Ombudsmen in decline: An ominous trend for American press

One year ago, Rem Rieder in USA TODAY wrote about ombudsmen, the individuals (often called “readers’ representatives” or “public editors”) employed by newspapers to keep a vigilant eye on the paper’s journalism and report the findings to readers.

Rieder painted a discouraging picture, noting that just half as many ombudsmen were working in U.S. news organizations as was the case a decade ago – and that more than a dozen media organizations axed the position following the 2008 recession. This, Rieder reported, even though a handful of new ombudsmen positions were being created in newsrooms in other nations.

The Organization of News Ombudsmen’s website lists members in 26 countries – 75 “regular” members, 39 “associated” members, 26 “honorary” members and 15 “retired” members. According to ONO, news ombudsmen (or “ombuds,” as they are sometimes called) make up the “regular” membership, with “others from the media, press councils, journalism schools or journalism publications” constituting the “associate” membership.

The acronym “ONO” is apt for an organization of public editors who are likely to utter, “Oh, no!” – at the very least – when they first are aware of a problem in their publications.

As advertising dries up and circulation numbers dwindle in the United States, most editors here would rather expend tight resources on reporters covering crime or courts or sports – or almost anything rather than on internal watchdogs, most of whom write weekly columns. Increasingly, though, ombudsmen are

blogging and tweeting to respond in a more timely fashion to concerns by readers. Whether or not this new-tech focus will stanch the exodus of public editors is unclear.

News ombudsmen have been a varied breed, encompassing everything from former journalists to academics to public relations representatives of their newspapers.

Before becoming the Washington Post's ombudsman (1992-1995), Joann Byrd had spent some 40 years on newspapers and had a graduate degree in philosophy (focusing on ethics).

Byrd says today the Internet has cut down on the necessity of having ombudsmen listen to people's complaints. But she added that the idea of listening to complaints and passing them along is still important.

"It's the whole idea of looking at the paper through the eyes of someone who didn't do the work," she said. "It's important to evaluate the paper from the point of view of one person removed from the process."

During her time at the Post, Byrd said her position was viewed as that of an "internal critic," a "very independent kind of position."

"What I did (in that job) was ask if the paper was holding itself to proper standards," she said. "All readers deserve a good paper."

Byrd said she's unsure that many comments from today's readers deserve to be printed.

"Some are just vile," she said.

Thus, Byrd said she was unsure, in times of tight newsroom budgets, that ombudsmen are always needed.

"The first moral obligation of a mainstream news organization is to keep the public informed of vital information," Byrd

said. “I see this as an implied promise. To live up to the newspaper’s promise to keep the public informed, a city hall reporter has to come ahead of, alas, an ombudsman.”

She added: “If it could be a position that reminded people that they needed to keep good standards, that would be a good thing.”

Geneva Overholser was an established journalist and editor before serving a stint as Washington Post ombudsman. She later served as dean of the Annenberg School of Journalism at the University of Southern California.

Overholser said she questions the importance of ombudsmen in an era on instant, new-tech feedback from readers. Nevertheless, she said ombuds can raise important issues such as the media’s overuse of anonymous sources, a topic she championed while at the Post.

She said the United States seems to be moving into an era where “many journalists don’t see the importance of having people on the record. I think that’s simply a mistake.”

Overholser praised New York Times’ Margaret Sullivan, the paper’s public editor, saying: “She (Sullivan) has waded into very complicated and important issues for the paper’s decisions to withhold stories when asked to do this by the government.”

Last year the Post ended its decades-long tradition of employing an ombudsman to critically analyze the paper’s reporting. For a time, its ombudsman position was replaced by a former journalist acting as a part-time readers’ representative. As of this writing, that part-time position is vacant.

Some professional ONO members have taken the ombudsmen, or internal watchdog role, in their columns by taking their media employer to task for embarrassing conflict-of-interest issues.

Others have tended to be more readers’ representatives, focusing more on subscribers’ concerns of delivery issues and published grammatical errors.

But regardless of how they have operated, there are fewer American ombudsmen today, and there is every reason to believe this downward trend will continue throughout this decade and century. This does not bode well for a press expected by the First Amendment to serve the public responsibly.