

[[LETTER FROM THE OMBUDSMAN]]

BY BILL KOVACH

THIS IS A NOTE TO THE READERS OF *BRILL'S CONTENT* about the role of ombudsman and how I intend to fill that role.

The idea of the ombudsman as a people's representative is nearly 200 years old. The notion came to the United States from Sweden, where it was born in 1809 as a sort of independent counsel meant to receive citizens' complaints about government abuse, investigate those complaints, and issue reports.

The Pulitzer family thought the idea might be used as a tool to elevate the standards of journalism, and as early as 1913, created what they called the "Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play" at their newspaper, the *New York World*. In a 1984 article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Cassandra Tate described how the *World's* first ombudsman noticed a pattern in the newspaper's reporting on shipwrecks: each such story featured a cat that had survived. When he asked the reporter about this curious coincidence, the ombudsman was told:

"One of those wrecked ships had a cat, and the crew went back to save it. I made the cat a feature of my story, while the other reporters failed to mention the cat, and were called down by their city editors for being beaten. The next time there was a shipwreck, there was no cat but the other ship news reporters did not wish to take chances, and put the cat in. I wrote the report, leaving out the cat, and then I was severely chided for being beaten. Now when there is a shipwreck, all of us always put in a cat."

Obviously, this sort of nit-picking could get in the way of the kind of tale of scandal and celebrity that was demanded by editors in the days of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *Front Page*. As the era of tabloid journalism flourished with flappers and speakeasies, Pulitzer's idea of accuracy and fair play withered. The late A.H. Raskin, of *The New York Times* and Ben Bagdikian of *The Washington Post*, two of the most aggressive and independent reporters of their time, are generally credited with resurrecting the idea of a press ombudsman in 1967. The *Times* was unimpressed with the concept. Bagdikian's *Post*, however, adopted it. And it is the work of such *Post* ombudsmen as Richard Harwood, Joann Byrd, and Geneva Overholser that has shaped my thinking about this new job of monitoring a magazine that chooses to monitor the work of other journalists and media workers.

Here's how I intend to begin the job. It will, I am sure, change as you call on my services. But for now, let me tell you

three things I will do, and three things that I do not believe are my job.

I am primarily here to receive and investigate specific complaints about the work of *Brill's Content*, and to make a judgment about how such complaints should be handled. This may mean that I will recommend corrective action to the editors, or that I may reply directly to the complainant in a formal letter, outlining my conclusions after investigation. In cases where neither of these seem to be the right solution, I will write a column examining the issue raised.

But there may be cases where I believe a problem needs addressing without a complaint. I intend to examine each issue of the magazine independent of any complaints, and to make suggestions or recommendations to the editors. In some cases, I may write columns on what I see as a reader of *Brill's Content*. I have my own personally paid subscription to the magazine, and I will come to the magazine just as you do, innocent of the decision-making or judgment that goes into its content.

Finally, I will keep a record of complaints and share that information with the management of the magazine on a regular basis, in order to keep them informed of trends in readers' judgments about the magazine's tone and standards.

Now let me tell you what my job is not.

Most important, it is not dependent upon the good will of the owners or managers of the magazine. *Brill's Content* gives me complete independence (in sports, it's called a guaranteed contract) and Steven Brill has given me the

research support I need for the job, as well as the promise that I get the last word in print if my judgment should conflict with that of the magazine's editors, writers, or owners.

And you should know that the job is not considered a substitute for other forms of complaint from you as a reader, such as letters to the editor or demands for corrections.

Finally, my job is not that of a censor. I am not here to try to keep things out of the magazine, but to encourage the highest journalistic standards in the publication.

I take this job, as it was offered, very seriously. In a society dependent for its good health on argument and debate, it is important that all of us who engage in the process do so in a way that guarantees that the process is fair as well as open. *Brill's Content* intends to hold the media to a high standard of performance in this regard. *Brill's Content* must therefore match or top in its own performance the standard it applies to others.

It will be my job to challenge the editors, writers, and owners of *Brill's Content* by calling on them to account for the way in which that standard is set and applied.

HOW TO REACH HIM

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