

# **Maintaining standards and editorial independence at ERR. Role of the ombudsman**

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# About speaker Tarmu Tammerk

- Ombudsman at Estonian Public Broadcasting
- Board member of the Organization of News Ombudsmen (ONO), the worldwide body for media ombudsmen
- Journalistic career of 20 years
- Extensive involvement in media training (ethics, self-regulation, association-building)

# Ombudsman at Estonian public media ERR

- instituted by the 2007 law on public broadcasting
- two main tasks:
  1. to handle complaints by viewers and listeners of ERR broadcasts and readers of online services
  2. to oversee the balance and impartiality of ERR (own initiative, not just acting on outside response)

# More tasks for ERR ombudsman

- to give recommendations for certain coverage (elections, the war)
- to give advice pre-publication, but only in general terms
- to conduct in-house ethics training
- to explain how media works (media literacy). A monthly radio show on media ethics by the ombudsman
- to act as gateway to ERR; not necessarily media ethics at all

# Role and regulations of ombudsman

- position is instituted by law
- procedure for handling complaints is self-regulatory, worked out by ombudsman and approved by ERR board
- to act as mediator between ERR and public
- to be independent from ERR board
- reports to supervisory council
- is employed by board but with consent from supervisory council

# Workload for complaints and feedback

- ERR ombudsman receives an average of 40 to 50 instances of feedback a month (complaints, questions, opinions about ERR programmes and online articles)
- Out of the 50, about 4 to 5 cases a month demand more careful examination and research (talking to the journalist and the editor, searching for documents, corresponding with the complainant etc)

# ERR standards

- ERR law, contains tasks and roles for ERR
- Code of ethics of the Estonian media – common to all media
- Best Practice of ERR – detailed document created by ERR, containing standards and guidelines
- Best Practice was adopted in 2010, has been slightly modified (eg to include reference to social media accounts of ERR)

# Expressing views of journalists

- personal opinions of journalists are not important in news and in thematic choices
- need to be aware that expressions on social media affect professional work of journalist
- ERR Best Practice: *“It is also important to be aware of the need to maintain independence when engaging in social media.”*



# Journalists and activism

- Clear line between journalism and activism
- ERR Best Practice: *The actions and behaviour of staff must not give the impression to the public that the staff member subject to pressure from any interest group. Eg, the independence of ERR may be compromised if a journalist publicly demonstrates his or her consumer preferences. ERR journalists must also professionally avoid expressing public support for political parties, associations or societies, other interest groups, etc.*

# Civic expressions



# Direct signals of views

- some hosts use Ukrainian ribbons, but no uniform policy
- ombudsman recommendation: no need to display ribbons, your work shows the values
- as a rule, no display of campaign symbols. Exceptions: infotainment shows.

# War coverage

- basis for coverage at ERR: Russia started war against Ukraine. This is unacceptable crime
- this foundations is not disputed
- “easier” war than some others to cover. Compare with Armenian-Azerbaijan war in 2020
- all-rounded information about developments from the battlefields - as much as possible. Care with sourcing

# Audience feedback about war

- in opposite directions: more news and special programmes *versus* give more non-war material
- decision: optimize war coverage, help keep positive routine for audiences
- angry calls mainly to Russian channels at ERR (new audiences)
- some want news to be raising morale
- complaints about using hostile symbols (Z, RF tricolour combination)

# Rules for election coverage

- Parliamentary elections in Estonia on March 5, 2023
- Rules for election coverage take effect in January 2023
- Rules specify format and themes of election debates as well as criteria for participation
- Ombudsman plays key role in handling complaints about coverage and monitoring election content

# Benefits of creating ombudsman post

- Adds to accountability and transparency of the media organization
- Improves the image of the media
- Takes off some political pressure
- Adds a system of quality control for media ethics and accuracy
- Journalists become more aware of media ethics

# Contact

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