



South East European Network  
for Professionalization of Media

# MODELS OF MEDIA SELF-REGULATION

## EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

**Ilinka Todorovski**

### **OUR MEDIA:**

A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism,  
counter polarisation and promote dialogue



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### **Examples of Good Practice**

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# I.

# INTRODUCTION

While the ethical foundations of high-quality and socially responsible journalism are practically the same around the world, based on a few pillars such as fact-checking, accuracy, impartiality, fairness, independence, and accountability<sup>1</sup>, there are at least as many different ways of recording them, mechanisms of enforcement and oversight, and especially models of self-regulation, as there are media landscapes. The nature, scope, and detail of ethical documents (code, charter, guidelines, declaration, principles, handbook, etc.)<sup>2</sup> and even the names of the individuals who are the agents of self-regulation in media institutions vary, and this difference may also reflect the different nature of their work (News Ombudsman, Public Editor, Standard Editor, Readers Editor, Ethics Adviser).<sup>3</sup>

Before we look at some selected self-regulatory models and how they work in media practice, let's take a look at the standards and the purpose and tasks of self-regulation.

When it comes to purpose, the inextricable link between responsible journalism and public trust comes first. The organic link between the two concepts has been underlined in the post-COVID era by a new armed conflict of great international proportions, the Russo-Ukrainian war, accompanied by an equally fierce battle for information dominance.<sup>4</sup> In these circumstances, the trusting relationship between media and audiences has broken down in many places, and to overcome a reticent or even cynical view of media work, it is not enough to defend trust, it is necessary to build on new foundations. This is even more true in the digital media environment, which is characterized by fast-paced and competitive news production and a blurring of the line between quality and trustworthy journalistic content produced to the highest professional and ethical standards, and media content that is subordinated to political, propaganda, commercial, or other interests and is as indifferent

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1 See, e.g., the principles of international associations <https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists> or <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are>.

2 For an overview list of ethics documents by country, see <https://research.tuni.fi/ethicnet/country/>.

3 It was precisely because of these changes that the international association of news ombudsmen, founded in 1980 as the *Organization of Newspaper Ombudsmen* (ONO), was renamed first the *Organization of News Ombudsmen* and finally the *Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors*, <https://www.newsombudsmen.org/the-history-of-ono/>.

4 See e.g. <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>.

and unresistant to fake news, disinformation, abuse, and hate speech as unedited social media posts. The effects of such posts can also have real and measurable harmful consequences, as was amply demonstrated during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Suffice to say, there is no self-regulation without clear standards. Readers, listeners, viewers, and other users of media products need to know at every moment exactly what journalists and the media mean when they talk about credibility and when they provide assurances that they are upholding the highest ethical and professional standards. These can be either codes of international or national journalistic associations, or specifically written rules of a media organization. In the words of Tony Calvin, Standards and Practices Editor at the US radio network NPR: “Standards are what help us maintain the trust of our audiences, and trust is something we cannot afford to squander”.<sup>6</sup>

The objectives of self-regulatory mechanisms are, at a general level, to ensure that standards are respected and, at a practical level (especially in contrast to court proceedings), to respond quickly, flexibly, and professionally to the day-to-day dilemmas of media work. Self-regulation also means encouraging continuous journalistic reflection on professional rights and wrongs, correcting mistakes on an ongoing basis, and (self-)reacting to and curbing bad practices, but also encouraging journalists and media outlets to accept criticism and engage in dialogue with audiences. A well-functioning self-regulatory mechanism does not mean that new rules are imposed on journalists from outside or that there is blanket public scrutiny of their work, but rather that there is an opportunity for the critical judge of the journalistic product to be someone from within journalism itself, with experience, knowledge, and reputation, someone who is able to interpret the accepted ethical and professional standards to the public while at the same time demand, with the power of professional argument and authority, that journalists adhere to these standards. To put it simply: self-regulation means a constant search for a balance between journalists’ right to freedom of expression and professional autonomy, and their responsibility towards the profession and the public.<sup>7</sup>

In the subsequent sections we will present five models of media self-regulation, the BBC (United Kingdom), the NPR (United States), the EER (Estonia), The Guardian (United Kingdom), and RTV Slovenija (Slovenia).

The selection provides insights into different formalized self-regulatory practices with different histories and in different media landscapes, in Europe and beyond, in public service media and in private companies.

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5 Three years after the outbreak, the first analyses on the relationship between trust in social networks and public health are available; see <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0282076>.

6 <https://www.npr.org/about-npr/688414932/putting-principles-into-practice#howthehandbookwillevolve>.

7 See e.g. Alan Sunderland, *The role of a news ombudsman, An international perspective*, OSCE Report, 2020, <https://www.newsombudsmen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OSCE-REPORT.pdf>, Miklós Haraszti, *The merits of media self-regulation, The Media Self-Regulation Guidebook*, Vienna, 2008, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/d/31497.pdf>.

## II.

# MODEL OF SELF-REGULATION AT BBC, THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION<sup>8</sup>

One of the world's largest and best-known public service media, with a giant television, radio, digital, and other production output, and a global audience, the BBC also has some of the most detailed ethical and professional standards and one of the most formalized self-regulatory processes, with a well-defined and, in recent months, additionally detailed complaints framework.

We include the BBC's complex model in the review not because any of the solutions could easily be implemented in smaller editorial offices and media houses, but because of the major shifts that have taken place in less than three years when it comes to trust, impartiality, and self-regulation, changes which indicate possible internal and external incentives to address weaknesses more seriously and to build trust.

We highlight three changes: the first occurred in September 2020, when the new Director-General of the BBC, Tim Davie, within a month of his appointment, secured an amendment to the standards to restrict staff social media activity, which he considered to be a major risk to the appearance of impartiality, especially because of journalists speaking out on controversial public issues.<sup>9</sup> The second change came in October 2021, when the Serota Review into the BBC's lack of compliance with standards<sup>10</sup> was followed by

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8 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc>.

9 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/oct/29/bbc-journalists-virtue-signalling-social-media-crackdown>.

10 <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/reports/the-serota-review.pdf>.

the 10-point impartiality and editorial standards plan<sup>11</sup>. The third change has been ongoing since July 2022, when the UK media regulator Ofcom (Office of Communication) ordered the BBC to simplify its complaints procedure.<sup>12</sup> Davie commented on this request succinctly: “Trust is a core value of the BBC. If audiences want to raise a complaint, they must be dealt with swiftly, fairly and consistently and the process must be easy to understand.”<sup>13</sup>

The BBC receives an incredibly high number of complaints, around one million a year, or three thousand a day.<sup>14</sup> In the coverage of Prince Philip’s death last spring alone, they received 110,000.<sup>15</sup> Because of the exceptionally high number of complaints, the complaints framework is strictly formalized.<sup>16</sup> The complaints rules set out the mandatory elements of complaints, which must not exceed 1,000 words in writing, and the procedure for dealing with them: the complainant receives a reply from the person responsible within 10 days; if they are not satisfied, they may make further arguments within 20 days, and if they are not satisfied with the amended reply they may appeal within a further 20 days to the Executive Complaints Unit (ECU), which conducts an internal investigation and replies within 35 working days at the latest. This is the final self-regulatory level of complaint. The next option is to complain outside the BBC, to the national regulator Ofcom, which in delivering its assessment considers both the BBC’s own standards and its own Code (the Broadcasting Code).<sup>17</sup>

The pillar of the BBC’s self-regulation is the Editorial Guidelines, a complex document containing both ethical principles (the Code) and editorial guidelines for dealing with specific content dilemmas, as well as a code of conduct for content creators and contributors.<sup>18</sup> One notable feature is that the Editorial Guidelines apply to all content published by the BBC, whether produced by BBC staff or externally, and that they are binding on everyone who works with the BBC, not just journalists, and regardless of whether they are BBC employees or freelancers. Another feature is that the standards are constantly updated according to the demands of the times, and their meaning in specific contexts is publicly interpreted time and again. For example, the latest update of the guidelines is dated April 2022,<sup>19</sup> and the latest public interpretation relates to the elections to be held in spring 2024.<sup>20</sup>

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11 <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-59088800>.

12 <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-61893741>.

13 <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-63784019>.

14 [https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/sites/default/files/2023-03/BBC\\_Complaints\\_Framework.pdf](https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/sites/default/files/2023-03/BBC_Complaints_Framework.pdf).

15 <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-63784019>.

16 [https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/sites/default/files/2020-06/BBC\\_Complaints\\_Framework.pdf](https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/sites/default/files/2020-06/BBC_Complaints_Framework.pdf).

17 This has been the case since 2017, when the new Royal Charter, which underpins the BBC’s work and sets out the public service commitments of the public service broadcaster, came into force. The Royal Charter for 2017–2027 brought in an external regulator, Ofcom, to take control on behalf of the public, replacing the BBC Council (BBC Trust), which was abolished at the time.

18 <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines>.

19 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/children-young-people-working/>.

20 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/mayoralcandidates2024/>.

The public explanations are one of the consequences of Ofcom's assessment last year that the BBC's standards and complaints were difficult for audiences to navigate and that complex rules and lengthy procedures were undermining the fairness of the treatment.<sup>21</sup> As a direct consequence, the BBC's website is much clearer and more user-friendly, and even includes a video presentation of the complaints procedure.<sup>22</sup> A third consequence is that since March this year, the BBC has a Director of Editorial Complaints and Reviews tasked with overseeing the complaints framework and the management of the ECU, which is made up of 13 editorial policy advisers and seven independent researchers. This work has been entrusted to Peter Johnson, author of the 10-Point Plan for Impartiality, previously the long-serving director of BBC Northern Ireland, where one of his central tasks was to ensure exceptionally accurate and impartial reporting during a period of a quest for a new social consensus in this part of the UK.<sup>23</sup>

The Director of Editorial Complaints has taken over some of the self-regulatory duties previously carried out entirely by the Director of Editorial Policy and Standards, a post held for two decades, since November 2003, by David Jordan, who had previously, since 1988, been editor of various BBC political programmes and shows.<sup>24</sup> The Director of Editorial Policies and Standards is responsible for the development and implementation of editorial standards, advising content makers on standards, and advising the management. Both directors report to the director-general of the BBC, who is also responsible for implementing the decisions of the ECU. These decisions are published on the website as they are made.<sup>25</sup>

Such a formalized and team-oriented self-regulatory mechanism is unimaginable in smaller media organizations. But in the BBC's case it works, ensuring unified operation across 21,000 staff and the same standards for all content produced by all BBC units on all platforms watched by hundreds of millions of people not just in the UK but around the world.

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21 <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-61893741>.

22 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/complaints>.

23 <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/howeare/peter-johnston/>.

24 <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/howeare/david-jordan>.

25 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/recent-ecu>.



# III.

## MODEL OF SELF-REGULATION AT NPR, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO IN THE USA<sup>26</sup>

NPR is an independent, not-for-profit media organization that has integrated over 1,000 US traditional radio stations and a wide variety of digital and online platforms into a public radio network with a national and global presence that reaches tens of millions of listeners and online users every week with a combination of local, national, and global content.

In addition to the values of social and cultural diversity<sup>27</sup> and free and independent journalism<sup>28</sup>, the essential building blocks are the common ethical and programmatic standards that are binding on all content makers in all editorial offices of the NPR network members.

The standards are set down in the NPR Ethics Handbook<sup>29</sup> which is updated twice a year. The Standards and Practices Editor is responsible for collecting initiatives from journalists, editorial staff, and other employees, for consulting on and publishing amendments, and for implementing what is written. This post has been held since 2021 by Tony Cavin, who believes that standards are what distinguishes a serious news organization from the ever-louder cacophony of competing voices on the internet.<sup>30</sup>

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26 <https://www.npr.org/about/>.

27 <https://www.npr.org/diversity/>.

28 <https://www.npr.org/network/>.

29 <https://www.npr.org/ethics/>.

30 <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-extra/2021/11/02/1051256148/tony-cavin-will-be-nprs-managing-editor-for-standards-and-practices>.

NPR's self-regulatory mechanism has another common link, the Public Editor, who oversees responsible journalism and acts as a bridge between journalists and listeners. Although appointed by the Board of Directors, she has full autonomy to handle complaints and other audience responses, to investigate how individual programmes were created, to think through dilemmas, and to determine compliance with standards.<sup>31</sup>

Since 2020 NPR's public editor since has been Kelly McBride, who took up the role during the first pandemic lockdown and the widespread social, health and political crisis that followed the outbreak of COVID in the US and around the world. A distinctive feature of her mandate is "outsourcing": the renowned media ethicist is not an NPR employee like her five predecessors were, but works on a contract with the Poynter Institute, where she is employed.<sup>32</sup>

This model of self-regulation does not have a specific formal structure or prescribed procedure. The way in which the Public Editor operates is individualized, relying on the professional authority and personal style of the specific editor. Her essential task is to independently and professionally investigate and analyse the practical media dilemmas raised by the audience in their responses. Whereas the previous Public Editor, Elisabeth Jensen, also received responses on behalf of the public via Twitter and Facebook and maintained genuine contact with the audience through frequent appearances on live shows, the only way to reach Kelly McBride is via an online form. The new Public Editor continues to publish a weekly newsletter for subscribers and occasionally publishes an in-depth discussion in the form of a column.<sup>33</sup> The newsletter usually contains an article or analytical piece on at least one specific media dilemma, a selection of other interesting responses, and often a selection of praised content or examples of good practice within the NPR.<sup>34</sup>

As an interesting example of the efforts to ensure transparency in media operations, I would like to mention the Public Editor's proposal to revise a section of the Code that had provoked reactions from the audience (how should the editorial offices included in the network report on book publications authored by NPR staff). She published an article on the matter, explaining the existing rules and practice, the opinion of her predecessor in a similar case, her proposal, and the response of the Standards and Practices Editor.<sup>35</sup> Her articles, written in a simple, easy to read style, provide an interesting read on everyday media practice but can also be used as a training manual for journalists and editors.

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31 <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2016/12/14/505405614/about-the-public-editor>.

32 The Poynter Institute is one of the most influential American journalism schools and research institutions in the US, based in Florida (<https://www.poynter.org/>).

33 <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/>.

34 <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/1081726086/newsletter>.

35 <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2023/05/18/1176876443/when-npr-journalists-write-books>.

# IV.

## MODEL OF SELF-REGULATION AT EER, A PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA IN ESTONIA<sup>36</sup>

The Estonian national broadcaster is the only public service media organization in Estonia. It produces three television channels (ETV 1, ETV 2 and, since 2014, the Russian-language RTV+), five radio stations and several online news portals in Estonian, Russian and English. It is fully financed from the state budget and has no advertising in its programming.

The public media service was created in 2007 by the merger of public television and public radio through a special law (the Estonian Public Broadcasting Act), which, among other things, created the post of Ethics Adviser and set down the rules of conduct.<sup>37</sup>

The Ethics Adviser monitors compliance with professional and ethical standards and good journalistic practices, receives and handles complaints from the audience, and monitors the balance of content. The EER does not have its own code of ethics, but its creators are bound by the national Code of Ethics for the Estonian Press<sup>38</sup> adopted by the Estonian Press Council,<sup>39</sup> and by the Good Practices of Engagement (Hea Tava), which obliges state and public institutions to act cohesively, to provide quality information and to involve the public in civic affairs.<sup>40</sup>

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36 <https://news.err.ee/584393/about-err-news-staff-and-contacts>.

37 <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/509012014002/consolide>.

38 [https://www.asn.org.ee/english/code\\_of\\_ethics.html](https://www.asn.org.ee/english/code_of_ethics.html).

39 [https://www.asn.org.ee/english/in\\_general.html](https://www.asn.org.ee/english/in_general.html).

40 <https://riigikantselei.ee/kaasamise-hea-tava>.

The Ethics Adviser is appointed by the Management Board in agreement with the EER Council, which has nine members (five representatives of parliamentary parties and four independent experts). The Ethics Adviser's dismissal is only possible with the agreement of the Council, which, assuming that the Management Board and the Council are independent entities, provides a safeguard against pressure from one side or the other, or against ad hoc dismissal. The Ethics Adviser reports to the Council at least twice a year and makes proposals to the Management Board or the Council as and when necessary to remedy weaknesses and prevent errors. The Ethics Adviser's decisions and proposals to the Management Board are advisory in nature, but the Management Board is required to provide reasons for non-compliance with the decisions and proposals. All this is laid down in Article 31 of the above-mentioned law.

And what do things look like in practice? Tarmu Tammerk has been acting as Ethics Adviser since the establishment of this self-regulatory mechanism in 2007, a full 16 years, so his practice is the only one we know.<sup>41</sup> Tammerk was a journalist until 2005, when he became president of the Estonian Press Council, a self-regulatory body at the national level established in 1991.<sup>42</sup> As Ethics Adviser, he headed the international Organization of News Ombudsmen from 2014 to 2016.<sup>43</sup>

The complaints procedure is not precisely formulated and is relatively simple: the audience is advised to send their responses first to the editors, and only if they are not satisfied with the response to write to the Ethics Adviser – either by traditional mail or by email. The Ethics Adviser typically replies within ten days. Brief instructions are published online.<sup>44</sup> Anyone who is not satisfied with the Ethics Adviser's conduct can complain to the Estonian Press Council.<sup>45</sup>

Individual summaries of reactions and replies, and analyses of major cases, are made publicly available online (two publications in the first five months of 2023),<sup>46</sup> the most prominent cases are also available in English on the EER's English portal. The last such publication is from January this year and announces the Ethics Adviser's close monitoring of the quality of electoral content.<sup>47</sup> Tammerk frequently speaks about media dilemmas and findings in the public and on EER shows.

The Ethics Adviser of the Estonian Broadcasting Authority operates as a "one-man band", with administrative support only, following a practice that he himself has established, which makes this a visible, fast, efficient and flexible self-regulatory mechanism, the kind that would be appropriate for all smaller media organizations with a manageable number of complaints.

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41 [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000190810\\_hrv](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000190810_hrv), p. 100.

42 [http://vana.meedialiit.ee/pressinoukogu/engl\\_09\\_01\\_06.html](http://vana.meedialiit.ee/pressinoukogu/engl_09_01_06.html).

43 <https://news.err.ee/112535/public-broadcasting-ombudsman-elected-head-of-world-body>.

44 <https://info.err.ee/982635/kaebuse-esitamine>.

45 <https://meedialiit.ee/pressinoukogu/>.

46 <https://info.err.ee/k/kommentaariid>.

47 <https://news.err.ee/1608847339/tarmu-tammerk-err-s-coverage-of-the-2023-riigikogu-elections>.

## V.

# MODEL OF SELF-REGULATION AT THE GUARDIAN, A BRITISH DAILY NEWSPAPER<sup>48</sup>

The Guardian, a British daily newspaper, has been in circulation for two centuries and under this name since 1959. It is published by the Guardian Media Group, which is owned by Scott Trust Limited, which operates as a limited company but reinvests profits in journalism rather than sharing them with shareholders. The Guardian's readership is usually classified as left-wing, liberal in politics and opinion.<sup>49</sup>

In 1997, with the appointment of Ian Mays as Public Editor, The Guardian became the first British media organization to set up an internal mechanism of journalistic self-regulation.<sup>50</sup> In doing so, it took inspiration from the practice of the US ombudsmen, then in their heyday and now in decline.

Mays served in this role for ten years and left a strong personal mark, shaping the British public's perception of what, how, and why a media ombudsman does what they do, how they do it, and why. He shared his thoughts on reader comments, questions, and complaints through his regular Open Door column, in which he published over 300 columns.<sup>51</sup> This column has been retained by his successors to write about the reactions of the readership. In November 2019, Elisabeth Ribban, a high-profile media personality with a long history in journalism and editorial work,

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48 <https://www.theguardian.com/about>.

49 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Guardian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guardian).

50 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/22/why-should-newspapers-not-be-accountable>.

51 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/open-door>.

was appointed as the Guardian's fifth Public Editor.<sup>52</sup>

The internal ombudsman, as the post is also called, covers all The Guardian's global editions (UK, US, and Australian), as well as its sister newspapers The Observer and The Guardian Weekly.<sup>53</sup> It reports its findings on compliance with ethical and professional standards to the fund that owns the newspaper company, which also appoints the Public Editor.

The foundational documents for assessing the quality and validity of complaints are the Code, the Social Media Guidelines and The Guardian and Observer Style Guide. The Guardian has its own Editorial Code of Practice and Guidance, which sets out the essential ethical and professional rules in ten pages.<sup>54</sup> The stylistic rules are all-encompassing, covering not only grammatical and stylistic issues, but also advising on substantive dilemmas related to word choice and practical matters such as how to write acronyms or the use of doctoral titles.<sup>55</sup> While they are conservative about changing the Code, which was last updated in 2011, the Style Guide is regularly updated and amended – most recently in June 2022.<sup>56</sup> Since 2015, journalists and other staff are also bound by Social Media Guidelines.<sup>57</sup>

A special feature of The Guardian's self-regulatory mechanism is that the Public Editor also ensures that errors are corrected and ambiguities are clarified in a regular online Corrections and Clarifications section.<sup>58</sup>

Its unwritten mission is also to promote reflection and public debate on journalism and the media, and on the importance of quality and trust for the development of democracy. This Guardian policy is one of the reasons why the US edition earlier this year hired Margaret Sullivan, former Public Editor of the New York Times, as a columnist.<sup>59</sup> This influential newspaper, like so many other American media in recent times, gave up this form of self-regulation in 2017, saying that it was enough for readers to judge quality and adherence to standards and that journalists and editorial boards did not need additional watchdogs.<sup>60</sup> Sullivan was the first woman Public Editor at the New York Times and then its longest-serving Public Editor (2012–2016). At the recent conference of the Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors (ONO) held in London in early June, she attracted attention when she highlighted the public's growing distrust of the "mainstream" media and stressed that trusted journalism can save global democracy. Democracy, she said, depends on truth, which depends, at least in part, on good journalism.<sup>61</sup>

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52 <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/elisabethribbans>.

53 <https://www.theguardian.com/info/2013/sep/23/guardian-readers-editor>.

54 <https://www.theguardian.com/info/2015/aug/05/the-guardians-editorial-code>.

55 <https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a>.

56 <https://www.theguardian.com/info/series/guardian-and-observer-style-guide>.

57 [https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2022/05/10/GNM\\_social\\_media\\_guidelines.pdf](https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2022/05/10/GNM_social_media_guidelines.pdf).

58 <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/series/correctionsandclarifications>.

59 <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/margaret-sullivan>.

60 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/public-editor/liz-spayd-final-public-editor-column.html>;  
<https://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/31/new-york-times-public-editor-239000>.

61 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/02/media-must-be-more-open-to-save-democracy-says-former-standards-editor>.

## VI.

# MODEL OF SELF-REGULATION AT RTV SLOVENIJA, SLOVENIAN PUBLIC BROADCASTER<sup>62</sup>

The Slovenian public broadcaster – RTV Slovenija – started out as part of the Yugoslav broadcasting system JRT. After 1991, it was transformed into a public institution with a cultural, informational, and educational mission. Its tasks are described in a 2006 law and a 2022 amendment to the law – the latter only became operational in May 2023 due to a referendum and a Constitutional Court suspension.<sup>63</sup> RTV Slovenia comprises five television channels (two national, one parliamentary, two regional), eight radio stations, a news web portal, teletext, a large music production with a symphony orchestra and a big band, a transmission and telecommunications division, and a number of other media and production services.<sup>64</sup> It is financed mainly by the compulsory RTV licence fee and partly by advertising and other commercial revenues and co-financing.

RTV Slovenija got its first ethics and professional code, modelled on the BBC's editorial standards, in 2000 (Professional Criteria and Principles of Journalistic Ethics), which also provided for the establishment of an Ombudsperson as a guardian of standards.<sup>65</sup> Before the first Ombudsman was appointed in 2008, a set of rules was adopted which defined the Ombudsman's tasks in detail and shifted the focus of the Ombudsman's work from the implementation of

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62 <https://www.rtvlo.si/rtv>.

63 <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO4461>.

64 <https://www.rtvlo.si/rtv/kdo-smo>.

65 <https://www.rtvlo.si/rtv/pravila-o-poklicnih-standardih/599018>.

the standards to the handling of audience responses.<sup>66</sup> Amendments to the Professional Criteria and Principles of Journalistic Ethics in 2014, 2016, 2019, and 2021 made the obligation of staff to cooperate with the Ombudsman more explicit, the complaints framework became increasingly formalized: deadlines and methods for submitting and handling responses were defined, and the procedure for selecting the Ombudsman was laid down: he or she is appointed for a five-year term by the Director General of RTV Slovenija following a public call for applications and confirmation by the Programme Council.<sup>67</sup>

Viewers, listeners, readers, and other users can provide feedback on content and services by phone, post, online form, or email, and receive a reply within 21 days. If they are not satisfied, they can amend their response and ask for it to be reconsidered. If breaches are found, the Ombudsman proposes measures to remedy the shortcomings and prevent their recurrence. The Ombudsman produces a monthly report on the responses and findings, which is published online, and also reports to the Programme Council on particularly important cases.<sup>68</sup>

Marica Uršič Zupan, previously a journalist for a local newspaper, became the fourth Ombudsman in January 2022.<sup>69</sup>

The mechanism became fully operational during the term of the third Ombudsman, Ilinka Todorovska (2017–2021), who built mutual trust with content makers through ongoing contacts with journalists and editors, by providing advice in case of major dilemmas, and by conducting regular visits to editorial offices throughout the broadcasting system. Trust with audiences was built by responding to complaints in a timely manner, by appearing regularly in RTV Slovenija programmes, including live, by answering questions from listeners and viewers, by making public appearances and statements on media issues, and by organizing visits and events around Slovenia. She built her credibility in professional circles by providing in-depth coverage of challenging and complex issues and editorial guidance on specific areas, such as public health reporting during the COVID pandemic.<sup>70</sup> She launched a visible and transparent website, [www.rtvlo.si/varuh](http://www.rtvlo.si/varuh), which brings together all ethics documents, reports, guidelines, news and a description of the complaint procedure in one place. With a small team of two colleagues, she quickly handled audience complaints, responded promptly to deviations from ethical and professional standards, defended the content makers against unspecific and unreasoned attacks, published monthly reports regularly – by the 10th of the month – proposed systemic solutions, and spoke out publicly on media challenges.

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66 [Informator RTV 74/2007, 28.6.2007.](#)

67 Informator RTV 27/2014, 11/09/2014; [https://www.rtvlo.si/files/varuhinja/2016\\_12\\_05-pravilnik\\_o\\_delovanju\\_varuha\\_pravic.pdf](https://www.rtvlo.si/files/varuhinja/2016_12_05-pravilnik_o_delovanju_varuha_pravic.pdf); [https://img.rtvlo.si/\\_files/2021/12/07/46\\_384780799070699538\\_pravilnik-o-delovanju-varuha-2021.pdf](https://img.rtvlo.si/_files/2021/12/07/46_384780799070699538_pravilnik-o-delovanju-varuha-2021.pdf).

68 <https://www.rtvlo.si/varuh/porocila>.

69 <https://www.rtvlo.si/varuh/o-varuhinji>.

70 <https://www.rtvlo.si/varuh/mnenja-in-priporocila/kako-porocati-o-cepivih-proti-covidu-19/603058>, <https://www.rtvlo.si/varuh/mnenja-in-priporocila/pogovorimo-se-o-covidu-in-vlogi-rtv/596457>, <https://www.rtvlo.si/varuh/mnenja-in-priporocila/o-javnem-zdravju-se-posebej-odgovorno/591077>.



Such a small and agile mechanism, working as a hybrid between formal and informal approaches, can be useful for both small and large media organizations. However, its essential feature is the individualized approach of the Ombudsman, which can be either a strength or a weakness, depending on who performs the role of Ombudsman and their method of work.

This has been demonstrated in the current term with several examples of bad practice, where the Ombudsman took shortcuts (sending PR messages instead of the Ombudsman's replies), remained silent on matters that were of great public and professional interest, or poorly argued her opinions (for example, on journalistic solidarity with bullied colleagues), met only once in a year and a half with the journalists of the top-rated TV channel, and was practically invisible and inaudible not only in RTV Slovenija media channels and in the public sphere, but also at the meetings of the Programme Council.

A particular circumstance and risk factor for the Ombudsman's effective action is the extremely high number of audience reactions, including ones that are clearly an abuse of the instrument, which have occurred during this term due to the crisis of governance and the political takeover of the broadcaster. The lack of control over reactions has increased the time it takes for the audience to receive replies, and there have been unreasonably long delays in the publication of the monthly reports (the report for February 2023 was only published in early June 2023).<sup>71</sup>

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71 <https://www.rtv slo.si/varuh/aktualno>.

# TABLES

Table 1: **MEDIA SELF-REGULATION – GOOD PRACTICES**

Table 2: **CODES OF ETHICS – GOOD PRACTICES**

## MEDIA SELF-REGULATION – GOOD PRACTICES

	MECHANISM	HANDLING COMPLAINTS AND COMMUNICATING FINDINGS	WHO HANDLES THE APPOINTMENT, DISMISSAL
<b>BBC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two directors share responsibility: <b>the Director of Editorial Complaints and Reviews</b> and <b>the Director of Editorial Policy and Standards</b>.</li> <li>Formalized complaints framework</li> <li>Monitoring compliance with editorial standards, handling complaints, advising, reporting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public response: online form, traditional mail or email, telephone.</li> <li>A tiered approach: first the editor in charge, then the Executive Complaints Unit (ECU); the final stage is the external regulator Ofcom.</li> <li>Publication of ECU findings online.</li> <li>Regular online Corrections and Clarifications section.</li> </ul>	Director-General of the BBC.
<b>NPR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Editor on behalf of the public (<b>Public Editor</b>)</li> <li>Individualized, unstructured approach.</li> <li>Monitoring compliance with the Code, receiving feedback, and suggesting changes or improvements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact with the public: online form.</li> <li>An analysis of a selected example of the correct or incorrect application of the standards is published in an e-newsletter and occasionally in a column.</li> <li>Regular online Corrections section.</li> </ul>	Board of Directors.
<b>EER</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Ethics Adviser</b></li> <li>Informal, individualized approach.</li> <li>Monitoring practice, interpreting the Code, receiving complaints, proposing solutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing feedback: traditional mail or email.</li> <li>As a first step, it is advisable to contact the relevant editorial office, then the adviser; the last step is the Estonian Press Council.</li> <li>The adviser publishes the findings and major analyses in a column.</li> </ul>	Management Board in agreement with the EER Council.
<b>The Guardian</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Editor on behalf of the public (<b>Public Editor</b>)</li> <li>Informal, individualized approach.</li> <li>Assessing the quality of content and the validity of complaints, promoting debates on media and trust.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address for responses: email.</li> <li>Quality and compliance with standards are assessed on the basis of complaints or at their own initiative.</li> <li>Publishes a regular column in Open Door.</li> <li>Regular online section Corrections and Clarifications.</li> </ul>	The Scott Trust
<b>RTV Slovenia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Ombudsman for viewers' and listeners' rights</b></li> <li>Semi-formalized approach.</li> <li>Receiving feedback, handling complaints, communicating with audiences, reporting findings, recommending improvements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact with the audience: online form, traditional mail and e-mail, telephone.</li> <li>Ongoing responses, publication of monthly reports with opinions and recommendations, presentation of the findings to the Broadcasting Council, presentation in public appearances.</li> </ul>	Director-General at the proposal of the Council

## CODES OF ETHICS – GOOD PRACTICES

	TITLE, LINK, SIZE	CONTENT AND SPECIFIC FEATURES	HOW THE CODE IS KEPT UP-TO-DATE	WHO IS BOUND BY IT
<b>BBC</b>	<b>The BBC's Editorial Standards</b> <a href="https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines">https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines</a> 367 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Own editorial standards which are very detailed and extensive and include rules for social media, guidelines on mandatory consultation in specific cases, and stylistic recommendations.</li> <li>• Online publication of up-to-date interpretations of specific provisions in new contexts.</li> </ul>	Completely revised in 2005, subsequently updated as necessary and according to expert assessment, most recently in 2022.	It applies to all content broadcast on the BBC, whether it be own content or externally produced. The provisions for journalists, other groups of programme makers and all staff also apply to freelancers participating in current production.
<b>NPR</b>	<b>NPR Ethics Handbook</b> <a href="https://www.npr.org/ethics/">https://www.npr.org/ethics/</a> 66 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Own ethics handbook which focuses on principles and less so on rules. It also contains guidelines for the production of radio and web content.</li> <li>• The document includes the Public Editor's individual recommendations.</li> </ul>	Fully revised in 2012. Updated twice a year, with proposed changes decided by the Standard and Practice Editor.	It must be adhered to by all participants on all radio stations and platforms included in the nationwide network, and it is the basis for benchmarking and exchange of own content.
<b>EER</b>	<b>Avaliku Sõna Nõukogu</b> <a href="https://www.asn.org.ee/english/code_of_ethics.html">https://www.asn.org.ee/english/code_of_ethics.html</a> 3 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General national code for journalists' associations, without specifics for the public service media or broadcasting production.</li> </ul>	Unchanged since its adoption in 1997.	It defines the rules of honourable conduct for professional journalists.
<b>The Guardian</b>	<b>The Guardian's Editorial Code</b> <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/info/2015/aug/05/the-guardians-editorial-code">https://www.theguardian.com/info/2015/aug/05/the-guardians-editorial-code</a> 14 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Guardian Editorial Code.</li> <li>• Two complementary documents: guidelines for the use of social networks and a style guide.</li> </ul>	Fully revised in 2007.	The Editorial Code applies to all editions, print, online, international, US and Australian, as well as both sister newspapers (The Observer, The Guardian Weekly).
<b>RTV Slovenia</b>	<b>Professional criteria and principles of journalistic ethics</b> <a href="https://www.rtvsl.si/rtv/pravila-opaklicnih-standardih/599018">https://www.rtvsl.si/rtv/pravila-opaklicnih-standardih/599018</a> 57 pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Own editorial guidelines, partly useless due to obsolescence.</li> <li>• Complementary documents: guidelines for the use of social networks and programme standards setting out the general values of public service media.</li> </ul>	Unchanged since its adoption in 2000.	Most of it refers to journalists and journalistic work, and to a lesser extent to other content creators or employees. Compliance with the Code is included in journalists' employment contracts.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ilinka Todorovski**, born 1966, is a Slovenian journalist, editor and author with more than three decades' experience working in the media. She has spent most of her professional career at the Slovenian public broadcaster, RTV Slovenija, as a reporter, presenter, correspondent from Croatia, and editor of daily news programmes and debate talk shows. Between 2017 and 2022, she was the news ombudsperson at RTV Slovenija. She is an advocate of high-quality journalism based on professionalism, independence, transparency and self-regulation.

## MODELS OF MEDIA SELF-REGULATION

### Examples of Good Practice

This publication is the result of research undertaken as part of the project **“Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarisation and promote dialogue”**. The first research series was conducted in the thematic framework titled “critical analysis of ethics codes and self-regulation in the media in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey”.

The project **“Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarisation and promote dialogue”** is jointly implemented by nine media development organisations from the Western Balkans and Turkey with the financial support of the European Union. The coordinator of the three-year project is the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo. Partners in the project are the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana; Bianet in Istanbul; the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje; the Montenegro Media Institute in Podgorica; the Novi Sad School of Journalism; the Peace Institute in Ljubljana; the Press Council of Kosovo in Pristina; and the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM).