

MEDIA OMBUDSMEN: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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This article summarizes a decade of comment on the most common form of "media ombudsman" in the United States and Canada, the newspaper action line. Widely adopted after 1965, action lines were expected by journalists and newspaper owners to play a significant role in increasing social justice, improving the commercial viability and public image of the press, and reforming the news business. The picture of social problems and proposed solutions presented in the printed columns reflects a reformed version of traditional newspaper populism. However, the available evidence suggests that the characteristics of the people who complain to action lines, as well as the economic, bureaucratic, and ideological forces within media organizations, prevent the fulfillment of the promise of social justice implicit in populist rhetoric. Instead of aggressive defenders of the rights of "John Q. Public," action lines are primarily passive referral services which transmit complaints to traditional public and private authorities. Action lines attract a great many users not only because they promise practical assistance in settling disputes, but also because a response from the newspaper is a significant form of personal recognition and a confirmation that one's problem is legitimate. However, the unsystematic way newspapers process disputes assures that the column is unlikely to have much effect on the institutional sources of chronic grievances. The article concludes with a comparison of action lines to the use of the media by "moral entrepreneurs" to increase the impact of reform movements.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the media and their publics is ordinarily and necessarily distant, anonymous and commercial. Newspapers sell news, entertainment, advertisements and want-ads. Television and radio broadcast information and entertainment, liberally salted with commercials. However, the news media do accept (and may even solicit) more active, two-way contacts with their readers, listeners, and viewers. Some of these contacts—for instance, chatty celebrity "question-and-

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answer" features—are nothing more than entertainment. Letters to the editor are a ritual outlet for opinion on community issues and for criticism of the newspaper's editorial policy. Gardening, hobby and health columns provide useful information and satisfy specialized consumer interests. Since the mid-1960's, columns in which the audience actively participates have proliferated. Among the most common of these new services are "media ombudsmen."

Many organizations that receive inquiries and complaints are commonly called "ombudsmen,"¹ a fact which confuses a discussion of dispute processing services operated by media organizations. William L. Barnett (1973: 154), for example, identifies three different functions in the American newspaper industry alone that fall under the aegis of "ombudsman."² The largest number, "action lines," are "conduits of reader complaints against business or government." Some newspapers also employ a "reader relations editor who receives and investigates "reader complaints against inaccuracy and/or inadequacy in the paper's reporting," advertising (Hynds, 1975: 139-144) or subscriptions (*Editor & Publisher*, 1974: 10-11, hereafter cited as E&P). A third, and rare, example is the autonomous "internal critic of the credibility and the reliability of the paper's reporting."³ Several other kinds of features which are not truly

¹ A great deal has been said about "official" ombudsmen as devices for managing citizen complaints against government. See for example, the series of monographs published by the Institute for Governmental Studies at Berkeley (e.g., Anderson, 1969; Weeks, 1973), and the numerous publications of Donald C. Rowat (1968a; 1973) and Walter Gellhorn (1966), both spokesmen in North America for the international ombudsman "movement." The most comprehensive empirical study of official ombudsmen is Hill's (1976) evaluation of the New Zealand Ombudsman. Action Lines cannot properly be called "ombudsmen," the "official characteristics" of which, Anderson (1969: 3) reports:

require that the individual filling it be: (1) independent, (2) impartial, (3) expert in government, (4) universally accessible, and (5) empowered only to recommend and to publicize.

I prefer to use the term "ombudsman" in the popular sense as any "citizen's defender, grievance man or public watchdog" (Rowat, 1973: vii).

² The most comprehensive list of active media ombudsmen is published annually in *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook* (1973-1977), the almanac of the newspaper industry. There is no similar compilation of radio and television ombudsmen in *Broadcasting Yearbook*, but an extensive list (with names and addresses) is included in Wasserman & Morgan (1974).

There is no reliable data on televised action features. One survey of 309 stations (Fang & Whalen, 1973: 368) showed regular ombudsman segments at only sixty-four stations (21 percent), but it reveals nothing about these "ombudsmen" and does not appear to be very reliable. See also Luter (1969: 72).

³ This is a position once held by Arthur Krock, who "served as an assistant to the publisher of the *New York's World* with the general assignment of providing a daily critique of that newspaper's performance in relation to the rest of the New York press" (Geyelin, 1974: v). It is also a function of the

ombudsmen, but nevertheless serve as conduits between readers and their newspaper will also be considered briefly.

This review of the literature focuses primarily on only one kind of ombudsman—the newspaper action line. I exclude “reader relations editors” and “internal critics.” They may have similar origins and are important to journalists and critics of the press, but they are insignificant outlets for social grievances. I am primarily interested only in those instances where newspapers have offered to become intermediaries in the public’s everyday disputes. The discussion focuses on North American newspaper action lines for several reasons: their written record is the most highly developed; it is accessible to me; and it is sufficient to generate hypotheses about media experiments with dispute processing. Where it is available and pertinent, I have included evidence of dispute services offered by other news media on this continent and abroad. This seems to reinforce my judgments about the nature of American newspaper ombudsmanship.

This review interprets a decade’s worth of reports, research, and comment on action lines. The record, while incomplete, suggests the breadth of experiments in dispute processing by newspapers, radio, and television. Although it incorporates all available empirical studies, the method is primarily descriptive, the methodology inductive. It is a survey of a body of literature, not an empirical study of individual newspaper action lines. It does not test hypotheses; it recapitulates what has been said about action lines in order to isolate a few hypotheses which are worth testing. This methodology necessarily introduces asymmetries in questions which can be answered about action lines. Some will find this unsatisfying, but the purposes are: (a) to reveal wasteful redundancies in research; (b) to synthesize the work that has already been done; (c) where appropriate, to question conventional interpretations of the function of newspaper action lines; and (d) to identify previously ignored lines of inquiry regarding media ombudsmanship which are worth pursuing.

I also wish to discuss action lines in a way that contributes to contemporary social research on law. The method I have chosen—a survey of the literature—reveals characteristics of action lines that will not entirely please some journalists. This

Washington *Post’s* current “ombudsman,” Charles Seib, whose position combines the roles of media columnist, “reader relations editor,” and internal critic; he does not administer an action line.

reflects the gap separating current research on media organizations from that on legal institutions. My impression is that journalists tend to dismiss action lines because, on the surface, they offer little insight into the questions that are currently important to critics of the press. At the same time, it may also be that action lines have received little serious attention from journalists because contemporary theories of the media's social function cannot adequately explain what they do.

Whatever the immediate significance of action lines to journalists, they have an independent importance to others who are interested in the organization and function of institutions that process disputes. Action lines have been called "one of the most remarkable developments among newspaper features in recent years" (Associated Press Managing Editors Association, 1973: 1, hereafter cited as APME). As many as 400 are active in cities in the United States and Canada. Each year they attract tens of thousands of complaints against government agencies and business firms, as well as many more requests for information and referral. In some instances, caseloads even exceed those of traditional local complaint outlets like the Better Business Bureau or an official consumer frauds agency. The remarkable, spontaneous development of a popular informal mechanism for processing large numbers of disputes deserves some attention.

Surprisingly, a great deal is known about newspaper action lines—enough to answer most basic questions. For instance, the concept of media "ombudsman" has been around for half a century; why, then, were most action lines in the United States and Canada begun only after 1965? Are there common economic and ideological links between action lines and other outlets for informal dispute processing begun in the last decade? Part II explores this question.

The remainder of the article examines questions that emerge from reviewing the literature. Part III considers the ways in which the organization and management of a newspaper complaint service define its audience. In order to regulate the flow of large numbers of complaints, action lines must restrict their recruitment of problems. The most common solution—relying primarily on written letters—seems to introduce an unintentional middle-class bias into the services offered. If this is so, what do action lines have to offer that makes them such a popular alternative to the large number of dispute processing alternatives already available to the middle class?

The literature reveals the existence of three characteristically different strategies adopted by newspapers to process complaints. Part IV evaluates the economic, bureaucratic, and ideological forces that determine these differences in style. This discussion is a prelude to a preliminary assessment of the potential of action lines as instruments of social change.

Part IV also examines a single, special issue that recurs throughout the literature on action lines: why do so few adopt an aggressive, adversarial strategy in processing complaints? There is substantial evidence that the institutional sources of chronic grievances are vulnerable to pressure from the media. However, a charge often made by journalists is that newspapers refrain from using their power because they are afraid of advertiser retaliation. The record suggests that this criticism of action lines is facile and self-serving. Some newspapers may be wary of displeasing their advertisers. But the record suggests, paradoxically, that the fact that newspapers are commercial institutions may partially *guarantee* the quality of services provided to complainants.

The review concludes with speculation on the potential of action lines to act as effective instruments of social reform. The economic, bureaucratic, ideological, and social forces that channel newspaper complaint processing are comparable to those that constrain other dispute processing alternatives, like public interest law or small claims courts. Weighed against a standard of provable social change, few recent innovations in the informal processing of disputes—including action lines—are astoundingly successful. Most action lines provide creditable services to the many individuals who turn to the newspapers for help with their problems. The evidence suggests, however, that their effect on the behavior of chronic complainers is quite limited. On the other hand, the record also suggests that social research on law should reconsider the potential of the media to amplify the efforts of committed social reformers.

II. THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN ACTION LINES.

Reader problem-solving features have appeared in newspapers at least since 1921, when the Knoxville *News* began a "General Knox" column (Beal, 1973: 9). In the early 1920's, "Mr. Fixit" solved problems at several newspapers owned by S. I. Newhouse in New York's suburbs (Beal, 1973: 10), but the idea was not widely copied until the mid-1960's. More than 300 action lines have since been started at newspapers throughout the United States and Canada (Beal, 1973: 70, Table 8; APME,

1968a, 1968b, 1973; Miami *Herald*, 1972). This recent popularity has been associated with: a) industry-wide shifts in media marketing strategies, b) changing professional values, and c) changes in popular taste.⁴

Media Marketing⁵

After decades of growth nation-wide, increases in newspaper circulation slumped in the 1960's. Suburbanization, changes in popular work habits and lifestyles, and competition from television⁶ were the principal causes of the decline (Hynds, 1975: 147-148; Klein, 1976). Economic competition created a need to change the ways news was marketed. Ombudsmen were justified as one of a number of mechanisms for ensuring reader identification and product loyalty against the attraction of television.

In the mid-1960's, action lines were earnestly promoted in trade journals and by professional associations.⁷ Especially influential was *Editor & Publisher*, which ran a five-part series in 1966 and 1967 describing action line experiments (E&P, 1966c; 1967a; 1967b; 1967c; Massa, 1967). This journal pursued the idea for more than two years. Intervention in disputes was initially justified on the basis of the information it would generate about things that were really troubling people (DiJulio, 1975), and topics this information might suggest for investigative reports (Hohenberg, 1973: 534) and features (Wanniski, 1966; Massa, 1967; Johnson, 1969). It was hoped that this channel of communication would strengthen the link between consumers and local news gathering efforts and thus fulfill what *Time* (1967: 58) referred to as "the first responsibility of today's newspaper." Accordingly, the early trade journal reports on action lines

⁴ A discussion of the international scope of experiments with media ombudsmen is deferred to pp. 825-828.

⁵ The tension between the profit-making goals of those who own the media and the ideals of the journalists who work for them is a constant theme in criticism of the press; cf. David Halberstam's (1976) "CBS: The Power and the Profits," a selection from his forthcoming study of American media moguls.

⁶ The assault on the print media began in earnest in 1959 with the first of a series of periodic opinion polls from Burns Roper, sponsored by the Television Information Office, the public relations bureau of the National Association of Broadcasters (Hynds, 1975: 17-18). By 1963, the Roper Poll, which was designed to compare television and newspapers as sources of information, showed that television news had for the first time superseded newspapers. Despite elaborate, impassioned, and continuing attempts to refute this evidence, the newspaper industry was clearly put on the defensive.

⁷ E.g., the American Society of Newspaper Editors [hereafter ASNE], 1966; the Associated Press Managing Editors Association [hereafter APME], 1968b, 1973; the International Newspaper Promotion Association [Watson], 1967: 50, col. 2; and the Society of Professional Journalists/*Sigma Delta Chi* [Wanniski], 1966; [Arnold], 1968.

were salted with reports of “scoops” (E&P, 1966a) and “tips” (*Wall Street Journal*, 1967: 16) generated by complaints.⁸

Changing Professional Values

The threat of television encouraged journalists and newspaper owners to reexamine accepted notions of newsworthiness, editorial policy, and professionalism. Like radio in the same period, newspapers were forced to redefine their social role. This process coincided in the 1950's with the revival of what Professor John Hohenberg (1968: 279; 1973: Ch. 28) has styled “public service journalism”:⁹

With a considerable part of the American press bogged down in mediocrity, and self-satisfied mediocrity at that, it is understandable that the electronic media and the news magazines have been able to strengthen their positions as purveyors of news and opinion to the nation. . . . Consequently, the current revival of public service journalism . . . amounts to something more than an expression of the press' willingness to serve the community, state and nation. A broad element of more or less enlightened self-interest exists here. . . . Joseph Pulitzer and E. W. Scripps, among others, championed such a philosophy on the assumption that a grateful public would support a press that acted on its behalf. The modern crusaders . . . are similarly motivated in large part. There are very few public service newspapers out of the 1,750 in the daily press and the 8,000 weeklies—perhaps a few hundred at best (Hohenberg, 1968: 228).

What distinguished these newspapers was their return to (a considerably reformed version of) an old winning formula¹⁰—crusading populism (cf. Kristol, 1972; Pool, 1976: 1236). Newspapers, the argument went, were challenged because of their own elitism and inertia. They could recapture

⁸ Although it appears to be the only instance to have received much attention, “[t]he *Washington Star* has picked up an extra five stories a week from the telephone tips; it finds the column so productive that it has assigned a [Pulitzer] prize winning investigative reporter . . . to the column staff” (Wanniski, 1966: 25; see also E&P, 1966a; *Time*, 1967: 58; and Hohenberg, 1973: 534). However, the *Star's* early ardor may have waned; DiJulio (1975) describes an action line at the *Star* that is neither significantly distinguishable from, nor more notable than, those at any other paper.

⁹ For a traditional interpretation of how journalism “serves its public,” see Bond (1961: Ch. 18), who cites such “services” as train, bus and plane arrivals/departures; advice or hobby columns; “seasonal services” (e.g., ritual holiday campaigns against drunk driving); “swinging open cultural doors” by printing full-color reproductions of the Great Masters; and “humanitarian” self-promotions (“Hundred Neediest Cases”).

¹⁰ Earlier, J. Liebling (1964: 18) commented on the way populism also serves the economic interests of the newspaper:

The Profit system, while it insures the predominant conservative coloration of our press, also guarantees that there will be a certain amount of dissidence. The American press has never been monolithic, like that of the authoritarian state. One reason is that there is always important money to be made standing up for the underdog (demogogically or honestly, so long as the technique is good). The underdog is numerous and prolific—another name for him is circulation. His wife buys girdles and baking powder and Literary Guild selections, and the advertiser has to reach her.

their lost stature by recognizing the *real* problems of “the man in the street”: alienation, social fragmentation, and frustrating powerlessness in a time of accelerating social change. “This is the day of mass man,” Brucker (1973: 211-212) explained: “If mass society is thus swallowing up the individual, why has journalism not come to the rescue?”¹¹

“Relevant” public service journalism,¹² according to Hohenberg (1973: Ch. 28), was more than a public relations gesture and not a return to cynical mock-crusades and discredited “yellow journalism.” It was ethical populism, possessing a “social conscience” and an appreciation for the “responsibilities” as well as for the traditional liberties of the press (Hynds, 1975: 23-28; see also Siebert *et al.*, 1956: Ch. 3). It was based on a “new theory of journalism,” developed since the 1940’s, that emphasized the positive social duties of the press.¹³ These duties included taking an aggressive, adversarial stance in reporting the “truth” (cf. Rivers, 1970); “making democracy work” by giving citizens the information they needed to influence the system in their own interests; and helping “individuals and communities adjust to change and improve themselves” (Hynds, 1975: 23-38).¹⁴ These were, perhaps not coincidentally,

¹¹ Lee Hills (1975: 164-165), editor of the Detroit *Free Press*, made a similar point in an address to the Missouri School of Journalism (emphasis in original):

The mass audience is, by and large, a silent one. Its needs and desires are largely unspoken and we [journalists] have—too quickly and too arbitrarily—arrived at our own definitions of what people ought to have in their newspapers. . . . Our audience is breaking up into smaller, self-selected groups that make their own rules and arrive at their own philosophies and moral views of the world. . . . That process of fragmentation probably started . . . in the 1950’s, under the stress of urbanization, racial conflict and the explosion of technology. But . . . I think we missed most of it. We were writing about *society* while people were thinking about *individual selves*. We weren’t communicating one-on-one, newspaper-to-reader. . . . The more important question is simply this: How honestly *relevant* is the newspaper to the lives of its readers? . . . Paying attention to the readers means doing something *for* them, giving them information they can put to use immediately; in short, providing them the instant opportunity to improve the quality of their daily lives.

¹² Hohenberg’s concept of “public service journalism” took so many forms that the category seems virtually meaningless. His examples include campaigns for “significant” law reform, Op-Ed Pages (Hohenberg, 1973: 528; but cf. Argyris, 1974), “precision journalism” (Dennis & Rivers, 1974: Ch. 8; Meyer, 1973), “advocacy journalism” (cf. Hynds, 1975: 159-162 with Dennis & Rivers, 1974: Ch. 5), widespread use of survey research and opinion polls; investigative journalism (Hohenberg, 1973: 530-533), the commentary of Jimmy Breslin (Dennis & Rivers, 1974), increased space for letters-to-the-editor (MacDougall, 1970; Singer, 1973: 33-40), and action lines (Hohenberg, 1968: 290; 1973: 533-534; Hills, 1975: 164-165; Hynds, 1975: 29-30; Brucker, 1973: 292-293).

¹³ Hynds (1975: 24-38), for instance, credits an interest in “responsible” journalism to, among others, Robert Hutchins (*via* Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947) and Wilbur Schramm (1957). See also Siebert *et al.* (1956).

¹⁴ Hynds (1975: 29) justifies action lines as the responsibility of the press “to help individuals and communities adjust to change.” To him, the action line

the social functions that, it was asserted (cf. Brucker, 1973: Ch. 8), television could not perform.¹⁵

Populist themes characterized stories about media ombudsmen in the popular press.¹⁶ Few commentators made extravagant claims that these complaint services could substantially increase social justice by themselves,¹⁷ or have much impact on transforming media organizations. Academic journalists did not give much attention to the potential of action lines. Action line reporters themselves seemed to see their role as that of the aggressive adversary of bureaucratic “red tape” and accessible, powerful, and tenacious defender of individual *rights*, rather than of social *interests* (cf. E&P, 1967g; 1971b; 1972a; Mitchell & Tennant, 1967; *Maclean's*, 1970). Most action lines did promise to be allies of those who submitted problems—the “little guy” (Cooper, 1974, 1975, 1976), the “powerless” (Cerra, 1976a: 57), the “underdog” (Rowat, 1968b: 33), the “silent majority” (Cooper, 1974), “Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen” (E&P, 1972a: 36), and “Mr. Poor American” (U.S. Senate, 1968: 121).

The promise extended to anyone disadvantaged by life in a complex, anonymous, modern society, not just to poor people. Themes of communication breakdowns, alienation, and social dislocation were repeated by action line reporters. Arnold (1968: 14), for instance, stated the problem in this way:

The current popularity of Action Line is a logical product of the times. American businesses—like American governments—have become so large that the man on the street feels futility even in finding an ear into which to complain. The tyranny of the businessman's computer is as absolute—and as frustrating—as the tyranny of petty bureaucrats. Main Street is as adept as City Hall in giving the runaround. When the

is a minor, but “particularly helpful” and upbeat, device for giving individuals the correct attitudes to deal with shoddy merchandise and inadequate government services.

¹⁵ Brucker (1973: 215-222), inspired by Marshall McLuhan, reduced the distinctive role of newspapers to a formula:

COMMUNICATION = CHANGE
TELEVISION = THE MASS
NEWSPAPERS = THE INDIVIDUAL

¹⁶ For instance, in the United States, see *Time* (1964, 1967); *Newsweek*, (1966); *VFW Magazine* [Warnick] (1968); *Mechanix Illustrated* (1970); and the *Wall Street Journal* (1967; [Sesser] 1971). In Canada, see *Maclean's* [Mitchell & Tennant] (1967; 1970); and *Chatelaine* [Edmonds] (1971).

¹⁷ Levine (1975: 51), however, argued that action lines “can revitalize our local institutions, reform the daily operations of business and government, even change the nature of democracy” (cf. Collins, 1969). Elliot Richardson (1976: 324-325) less extravagantly praised action lines as devices for equalizing relations between individuals and large organizations. Brucker (1973: 292-293), on the other hand, claimed that action lines were only a “modern variation of the letters to the editor,” useful only in creating the image of the newspaper's identification with readers. Hohenberg (1968: 290-291) called them a safe alternative for newspapers that lacked the resources (or were unwilling to pay) for more significant forms of “public service journalism.”

Home Office, accessible only by mail, becomes involved, the customer feels that he has lost all recourse, all hopes of equity.

What people needed was an ally, a good friend and a counsellor who could stand up to the exploiters. Commenting on this advocacy role, Edmonds (1971: 42), a Canadian journalist, called action lines "Courts of Last Resort." "Due process of law," he said, "is too slow and costly to solve the relatively minor problems thrown up by increasingly complex government and business structures, and by selling techniques as complicated as the products of the technological age they have been set up to market."

Popular Taste

The spread of media ombudsmen throughout North America was also a commercial response to popular values which apparently have universal appeal.¹⁸ Participation features had a respectable history; they were found in both electronic and print media and were not restricted to North America. The format was discovered by accident at the turn of the century during experiments with mass marketing techniques. It was adopted because it seemed to be popular, not because newspaper owners were committed to its implicit values or interested in its social functions. The continued vitality of the participation format, however, is evidence that it struck some fundamental chord among the reading public.

The basic appeal of the participation feature is reflected in the available data on the volume of complaints to action lines. From the point of view of the newspaper business manager, most services have been astonishingly successful, a fact which is repeatedly emphasized in the trade literature. The ten largest of 222 services in the APME's census (1973; see also Beal, 1973) reported receiving nearly 30,000 inquiries each week. The *Charlotte News* received 120,000 telephone calls in its first two years of operation (*Wall Street Journal*, 1967: 1). The *Philadelphia Inquirer* received 347,656 inquiries in its first year, "the largest phone and mail response for a feature in the *Inquirer's* history" (E&P, 1971a: 44).

In 1973, nearly half (43.7 percent) of the papers in Beal's survey (1973: 97, Table 26) also reported rising caseloads. Seventeen percent (37) claimed that the action line was their "best read feature" (Beal, 1973: 108). Soon after the *Detroit Free Press* introduced an ombudsman, an audience survey "showed 78 percent on a given day read some part of Action Line. Even

¹⁸ See Note 52 below.

more impressive were the figures for the teenage audience. The same survey showed 71 percent of the boys and 73 percent of the girls read the column" (E&P, 1966b: 20; see also Beal, 1973: 46-47). This response undoubtedly strengthened the position of action lines as regular features. In fact, editors were more optimistic about the long-term survival of action lines in 1973 than they were in the first APME (1968) survey, primarily because it was thought action lines had increased circulation (see Beal, 1973: 139, Table 48).

III. MANAGING ACTION LINES

Despite common origins, philosophical justifications, and economic incentives, there are great differences in the way action lines operate. Although discussion is somewhat limited by a lack of credible information and scholarship, enough data exist to identify the ways in which action lines commonly (1) maintain a staff, (2) manage their caseloads, (3) routinely screen complaints before printing them, and (4) solve problems. These data indicate that the resources newspapers invest in action lines are quite limited. Because of the popularity of the services, this creates, in turn, a significant problem in keeping workloads within manageable limits.

The strategies employed to regulate the flow of business apparently have the unintentional (but not unwelcome) consequence of limiting services provided to those who possess relatively greater social advantages. This "class bias" is reinforced by an apparent tendency among action lines to stress the *image* rather than the substance of ombudsmanship. The potential sting of this conclusion is reduced when one observes the large numbers of people who claim to be pleased with the services they receive. People are happy even though action lines may deliver much less than they promise and may stimulate no institutional reforms. This suggests that complainants must be looking for something other than the resolution of their disputes.

Resources and Staffing

A survey by the *New York Times* of seven newspaper and electronic action lines in the New York area illustrates the differences in support they receive from their parent organizations.

Table 1. Action Lines in the New York Area, 1976

Name	Number of complaints per week	Access	Staff size	Type of staff	Routine method of handling complaints	Personal follow-up
WABC-TV Eyewitness News Help Center	500	Letter	120	Volunteer part-time	Telephone	Yes
WNEW-TV "Action reporter" Chris Jones	1,000	Letter	3	Mixture	Form letter	No
Daily News action line (Nassau-Suffolk only)	2,500	Letter	3	Paid	Form Letter	No
WNBC-TV Action 4	1,000	Letter	8	Mixture	Form letter	Sometimes
Channel 13 Help Center	200	Phone 10 A.M.-1 P.M. weekdays	70	Volunteer and law student part-time	Telephone	Yes
L.I. Press "Help!" column.	250	Letter	2	Paid	Form letter	No
WMCA Call for Action	300	Phone 10 A.M.-1 P.M. weekdays	50	Volunteer part-time	Telephone	Yes

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Newspaper action lines are small, in-house affairs.¹⁹ Unlike broadcast ombudsmen, they rarely use volunteers, law students, or other outsiders to provide technical assistance or to increase the efficiency of their staffs. The largest in Mattice's (1976: 14) survey of 113 newspapers—that of the Minneapolis *Star*—had seven full-time employees; the average had only 1.8. Thirteen (11.6 percent) had no employees at all, preferring to distribute reader problems among newsroom staff. The largest in the APME (1973: 6) survey had only eleven full-time employees.

Managing Caseloads

The popularity of action lines creates a dilemma for newspapers. The record suggests that owners are apparently unwilling either to increase costs by hiring more paid staff, or to increase efficiency by using volunteers to process complaints. At the same time, they do not wish to forfeit the obvious circulation and public relations benefits of processing complaints, or to tarnish the populist image they like to maintain. Accordingly, ways must be found to keep potentially staggering

¹⁹ In 1973, expenditures on 222 action lines totalled only \$3-million (Beal, 1973: 79, Table 14).

caseloads within manageable limits without damaging the desired public image. The dilemma is resolved in three ways, only two of which seem to involve deliberate policy. First, the flow of business into the service can be moderated by limiting the recruitment of complaints. Second, the public image of the column's jurisdiction can be roughly determined by printing only certain classes of problems. Third, the dilemma partially resolves itself because many complainants are looking for something other than assistance in resolving disputes. The combination of strategies selected by the action line is one indicator of the newspaper's true commitment to the ideal of social reform.

Limiting Recruitment

The principal strategy for keeping caseloads under control, adopted by nearly all action lines, is to shift the burden of complaining to the individual with a problem. Action lines react to problems submitted to them; they do not aggressively solicit complaints.²⁰ There are four techniques for restricting recruitment even more: (1) personal interviews, (2) direct telephone calls, (3) letters-only, and (4) telephone recording devices. Most action lines use more than one of these techniques, but the most common are letters-only and telephone recorder formats. From the point of view of most complainants, personal interviews and direct telephone calls are the best way to complain. They allow for the presentation of more information about the dispute than do either letters or recorded conversations. They have the added advantage, Mattice (1976: 30-31) suggests, of providing the psychological reassurance and personal recognition that many people seem to need (see Hannigan, 1977: 697-698). But they are expensive, disrupt office routine, and offer few public relations advantages. It is a credit to the seriousness of an ombudsman's commitment to public service if personal interviews or telephone calls are accepted.²¹

²⁰ Mattice (1976: 16) notes that a magazine advertising campaign by KABC-AM's (Los Angeles) "Ombudsman Service" was terminated because it generated unmanageable numbers of complaints. "Call For Action" relies exclusively on television and radio spot promotions, but their number and the times when they are broadcast are restricted, as are the hours when telephone calls will be accepted.

²¹ The most elaborate interview system may be that of the Chicago *Tribune*, which outfitted a recreation vehicle as a mobile "Action Express" (Healey, 1968). Mattice (1976: 16) reports a similar service at a Los Angeles radio station:

Several staff members of KABC Ombudsman Service park a distinctively-labelled truck in large shopping centers for two or three days per month. Having some knowledge of the social composition and residence patterns of the KABC audience, the service takes the truck to

Approximately one third of all newspapers prefer to rely entirely on telephone recording devices (Beal, 1973: 6; Mattice, 1976: 17). Introduced in 1961 by the Houston *Chronicle's* "WATCHEM,"²² recorders, typically, give the caller two or three minutes to express a complaint or question. Calls are later transcribed and the queries (the reader undoubtedly assumes) are turned over to reporters for action. The devices are a relatively inexpensive way to generate large numbers of complaints, and they minimize the disruption of office routine. The APME (1973: 2) reports that "[r]ecorders attracted 60 percent of all queries coming to the 68 columns [surveyed] and drew 42 percent of all queries coming to all columns." The larger numbers of complaints to services that use recorders increase the chance that reporters will find interesting problems to fill a daily column.

The benefit to callers is less obvious. There have been no systematic studies, but recorders may be the least effective way to help people. Levine (1975: 43) bluntly accuses action lines that use recorders of being consumer frauds (cf. Mattice, 1976: 30):

This device . . . is an utter fraud, since it generates such a volume of complaints that all attempts to select the most serious cases are overwhelmed. Moreover, as Kenan Heise of the *Chicago Tribune* says, "The phone calls are usually inaccurate and provide insufficient information." The true cynicism of the arrangement is shown by the *Chicago Daily News*, which several years back decided to erase the recordings of phone calls it didn't consider interesting.

Recording devices also favor those able to express themselves orally in English in a brief amount of time. They are least likely to generate coherent, understandable, usable information about a reader's problem. In more than one fifth (22.7 percent) of the calls to the Washington *Star*, the caller hung up without providing any information (DiJulio, 1975: 30). A large number, which were simply ignored, were either pranks or were from people too inarticulate to state a problem. Even if a caller managed to state a complaint that could be transcribed, there was no assurance of action. Although the *Star* tried to answer all inquiries, it was acknowledged that "if there are great time pressures . . . , the less articulate ones are generally less likely to get answered" (DiJulio, 1975: 87).

The most common method of access to an action line is by letter only. Nearly one half (46 percent) of newspapers in one

centers where they are least likely to encounter KABC listeners. This mobile unit accounts for about one quarter of the Service's total volume.

²² The letters "WATCHEM" correspond to this action line's telephone number (E&P, 1961).

survey relied exclusively on letters (Mattice, 1976: 31). But, like recorders, a letters-only requirement does more than merely restrict the intake of complaints; it also tends to define the social characteristics of the service's clientele.²³ This conclusion is supported by the only two studies which have interviewed people who complain to action lines (cf. Haskins, 1968: 38). The less rigorous is Mohapatra's (1974: 6-8) series of interviews with sixty-four persons who complained to the Norfolk *Ledger-Star's* "Hotline," a service that relies primarily on letters. More than 90 percent of these complainants were white (despite a large local black community); 66 percent owned real property; and 34 percent were college-educated. Hannigan (1977) surveyed 282 persons who complained to the London (Ontario) *Free Press'* "Sound Off," a column that relies exclusively on letters. Nearly half were younger and better educated than the norm in that Canadian city. Comparatively few low-income, elderly, poorly educated, or (in the case of Norfolk) black, people used either column.²⁴ These data, while limited, seem to suggest that letters-only action lines tend to recruit relatively advantaged people.²⁵ From the perspective of circulation-conscious newspaper business executives, this is an attractive feature: most urban dailies are aimed at a white, middle-class, and increasingly suburban market (Klein, 1976). But it also suggests that, despite the populist rubric appended to the action line phenomenon, media ombudsmen may have less impact on the serious problems of the most disadvantaged people in their communities than was hoped.

Controlling Reputation

There is little precise information on the ways complaints are processed by media ombudsmen: no one has ever followed

²³ English-language literacy and the ability to express one's grievance coherently in writing are favored. There have been isolated experiments with special action lines for non-English speaking minorities—most notably in Washington (E&P, 1969a) and Chicago (E&P, 1971d)—but one might expect the least advantaged people in most cities to be discouraged from using the action line.

²⁴ DiJulio (1975: 77), comparing the addresses of selected correspondents to census data on neighborhood income level, found no significant variations. This methodology does not appear to be as reliable as Hannigan's (1977) and Mohapatra's (1974) personal interviews.

²⁵ In this regard, the newspaper action line may be indistinguishable from official complaint services. Larry B. Hill (1976: Ch. 5) reports that, after an initial burst of complaints from "relatively inarticulate, educationally marginal individuals," the clients of the New Zealand Ombudsman came to be recruited mainly from the more advantaged segments of that nation's population.

Table 2. Complaints to Action Lines

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Column Name	Action Line	NEWSpover	NEWSpover	Action Line	Ask the Globe	Action Line	70 Action Lines
Newspaper	Gainesville (Florida) Sun	Buffalo Evening News	Buffalo Evening News	Akron Beacon-Journal	St. Louis Globe-Democrat	St. Louis Post-Dispatch	70 Different Newspapers
	612 Letters Published	1068 Answers published	112 letters received	231 Answers published	344 Answers published	289 Answers published	1282 Answers Published
N	Horton, 1971: 11-15	Angus & Kaplan, 1968	Paien, 1972	Bellay, 1970: 19	Bellay, 1970: 19	Bellay, 1970: 19	Mattice, 1976: 36, Table III
SOURCE REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION About Other Government	40.4% (247)	27.5% (294)	33.0% (37)	85.3% (197)	91.9% (316)	97.3% (252)	56.1% (748)
	13.6% (83)	25.2% (269)					
COMPLAINTS Against Government	16.8% (103)	38.4% (410)	12.5% (14)	5.6% (13)	6.9% (24)	1.9% (5)	16.3% (206)
	27.8% (170)	8.9% (95)	53.6% (60)	9.1% (21)	1.2% (4)	0.8% (2)	24.4% (308)
OTHER	1.3% (9)	No Data	0% (1)	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data

a sample of cases through the system; there is no detailed taxonomy of inquiries that compares the patterns of those received with those published. There is enough data, however, to conclude that editors exercise considerable discretion over the kinds of problems printed (cf. Levine, 1975: 48). Table 2 records the patterns implicit in these discretionary decisions to publish complaints. These are the only seven studies I could locate which have gathered comparable data on the character of caseloads.

While they clearly prefer the role of information clearinghouse, all action lines accept a reasonable proportion of complaints against government officials. Most will entertain complaints against business firms, but comparatively few of these end up in print. A few—for instance, those at the Gainesville *Sun* (Horton, 1972) and the Detroit *Free Press* (E&P, 1970b—serve as supplementary letters-to-the-editor features, printing general opinion and “gripes” from readers. The proportions of information, complaints, and gripes vary considerably among newspapers. Data from Gainesville (Horton, 1972), Buffalo (Angus & Kaplan, 1968), and from across the country (Mattice, 1976) suggest that the ratio of information items that are printed to problem-solving items is roughly 60:40.

The evidence also suggests a direct association between caseloads and the degree to which a column emphasizes solving problems: action-oriented ombudsmen report higher caseloads (Kavanaugh & Beal, 1975; cf. Bellay, 1970). Furthermore, readers seem to prefer action lines that tackle business rather than government.²⁶ Beal (1973: 99, Table 27) reports that 85 newspapers claimed an increase in complaints against business between 1971 and 1972; complaints against government had increased at only 56 newspapers during the same period. Several newspapers have reported dramatic increases in the

²⁶ Arnold (1968: 14), in fact, credits the popularity of media ombudsmen to the decision of editors to accept consumer complaints, an area ignored by official ombudsmen:

Newspapers have offered such a feature before; never had it caught fire. Why this ballooning popularity today? The answer lies in a subtle shift of function of the Action Lines. When first introduced two or three decades ago, and also in its present reincarnation, this department was seen by the editor as an ombudsman, an ally of the frustrated citizen in his endless and usually fruitless fights against City Hall. It is performing that function admirably today, but it has also moved into a new area as an intermediary between customer and American Business. . . . The most successful Action Lines have the highest ratio of consumer complaints.

rate of complaining after they began to solicit consumer complaints (Whiteley, 1971; E&P, 1972a; Beal, 1973: 17-18; but cf. E&P, 1969b with Massa, 1967). It is therefore surprising to find an indication in Table 2 that action lines may deemphasize (and perhaps discourage) dispute processing in favor of disseminating information and providing entertainment. Column 3 in that Table records the patterns of letters *received* by one action line; all the other columns record patterns of inquiries actually *published*. While the sample is small, the comparison suggests that what gets printed may bear little relation to the patterns of problems submitted by readers. If the data are representative,²⁷ even the more adversarial action lines tend to play down complaints against business.²⁸ Both policies seem to contravene reader preferences.

Solving Problems

Despite the fact that action lines do not deliver all they promise, nearly everyone served by such columns seems reasonably pleased with their performance. Caseloads were reported to be rising at nearly half of all newspapers in one national survey (Beal, 1973: 104, Table 17). A majority of those interviewed by Mohapatra (1974: 9) felt that the column at the Norfolk *Ledger-Star* had rendered "good" service; 86 percent suggested expanding its role in the community. (Only 17 percent rated the service "poor.") People in London, Ontario, were even more pleased with their *Free Press*' "Sound Off": "Nearly three quarters (72.7 percent) of the sample indicated that they would use the column again in the future if they had

²⁷ Although his data are not strictly comparable, Hannigan's (1977: 687) analysis of complaints to the London (Ontario) *Free Press* suggests that these figures *are* representative. Of a sample of 282 letters, 62.4 percent clearly involve sales of goods or services. The most common grievances in London included failure to receive merchandise and defective products and repairs. The same pattern is repeated at four ombudsmen services in California (Mattice, 1976: 42-46).

²⁸ The most striking data in Table 2 is the comparison of Columns 2 and 3: more than half of the sample of letters received by the Buffalo *Evening News* involved complaints against businesses. Yet, Angus' & Kaplan's (1968) earlier survey of the same column suggests that fewer than ten percent of these were printed. At the same time, the *News* appears to publish a far larger proportion of citizen complaints against government—38.4 percent of the total (Angus & Kaplan, 1968). While one cannot easily infer from data with a five-year gap, this comparison suggests that action lines may compensate for discouraging consumer complaints by publishing a larger proportion of citizen complaints against government.

One might reasonably expect the configuration of complaints to vary among communities. In Gainesville, Florida, for instance, there are many more complaints against the Federal Government than in Buffalo. This may reflect the large population of pensioners and retired military personnel who live in that area (Horton, 1972: 11).

other consumer problems; less than a tenth (9.6 percent) said they would not" (Hannigan, 1977: 694).

However, Hannigan (1977) and Mohapatra (1974) do not appear to have completely explained the patterns they identify. In Norfolk, for instance, the action line may well have tapped a pool of chronic complainers. Forty-five percent had used the *Ledger-Star's* service more than once; 11 percent four times or more. This suggests that an ombudsman may attract a fair number of *kvetchers*, people who find it easy to transform minor grievances into a stream of complaints.²⁹

Hannigan's study is the only available systematic investigation of the *outcomes* of complaints. His data indicate that the London *Free Press'* "Sound Off" may not be astoundingly successful in resolving disputes. The service was clearly successful in only about half (46.5 percent) of its cases (Hannigan, 1977: 693-694):

On the other hand, in about a quarter (24.5 percent) of the cases, *Sound Off* was not able to help the consumer with his/her problem. Finally, in 23.0 percent of the cases, the respondent did not yet know whether *Sound Off* had been of any assistance in problem solving. . . .

A few complainants (3.9 percent) were able to solve their own problem without the intervention of the newspaper.

The inverse relationship between the social status of complainants and actual dispute resolution, referred to earlier, also affects consumer satisfaction with the action line. According to Hannigan (1977: 695):

[W]hen complaint resolution was cross-tabulated with socio-economic background of [complainants], it was found that the socially advantaged were generally helped *least* by the newspaper ombudsman, while middle-income, middle-status consumers were helped most. . . . This can, perhaps, be explained by differences in the kinds of problems brought to *Sound Off*, as well as in expectations about what constitutes a successful resolution.

Better-educated, more affluent complainants probably have higher expectations about a satisfactory solution, and may thus create an impression of intransigence, to which the complaineer reacts with hostility. Working-class complainants are, one presumes, less concerned with abstract rights and more willing to compromise and accept something less than "the whole pie."³⁰ Action lines retreat from involvement in disputes between truly hostile parties where there are unsettled questions

²⁹ If this is so, despite the hopes of some observers (e.g., Johnson *et al.*, 1977) the utility of action lines in reducing the pool of social grievances may be quite limited.

³⁰ Ross and Littlefield's (1978: 212-213) study of complaints to a Denver appliance store also indicates that persons in relatively higher social classes tend to complain more often. Crowe's (1978: 225-228) analysis of complaints to the

of right and of fact. These are not problems that can be solved by a routine referral. If the complainee is adamant and presents some principled reason for refusing to settle the complaint, media ombudsmen often refer the reader to Small Claims Court or to the Better Business Bureau.

Even so, many who were not materially helped liked the ombudsman: "In some cases, the clients who had not been helped specified that they thought that *Sound Off* had tried its best, but that no one was powerful enough to influence the complainee" (Hannigan, 1977: 694). All this good will and the possible existence of a pool of regular users suggest that many complainants are satisfied by being offered a sympathetic ear and some recognition from the outside world that they have a legitimate grievance.

Other Participation Features

Action lines are not the only media forum in which persons may register complaints or ask for assistance. And like action lines, these other fora provide a variety of services beyond assistance in settling disputes. Advice to the Lovelorn columns, among the most popular features in newspapers,³¹ are a good example. They serve as information clearinghouses,³² as "safety valves" for the frustrations and anguish of self-perceived victims of mass society,³³ and as referees of complaints. In some respects, refereeing complaints between readers is a form of non-binding arbitration. "Almost half the writers" in Gieber's (1960: 512) survey:

Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination concludes that working people tend to be more satisfied with settlements that fall short of absolute vindication.

³¹ There are many other kinds of advice columns; more than one hundred are distributed nationally by feature syndicates (see E&P, 1975), and many more are written locally. Lovelorn columns were a circulation-building, entertainment device popularized by William Randolph Hearst to humanize his mass-circulation, urban newspapers. For a traditional, uncritical interpretation of the entertainment function of the lovelorn column, see Bond (1961: 260).

³² Gieber (1960: 507) reports that 7.6 percent of the correspondents in his sample merely requested referral of some sort. In Dibner's (1974: 152) survey, ten percent requested referral.

³³ Gieber (1960: 512-513) believes that letters to the lovelorn columnist are indicators of urban anomie:

One of the characteristics of the letter writers is membership in the lower socio-economic class. The cultural indices of the letters suggest that many are recent in-migrants to Northern metropolitan areas from the rural South. These individuals have not yet been incorporated into the cities' institutional life. Others are isolates who never have been part of the social structure or who recently have broken away from formal institutions for individual reasons. . . . The newspaper becomes the last link of communication with the "community."

The founder of the Houston *Chronicle's* "WATCHEM," the first of the contemporary, successful action lines (*Wall Street Journal*, 1967: 1, Col. 4) and the editor of the Chicago *Tribune's* "Our Town" (E&P, 1967a: 44) agree.

[A]re not only asking for support, but also for [the columnist's] intervention in a conflict situation. A teenage girl will write that her mother argues over the proper hour of curfew; the mother agrees to abide by the columnist's ruling. A wife writes that she had a dispute with her husband and he suggested a third party; the wife wrote to the lovelorn columnist.

Nearly all disputes submitted to the lovelorn column involve conflict in intimate social relationships. Three quarters (77 percent) of the letters in Dibner's (1974) survey requested assistance in family disputes. More than half (Dibner, 1974: 152) wanted "explicit directions on how to act." In such cases, the columnist, mindful "that she was on the side of moral law and social custom" (Gieber, 1960: 509), dispenses authoritative statements on the customary rules that will resolve the dispute.³⁴

Bintl Brief, an ethnic variant of the lovelorn column, offers further evidence of the role of the audience participation feature as an acculturation device, a source of personal recognition, and a commercial vehicle. *Bintl Brief* (literally, "A Bundle of Letters") has been a feature since 1906 of New York's Yiddish-Language daily, the *Forward*.³⁵ In comparison to contemporary action lines, the column attracts particularly intense and intimate problems. W. I. Thomas analogized the *Bintl* editor's role to that of the rabbi or of the Talmudic scholar in adapting and applying religious law to the unique social problems of the immigrant Jewish community (Bressler, 1952: 398-401). He attributed the remarkable influence of the service to the traditional "religious legalism" of the Jews in Eastern Europe. But the *Bintl Brief* is really a variant of the lovelorn column rather than a different type of service. The status of both derives from the social authority correspondents attribute to the column's authors.

The radio "open line," like the action line, is a product of the 1960's.³⁶ It is one of a number of cathartic media services

³⁴ Syndicated lovelorn columns are in fact promoted by emphasizing their right to speak authoritatively on mores. "Dear Abby" and "Ann Landers" are especially proud of their "panels of experts"—clergymen, psychologists, doctors and lawyers—on whom they call for advice.

³⁵ The only comprehensive analysis of letters to the *Brief* was begun in 1918 by W. I. Thomas, the noted sociologist and scholar of immigration studies. From 1918 until his death in 1947, Thomas translated or abstracted thousands of letters, from which he had hoped to extract prototypical patterns of social disorganization and reintegration among Jewish immigrants in America. This work, interrupted by Thomas' death, was reconstructed in an unpublished thesis by Marvin Bressler (1952). Thomas rejected a quantitative analysis of letters to *Bintl Brief* because there were too many biases in the sample to permit inferences about the magnitude of, or changes in, the problems afflicting the immigrant community. For translations of *Bintl Brief*, see Metzger (1972).

³⁶ There is no published history of the phone-in format (but cf. *Broadcasting*, 1973). Singer (1973: 15-16) finds its roots in the radio telephone quiz shows

that provide escapes from loneliness, frustration, and alienation (cf. U.S. Senate, 1968: 82-84), although like the others it also serves a minor dispute-resolution function.³⁷ For many older persons, shut-ins, truck drivers, and others who are lonely or work under conditions of solitude in the nighttime hours, the radio phone-in show may substitute in a small way for participation in more lasting relationships (cf. Gildea, 1976).³⁸ The open line is neither an authority on mores, like the *lovelorn* column, nor primarily a forum for settling disputes. In subject matter, it is primarily an information clearinghouse. More than one-half of the calls to an open line in London, Ontario, for example, sought an exchange of information, of goods, or items reported lost and found. About 10 percent were dispute-oriented, while the remainder were a mixed batch of letters to the editor, *lovelorn* advice requests, pleas for help, jokes, and general chit-chat (Singer, 1973: 50).

Figure 1 suggests three possible ways to classify these various media features, according to the values they embody. All

of the 1930's, but credits its recent popularity to increased competition from television. Not only did television threaten newspapers, but radio also lost its status as the national medium of information and entertainment. Paralleling the print media, the radio industry pursued a policy of "localization," emphasizing the special role of the radio station in community affairs. The "open line," like the action line, dramatizes that involvement. For a current directory of local radio public affairs and entertainment programs, see National Research Bureau (1977).

³⁷ A variation on the open line is the *Boston Globe's* "Confidential Chat" (Yoffe, 1976):

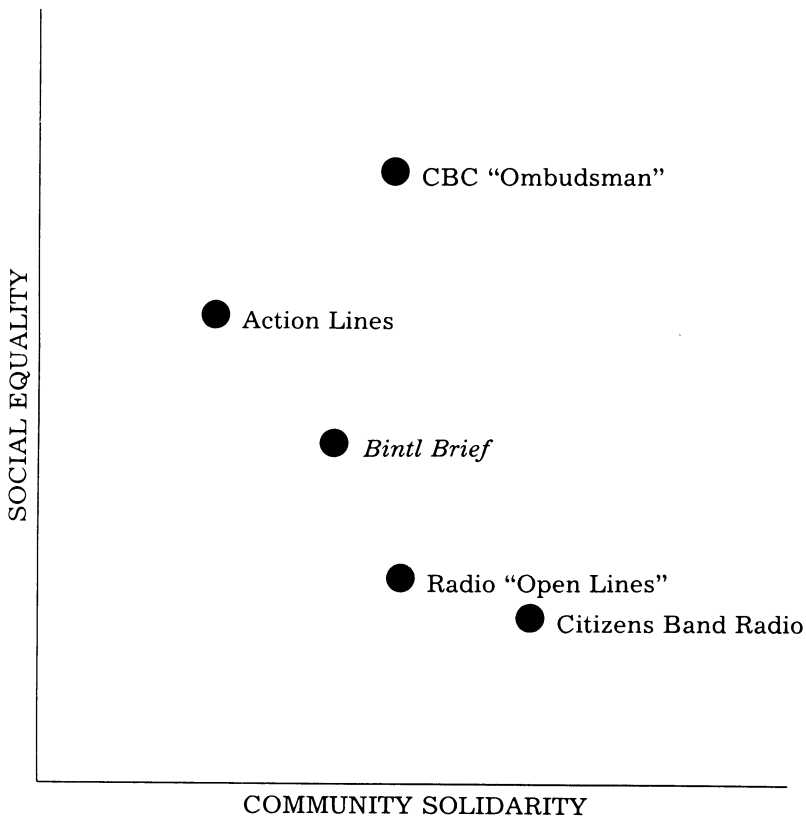
Confidential Chat has elements of Dear Abby and Hints from Heloise columns, but its readers see it as more than just another advice column. It's a place for the 35,000 people who write in regularly to share experiences and problems anonymously. . . . David Reisman, a Harvard sociologist and Chat reader, says he thinks that part of the column's appeal is that it offers people a chance to argue and to "anonymously share concerns outside their immediate circle." He adds: "I don't think all Americans need therapy, most need company."

Another example from an unusual medium is the telephone "crisis line" or "hotline." Although commonly associated with suicide prevention and drug problems, a survey of 133 hotlines from across the country (Lander, 1974) found "legal" problems a major part of their caseloads. Although the author never adequately defines what "legal problems" may be, they are rated fifth *above suicide* in frequency by hotline officials who were asked to rank order 86 "problem areas."

³⁸ Singer (1973: Ch. 6) reports that as many as 20 percent of the entire population of London, Ontario (a city of 200,000), have called an open line at least once. One of the three shows in London "airs nearly 15,000 calls annually and receives considerably more" (Singer, 1973: 56). These data lead Singer (1973: 54-56) to conclude that the "radio phone-in show has clearly become the dominant method by which the population uses mass media for 'feedback' in our society." Beyond the cathartic personal satisfaction a person experiences by calling or listening to an open line, the significance of such "feedback" is unclear. Open lines do not promise concrete social change like action lines; they seem, instead, to reflect a deep need to be part of a community that cares about one's feelings.

participation services offer some measure of personal recognition, directly or indirectly. However, they differ considerably in the degree to which each promises membership in a meaningful community, or some real or perceived social equality. Love-lorn columns and the radio open line appeal to a community of persons with similar class backgrounds and similar problems—in the former by authoritative reassurance on rules of etiquette and behavior; and in the latter by personal telephone and radio contacts. To the extent that they offer a vision of social equality, it is the reassurance of common adversity.

Figure 1



Action lines,³⁹ on the other hand, promise to intervene in disputes on the side of the aggrieved "little guy," and thus promote the vision of equalization between those with resources and those without.⁴⁰ But action lines also promote personal recognition and thus may satisfy their constituents even when the ombudsman cannot deliver as promised.⁴¹

³⁹ See below at p. 825.

⁴⁰ See *News in Engineering* (1972).

⁴¹ See below at p. 826.

Figure 2

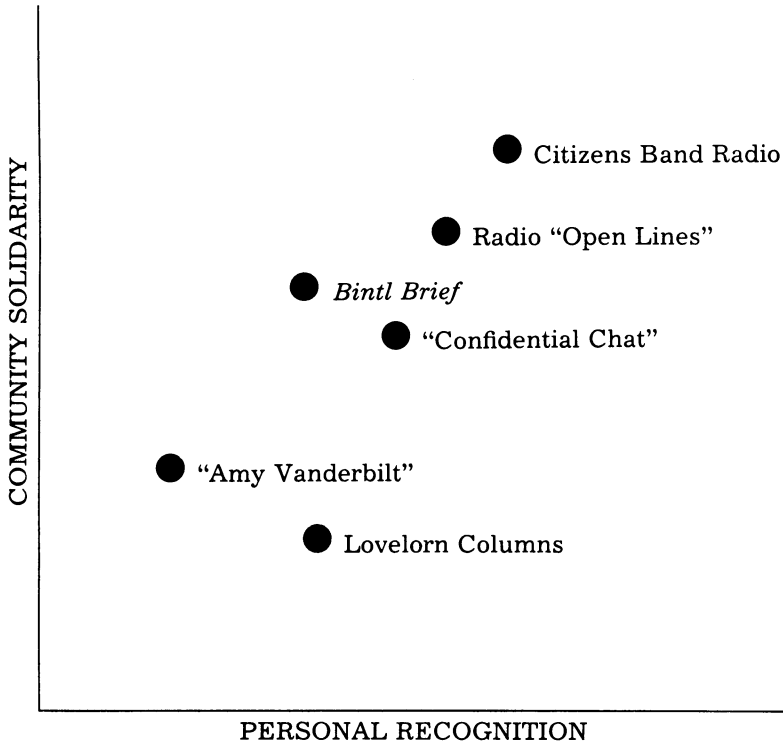
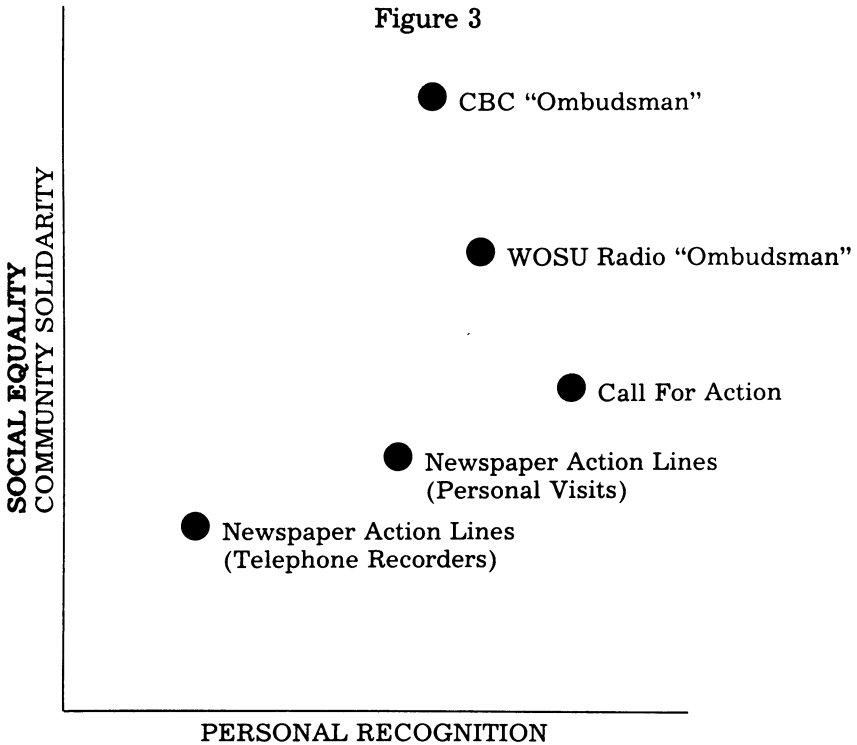


Figure 3



IV. PATTERNS OF DISPUTE PROCESSING: WHY ARE THERE SO FEW ADVERSARY ACTION LINES?⁴²

Styles of Newspaper Ombudsmanship

There has been no systematic survey, but anecdotal reports indicate the existence of at least three distinct modes of problem solving by newspaper action lines. These variations in style and behavior are apparent in the following composites extracted from the literature.

*The Entertaining Action Line.*⁴³ Within days of each other in 1966, the two major newspapers in St. Louis—the *Post Dispatch* and the *Globe-Democrat*—rushed into the business of processing disputes. Neither apparently thought of their columns as serious complaint bureaus; they were “promotion gimmicks” (E&P, 1967c: 32) in a circulation war.⁴⁴ Both emphasized cartoons, public announcements, general information, human interest stories, and frothy questions and answers on hobbies, music, local history, and sports (Bellay, 1970: 31, Table 3), rather than “action” on complaints. In five months, the column at the *Post-Dispatch* printed responses to only seven complaints, 2.7 percent of all inquiries published. The *Globe-Democrat’s* service was little better; in the same period, it printed forty complaints (11.3 percent). The *Post-Dispatch* was discouraged by the quality of questions it received. According to its executive editor (Bellay, 1970: 41):

The result was extremely disappointing for both us and the *Globe*. . . . [W]e discovered that about 95 percent of the calls to Action Line were “nut” calls. People wanted to know the names of the person next door who insisted on undressing in front of the window and similar silly things. . . . [I]t was altogether an unrewarding bit of business.

After only five months of unprofitable operation in which neither received any circulation advantage, both St. Louis papers quietly scuttled their ombudsmen.

The Adversary Action Line. While uncommon, there are action lines that approach the adversarial model of public service journalism. Levine (1975: 46-48), for example, cites the

⁴² See Note 37, above.

⁴³ See Bellay (1970).

⁴⁴ According to the executive editor of the *Post-Dispatch*, the newsroom accepted the action line only after “much prodding from the circulation department” (Bellay, 1970: 41). This initial hostility may have given the news staff some incentive to assure that the column failed.

action line run by the Gannett chain's "flagship," the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle* (see also Wilt, 1970):

One way to get results [the editor of the *Democrat & Chronicle's* action line found] was to repeatedly publish the names of companies and agencies that received complaints until they became more responsive. "After beating the hell out of Social Security for a while," he said, "we didn't have to bother. They became more cooperative." Another method was to print the names of stores that "told us to mind our own business." He notes, "It was our way of telling the community that a certain store wasn't interested in you, the consumer." The column didn't back away from occasionally naming doctors and lawyers who were screwing the public—a move that was, and is, almost unknown among Action Line columns. . . . The column also served to strengthen the local consumer movement, including the usually weak Better Business Bureau. In this case, the Bureau cooperated with the column, and [the editor] took to printing the names of the businesses that didn't satisfactorily reply to Bureau inquiries within 30 days.

The Cooperative Action Line. Most action lines fall between these extremes, neither discouraging complaints (like the entertaining action line), nor aggressively pursuing them (like the adversary action line). The style of these ombudsmen seems to be shaped by the network of relationships that develop between individual reporters and local business and political leaders. "One key to the success of all the help services," Cerra (1976a: 57) reports, "is their knowledge of the names of powerful government and business executives who can short-circuit normal bureaucratic procedures." This type of action line is distinguished by the way it processes complaints. Most problems are "solved" by a routine referral, and "success" is measured by case flow rather than by dispute resolution.⁴⁵ The editor of the Toronto *Star's* "Probe," for instance, describes his "infallible system" for dealing with complaints (Edmonds, 1971: 84):

Someone complains about poor merchandise or service, and we send the complaint to the president of the company concerned—always to the president—saying we have this complaint and could he please look into it for us. Ninety percent of the time the president didn't know anything about it, but he wants to keep customers happy and he cuts red tape down the line and solves the problem.

The cooperative action line defines reader problems as primarily a "failure to communicate," a product of the ignorance, stupidity, or intransigence of lower-level functionaries. These problems call for a dose of traditional executive authority, not major institutional reform. "In the long run," Arnold (1968: 15; see also Murray, 1968; *Wall Street Journal*, 1967: 1) explains:

⁴⁵ There are no accurate data on the disposition of complaints by action lines. Mattice (1976: 44) does report that 63 percent of complaints to KABC-AM's (Los Angeles) "Ombudsman Service" were disposed of by a routine referral.

[T]he ombudsman serves the receiver as well as the originator of complaints. Few businesses, no matter what their size, want disgruntled customers. Most of the grievances directed against business result from ignoring or misinterpreting company policy. Many complaints are caused by size alone, rather than venality or inefficiency. The tightly-defined procedures necessary to handle huge volumes just can't cope with the atypical. . . . When an honest broker brings the grievance to the attention of the proper level of management, remedy is usually speedy and ungrudging.

No one has tried to count the number of action lines in each category, but one can usually identify the entertaining action line. Those that use telephone recorders—about a third of all (Beal, 1973: 6; Mattice, 1976: 17)—are likely to find personal service impossible. Action lines that are promoted for their miraculous “achievements” are also suspect.⁴⁶ Lacking strong commitment to public service, the entertaining action line may become a covert advertising gimmick. “[T]he requests for hard-to-find items—‘where can I find a pink llama-skin coat’—often amount to little more than plugs for local businesses,” Levine (1975: 48) charges. “And in fact, many of these queries are actually planted by friends of a manufacturer seeking free advertising” (see also Loh, 1976).⁴⁷

Action services may also drift away from dispute processing. The Miami *Herald*, for instance, was so “swamped by questions from senior citizens caught in bureaucratic foul-ups” that it “[wore] out many previously cooperative officials.” The service turned instead to “humor, the off-beat, and alas, the trivial” (E&P, 1966c: 10). Such action lines, however, are clearly a minority. The major question that arises from the literature is why so few action lines adopt the adversary mode, preferring instead the cooperative style of dispute processing.

The Adversary Mode

There are enough reports of aggressive adversary action lines to indicate that newspapers could, if they wanted, attain

⁴⁶ For example, a cross-town helicopter trip to help the parents of two girls attend college graduations on opposite sides of St. Paul (E&P, 1967g); a trans-continental cake bake-off sponsored by *Cocoa Today* (Florida) (E&P, 1967a); arranging for the Goodyear blimp to flash “Birthday Greetings” to the correspondent’s friend (E&P, 1966c); and finding a mink stethoscope for a doctor who had everything else (Hollar, 1973).

⁴⁷ This problem is recognized by the Houston *Chronicle’s* “WATCHEM” (E&P, 1966c: 9):

Uniting willing donors and people with unusual needs always gets good readership. Examples are a wig for a leukemia victim of 16 whose spir-its were lagging, and an organ that was arranged for donation to a nun who conducted religious services in the county jail. Excesses of such items are avoided, of course, to avoid the public’s changing the name to “want’em.”

this goal. The usual indicator of "adversariness" is the willingness of the column to name recalcitrant complainers in print.⁴⁸ The available evidence suggests that adverse publicity is an extraordinarily powerful weapon, especially if used against local merchants, but against some government agencies as well. The action line editor at the Buffalo *Evening News*, for example, reports several instances in which bad publicity had immediate and disastrous effects (see Palen, 1972: 49). In one case, a neighborhood dry-cleaner ruined a dress, but refused to replace it or to pay for the damage. Within a few days after the company's name appeared in the column, its business had dropped by 50 percent. In another, a large home improvement contractor, grossing \$17,000 a week, failed to correct a problem which he promised the newspaper he would. After being given a second chance, his name was printed. Soon after, he complained to the *Evening News* that his volume had fallen to \$7,000 a week. His competitors had even begun using the column in their sales promotions.

There is theoretical support for the effectiveness of publication as a stimulant to corrective action. The acute sensitivity of businessmen to threats to their reputation is well-documented (cf. Macaulay, 1963; Leff, 1970; Hirschman, 1970). Macaulay (1963: 64; see also Leff, 1970: 25-26) describes the intricate network of contacts and the flow of information among tradesmen that deters firms from breaching their mutual obligations:

Not only do the particular business units in a given exchange want to deal with each other again, they also want to deal with other business units in the future. And the way one behaves in a particular transaction, . . . will color his general business reputation. Blacklisting can be formal or informal. Buyers who fail to pay their bills on time risk a bad reputation in credit rating services such as Dun and Bradstreet. Sellers who do not satisfy their customers become the subject of . . . gossip exchanged by purchasing agents and salesmen, at . . . trade associations or even at country clubs or social gatherings.

In their relations with business, consumers are as vulnerable as other businesses. The large volume of one-shot sales transactions creates economic incentives for credit companies to specialize in the "generation, transmission and communication of information and the threats of information" about the reputation of individual consumers (Leff, 1970: 26). Access to this information gives businessmen coercive power over consumers. Unfortunately, consumers do not usually have the same easy access to information about the reputation of businessmen. Although they have an obvious interest in spreading

⁴⁸ Routine examples include newspaper reports of Health Department inspections of restaurants, groceries, and cruise ships (Blumenthal, 1977).

the word about bad business practices, “the consumer-to-consumer information network about merchants and products functions poorly, certainly less efficiently than the same mechanism among merchants” (Leff, 1970: 31). Without this basic element of equality in their relations, the development of informal alternatives to official dispute processing is retarded (cf. Galanter, 1974: 130-135).

Action lines appear to substitute (at least intermittently) for a consumer-to-consumer information network. Large numbers of consumers either withdraw from deals with, or avoid, firms mentioned in the ombudsman column (cf. Felstiner, 1974; 1975). Using a terminology suggested by A.O. Hirschman (1970), the power of the action line is “voice” coupled with the threat of “exit.” The column penetrates the upper levels of business firms, reaching senior executives who can investigate and overrule subordinates. The threat of publicity is implicit, but palpable. In most cases, action line editors claim, there is no reason for the newspaper to escalate—the problem is resolved spontaneously, often in the reader’s favor.

Some adversary media ombudsmen (found primarily in the electronic media) seem to have escaped the limitations of newspaper action lines.⁴⁹ *CBC Ombudsman*, the Canadian Broadcasting Commission’s action line, is the most ambitious, most thoughtfully designed, and perhaps the most influential in North America. The half-hour television program is broadcast throughout Canada in English three Sundays each month during the regular season. It is reported (Friedmann, 1976: 21) to be one of the most popular programs on the network, drawing 1.5 million viewers—ten percent of the entire adult population in Canada. Assisted by a small, full-time staff of lawyers and journalists, *Ombudsman* was created and is hosted by Robert Cooper, an attorney who formerly served with Legal Aid in Montreal and who has taught at McGill Law School. The format, which solicits letters from viewers across the country, is modeled after a similar service of the socialist television network, VARA, in the Netherlands.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Less well-documented examples include *Underdog*, a quixotic, bizarre and short-lived volunteer complaint organization described by Rowat (1968b: 33-34); Bernard Meltzer’s phone-in show carried on radio stations in New York and Philadelphia (see Langley, 1976; Graham, 1978); KTRK-TV (Houston) consumer advocate Marvin Zindler (see Robins, 1978). There are undoubtedly many other adversary reporters who have not received attention in national media.

⁵⁰ Letter from Frances-Mary Morrison, *CBC Ombudsman* staff (5 September 1975). Dutch television stations are assigned by the government to political groups and to ethnic and other minorities if they can gather a sufficient number of subscribers. There are also commercial networks similar to those in North

Although limiting itself to complaints against government, CBC *Ombudsman* promises much more than case-by-case, ad hoc problem solving. According to Robert Cooper (1975: 10; emphasis in original):

CBC Ombudsman will try to be a "wired" public interest law firm. It can *dramatize* experience—in particular institutionalized grievance—in a manner that is almost not available to any other kind of lawyering; it can *sensitize* us to injustice—and thus *cultivate* consciousness and help to build a constituency of conscience; it can gain *access* to the highest link of decision making and thus pierce the government veils that isolate and insulate the government from the aggrieved; it can attempt to *redress* wrongs—not only in terms of the *aggrieved* individual, but in terms of the common weal—the public interest. And ultimately, therefore, it can hope to reform the law—if not the bureaucracy—in the service of the people.

Cooper's experiment has been quite successful. In its first season (January-May, 1974), *Ombudsman* received over five thousand letters and closed over one thousand cases.⁵¹ During the second season, it received an average of 350 letters each week. There are no published accounts of how the program processes complaints. However, an unpublished paper (Friedmann, 1976: 21) links a sudden increase in the volume of complaints to official provincial ombudsmen, which occurred in 1974, to the CBC series. "Taking all factors into account, it appears highly likely that [the formation of CBC *Ombudsman*] accounts predominantly for the increased rates of petitioning."

Call for Action (CFA) developed from an attempt to upgrade and redirect middle-class (especially women's group) volunteerism (Quinn, 1971: E7; Dunning, 1978). Begun in 1963 by Ellen Sulzberger Straus, *CFA* originated on New York's WMCA-FM Radio. It is now an independent, non-profit information, referral, and advocacy service with headquarters in Washington, D.C. Until 1974, *CFA's* expansion to other cities was supported by grants from the National Urban Coalition (Carmody, 1969) and the National Center for Voluntary Action (Call for Action, Inc., 1978: 1). The number of affiliates has varied, but *CFA* is carried on a contract basis by more than 40 radio and television stations. Staffed by trained volunteers, it relies on direct telephone calls to recruit clients. The host station provides office space and broadcasts occasional short promotions listing the *CFA* telephone number and the hours the

America. The socialist VARA network has reportedly established a foundation to guarantee financial support and independence for its ombudsman.

⁵¹ Letter from Robert Cooper, CBC *Ombudsman* (23 January 1975). See also Cooper and Castner (1978: 314). Cooper does not explain what he means by "closing" a case. It probably indicates a successful referral which results in a solution satisfactory to the complainant.

service accepts calls. The number of spots and hours are restricted to reduce caseloads.

CFA is essentially a referral service. The volunteer staff spends a good deal of time compiling lists and directories of community resources (cf. Call for Action, Inc., 1972). Callers are first asked to try to solve their own problems, but volunteers intervene to mediate solutions if necessary (Mattice, 1976: 31). *CFA* staffers also try to provide personal reassurance and sympathy, a service they feel is greatly desired by callers (Mattice, 1976: 60). Even more than most newspaper action lines, *CFA* emphasizes maintaining good relations with its network of contacts, and has developed an elaborate set of testimonials and other reinforcements for helpful respondents. Most *CFA* branches maintain a low profile in the community, but the national office has experimented with a number of notable innovations in public service broadcasting. WMCA Radio has, for instance, supported test case litigation on the subject of reapportionment (*WMCA v. Lomenzo*, 377 U.S. 633, 1964). *CFA* also sponsors "Ask the Expert," an open line program which invites listeners to ask advice of lawyers and other professionals (Goldstein, 1976).

Unlike newspaper action lines, *CFA* does use complaints to provide intelligence on community problems. Its branches devote a great deal of time to developing statistics on complaints, reports of which are forwarded to the national office (Carmody, 1969: 47):

[T]he point of the program is not simply to give guidance to individuals strangled by the red tape of city government. The radio station must then act on what it has learned from the people who have called in and use its editorial power on the air to crusade against any agency that has consistently been the cause of citizens' complaints.

In support of this commitment to action, *CFA* has joined with other public interest and lobbying organizations to process information about complaints. It recently conducted a national telephone survey of consumer grievances in association with Ralph Nader's Center for Study of Responsive Law (Best & Andreasen, 1977; Cerra, 1976b).

Action lines which are found in socialist countries appear to be the most aggressive. There they compensate in part for a lack of the type of consumer feedback one finds in a free market.⁵² In addition to the Dutch socialist action line that inspired

⁵² Ombudsman-like services are also found in Third World countries. Noorani (1977) describes an action line-like radio service in Senegal:

"Dissoo" is a word in Wolof, an African language. It means understanding and dialogue. . . . "Dissoo" is the Senegalese government's way of maintaining an open two-way communication line, so that both the officials and the people, especially in the rural areas, can together

CBC *Ombudsman*, lively action line-like services are found in Poland (Gellhorn, 1966: 302-307) and in the Soviet Union (Ramundo, 1965; Hopkins, 1970: 298, 302-07; Robertson, 1967). The authority of the Soviet press to recruit complaints is based on a theory of the relationship between the press and the state that is alien to the United States or Canada (cf. Hynds, 1975: 24-25; Siebert *et al.*, 1956: Ch. 4). As branches of the Communist Party, Soviet television, radio, and newspapers have an affirmative obligation to build a Communist society.

Politics aside, Soviet action lines function like those in North America. Russians regularly complain to the media by the hundreds of thousands. Many complaints are similar to those in the United States and Canada. A study of two Leningrad newspapers (Hopkins, 1970: 304-305) revealed that "[t]he bulk of complaints centered on consumer services—housing, public transport, services, and retail trade. These themes appeared in about half of all [43,227] letters received by *Leninogradskaya Pravda* in 1964 and in about 25 percent of those [30,568] sent to *Verchernii Leningrad*." Only about one in ten was published; most were simply referred to public agencies for action. Some (especially those that revealed inefficiency or laxity in achieving national economic and social goals) became the basis for exposés, in-depth investigations, and raids by teams of newsmen (Robertson, 1967).⁵³ Some raids extended across the country and involved hundreds of reporters and assistants who had unrestricted access to officials and to records and were able to operate without search warrants or threats of libel action.

shape the development of the country. . . . [It] uses a hook-up between a village and Radio Senegal studios. In the village, groups of people gather around the mobile radio equipment, awaiting their turn to give free expression to complaints and criticism of the government. . . . In the studios, government representatives wait to answer in plain and simple language, and in a direct and unambiguous manner. . . . It was like opening the floodgates. The officials were startled by what they heard and had a hard time answering the complaints.

An Indian action line runs each Sunday in *The Statesmen* of Delhi. An apparently very aggressive action line, "Kolbotek," has been broadcast for the past five years on Israeli television. Produced and directed by an attorney, Gideon Lev-Ary, "Kolbotek" is popular, attracting 1.4 million viewers each week. It appears to operate much like CBC "Ombudsman," except that the Israeli service places far greater emphasis on consumer complaints. For description of "Kolbotek" and its staff, see Siegel (1979). For a French example, see MacLauren (1977).

⁵³ For descriptions of the exploits of "raid brigades" in the Soviet press, see Ramundo (1965: 116), Hopkins (1970: 297-298), and Robertson (1967). See also Whitney (1978).

The Failure of the Adversary Mode

It is possible for the media to adopt an adversarial stance toward social injustice, but few newspapers do. There seem to be four factors that explain this phenomenon. The first of these, already discussed, is *lack of consumer demand*. Most inquiries to action lines do not even ask for assistance in resolving disputes. Even when disputes are submitted for action, users appear to be looking for more or less than an aggressive confrontation with the complaine. The column can satisfy complainants by appealing to their equally strong desires for personal recognition or community solidarity. These needs can be satisfied without the adoption of an adversary strategy designed to bludgeon complainees into settling disputes.

Second, *economic factors* are often criticized for suppressing adversariness in the newspaper industry. The usual charge is that aggressive reporting is discouraged because owners, business managers, and editors are easily cowed by advertisers. This is a sore point for some journalists (see Arnold, 1968; Wilt, 1970; Margolius, 1973; Levine, 1975). "Consumer journalism," Wilt (1970: 24) complains, "has one inherent difficulty; . . . the opposite of consumer is seller." This economic dependence is alleged to introduce "bias" into news reporting.

The action line literature does reveal that the economic aspect of the news business has an influence on the way complaints are processed, but this influence is not always negative. Adversariness may be suppressed in small towns and suburbs, where editors may see themselves as custodians, not adversaries, of powerful community interests (see Ghiglione, 1973: 3; Beal, 1973: 116). Reports from larger communities indicate that angry advertisers have sometimes punished newspapers for broad *investigative reports* focusing on their industry. A costly advertising boycott of the Gainesville *Sun*, described by Horton (1972: 19), although occasioned by a complaint to the action line, was actually in retaliation for an investigative series on shoddy warranty practices in the local mobile home industry. Advertiser boycotts and threats of libel suits have reportedly curtailed aggressive consumer reporting in several other cities (Waters, 1975). Nearly two-thirds of the action lines in Beal's (1973: 107-108) survey reported receiving complaints from advertisers, professionals, and officials who had been mentioned in the columns.

Nevertheless, equally persuasive evidence suggests that the threat of advertiser retaliation has had little effect in determining the characteristic cooperative style adopted by most action lines. Many action lines do use complainee names in some form: nearly half (48.6 percent) of the 222 newspapers in Beal's (1973: 114, Table 34) survey "always or usually" identified complainees; less than a third (32 percent) "seldom or never." If businesses and political leaders had really felt threatened by seeing their names appear in these columns, one would have expected a noticeable outcry. There appear to be three principal reasons why the regular use of names has not led to economic retaliation:

1. A certain amount of adverse publicity—especially in a highly competitive market—can be advantageous to business. In a strictly managerial sense, a complaint referral service can serve a useful purpose in identifying problems in the quality of services provided to consumers. These problems can be more easily corrected if they are brought to the direct attention of company executives. A newspaper may receive an angry call from a business which has been mentioned in an Action column, but occasional references are less likely to stir up trade associations and other commercial groups.⁵⁴

2. An examination of complaints received (rather than those printed) by action lines suggests that major advertisers (for instance, large retail merchants, grocery chains, and auto dealers) are not frequent targets. Using a classification suggested by Macaulay (1963), Table 3 reports a sample of nongovernmental disputes submitted to one action line in Buffalo, New York.

⁵⁴ The reluctance to use names may be a reaction to the unexpectedly severe impact of consumer "exit" on businesses. There is little evidence that the proponents of action lines had much of an idea about how such services might really work. Not surprisingly, some seem to have been unprepared for the consequences of printing adverse information. From one perspective, the dramatic drops in sales that startled the Buffalo *Evening News* are unfair, but no more so than the losses from business gossip described by Macaulay (1963). The punishment inflicted on the complainee may exceed the minimum amount needed to assure redress and to deter future violations. Yet, rather than attempt to determine the practical and ethical limits of the publication sanction, these "horror stories" of defamed retailers may paralyze the will to use the "power of the press" to settle disputes. The Buffalo *Evening News*, for instance, at one time restricted the use of names to "two instances":

1. Where the group is very much in the public realm. Blue Cross, the utility companies, public service and charity groups, etc.
2. Where we are gunning for somebody. We do this on occasion where there is a consistent pattern of non-performance.

The *News* imposed this policy because "in most . . . cases, particularly commercial, mention of a group's name in our column carried a strong negative impact" (see Palen, 1972: 66).

Table 3. Non-Governmental Complaints Submitted to the Buffalo *Evening News*' Action Line

TYPE OF DISPUTE AND COMPLAINEE	SUBTOTALS	TOTAL (N = 60) (%)
A. PERSONAL (Relatives, Friends, Neighbors)	0	(0%)
B. CONTRACTUAL (60)		
1. Long-Term*	13	(21.7%)
a. Job	2	
b. Landlord/Tenant	2	
c. Utilities (Gas)	4	
d. Insurance	3	
(1) Medical	1	
(2) Automobile	2	
e. Bank/Loan Company	0	
f. Credit Company	2	
2. Short-Term	47	(78.3%)
a. Sales (Services)	13	(21.7%)
(1) Professional	4	
(2) Skilled	1	
(3) Mover/Carrier	4	
(4) Realtor	1	
(5) Other	3	
b. Sales (Goods)	34	(56.7%)
(1) Retail	19	
(2) Mail Order	10	
(3) Home Repair	1	
(4) Magazines	4	

* Relationships in which there is an expectation of a continued association.

NOTE: Medical = Blue Cross/Blue Shield

Professional = Doctors (3); Lawyers (1)

Skilled = Plumber (1)

Other = Hairdresser (1); Photographer (1); Restaurant (1).

Source: Palen (1972:18, Table 8)

All disputes arose from contractual relations; none came from among friends or within a family.⁵⁵ About one quarter (22 percent) of the complaints involved long-term contractual relations (e.g., employment, housing, or long-term debts). These are the sorts of relationships where one would expect alternative outlets for dispute resolution to have developed (Macaulay, 1963). Most (78 percent) involved one-shot, short-term sales of goods or services. Except for Sears, major local retailers did not appear in this sample. One explanation may be that these firms, most of which subscribe to the canons of the Better Business Bureau, have a vested interest in maintaining their reputation for good business practices (cf. Ross & Littlefield, 1978: 200). It may be a lot less costly for them to resolve most disputes in a way which satisfies their consumers than to risk the adverse publicity of media complaints.

Nearly all complainees were nonresident mail order houses, small or single-outlet enterprises (e.g., auto repair

⁵⁵ Mattice (1976: 52) reports the same pattern at four action lines in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

shops, dry cleaners, furniture and clothing sales stores), or large, regulated business monopolies like the utility companies or Blue Cross/Blue Shield.⁵⁶ None of these are major advertisers. They are, however, "easy marks" for the press: small businesses cannot easily retaliate against bad publicity; baiting the utility companies is a populist tradition; and nonresident mail order firms or magazine publishers are less vulnerable to the threat of a bad local press than are local businesses.

3. The relationship among newspapers and other powerful local institutions is one of interdependence. The press wants news stories and advertising, but politicians and businesses need publicity. "The Los Angeles *Times* and the Washington *Post* may tear apart a local retailer for his credit or warranty policies—but because the papers are the best way to reach the market, any businessman who withdraws his ads will be putting emotion over self-interest" (Levine, 1975: 45). The unhappy advertiser does not always have the option of switching to another newspaper; in many cities, there is only one newspaper. Television and radio, on the other hand, appear to be far more vulnerable to advertiser pressure than newspapers are, at least where there is competition among stations and a firm can switch from one to another with only marginal loss in audience impact (cf. Waters, 1975). Yet, the impression one gets from reading scores of reports on media ombudsmen is that electronic action lines have been consistently more innovative, more aggressive, and more adversarial than those in newspapers.⁵⁷

Third, *organizational factors* may affect the level of adversariness exhibited by media ombudsmen. I have not attempted a comprehensive analysis of internal processes in news organizations which shape the character of the action line (cf. Breed, 1960). It is apparent, however, that there is a great deal about the job of being a reporter that is incompatible with the

⁵⁶ Horton's (1972: 15) analysis of 2,111 items published in the Gainesville *Sun* concurs. Only 37 percent of consumer complaints involved local merchants or services; the largest number (15.8 percent) involved nonresident mail-order firms and magazine subscriptions. The volume of complaints against interstate firms has generated at least one nationally syndicated, weekly action line, A.E. Rowse's "Helpmate" (E&P, 1973). Rowse, a newspaperman and former director of Lyndon Johnson's Office of Consumer Affairs "[focuses] on widely distributed products and services . . . select[ed] from representative complaints and inquiries from client newspapers" (Mattice, 1976: 43). He is also reported to work closely with the National Better Business Bureau. Another national referral service, "Buyer's Billboard," is offered by United Press International.

⁵⁷ This is apparent in the only study ever to compare electronic and print action lines (Mattice, 1976). The lack of reports about problems with advertisers is itself some evidence that newspaper action lines do not do very much to upset powerful local economic interests.

adversarial mode of problem-solving. Five organizational factors seem to have the greatest effect on determining the styles of complaint processing adopted by media ombudsmen.

1. Recruitment practices or policies may attract less adversarial reporters. Most reporters assigned to the column come from traditional newspaper roles. Many of these people are either junior employees who can be easily spared or experienced reporters who are chosen because of their knowledge of community resources and their personal contacts. Although younger people may be more likely to be attracted to the adversarial style, they are also more likely to be closely supervised by senior editors who are not. Experienced action line reporters, on the other hand, may be quite effective in managing complaint referrals, but they are not likely to adopt an abrasive style that might antagonize their contacts.

Recruiting ombudsmen from more traditional media roles introduces a set of attitudes that may be antithetical to an activist conception of the action line. For instance, Palen (1972: 15-16) found these attitudes among the staff of one metropolitan daily:

[The staff] tends to see red tape as human error rather than institutional malaise. The problem is not with the defects of the Internal Revenue Service or the City Marshall's Office as *institutions*, but with the secretary on the fifth floor of the Federal Building who has had a bad night, has a headache and has not gotten around to solving the complainant's case. If one can get to that secretary (or her superiors), the problem is solved by lubricating the machinery in the right places, unsticking the logjam. . . . This attitude . . . does facilitate the solution of individual problems . . . , but it also affects the way problems are solved. This newspaper is reinforcing, rather than attempting to change, the apparatus of local government and business institutions.

2. Because of the role conflicts which they arouse, action lines also have a generally low status within media organizations. According to Collins (1969: 27; see also Levine, 1975: 51):

[Reporters] aren't enchanted with the idea of helping readers. They do not want to be social workers. Few want to be taken off the police beat, the county court beat, the rewrite desk. Their sources will atrophy if they work on the column.

3. The isolation of action line staffs encourages rivalries and makes communication within the newspaper difficult. DiJulio (1975: 88) reports that, rather than sharing their "tips" and "leads," action line reporters at the *Washington Star* hoard them. Yet, even when story suggestions are sent to the newsroom, they are frequently ignored.

4. It has also been argued that the personal values of newspaper executives (including senior editors and reporters) differ from those of the news staff. "Upper Media People," Bethell (1977: 36) declares, are not seriously committed to the

“mythic view of journalism” (Epstein, 1975: 21) that the press and government are truly adversaries. According to this theory, the people at the top of news organizations are more interested in retaining their social and political influence than in fulfilling their professional responsibilities.⁵⁸ For them, adversary reporting is merely one tool to be used when it is convenient or when other forms of influence fail. There is no available evidence that this motivation has a significant retarding effect on action lines. But news executives may at times join with business managers to suppress adversariness if it endangers their personal influence in the community.

5. The way most reporters customarily perform their tasks also affects the character of dispute processing services. Despite the popular mythology surrounding investigative journalism, reporters rarely prepare stories by stealthily rooting around in agency files or by aggressively confronting officials with probing, embarrassing questions. More often, they are handed stories by friendly insiders—“whistle-blowing” employees or executives who have some ulterior motive (usually related to office politics) for “leaking” a story (cf. Bethell, 1977; Epstein, 1975: 19-32). The usual way action lines process disputes represents another use for this existing system of informal contacts between reporters and business or government executives. Both the reporter and the executive are likely to want to maintain a mutually satisfying, long-term relationship. Therefore, neither is likely to assume an antagonistic stance in referring or responding to complaints (cf. E&P, 1966c: 10).

The combination of these organizational factors may explain in part the image of dispassionate and objective neutrality which several commentators have attributed to action lines. According to Mattice (1976: 40):

Action liners are profoundly concerned with their own images of objectivity because they believe that the true source of their power rests not in the ability to cause severe economic damage to complainers, but in the complainers' willingness to hear them out. The network-building so crucial to many action liners requires that [the column] not hinder its own access to members of its own audience.

The reporter's need to appear to be neutral in a dispute seems to reinforce the popularity of the letters-only policy for complaints. “With a letters-only policy,” Mattice (1976: 17-18) explains, “the action line can easily photocopy a record in each

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the “myth” of the adversary press, see Bethell (1977).

case or, if not equipped to render effective assistance, forward the letter to some other complaint manager, all without compromising its own image of objectivity with an incorrect interpretation of facts." Complainees, not surprisingly, are less hostile to a well-reasoned, dispassionate referral than to an uninformed, aggressive exposé of their bad practices.

On the other hand, there is little evidence that a cooperative style and a letters-only policy result in significantly better representation of complainants. Indeed, action lines "expend little effort establishing facts as foundations for legal conclusions," seldom analyze patterns in complaints, and rarely mediate solutions (Mattice, 1976: 52). "Despite their blanket invitations to the public to present them with any kind of complaint, [they] steer clear of such problems as whether a home improvement contractor did indeed botch that \$5000 kitchen remodeling job" (Cerra, 1976a: 31). A complainant's letter legitimizes the ombudsman's intervention in the dispute, but it is not a license to act as a judge of the validity of the complaint. The action line reporter even attempts to avoid making judgments about the business and bureaucratic practices that may be the true cause of the dispute. Instead, a few letters are selected for print because they are informative and because they maintain the image of the press as the friend and ally of "the little guy." But the cooperative action line is neither a forum for settling disputes, nor an ally of the disadvantaged; it is primarily a complaint referral service.

Fourth, *ideological factors* are of some importance in explaining differences among media ombudsmen. Throughout the literature there is the recurring suggestion that the working values of journalists are hostile to the adversariness expected from action lines. The failure of action line reporters to behave like investigative reporters may be, to a considerable degree, self-induced. Such an argument is, of course, only an hypothesis. A thorough study should reveal the informal norms that guide action line editors in selecting and assigning priorities to different classes of complaints and inquiries. A survey of these norms may reveal that newspaper reporters make timid ombudsmen because they are not convinced that acting as an advocate for individual complainants is an appropriate role for the media. Four elements of what might be termed the reporter's "working philosophy" seem to inhibit the spread of the adversarial ideal. These are presented in descending order according to the amount of evidence mustered in support of each.

1. It is argued that newspaper intervention in disputes might cause unfair settlements. For instance, several action services in New York City refuse to accept complaints about delays in the delivery of routine government services, such as inspections for housing and sanitary code violations (Cerra, 1976a: 57). They argue that it is unfair to other citizens to force agencies to push routine complaints to the head of the queue.

2. Reporter attitudes toward the people who complain to action lines are contradictory. On the one hand, the usual function of the cooperative action line is to restore communication between *individuals* with problems and the *individuals* in large organizations with the power to solve them. At the same time, the inference I draw from the literature is that reporters do not really relish being ombudsmen if the job means merely processing large numbers of routine disputes for individuals. Their professional ideal is to become a "tribune" of an ideal class—"the people." This bias is revealed implicitly in the kinds of problems action lines prefer to print. Despite the apparent interests of readers and the actual ability of the services to solve problems, action lines favor complaints against government.

Some had hoped that complaints would become a supplementary source of information about "what's really bothering John Q. Public." But the flow of complaints is seldom analyzed to reveal fresh insights.⁵⁹ Perhaps this is so because the action line reporter thinks that he already knows what is bothering the "man in the street." The patterns revealed in complaints actually published seem to reflect the reporter's search for dramatic substantiation of his preconceptions of the nature and causes of social problems.

One can only infer the kinds of problems that attract the action line reporter. Some letters—for instance, the one that permits the newspaper to promote itself as a friend of the "little guy"—are important because they serve the commercial interests of the newspaper.⁶⁰ Others—for example, citizen complaints about government services—are justifiable because the legitimacy of taking an adversary stance toward government is well-established (cf. Siebert *et al.*, 1956: Chs. 2-3; Kristol, 1972: 48). A newspaper's relationship with business is more ambiguous. Despite the heritage of the muckrakers, the

⁵⁹ Mattice (1976: 55), for instance, reports that only 14 percent (16) of the 114 action lines in his sample regularly analyzed their files to detect patterns of chronic violations.

⁶⁰ The promotional benefits of action lines are a common theme in trade journals (see, e.g., E&P, 1966a; 1967g; 1970c; 1971b; 1971c).

idea that the press may have a social responsibility to be an adversary of business is comparatively recent (cf. Siebert *et al.*, 1956). Citizen complaints against government can be printed without risk because they fit traditional, ritual campaigns against "red tape" or corruption and incompetence in government. Chronic complaints that do not fit these conventional expectations may be shunted aside.

The second and third ideological restraints on adversariness are interrelated: the ways a newspaper can promote social change are constrained by conventional beliefs about the press' role in politics and in society and by professional norms. The notion that the press has an affirmative duty to "help individuals and communities adjust to change" (Hynds, 1975: 28), while often repeated, is interpreted in different ways. Traditional political theory (cf. Siebert *et al.*, 1956: Ch. 2) restricts the press to an indirect role in enhancing social justice. The reporter dramatizes individual social grievances not to obtain individual redress, but to inform the electorate and mobilize public opinion. Such publicity it is believed, stimulates the mobilization of interest group activity.

The press is careful to defend its legitimacy as an independent intervenor in this process. It does so in two ways: by appealing to philosophical and constitutional doctrine; and by defining organizational roles to induce reporters to behave in ways that reinforce this special political status. From this point of view, the character of the action line is shaped by the doctrines which define the preeminent organizational goals of the newspaper. These have little to do with the more limited goals of the action line, which may contradict the fundamental interests of the parent organization. Professional objectivity is necessary, not only to protect the reporter's network of contacts, but also to assure that the media can play a special meditative role between officials and the public. The organization and its decision-making processes must therefore be insulated from outside interference which may raise questions about the integrity of the press. This insularity may explain the unwillingness of newspapers to recruit action line reporters from outside the organization. An unintended consequence of this policy, however, is to discourage the recruitment of action line reporters with more activist opinions of the "power of the press." There does not appear to be a deliberate policy to censor action line reporters for excessive adversariness; rather the higher economic, bureaucratic, and ideological interests of

newspaper organizations demand that the great potential for disruption implicit in action lines be controlled.

The “Success” of the Cooperative Model

The evidence presented so far illustrates the economic, organizational, and ideological factors that inhibit the development of adversary action lines. The most common variety of action line—that which adopts the cooperative mode of dispute processing—still provides satisfactory services to tens of thousands of individuals each year. Why are action lines of this type so successful when they could easily have degenerated into “entertainment features”? Paradoxically, the status of newspapers as profit-making business firms seems partially to guarantee the quality of services delivered. Because newspaper action lines must justify their activity to the parent organization they must deliver a fair amount of the service promised. The cooperative mode of complaint processing represents a compromise among the constituencies that are truly important to the newspaper: powerful community interests (especially advertisers), readers, and staff reporters.

Powerful Community Interests

Cooperative action lines do not seem seriously to threaten local businesses or public officials. Bureaucrats and regulated industries are attacked, but they are skilled at defending themselves and are generally insensitive to the threat of publicity. Only a small part of the business community—retailers of services and products—are likely ever to be targets of complaints. Of these, newspapers have to be cautious in dealing with major advertisers, firms which could easily retaliate if their reputations in the community were threatened. But the passivity of action lines, their reluctance to use names, their stress on “objectivity,” their unwillingness to examine complaints systematically, and their subtle screening of problems readers submit, limit the threat to advertisers. So long as the newspaper emphasizes information and complaints against government and nonresident or marginal local businesses, the business community has little reason to object. In fact, because most complaints are privately referred, it can even provide a useful service as a substitute for an expensive internal complaint processing system.

Readers

From the perspective of newspaper owners, action lines are primarily circulation boosters. But circulation (like television

ratings) can be measured objectively by independent survey research firms, and is not easily fabricated. The press must therefore seriously try to produce a service that will attract and hold an audience. Action line reporters will also attempt to avoid the backlash one would expect if readers felt deceived or defrauded by the ombudsman. The cooperative model minimizes the chance that readers (and complainants) will be disillusioned. By processing large numbers of complaints, the columns satisfy a great many people, even if complainants are not always victorious in their disputes. By restricting access to middle-class consumers, they tend to serve a class of people that is less likely to be disappointed if the newspaper cannot equalize the balance of power between the "little guy" and large organizations. The middle class is apparently more interested in satisfying a need for individual recognition. It accepts the column's symbolic nod to the ideal of social equality because its need for personal recognition is equally, or more, important. Those with the greatest interest in increasing social equality—the economically disadvantaged—do not complain to newspapers at a high rate.

Reporters

The quality of the cooperative action line is also maintained by the professional integrity of newsmen. Reporters want to limit the influence of the business managers over editorial policy and to maintain an honest commitment to public service. As much as they can without endangering their carefully maintained networks of contacts and news sources, they are also under pressure to become aggressive defenders of the rights of the public. The cooperative model satisfies most of these goals: it permits (even encourages) a certain amount of relatively ritual adversariness; it solves large numbers of individual problems; it pleases the people who write; it entails little risk of angering important contacts.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous attempts have failed to address the complex picture of media ombudsmen generated by this review of the literature. Those who have approached action lines from the standpoint of communications theory (e.g., Singer, 1973; Hannigan, 1977) or social psychology (e.g., Wolkon & Moriwaki, 1973) agree that they play a therapeutic role by reducing loneliness and anomie and reinforcing community solidarity. Political scientists have ignored media ombudsmen, and their

comments on comparable media features are limited to the role of such features in increasing the political efficacy of individuals and groups (cf. Crittenden, 1971). But these are functions of all mass media; they are not special attributes of action lines.

Lawyers dismiss action lines as either too inconsistent (cf. Mattice cited in Levine, 1975: 49), or too dependent on the good will of complainers (Johnson *et al.*, 1977: 93) to have a significant impact on the resolution of grievances. Several journalists (e.g., Levine, 1975; Cerra, 1976a; Wilt, 1970) recognize the failure of ombudsmen to live up to their promise, but they are most concerned with the implications of this failure on the affirmative social responsibilities of the press (cf. Siebert *et al.*, 1965: Ch. 3). Most journalists conveniently attribute the gap between the dream and the reality of media ombudsmen to the philistinism of newspaper owners. But they ignore the limited opportunities that exist for aggressive ombudsmanship at most newspapers.

The history of action lines reflects the chance confluence of the interests of liberal journalists, newspaper owners and the relatively more advantaged members of mass society. In the mid-1960s, journalists saw action lines as one way to demonstrate the social responsibilities of the press. Newspaper owners promoted them because they seemed to attract readers. Readers used action lines because they implicitly promised to satisfy their fundamental needs for community solidarity, social equality, and personal recognition. The action line experiment seems to parallel those of other "moral entrepreneurs" during the mid-1960s. Activist lawyers, for instance, tried to mobilize the legal system and the legal profession in support of the social and economic aspirations of the disadvantaged.

This is a history which has lately received a good deal of critical reexamination. A recent article by David Trubek (1977) in the *Review* is representative. Liberal, capitalist societies, Trubek says (citing Roberto Unger, 1976), are formally committed to the ideals of egalitarianism, individual liberty, and community. They are at the same time polarized by great disparities in wealth and social class, and plagued by economic and social forces that disrupt communities and destroy individual self-respect. The contradiction between the values and the realities of life in western, industrial societies is reflected in the "perennial problem" (Trubek, 1977: 539) of the sociology of law: why doesn't the "law on the books" correspond to the "law in action"? The "gap" between official ideals and perceived social reality is a problem because it undermines the legitimacy of

the dominant social order and its institutions.

Paradoxically, Trubek (1977: 561) says, the existence of the “gap” creates incentives for “moral and political ‘entrepreneurs’” to “take advantage of the pressures of ideals and the legitimation needs of the system to effect changes that can further genuine equality, individuality and community.” Thus, a major theme of public life in a liberal state (for instance, in the United States and in Canada where action lines are so popular) is the struggle by reformers to “close the gap” between the way things are and the way they ought to be. The special, mediative role that law and lawyers try to play in this struggle is a motif in recent social research on law (cf. Scheingold, 1974). But the history of action lines suggests that lawyers have no monopoly in the “gap closing” business.⁶¹ The media also play an important role in calling attention to the gap, obviating the need and reducing the pressure for the invocation of formal authority.

Like public interest law, action lines did not develop as originally envisioned. They promised to be allies of the disadvantaged, but they are more often outlets for the routine grievances of the middle class. This is, in a sense, akin to Scheingold’s (1974) “myth of rights.” Some liberal journalists had hoped that, by nudging the press into a more adversary stance toward economic and bureaucratic exploitation, ombudsmen could help reform the practices of businesses and government agencies. Instead, action lines routinely process complaints with a respectful, fact-filled referral to well-placed acquaintances and senior executives. This practice reinforces, rather than threatens, traditional patterns of authority in organizations that are the target of complaints. The dominant cooperative style assures that action lines will have an effect only on the periphery of business and bureaucratic practice. They can have a salutary effect in relieving gross exploitation and injustice in a few individual cases which happen to come to their attention. But complaint referral services in the action line model are not likely to have much effect on the fundamental institutional sources of grievances.

Newspaper action lines are probably no worse than many other informal outlets for grievances. The commitment of such

⁶¹ The methodology of a literature survey does not permit one to develop a truly comprehensive picture of the ways in which the media have responded to the challenge of liberal social reform. However, treating this survey as a preliminary study does clarify one problem understated in Trubek’s somewhat optimistic assessment of the probabilities for progressive social change. It suggests that the problems moral entrepreneurs have in sustaining an organized effort may undermine their hopes for achieving social goals.

services to populist values, like the commitment of newspapers generally, is mainly rhetorical. But they do provide a fair measure of redress for certain chronic, middle-class complaints—computer billing errors, lost mail subscriptions, and the like. They also provide a reasonable amount of personal reinforcement and reassurance to people who feel alienated in a mass society. Because of this, they have become a commercial success in generating and maintaining a loyal audience for many newspapers. There is, on the other hand, little likelihood that a newspaper will be taken to task because it fails to close the “gap” between the promise and the reality of action lines. Middle-class complainants are apparently less interested in the promise of social equality than they are in personal recognition and in belonging to a meaningful community. For this reason, it is unlikely that newspaper action lines will ever, as Levine (1975: 51) claims, “revitalize our local institutions, reform the daily operations of business and government, even change the nature of democracy.” Instead, like the small claims courts described by Yngvesson and Hennessey (1975), the character of newspaper ombudsmen will merely reflect the existing distribution of advantages in a liberal, capitalist society. Action lines are not insignificant outlets for grievances, but in terms of promoting meaningful social change, they are simply redundant.

It may be that action lines actually diffuse pressure for necessary reforms in business and government. By engendering in their constituencies a misplaced confidence that media intervention can provide redress of the most common, or at least the most egregious, complaints, they may provide government and business with effective insulation. Newspaper action lines have, as far as I can tell, generated no significant law reforms, no shakeups in corporate boardrooms, no lasting mobilization or organization of complainants, and no permanent solution to the inadequate flow of information from one consumer to another. Only a few media ombudsmen, most notably CBC’s *Ombudsman, Call for Action*, and the Soviet “raid brigades,” seem to have escaped the dead end in which most North American newspaper action lines currently find themselves.

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