen and stresses that diversity of both staff and content require measuring for effective change.

In Canada, some BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) journalists are now doing this critical work of holding newsrooms to account for diversity and inclusion metrics. In January 2020, a new organisation, Canadian Journalists of Colour (CJOC) joined forces with the Canadian Association of Black Journalists (CABJ) to issue "Calls to Action" to my country's news industry to address "glaring racial inequities".

Leading the list of their seven calls to action is, once again, accountability and transparency – a call for newsrooms to report diversity statistics and release them publicly – something I am well aware that much of Canadian media has resisted for some time. Canadian journalist [Anita Li](#), co-founder of Canadian Journalists of Colour (CJOC) and an executive member of the Online News Association, a Vision25 partner, told me it

²⁶ Mije.org. 2020. *Vision25: Building Racial Equity in Newsrooms*. [online] Available at: <<https://mije.org/news/2020-10-01-vision25.html>> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

was a deliberate decision to make public accounting the first call to action because, “You can’t solve an issue without first acknowledging it.” It is also essential, Li said, that the public can hold journalism to account. “The whole idea of journalism is to be of public service; we are meant to serve the diversity and breadth of audiences for all of Canada. Diversity is not just a benefit for underrepresented groups.”

The work of tracking the diversity of newsroom staff is underway in many Canadian newsrooms now, driven, in large measure, by these calls to action. But, as Li and CABJ executive-director [Nadia Stewart](#) wrote recently, it took six months for any of Canada’s largest established news organisations to take notice of these calls and only after “the crush of media reckoning” that took place in newsrooms across North America following the killing of George Floyd.²⁷

In working with newsrooms, CJOC and CABJ make accountability a priority, keeping track and circling back to monitor progress on any commitments news leaders make about diversity and their newsrooms. “We want action, not lip service,” Li told me.

Newsroom representation is critical to accurate and fair representation in news coverage. Ryerson School of Journalism professor [Karyn Pugliese](#), a citizen of the Pikwàkanagàn First Nation in Ontario, sees a direct connection between the small numbers of Indigenous journalists working in Canadian newsrooms and the large amount of unfair, inaccurate coverage that has marginalised and stereotyped Indigenous peoples.

The longstanding failures of Canadian journalism in covering Indigenous issues was made clear in the 2015 final report of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It issued calls to action to Canadian media to report and reflect responsibly on Indigenous peoples and issues. It also called for the hiring and promotion of Indigenous journalists in newsrooms with a view that this would lead to better reporting and an end to harmful stereotypes.

²⁷ Li, A. and Stewart, N., 2021. *CABJ and CJOC on calls to action one year later*. J-Source <https://j-source.ca/article/cabj-and-cjoc-on-calls-to-action-one-year-later/>

Pugliese, former executive director of News and Current Affairs at APTN (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network), still doesn't see that happening in much of mainstream Canadian media. Indigenous journalists must navigate newsrooms in which systemic racism is a daily reality and news is defined largely through a white lens, she told me. "Issues are covered like a conversation among white people: 'Look, an Indian was murdered down by the river; you should stay away,'" said Pugliese. She points to the reality of "a lot of Boomer males" in newsroom decision-making roles as a reason why coverage too often doesn't fairly and accurately reflect Indigenous peoples and perspectives. "So many issues get reframed, rewritten or discarded because they have to be of interest to white Boomer males."

The bottom line here is that newsroom diversity is about more than numbers. It is about accuracy and fairness in covering communities, core tenets of trustworthy journalism. Indeed, as Dorothy Byrne, head of news and current affairs at the U.K's Channel Four, [told an Oxford seminar in 2019](#): "If your newsroom is not diverse, you are getting the news wrong."²⁸

²⁸ Byrne, D., 2019. "*If your newsroom is not diverse, you will get the news wrong*". [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/if-your-newsroom-not-diverse-you-will-get-news-wrong> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

The link between diversity and trust

Among The Trust Project's eight "trust indicators" is a commitment to "diverse voices" and accountability to the public for diversity staffing. The global trust initiative thus makes the vital link between diversity and trustworthy journalism.

The questions the project asks in regard to diversity are questions journalists – and the public editors who hold their work to account – should also ask. "What are the newsroom's efforts and commitments to bring in diverse perspectives across social and demographic differences?" and "Are some communities or perspectives included only in stereotypical ways, or even completely missing?" I asked founder [Sally Lehrman](#) why she included diversity as a core value to earning public trust in journalism. The answer is simple: the public that consumes news says it values diversity in news.

The Trust Project began by asking groups of diverse people what they value in news, what makes them trust news and deem it essential to their lives. These respondents made clear they want to hear more from people outside traditional power structures. "People told us they think news is a way toward understanding other people's lives and said they want to see themselves represented in the news," said Lehrman, co-author of the 2019 book, *Reporting Inequality*. "One of the reasons we have sometimes downplayed the importance of diverse voices in news is that we are not listening, and we too often don't have people of colour in the room. When I started telling news executives about our user research many were surprised by the desire for diverse voices."

As Lehrman well knows, in becoming part of The Trust Project, the *Toronto Star* struggled to meet this trust indicator connected to diversity. That's because the news organisation had no official accounting for diverse staffing and, at that time, some senior executives opposed making any such information public, regarding it as an internal "HR" matter. I faced resistance at that time for any sort of public accountability statement for diversity in staffing. Lehrman told me the *Star* was not the only news organisation that found the diversity indicator problematic, nor the only Canadian news organisation to tell her that collecting and making diversity data public was "an American thing". Of course, there is

plenty of documented evidence proving that most American media has fallen short in accountability for diversity in staff and content for some time. Commitments made by the newspaper industry at its 1979 American Society of Newspaper Editors' conference to bring newsroom diversity numbers to parity with the nation's population stalled.²⁹ As Lehrman told me, Dori Maynard, the now-deceased former president of the Maynard Institute and daughter of Institute founder, Robert Maynard, often expressed dismay over the low priority U.S. journalism gave to diversity imperatives. "Dori used to say, 'Diversity is not even just on the backburner, it's outside of the kitchen'."

Why have newsrooms failed for so long to make a priority of newsroom diversity and content that reflects the diverse publics they seek to serve? Some literature links it to a failure to regard diversity as a core principle of ethical journalism. That's the thesis of a 2015 *Journalism Practice* article that examines why only "superficial staff and story-perspective diversification" has taken place over many decades.³⁰ It provides convincing evidence that news organisations and individual journalists have not regarded diversity and inclusion as a must-do aligned with trustworthy journalism's values of accuracy, fairness and public accountability.

We all, collectively, must bear responsibility for this failure. As it states, "a clear majority of journalists did not view diversity as ethically imperative and did not believe it represented a salient aspect of their own work or personal responsibility." It suggests that even well-regarded industry ethics codes and standards of practice that refer to diversity do so largely as superficial lip-service. The authors conclude that the journalism industry must identify core reasons to diversify – how diversity is related to journalistic mission and what are the specific diversity expectations for the work journalists produce. It must come to terms with how diversity "dovetails with, and reinforces, established professional values and ethical principles".

²⁹ Arana, G., 2018. *Decades of Failure: 17 percent of newsroom staff is not white*. Columbia Journalism Review https://www.cjr.org/special_report/race-ethnicity-newsrooms-data.php

³⁰ Bodinger-deUriate, C. and Valgeirsson, G., 2015. *Institutional disconnects as obstacles to diversity in journalism in the United States*, *Journalism Practice*, pp 399-417

[Hannah Storm](#), who will step down as director of the UK-based Ethical Journalism Network in April 2021, certainly regards diversity as a core element of ethical journalism. As she told me, “Ethical journalism is about accountability. It’s about representation and humanity, and it’s about accuracy. We are nowhere close to accurately representing the communities we serve.” Storm contends that journalism’s culture – with its “huge systemic inequities” that have too long rewarded “educated, cis-male, middle-aged white men” – must change if journalism is to meet its ethical imperatives of more representative coverage.

“I think a lot of women of a certain age have spent much of their careers having to erase their gender because it is the only way to be part of the industry, and that’s what is happening to journalists of colour,” she said. “Unless we have better representation and better plurality, we are never going to amplify stories of more people that matter; we are always going to have division, and dissent, and polarisation.” Indeed, ethical journalism demands that journalists must make space for the full range of humanity, Storm says.

A task of accountability

In its 2018 update of the [Torstar Journalistic Standards Guide](#), a project on which I worked with the *Star's* editor and other senior editors, we included what I regard as a radical commitment to public accountability and transparency. It states: “We should be prepared to explain what we do in gathering and presenting news and information, and the journalistic judgements involved in all we publish.”

This seems to me to be a *raison d'être* for a public editor in a world in which news audiences increasingly both distrust news sources and seek more accountability and transparency. Certainly, when the role was created in the United States in the late 1960s, it was seen as a means of providing “the potential for restoring public confidence and helping the press move toward its mandate of public responsibility.”³¹

In the considerable academic literature on the news ombudsman movement, the role is examined as a “media accountability instrument”³² and a form of media self-regulation inextricably linked to journalism’s social responsibility function – the idea and ideal expressed in the United States’ 1947 Hutchins Commission on the freedom of the press that journalism exists to serve the public interest and the greater good.³³

Yet resistance to being accountable to the public has long been an issue in journalism. Could this be, as Rusbridger suggested in his 2007 ONO speech, one of the main reasons why only a miniscule percentage of the world’s newsrooms have created this role over the past five decades?³⁴

Faced with dual challenges of shrinking newsroom budgets and growing public criticism, how many news executives want to pay someone to hold their journalism up for critical

³¹ Mogavero, D., 1980. *The American Press Ombudsman. Freedom of Information Centre Report No. 427*. p.1 School of Journalism, University of Missouri at Columbia. From K. English files.

³² Fengler, S. and Eberwein, T. et al (eds), 2014. *Journalists and Media Accountability: An International Study of News People in the Digital Age*. Peter Lang Publishing.

³³ Nemeth, N., 2003. *News Ombudsmen in North America: Assessing an experiment in social responsibility*. Praeger Publishers. Nemeth’s exhaustive examination of the news ombudsman role is focussed on the history and execution of the role as a media accountability function linked to journalism’s social responsibility purpose.

³⁴ Rusbridger’s talk to the ONO conference, “The News Ombudsman in the Digital Future” was published on the Guardian’s website on May 21, 2007. It can be retrieved here:

<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Media/documents/2007/05/21/speech.pdf>

examination in the public light? As Karen Rothmyer, former public editor of Kenya's *The Star*, wrote in a 2013 report on news ombudsman and accountability, editors have long deemed it quite appropriate to ignore or push back against public criticism: "‘We stand by our story’ was considered to be the appropriate response to any criticism from a member of the public, and ‘Never apologise, never explain’ was a motto that most editors lived by," Rothmyer states.³⁵

This traditional macho hallmark of journalism culture is journalistic hypocrisy that undermines trust in our work. Why should news audiences trust journalists who say one thing and do another? Journalists see their primary function as holding politicians and public officials to account, so why shouldn't journalists be held to account too? The words of scholars Theodore Glasser and Stephanie Craft, written 25 years ago about journalism and public accountability, remain relevant today and provide further rationale for a public editor. "The press needs to assume responsibility for – and invite comment on – the quality of its performance and the integrity of its practices. In short, the press needs to recognise itself as a distinctively public institution bound by the same standards of accountability expected of other public institutions."³⁶

Certainly, the internet created greater demand for journalistic accountability. In a digital world in which multiple platforms give citizens easy access to comment on, criticise, and cancel a media organisation's journalism, it would seem imperative that news organisations offer strong, independent means of holding themselves to public account.

But news organisations that have axed their independent public-facing accountability roles in recent years – most notably the *New York Times*³⁷ and the *Washington Post*³⁸ – have said just the opposite, arguing that social media provides the means to holding them to account.

³⁵ Rothmyer, K., 2013. *Giving the public a say. How news ombudsmen ensure accountability, build trust and add value to news organizations*. p. 26, FES Media, Africa Series.

³⁶ Glasser, T. and Craft, S., 1996. *Public journalism and the prospects for press accountability*. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, pp 152-158.

³⁷ The *New York Times* ended its public editor role in May 2017, even before then public editor Liz Spayd completed her term. It had launched the role in 2003 following a highly publicised fabrication and plagiarism scandal involving reporter Jayson Blair.

³⁸ The *Washington Post* discontinued its ombudsman position in 2013 following 43 years of what was generally considered the most independent and strong ombudsman office in the news business.

That seems a disingenuous argument to anyone of us who serve or have served in the in-house accountability role. As [Esther Enkin](#), then president of ONO and news ombudsman for Canada's CBC, said in 2017 when the *NYT* announced its public editor role was no longer necessary in the age of social media: "On the contrary, it is more necessary than ever. The social media space is characterised by heat and little light, angry assertions and not as many facts. News organisations truly committed to accountability make a powerful statement when someone they hire is able to criticise and question editorial decisions."³⁹

³⁹ Enkin, E. (2017) Statement retrieved from K.English email files.

Public perception and public engagement

The “god-term” upon which the meaning of journalism rests, according to media critic James Carey, is “public”. And, in the 54 years since the *Louisville Courier-Journal* appointed the first news ombudsman in North America (followed closely by the *Washington Post* in 1970, and *Toronto Star* in 1972), much has been written in both the academic and popular press about whether the role offers any substantial value to the public.⁴⁰

The primary debate has been whether this role truly serves the demands of public accountability or merely functions as “public relations” for a news organisation. As the well-worn argument goes, can any public editor employed by a news organisation truly, “bite the hand that feeds it” and hold that news organisation to account? Or do public editors too often pull their punches, particularly when it comes to being critical of systemic issues and policies mandated within their organisations’ highest echelons?

Undoubtedly, this is a job that operates, “at the intersection of competing and contradictory demands”.⁴¹ It’s why the tightrope metaphor is so ubiquitous in discussions of the role. It’s also why, I believe, the job is best done as a limited-term contract of three to five years, rather than a longstanding term of employment.

The answer to whether we pull punches to avoid being vocal public critics of our news organisations is mixed. Some certainly do, sometimes. I certainly did, sometimes – particularly when it came to criticising business decisions. I said little, for example, about the cutbacks that decimated the newsroom’s copy-editing function – a decision that most certainly led to more errors and reader complaints. I also refrained for some time from speaking out publicly about the need for more diversity in staffing and coverage, even as I wrote private memos to my higher-ups expressing this view.

⁴⁰ There are varying versions of the genesis of the role in North America with some dating it back to 1913 and the (New York) World when Ralph Pulitzer established a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play. See Akita, K. and Kenney, R. *What’s a newspaper ombudsmen? Notes on a cross-cultural debate for a discussion of the role’s genesis in Japan and throughout North America*. Online article retrieved from K. English files. <http://db.csri.for.aichi-pu.ac.jp/10-9.pdf>

⁴¹ McEvoy, P., 2008. *The lonely hell of an ombudsman*. Article published on the website of Organization of News Ombudsman and retrieved from K. English files.

The 2008 Danish report “The Internal Watchdog” contends there is a danger the role can be seen as “spin” for a news organisation, focused primarily on “the task of calming down critics and cantankerous people.”⁴² An ideal ombudsman, according to a 2010 report for the Netherlands Media Ombudsman Foundation (*The News Ombudsman: Watchdog or Decoy*) is one who is fully independent and “publicly and critically assesses” a news organisation’s journalism.

Think of [Margaret Sullivan](#), for example, who carried out the role of the *New York Times*’ public editor from 2012-16. Alan Rusbridger states that Sullivan was “the outstanding public editor of her time, against whom all others were measured,” I agree. But, as the Dutch report from 2010 concludes: “truly independent ombudsmen [...] represent a small minority.”⁴³

My experience in the role and my perception of how the role is conceived and carried out elsewhere aligns with that conclusion. I believe many of us fall short of the ideal of total independence and robust public criticism, largely because news organisations have structured the role to keep us teetering on that tightrope between the news organisation and the public. Few news organisations truly want fierce, unfettered accountability.

Keeping the public at the heart of the role requires strong independence, supported from the top, integral to the job description, and fiercely executed. In an insightful 2014 article about how news ombudsmen can encourage ethical and responsible news organisations, Spanish scholar Carlos Maciá-Barber asserts that the primary purpose of the role must be “defending the rights of readers, visitors or listeners”.⁴⁴

He offers a persuasive argument that, to be most effective, the ombudsman must not be regarded as either a public relations person, or as, “a bureaucrat who processes grievances”. Certainly, this is a perception that I, and others in the role, have pushed back

⁴² Orberg. p.6, see footnote 6

⁴³ Evers. H. Summary of above report published on website of Organization of News Ombudsman, posted April, 2010 and retrieved Oct. 2020.

<https://www.newsombudsmen.org/the-news-ombudsman-watchdog-or-decoy/>

⁴⁴ Macia-Barber, C., 2014. *How News Ombudsmen help create ethical and responsible news organizations*. pp. 107-23 in *The Ethical Journalist*, I.B. Tauris&Co.

against with newsroom journalists and senior executives. The very word “ombudsman” has ancient Scandinavian roots meaning, “the man who sees to it that the snow and ice and rubbish are removed from the streets and that the chimneys are swept”. But I resisted being – or being seen as – a clean-up department, there to mop up the mess of mistakes.

Maciá-Barber makes a compelling case for a strong public editor who operates primarily for the public good. This is similar to the idea of the public editor or ombudsman as an authoritative “ethics officer” with robust powers put forward in a 2000 article, “*Creating an effective newspaper ombudsman position.*”⁴⁵

Maciá-Barber goes further to envision an oversight role entailing some measure of executive decision-making and intervention powers – not simply the weaker “moral authority”, as is generally the case. He argues that those who take on these roles should be given the power to ensure that editors and all others throughout a news organisation live up to their journalistic responsibilities. He calls for “proactive” powers that extend beyond responding to or adjudicating complaints to actively “investigate any errors, deficiencies or violation of professional ethics”. That’s a considerably broader vision for the role than it tends to be conceived and practiced.

As he writes, “Ombudsman should conduct rigorous analyses of the deep-seated causes that underlie organisational and hiring systems of corporate actions and editorial decisions.” This argument is key to envisioning a public editor role that could become more relevant to newsrooms and the public in taking on accountability for diversity and inclusion.

Maciá-Barber also places high value on the transparency elements of the role to promote audience participation, the public’s right to information, and, of increasing importance to current discussions about trust in journalism – media literacy.

⁴⁵ Meyers, C., 2000. *Creating an effective newspaper ombudsman position*, pp 248-256 *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. Vol. 15.

The longer I did the role, the more important I came to view its opportunity to explain journalism to the public. I regarded my work of explaining journalism to readers not as “PR” but as a means of enhancing media literacy. Through many thousands of interactions with the *Star’s* public, I learned that journalism has far to go in creating greater public understanding of journalistic standards, norms and the culture of journalism.

I spent many hours explaining critical matters such as the distinction between news and opinion journalism, the balance between privacy and public interest, the need to label paid content, the risks and rewards of confidential sources, and ongoing questions about what is news and who decides what’s news.

One of my most popular initiatives was my annual *You be the Editor* column in which I laid out some of the journalistic standards’ issues I had faced and asked readers what they would do if they were making the judgement calls.⁴⁶ Readers told me they gained a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the many judgments the newsroom makes 24/7. As one reader said, “It’s a fine balancing act, reporting the news while maintaining accuracy, impartiality, objectivity, empathy, sensitivity and good taste.”

In recent years, as the label “fake news” became a common epithet across the news and information ecosystem, I worked to create understanding for *Star* readers of the imperatives of “real news”. I wrote and spoke about the rights of readers and the responsibilities of journalists – what news audiences should expect of our work. I believe demystifying journalism is critical.

As I wrote in a 2017 column, “Journalists cannot take for granted that the public we believe we work for truly understands journalism’s purpose and mission, or that our

⁴⁶ English, K., 2019. Opinion | *You be the editor: What would you do if you were in the editor’s seat? Take our quiz.* [online] thestar.com. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2019/12/20/you-be-the-editor-what-would-you-do-if-you-were-in-the-editors-seat-take-our-quiz.html> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

readers — indeed, our core customers — understand what seems to journalists to be the basics of journalism.”⁴⁷

Opening the doors to public understanding of the many factors that influence the creation of news is central to the public editor mandate and to ethical journalism. This core value of transparency is encoded in the U.S.-based Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics which states: “Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.”⁴⁸

To that end, the SPJ code calls on journalists to commit to a number of actions and attitudes, such as explaining news coverage and inviting dialogue with the public; encouraging the public to voice grievances against the news media; admitting mistakes and correcting them promptly; and exposing unethical journalistic practices. As my next section indicates, all of this is key to redefining the role of the public editor.

⁴⁷ English, K., 2017. *Opinion | Democracy demands media literacy: Public Editor*. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2017/03/03/democracy-demands-media-literacy-public-editor.html> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

⁴⁸ Spj.org. 2014. *SPJ Code of Ethics - Society of Professional Journalists*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

A new role for public editors

Just as journalism has failed in being diverse and inclusive over the past 50 years, so too, we have seen, has the role of public editor failed to take hold in global journalism over those same five decades. Is there a solution here that could make the public editor more relevant and newsroom diversity and inclusion a greater reality?

Could the role of public editor evolve to encompass active responsibility for holding news organisations to public account for diversity, inclusion and equity imperatives? I say: why not? Accountability to the public is core to the work of public editors, and diversity and inclusion in journalism demand public accountability. Someone must do this accountability work if newsrooms are to ever rectify long-standing failures in creating diverse newsrooms and news coverage. Why not a public's editor?

I envision this essential work can be part of a public editor's remit if the role is mandated to provide strong independence, proactive, robust powers and some measure of executive authority as envisioned by Maciá-Barber. This public's editor would be empowered to question the status quo of journalism and the professional standards that have failed to regard diversity as a core journalistic value.

As agents of public accountability, public's editors should criticise news coverage that perpetuates inequality and examine reasons – both on a daily and systemic basis – why this is so. They should stand for accurate and fair coverage of marginalised, under-represented individuals and groups. They should work to create public understanding of why diversity and inclusion in news matters. They could hold newsrooms to account for staff diversity data and share this information with news audiences through ongoing public reports, similar to the accountability work auditor-generals do in holding governments to account.

That is not to say that some of this is not happening to some extent now in the offices of public editors and news ombudsmen around the world. But accountability for diversity and inclusion is generally not core to the conception of the role. In response to my survey

question, “Do you play a role in ensuring the diversity of your news organisation in regard to both sources in the news or newsroom staffing”, just 35% responded yes. But 50% said they are called on to communicate with news audiences about the diversity of their news organisations. That makes sense. One cannot serve in the role of public editor today without engaging with many publics on all of the issues of identity central to the news and society: race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability and disability, and so on.

I know most every person serving in this role now has many examples of responding to concerns and adjudicating complaints about diversity and inclusion concerns.

In the UK, the *Guardian*’s readers’ editor, [Elisabeth Ribbans](#) has been called on to assess concerns by the Centre for Media Monitoring, a project of the Muslim Council of Britain, that the British media is quicker to label an incident as terrorism “where the perpetrator is identified as being a so-called Muslim”.

In the specific incident that was raised, she did not believe that to be the case but in investigating and writing about it, she raised public awareness of a valid issue of concern.

In The Netherlands, [Margo Smit](#), ombudsman for the public broadcasters (NPO), Hilversum, keenly understands the responsibilities of public broadcasters in serving diverse publics. Smit’s role provides more proactive powers than some other news organisations, and she regards diversity as core to her work and the public trust.

“I have an obligation to see whether broadcasters are covering all corners of society and if they do so in an unbiased way,” she told me. In past years, she initiated an assessment of the diversity of guests on the broadcaster’s news and current affairs television programmes over the course of a year, determining that while there has been some progress made, the diversity of The Netherlands is not fully reflected in its programming.

In my time as public editor, I was called on often to adjudicate public complaints about coverage considered to be racist, or that stereotyped people in various ways. The *Star*’s diversity policy, updated in 2018 to align with its Trust Project commitments states:

“Torstar newsrooms aim to reflect the diversity of our communities and respect the human rights and equal dignity of all. We aim for a variety of voices as sources and contributors in our news and opinion. We seek to foster greater community understanding about ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic status and physical/mental ability and do not perpetuate hurtful stereotypes.”

Those words were in addition to the longstanding newsroom code proviso that, “Generally no reference, direct or indirect, should be made to a person’s race, colour or religion unless it is pertinent to the story.”

In multicultural Toronto, so many of the world’s geopolitical conflicts made it to my office through complaints from individuals and groups aligned with these issues. I aimed to listen and learn but I know I did not always get things right. For example, I understand now that I let down people in Toronto’s Somali community who complained to me about the *Star*’s 2013 report of its then mayor, Rob Ford, having purchased crack cocaine from “Somali drug dealers” who had spoken confidentially to the *Star*. That initial news report, referred to the ethnicity of the otherwise unidentified drug dealers 11 times. In investigating and writing a column about these complaints, I said the *Star* had gone overboard in the references but deemed the fact itself was relevant.⁴⁹

Here, my judgement aligned with the reporters and editors who argued strongly that the *Star*’s policy on responsible journalism involving confidential sources required providing as much detail as possible about these sources who were granted anonymity for their revelations about the mayor. But, as the Somali-born university student who had complained to me responded when I explained this: “There is journalistic responsibility and there is social responsibility.” In reflecting later, I came to see his point that the harm of including this ethnic identifier was potentially greater to young Black men in the community than the benefit of reporting it. In this clash of journalistic values between the

⁴⁹ English, K., 2014. *Opinion | Star overdid ‘Somali’ references in first report of drug dealers peddling Rob Ford crack video: Public Editor*. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2013/05/24/star_overdid_somali_references_in_first_report_of_drug_dealers_peddling_rob_ford_crack_video_public_editor.html> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

responsibility to provide information about confidential sources and the need to determine the relevance of racial references, I erred.

I found it most satisfying when my role in diversity initiatives became more proactive than reactive. In 2014, then publisher John Cruickshank assigned me to a “special project” to work with the newsroom’s senior management to examine how the *Star* could more fully reflect the diversity of Toronto. We set goals and determined targets and measures with all newsroom managers to track coverage on an ongoing basis and, I believe, made some measure of progress in diversifying sources, stories and images.

In my column about this initiative, I told readers that the *Star* had long fallen short of producing news and information that looks like Toronto and said that, “When we do not fully and truly reflect the diversity of Toronto we give readers an incomplete and inaccurate picture of their community.”⁵⁰ I wrote many times about the need for journalists to expand the diversity of their sources beyond the usual white male experts.

In a column published shortly before I left the role, I asked why the *Star* had been talking internally about the problem of a predominantly white newsroom for more than 25 years, and yet the make-up of the newsroom continued to look nothing like the greater Toronto community. I told readers it is well past time for a “reckoning” within journalism, “a time to examine journalism’s role in the damaging prevalence of systemic racism”.⁵¹

I believe now that to be most relevant – to play an effective part in this required journalistic reckoning for equality – a public editor must be proactively anti-racist and question the impact of “the power of whiteness and masculinity”⁵² that has long dominated journalism and society.

⁵⁰ English, K., 2014. *Opinion | Diversity is right course: Public Editor*. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2014/06/19/diversity_is_right_course_public_editor.html> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

⁵¹ English, K., 2020. *Opinion | Time to act on newsroom inequality*. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2020/06/11/time-to-act-on-newsroom-inequality.html> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

⁵² Callison and Young, p.4., see footnote 8

This is my own reckoning: I did not do that enough in serving as public editor of a 129-year-old legacy news organisation steeped in traditional journalistic values. I am coming to more fully understand the implications of the reality that the values, standards and structures of the journalism that I have long been part of were largely designed and dominated by white men. To navigate newsrooms required seeing and doing journalism as those men had defined it.⁵³

Now, as a new generation of journalists around the world debate journalism's values, standards and structures, asking the valid question of whether impartiality in journalism was ever anything but "a privilege afforded to white journalists",⁵⁴ I listen and I seek to learn, understanding that change must come. And, in taking stock of my long tenure as public editor, I see those times when my implicit bias for journalism's status quo values resulted in my assessing issues with a too-narrow lens instead of the anti-racist perspective equality demands.

Since my departure, the *Star* has taken further steps toward its own reckoning for greater equality. In August, editor Irene Gentle appointed race and gender columnist, [Shree Paradkar](#) to the additional role of "internal ombud" to oversee sensitive race and identity issues within the newsroom. In her new role, Paradkar will "provide a safe place for BIPOC journalists and all journalists to express editorial-related discrimination and bias concerns" to newsroom management.

⁵³ I agree with Hannah Storm that women of my generation did, to a large extent, have to ignore our gender to get along in newsrooms – even as we recognised the inequalities we faced. But, I also now understand that in fighting our battles for equality since the 1970s, we white women largely failed to understand the reality of intersectionality and the greater inequalities faced by journalists of colour.

⁵⁴ Mattar, P. (2020) *Objectivity is a privilege afforded to white journalists*. The Walrus, <https://thewalrus.ca/objectivity-is-a-privilege-afforded-to-white-journalists/> Required reading about the experiences of racialized journalists and journalism's standards and practices. See also, Chowdhury, R.(2020) *The forever battle of a journalist of colour*, Dalton Camp Award winning essay, *Toronto Star*, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/07/11/the-forever-battle-of-a-journalist-of-colour-dalton-camp-award-winning-essay.html>

While the *Star* sees value in this ground-breaking internal position as something separate from its public editor, this role seems to me also to offer a path ahead for defining broader aspects of a proactive public editor who is engaged fully with the need for diverse newsrooms and anti-racist coverage. Paradkar is consulting with Gentle and the new public editor to update the *Star*'s journalistic standards guide through an "anti-oppression lens." In emails, she told me that when readers raise questions around representation issues, Campion-Smith, the new public editor, seeks her counsel. Paradkar sees a clear distinction between her new role and that of the public editor: "An internal ombud is more deeply embedded at the creation stage. They're engaged in building relationships with people who are not heard, amplifying their concerns – could be anything from assignment, to how a story was treated, to omissions."

I believe that if the role of public editor is to be more relevant to the challenges of today's newsrooms, a clear mandate to oversee diversity should be part of the role. This public's editor would fulfill the mandate on behalf of the public and for the public good – and fiercely. They would assess and audit newsroom staffing and its journalism to determine whether it reflects the scope of the community and hold the news organisation to public account when it does not. They would question the implicit biases inherent in how the newsroom defines journalism's standards and values. They would understand intersectionality and the fact, as Paradkar wrote in her inaugural race and gender column, that "non-representation in journalism is a form of oppression".

They would champion anti-racist news coverage and investigate – over the range of time – the news organisation's commitment to fair and accurate coverage of all the publics it promises to serve. They could connect and consult with a diverse range of people from those many publics, including considering working with a diverse community advisory board.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ As public editor, I was a regular participant at monthly meetings of the *Star*'s diverse "Community Editorial Board" until it was disbanded in 2010. Plans are in the works to revive this initiative.

Overall, they should regard diverse, inclusive equitable news and information as core to ethical journalism and make that a primary plank of holding a news organisation to the publics' account.

Conclusion

I offer here one core recommendation: hire a public editor. Encourage your newsroom to be accountable to its publics, and transparent about its journalism. In this current and concerning crisis of trust in journalism, this necessary reckoning for journalistic equality, this could be an investment as valuable as another beat reporter.



Kathy English at work, December, 2016. (Toronto Star file photo)

Quite likely, you have given little thought to the potential value of a public editor to serve as an independent intermediary between your journalism and the communities you seek to serve. Or, perhaps you say it's part of your job to be accountable to your news audience, even though you have little time or inclination to engage with public concerns about your journalism. Perhaps this role once existed and your organisation killed it, figuring the social media corps of critics could reliably hold your journalism to public account.

A news organisation that creates and commits to an independent public editor makes a strong public statement about its commitment to trustworthy journalism. Public editors do the work of overseeing accuracy and fairness and other imperatives of ethical

journalism. They can correct your mistakes. They are your public promise of accountability and transparency. They will engage with your news audience and create public understanding of the importance of trustworthy journalism in a world polluted by disinformation. When appropriate, they will defend your journalists from the increasingly hostile invective.

A strong, proactive public editor can be part of this current reckoning in journalism that is looking increasingly like a required revolution in journalism culture. This public editor can hold your newsroom to account for diverse, inclusive journalism of equality aligned with journalism's moral mission in a liberal democracy. While that has not been a significant element of the role in the past, it could indeed be a vital part of its future. Your public editor will be accountable to diverse publics – a publics' editor for the 21st century.

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Immediate job opening: Publics' Editor

Reporting to the CEO, we are seeking an experienced journalist to serve as our publics' editor. This role is entirely independent of the newsroom with a mandate to represent the interests of our publics' and the publics' good. The primary objective is to ensure the accountability and transparency of this news organisation through regular public reporting on our journalism and its impact on the multiple, diverse communities we seek to serve. In this position, you will serve as chief ethics officer. You will have proactive oversight responsibility for accuracy, fairness and the ethical professional standards of trustworthy journalism, including our commitment to diverse and inclusive journalism of equality. You will respond to and adjudicate public concerns and complaints, and initiate investigations of systemic issues that could undermine our ethics and excellence. You will hold us to account publicly for our inevitable failures and work with us internally to investigate systemic issues that undermine our highest standards, seeking solutions that result in responsible, inclusive journalism that serves democracy and all of its citizens. We are seeking an individual with a strong journalistic ethical compass and deep understanding of anti-racist journalism and its moral mission to represent and reflect equal dignity for all. This is a five-year, limited term contract: done right, you may well burn bridges within this news organisation as you build bridges with our publics. This is a high-stress position, oft-referred to as the loneliest job in journalism. It is also one of journalism's most interesting and relevant roles in which you can make a difference.

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