

THE NEWSPAPER OMBUDSMAN AND CONSUMER COMPLAINTS: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT

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This paper reports the results of a survey of 282 clients of *Sound Off*, a Canadian newspaper ombudsman. The data suggest that the newspaper ombudsman works best as a communication “facilitator” but is less effective as a dispute “mediator.” Furthermore, this service was found to be of least benefit to the socially advantaged who appear to use it to pursue more difficult problems. Nevertheless, 73 percent of the respondents indicated that they would use this “action line” service again if the need arose.

One of the most striking changes in North American society in the present century has been the increase in societal scale. One measure of this change has been suggested by Greer: the “increasing span of organizational networks in which men and machines are integrated for productive and distributive purposes” (1962: 41). Within the marketplace, the meaning of this change is that consumer goods are rarely produced locally, so that the consumer almost never deals directly with the manufacturer. Normally, the consumer must carry out commercial transactions with a maze of middlemen—distributors, wholesalers, agents, and retailers. When a product is defective, it is difficult to identify who is responsible for the problem. The individual is sent from point to point along the chain of distribution without receiving satisfaction anywhere.

Another dimension of the increase in societal scale has been the trend toward specialization. Particularly with the advent of a widespread computer-based technology, many manufactured items are simply too complex for the consumer to appraise intelligently or to repair in case of a breakdown. Sanford has appropriately observed that, as technology has become more complicated, the handyman, the fixit shop, and the do-it-yourself process have been all but eliminated (1970). For example, the average consumer cannot “tinker” with a printed circuit.

Thirdly, the normative relationship between buyer and seller has changed with the transition to a more urbanized large-scale society. In an earlier age, the system of social control in the

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marketplace, and in the community as a whole, tended to operate in favor of the buyer. Since the merchant and the artisan were often known personally, shoddy manufacture or delinquent service could significantly affect one's reputation. Today, this informal system of social control rarely operates. With the growth of mail-order businesses and large discount chains, transactions in the marketplace have become more impersonal. In some cases consumers may be dealing with an official such as the circulation manager, who exists only as a pseudonym for purposes of correspondence. In other cases, the merchant will send his accounts to a collection agency, making it difficult for the consumer to hold the seller accountable for his goods or services by withholding payment.

The changes outlined above have undoubtedly made it more difficult for the individual to redress a consumer grievance. Singer has summed up the problem of the citizen in the complex society in this way:

During a time of great change, as organizations proliferate and become more complex, linkages between individuals and [the] organizations upon which they depend become vague, less discernible; and there develops a puzzling contradiction, for, as our society becomes more rationalized in a technological-economic-and-social sense, much more that is important to the individual attempting to cope becomes enmeshed in a grey, ambiguous, difficult to define panoply of channels and procedures; people become less sure about their rights, their legitimacy in seeking them, their way of communicating their feelings, opinions, and needs to such institutions and, therefore, to their society. [1973:1]

I. CONSUMER GRIEVANCES AND COMPLAINTS

In dealing with consumer problems, a crucial distinction must be made between a grievance and a complaint. The term grievance denotes the individual's sense that he or relevant others have been wronged (Jennings, 1968:372). Given this perception of injustice, different responses are possible (see Sarat, 1976).

A consumer may take no remedial action, regarding the whole transaction as an instance of "bad luck." Psychologically, however, this response can generate affective byproducts such as anger, disesteem for the other, and guilt (Blumstein and Weinstein, 1969). This "inert" response becomes less practical, of course, if the other party in the transaction is actively seeking some additional performance by the consumer, for instance, payment for goods or services rendered.

Secondly, the aggrieved consumer can choose to "exit" from the problem situation (Hirschman, 1970) and seek more satisfactory terms or relationships. For example, in a landlord-tenant dispute over building maintenance, the tenant may simply choose to move elsewhere.

A third alternative is to undertake action "directed at correcting the imbalance between inputs and rewards" (Blumstein and Weinstein, 1969:408). Such demands for compensatory action frequently take the form of complaining, either to the source of the problem, or to a third party who has the power to investigate (a regulatory commission) or to adjudicate (a court). In Hirschman's terms, complaining involves giving "voice" to one's problems.

In recent years, a new type of third-party intervenor has arisen, commonly known as the "media ombudsman." Such ombudsmen have no legal power to rule in a consumer dispute, but they do know how to short-circuit bureaucratic procedures and facilitate communication between complainant and complaine. The particular media ombudsman to be considered here is the action line or newspaper ombudsman.

II. THE NEWSPAPER OMBUDSMAN

Since it originated in Houston in 1961, the newspaper ombudsman has become a popular feature of many daily newspapers in Canada and the United States.¹ As a complaint channel, its effectiveness rests primarily upon the expertise it develops in communicating with corporate organizations and in circumventing red tape. This advantage is buttressed by the power to sanction recalcitrant businesses and agencies through publishing sample cases, although many media ombudsmen find that complainees are more amenable to settlement if the sanction is not used.

The newspaper ombudsman can often deal effectively with complaints where the individual consumer cannot because it possesses superior resources, both of time and money. For example, the newspaper ombudsman is able to follow up difficult cases by long-distance telephone calls, something which many complainants cannot afford. This, in turn, allows the action columnist to circumvent organizational "gatekeepers" and deal directly with those officials possessing significant authority and discretionary power. Dealing with the top has been found to ensure a more rapid and favorable disposition of grievances. For example, Olson's study of grievance letters in Wisconsin found that letters sent directly to state agencies were given less time than those referred to the agency by the Governor's Office (1969). Similarly, Whitford and Kimball (1975:672) found that complaints referred by legislators to the Office of the Commissioner of Insurance of Wisconsin

1. Recently, however, growth seems to have slowed or ceased. From 1973 to 1975 the number of action lines in the U.S. and territories only increased by five from 310 to 315. In Canada, the increase over the same time period was one, from 8 to 9 (*Editor and Publisher International Yearbook*, 1973-75).

received "expedited consideration" by the insurance companies involved, and amicable settlements were more likely. In addition, media ombudsmen, unlike consumers, do not accept without question the definition of the situation offered by the organization and thus are not intimidated by corporate rules and policies.² In addition to solving consumer complaints, the newspaper ombudsman performs a socialization function, both because readers can learn from the published cases, and because the action columnist frequently discusses items of general interest to all consumers, such as new legislation regulating door-to-door sales.

Although there is a growing social science literature concerning government appointed ombudsmen (e.g., Rowat, 1965; Gellhorn, 1966; Peel, 1968), there have been relatively few published data on newspaper ombudsmen and their clients. Existing research includes Singer's (1973) study of mass feedback channels in a Canadian community,³ a report by Nelson and Storck (1974) on the way in which the rest of the newspaper staff perceive the action columnist, and a content analysis of three American action line columns (Bellay, 1970). Also pertinent are a report on the newspaper as a problem solver (Palen, 1972), and a forthcoming article on mass media complaint managers (Mattice, 1977).

The research project described below is, to our knowledge, the first comprehensive survey of the clients of a newspaper ombudsman service. The study had three main objectives: (1) to construct a sociodemographic profile of those who contact the newspaper ombudsman with a problem; (2) to discover what barriers were encountered and what other complaint channels were utilized prior to approaching this institution; and (3) to determine the consumers' views about the way the action columnist resolved complaints and their attitudes towards this service.

III. DATA COLLECTION

The focus of the present research is a Canadian newspaper ombudsman—*Sound Off*—carried in the *London Free Press*. The paper serves a metropolitan area of 286,000 in Middlesex County, as well as a considerable rural population throughout much of the rest of Western Ontario. *Sound Off* was the third action column to be established in Canada, and at the time the data were gathered it received approximately five thousand letters per year.

2. I am grateful to Michael Mattice for this point.

3. A mass feedback channel is a two-way communications linkage which makes it possible for the individual to participate in the process of opinion formation, to inquire, or to seek help (see Singer, 1973:21). Examples include the "open line" radio program, the letters to the editor column of the newspaper, and the action line service.

Complaints to *Sound Off* must be made in writing; telephone callers are counseled to follow up their calls with letters outlining the details of the complaint.⁴ Letters received by *Sound Off* are photocopied and sent with covering letters to the merchant, company, or agency involved (the complaineé). If the complaineé is unresponsive, the complaint is followed up by direct telephone calls to senior officials of the organization. There are no limits on the type of problems handled by *Sound Off*, except that private disputes between individuals (for example marital problems) are not dealt with.⁵ The data for this study are provided by a random sample of 282 Western Ontario residents who had made a written complaint to *Sound Off* between October 1970 and January 1971.⁶

The selection of the sample posed an initial methodological problem. One of the important policies of *Sound Off* is that the identities of correspondents are guarded; thus, to have surveyed complainants without their expressed permission would have represented a breach of trust on the part of the action columnist. To overcome this problem, all prospective respondents were sent a letter by the action columnist informing them that they were to be part of a sociological study and inviting those who did not wish to have their names released to contact him. Only three individuals reacted negatively to this letter. In fact, the final return rate was eighty percent of the 350 questionnaires mailed.⁷ The respondents were almost evenly divided between London and Middlesex County residents, indicating that the consumer problems discussed here are certainly not restricted to city dwellers.

The data were analyzed in cross tabulation form using a chi-square test of significance and Pearson's contingency coefficient (C) as a measure of strength of relationship.

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4. The sample, therefore, does not include telephone callers who requested information or referrals but did not file a written complaint. Statistical information is also available about clients of "Information London," a telephone information and referral service which generally serves a similar "informational" function. See Singer (1973).
 5. Some consumers, of course, use a "shotgun" approach to get action, and send complaint letters to a number of different agencies. However, Gaedeke (1972:53) reports that a great majority of the complaint agencies he surveyed indicated that "their disposition of complaints does not vary when they are the second or third recipient of a complaint." Similarly, *Sound Off* responds to all complaints, with the exception noted above.
 6. It is possible that the sampling method introduced a seasonal bias. However, it was thought that more precise information could be obtained on relatively recent problems. Future studies with more extensive resources should adopt a quarterly sampling strategy in order to overcome this possible bias.
 7. There are several possible reasons for this high return rate. First of all, the population being sampled may have been more inclined to be mail communicators, as evidenced by the fact that they wrote to *Sound Off* in the first place. Secondly, the letter from the action columnist probably gave the study a certain legitimacy in the eyes of potential respondents. Thirdly, use of postcard verification forms, reminder notices, and a second mailing of the questionnaire to those who did not reply initially helped to increase the return rate.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Social Profile of the Sample

A significant measure of the utility of a complaint channel is who uses it. If it only serves a social elite who already possess superior resources for redressing their grievances, then the newspaper ombudsman would appear to be somewhat redundant. If, on the other hand, it is also used by those who are generally less advantaged, and therefore in a poorer position to cope with consumer problems then it can claim a redistributive value. The composite profile of the action line client reported here is based upon the traditional measures of sex, age, family income, education, and occupational status.⁸

According to our data, females were overrepresented in the *Sound Off* clientele. Of our respondents, 51.8 percent were female and 40.8 percent were male.⁹ Even given the slight preponderance of females in the general population, females appear to be more likely to use the newspaper ombudsman than males. There are several possible ways of explaining this difference. The action columnists themselves suggest it is mainly a function of time; many women have more time than men to handle joint family problems (Edmonds, 1971:90). Then, too, women are generally involved in a wider range of consumer purchasing, although the male has traditionally handled more complex, expensive purchases such as motor vehicles. Finally, specialized women's periodicals have tended to stress consumer awareness much more than those directed towards men.

The newspaper ombudsman client is generally a young adult. The median age of respondents was thirty-six years, with over half (51.5 percent) under forty. Comparing the age distribution of *Sound Off* clients to that provided in census data (Table 1), it was found that those in the 20-29 age bracket were overrepresented, while those over sixty were noticeably underrepresented. This may reflect the greater consumer buying power of the young adult group, although it may also be an indication of the greater appeal of "consumerism" to the younger consumer.

8. The measure used was the Blishen index (1967), a Canadian index of occupational prestige somewhat similar to the American Hatt-North scale.

9. Another 7.4 percent gave no indication of gender. By way of comparison, in 1971 the sex ratio for Middlesex County was 96 males to 100 females; in London the ratio was 94 males to 100 females (*Census of Canada*, 1971).

TABLE 1
AGE OF *SOUND OFF* RESPONDENTS^a COMPARED
TO GENERAL POPULATION

Age	General Population		Sound Off Respondents
	London	Middlesex County ^b	
20-24	15.9%	11.5%	16.3%
25-29	12.7	10.2	17.1
30-34	10.0	9.6	10.6
35-39	9.3	9.4	9.4
40-44	9.3	9.6	6.9
45-49	9.6	10.0	11.4
50-54	7.9	8.7	9.8
55-59	6.8	7.6	7.4
60-64	5.4	6.7	2.5
65-69	4.4	6.0	4.5
70-74	3.4	4.4	2.5
75 and over	5.3	6.3	1.6
Totals	100.0% (N=141,590)	100.0% (N=34,815)	100.0% (N=245)

a. Excludes those 19 years and under. This group made up 4.6% of the total sample.

b. Excludes the City of London.
Source: *Census of Canada* (1971).

There are two ways in which socioeconomic variables (education, income, and occupational prestige) might affect action line usage. First, the higher status, better educated consumer may utilize the service less because he/she is more socially competent and, thus, better able to redress a grievance without turning to a media ombudsman. On the other hand, the use of a coping channel such as the newspaper ombudsman may itself be an indicator of social competence, in which case the socially advantaged would be overrepresented among *Sound Off* clients and the disadvantaged underrepresented.¹⁰

According to the present data, *Sound Off* respondents were somewhat better educated than the general population. Comparison of this clientele with census data in Table 2 indicates a definite overrepresentation of college graduates and an underrepresentation of those with only a primary school education. This gives some support to the second line of reasoning. Family income was a less reliable measure here, in part because of the lower rate of response to this question (11 percent). The largest single category of respondents (18.4 percent) came from the \$5000-6999 income

10. It should be noted that those who are socially disadvantaged may also be underrepresented among users of the newspaper ombudsman service for the simple reason that they are less able to purchase goods and services, especially luxury items and mail-order products.

TABLE 2
EDUCATION OF *SOUND OFF* RESPONDENTS COMPARED
TO GENERAL POPULATION

Education	General Population ^a		<i>Sound Off</i> Respondents
	London	Middlesex County ^b	
Primary or less	27.3%	38.7%	15.4%
Secondary	61.0	55.8	59.7
Some university	5.3	3.1	7.0
University graduate	6.4	2.4	11.7
Teacher's college	—	—	1.8
Commercial, nursing, secretarial	—	—	9.2
No response	—	—	2.2
Totals	100.0% (N = 144,270)	100.0% (N = 36,680)	100.0% (N = 273)

a. Population 5 years and older not attending school fulltime.

b. Excludes the City of London.

Source: *Census of Canada* (1971).

bracket, somewhat more than the 11.9 percent in this category in the 1971 census population of metropolitan London. When respondents were classified on the basis of occupational prestige, it was found that 25.9 percent were in the low, 27.3 percent in the middle, and 10.3 percent in the high status categories. Unfortunately, available resources did not allow a control group to be drawn from the community-at-large; thus, no accurate comparison with the general population could be made with respect to this variable.

One method of reaching more of the population of socially disadvantaged consumers who presently are not being fully served by the newspaper ombudsman would be to allow complaints to be made in person; composing a complaint letter may be an obstacle to such persons that it is not to the better educated, more socially competent consumer. Perhaps a storefront office, an innovation increasingly used by organizations ranging from banks to dental clinics, might also help to make this service both more visible and more accessible.¹¹

11. According to 1969 figures, nearly six of every seven households in Middlesex County (including London) received the *London Free Press* (*Canadian Audit Bureau of Circulation Report*, 1969). The use of alternative media to advertise the service, such as leaflets or billboards, might also be worthwhile in order to reach the remaining eleven percent.

B. Nature of the Grievances

As seen in Table 3, the largest percentage of those who wrote to *Sound Off* (25.2 percent) were aggrieved because they did not receive merchandise they had ordered. This reflects the significant growth of mail-order commerce in North America, especially the sale of nonessential items. One respondent, a forty-five-year-old occupational therapist, waited four months for a reply to her letter asking about magazines she had ordered. After the company finally responded that the magazines would be forthcoming shortly she sent two more letters, but two months later she still had not received the magazines. Similarly, another respondent reported that she had received a card announcing that the merchandise she had ordered would arrive in ten days, but that she actually received it three months later, and only after the newspaper ombudsman had intervened.

TABLE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF GRIEVANCES

Type of Grievance	Percentage
Failure to receive merchandise	25.2
Defective merchandise, repair work	22.0
Problems re social benefits, insurance	10.0
No refund given	8.5
Billing problems	6.7
Liability problems	5.0
Problems with government services	3.9
Real estate, housing problems	3.6
Other miscellaneous	11.9
No response	3.2
Total	100.0
	(N=282)

Another common complaint concerned defective merchandise or repair work. This illustrates well the dysfunctional aspects of what Toffler (1971:52) has called the “economics of impermanence”; it is more profitable to build inexpensive disposable goods that cannot be repaired since advancing technology tends to lower the cost of manufacture much more rapidly than the cost of repair.

The present data did not allow a breakdown of consumer problems by the nature of the product or service involved. However, there is considerable evidence that automobiles and major appliances are the leading categories of faulty merchandise. For example, a 1972 Canadian study of complaints received by six government and three nongovernment complaint offices found motor vehicles, appliances, and home furnishings to be high complaint subjects, especially with reference to repair and servicing (Godfrey and Edgecombe, 1972). Similarly, Gaedeke’s survey of

thirty-two state consumer protection agencies and fifteen voluntary consumer councils and associations in the United States revealed that the sales and servicing of new automobiles generated the most complaints for both types of agencies (1972:49). And a two-volume report by the Ontario Law Reform Commission on consumer warranties and guarantees singled out automobiles and color televisions for criticism (Louttit, 1972).

Other types of problems constituting over 5 percent of the total were: social benefit and insurance claims (8.5 percent), failure to give an expected refund or credit (8.5 percent), and billing problems, especially those related to computer errors (6.7 percent).

C. Prior Coping Efforts

A surprisingly high percentage of respondents (90.8 percent) made some attempt to cope with their problems by direct, two-party, negotiation with the complaine. It was only when these failed that they approached the newspaper ombudsman.

In addition to these two-party negotiations, over a quarter (27.3 percent) of the sample utilized some other third-party mechanism before turning to the newspaper ombudsman. As shown in Table 4, the source most frequently utilized was a lawyer; 5 percent of the total sample indicated that they had sought legal advice. A slightly smaller number of respondents attempted to go to a higher level of responsibility in the distribution process, for example, the head office of a delinquent company. Other secondary complaint channels varied from the union to the Chamber of Commerce.

Seeking help from these other secondary complaint channels was not related to socioeconomic background, a finding that would seem to contradict the conventional wisdom that the advantaged are more likely to use these third-party channels.¹² However, this group may instead have bypassed the newspaper ombudsman in the first place and gone directly to a lawyer or other formal mechanism, actions which the present research does not record.

D. Types of Complaine Responses

The 257 respondents who had first engaged in two-party negotiations were asked how the complaine had responded. As seen in Table 5, nearly a third (31.1 percent) of the respondents indicated that the complaine ignored them, mostly by failing to

12. For example, in both the Canadian and British samples surveyed by Friedmann (1974), respondents who indicated that they would employ a third-party channel (ombudsman, elected representative, government department) in case of a complaint were disproportionately drawn from the higher socioeconomic levels of the population and from those with a higher educational attainment.

TABLE 4
THIRD-PARTY CHANNELS UTILIZED BEFORE COMPLAINING
TO THE NEWSPAPER OMBUDSMAN

Third-Party Channel	Percentage of Total Third-Party Channel Citations
Legal assistance	17.50
Chamber of Commerce/ Better Business Bureau	13.75
Manufacturer	10.00
Head office	10.00
Government department/ agency	8.75
District (regional) office ^a	6.25
Insurance agent/adjuster	5.00
Other newspaper ombudsmen	3.75
Police	2.50
Member of Parliament	2.50
Union	2.50
Post Office	2.50
Employer	2.50
Doctor	1.25
Small Claims (Division) Court ^b	1.25
Other	6.25
No response	3.75
Total	100.00 (N=80)

a. Canadian businesses are often organized by district or region, this being an area encompassing several counties. Complaints about a local dealer/service outlet are sometimes taken one step higher in the distribution chain to the district office in hope of resolution.

b. Until 1971, the Small Claims Court in Ontario was known as Division Court and is still sometimes referred to by this name.

TABLE 5
RESPONSE BY COMPLAINEE WHEN FIRST CONTACTED
BY COMPLAINANT

Response	Percentage
No answer	31.1
Promised action	19.5
Denied liability/responsibility	16.3
Refused action/customer wrong	10.9
Gave "runaround"	7.8
Rebuffed, insulted	5.4
Other	5.4
No response	3.5
Total	100.0 (N=257)

reply to letters seeking information or action. In a fifth (19.5 percent) of the cases, the complaineer promised action but failed to perform. Another significant grouping of respondents (16.3 percent) was told that the complaineer was neither liable nor responsible and therefore would not acknowledge the complaint as legitimate. Closely allied to this were another 11 percent of the cases where respondents were informed that the complaineer would take no action and that they, the consumers, were in the wrong.

These responses were then divided into three categories: non-communicative, evasive, and hostile.

A *noncommunicative* response refers to a failure by the complaineer to acknowledge the consumer's inquiry. This technique is particularly frequent in mail-order transactions: a forty-nine-year-old secretary reported that the complaineer "refused to acknowledge my letter re delivery of the item or a refund."

An *evasive* response denotes action by the complaineer which seeks to "put off" the complainant. It refers to a situation where the complainant is either promised action that is never forthcoming, or is given the runaround. The function of this type of response is to "cool off" (Goffman, 1952) the complainant by an assurance that everything has been taken care of or by shifting the blame to someone else. A twenty-five-year-old widow, dependent upon mother's allowance checks, was told that the appropriate government agency would look into why these checks were not arriving, but "never did"; and a twenty-one-year-old secretary described how the clerks in the store where the defective merchandise had been purchased suggested that she contact the store manager but, like the Major in *Catch 22*, he was never in.

The complainant is given a *hostile* response when he is informed that he is wrong, that the claim is invalid, or that responsibility for the problem lies entirely with the consumer. In some cases, the consumer may be flatly rebuffed or insulted. A sixty-nine-year-old retired teacher, embroiled in a misunderstanding over the type of automobile ordered, indicated that the company "took their salesman's word and said I was mistaken." Another respondent, frustrated by garment damage at the cleaners, was told that the company did not "give a damn" what he did. Why this reaction on the part of the complaineer? One possibility is that the complainant has insulted the complaineer in the course of articulating the complaint and thus has generated a hostile response. Then, too, the complaineer may simply not be governed by the public relations dictum that the customer is always right. A third explanation is that, where the complaint is aggressively pursued, redress would involve a loss of face for the complaineer.

The *Sound Off* data show that 31.1 percent of those who contacted the complainee about their problem received noncommunicative responses, 27.2 percent evasive answers, and 32.7 percent hostile replies. When cross-tabulated with socioeconomic variables, notable differences were found, especially in relation to education. As shown in Table 6, those with post-secondary education were much more likely to have received a hostile response and least likely to have received a noncommunicative response. Somewhat similar results were found in relation to income and occupational status, although these relationships did not reach statistical significance. As shown in Table 7, those respondents with family incomes of \$11,000 and above were most likely to receive hostile responses, while those whose family income was less than \$5000 were least likely to receive this type of complainee response. Furthermore, Table 8 shows that those from the upper status category were far more likely than the other occupational prestige groups to receive hostile replies and far less likely to receive replies classified as "noncommunicative."

TABLE 6
VARIATION IN RESPONSE OF COMPLAINEE WITH
EDUCATION OF COMPLAINANT

<i>Response of Complainee</i>	<i>Education of Complainant</i>					No Response
	Primary	Some H.S.	H.S. Grad.	Post-Secondary	Other	
Noncommunicative	32.5%	28.1%	34.3%	26.5%	33.3%	100.0%
Evasive	30.0	32.8	24.3	24.5	24.3	—
Hostile	25.0	28.1	32.9	49.0	27.3	—
Other	7.5	6.2	7.1	—	6.1	—
No response	5.0	4.8	1.4	—	9.0	—
Totals	100.0% (N=40)	100.0% (N=64)	100.0% (N=70)	100.0% (N=49)	100.0% (N=33)	100.0% (N=1)

$$\chi^2 = 24.806 (0.001)$$

df = 6 (categories "other" and "no response" not included in analysis)

$$C = 0.3286$$

These differences may, in part, be a function of the influence of post-secondary education. On the one hand, those with a post-secondary education may articulate their complaints more effectively, thereby eliciting a hostile response from complainees who

TABLE 7
 VARIATION IN RESPONSE OF COMPLAINEE WITH
 INCOME OF COMPLAINANT

<i>Response of Complainee</i>	<i>Income of Complainant</i>				No Response
	<\$5000	5000- 8999	9000- 10,999	≥11,000	
Noncommuni- cative	33.3%	28.1%	40.6%	28.8%	31.0%
Evasive	27.1	33.7	28.1	22.0	17.3
Hostile	18.7	33.7	31.3	42.4	34.5
Other	12.5	2.2	—	5.1	10.3
No response	8.4	2.3	—	1.7	6.9
Totals	100.0% (N=48)	100.0% (N=89)	100.0% (N=32)	100.0% (N=59)	100.0% (N=29)

$x^2 = 6.740$

df = 6 (categories "other" and "no response" not included in analysis)

C = 0.1760

TABLE 8
 VARIATION IN RESPONSE OF COMPLAINEE WITH OCCUPATIONAL
 PRESTIGE OF COMPLAINANT

<i>Response of Complainee</i>	<i>Occupational Prestige of Complainant</i>					No Response
	Lower	Middle	Upper	Never Worked	Other	
Noncommuni- cative	30.1%	32.3%	19.2%	41.2%	31.5%	27.8%
Evasive	30.1	30.9	26.9	20.6	18.4	33.3
Hostile	32.9	32.3	53.9	26.5	28.9	22.2
Other	5.5	2.9	—	5.9	13.2	5.6
No response	1.4	1.6	—	5.9	7.9	11.1
Totals	100.0% (N=73)	100.0% (N=68)	100.0% (N=26)	100.1% (N=34)	100.0% (N=38)	100.0% (N=18)

$x^2 = 6.276$

df = 6 (categories "other" and "no response" not included in analysis)

C = 0.1788

feel some sense of threat. Yet, alternately, this may simply reflect the perception of the well-educated complainant, who demands and expects a satisfactory answer and is discontented with anything else. In either case, awareness of civil rights, familiarity with how bureaucracies operate, and ease in dealing with complex organizations, which result from several years at a post-secondary educational institution, probably influence the way in which a complaint is pursued and ultimately resolved. Considerably more research is needed on this point, however.

The decision to go to another third-party intervenor prior to approaching *Sound Off* appears to be related to the type of

response elicited when confronting the complaine. As indicated in Table 9, those who received a hostile response were much more likely to go to another source of possible assistance than were those who received evasive or noncommunicative responses. It may be that the hostile response stimulates the complainant to try a number of different channels of redress, especially when it is remembered that most of the other third-party intervenors are persons or institutions likely to be perceived as authority figures (see Table 4, *supra*).

TABLE 9

CONTACT WITH ANOTHER THIRD-PARTY COMPLAINT CHANNEL PRIOR TO APPROACHING *SOUND OFF*: BY RESPONSE OF COMPLAINEE IN INITIAL TWO-PARTY NEGOTIATIONS

<i>Contacted Another Channel</i>	<i>Response of Complainee in Initial Two-Party Negotiations</i>				
	Noncommuni- ative	Evasive	Hostile	Other	No Response
Yes	23.8%	24.2%	39.6%	21.4%	33.3%
No	76.2	74.3	60.2	78.6	55.5
No response	—	1.5	1.2	—	11.2
Totals	100.0% (N=80)	100.0% (N=70)	100.0% (N=84)	100.0% (N=14)	100.0% (N=9)

(N=257)

$$\chi^2 = 8.127 (.05)$$

df = 2 (categories "other" and "no response" not included in analysis)

$$C = 0.1843$$

E. Resolution of the Complaint

In ascertaining the outcome of a consumer complaint, two methodological approaches can be taken. The researcher can attempt to gather all pertinent details about the case and then make a judgment about whether the resolution was just or successful. Alternately, one can ask the complainants themselves whether the complaint was resolved to their satisfaction. In the present study, the latter method was utilized.¹³

As indicated in Table 10, *Sound Off* was helpful in resolving the problem in nearly half (46.5 percent) of the cases it handled. 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 prob-

13. A most worthwhile approach for future research in this area would be to compare complainants' perceptions of the success of resolution with those of a panel of judges. It is likely that the former would incorporate "therapeutic" elements in their evaluations which would be missing in the judgments of the latter.

lem. 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; in many of these cases, the complainee had not yet responded either to the respondent or to the newspaper ombudsman.

TABLE 10
COMPLAINT RESOLUTION

Resolution	Percentage
Cleared up problem completely	35.5
Partially cleared up problem	11.0
Did not help	24.5
Solved problem by oneself	3.9
Made problem worse	0.7
Don't know yet	23.0
No response	1.4
Total	100.0 (N=282)

TABLE 11
VARIATION IN COMPLAINT RESOLUTION WITH COMPLAINEE'S
INITIAL RESPONSE

Complaint Resolution	Complainee's Initial Response				
	Noncommunicative	Evasive	Hostile	Other	No Response
Helped	50.0%	42.9%	35.7%	42.7%	76.7%
Did not help	22.5	20.0	38.1	33.1	—
Don't know yet	23.8	24.3	23.8	21.6	33.3
Solved it oneself	2.5	10.0	2.4	—	—
No response	1.2	2.8	—	—	—
Totals	100.0% (N=80)	100.0% (N=70)	100.0% (N=84)	100.0% (N=14)	100.0% (N=9)

$\chi^2 = 13.104$ (0.05)

df = 6 (categories "other" and "no response" not included in analysis)

C = 0.2323

Nearly three quarters (72.7 percent) of the sample indicated that they would return to *Sound Off* again in the future if they had other consumer problems; less than a tenth (9.6 percent) said they would not. 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.¹⁴

The perceived resolution of the complaint varied significantly with the complainee's initial response to an attempt by the complainant to engage in two-party negotiations (see Table 11). The

14. Media ombudsmen may also be attractive because they are free, whereas formal legal channels are costly both in terms of time and money.

complainant was most likely to find *Sound Off* helpful where the complainees response was noncommunicative, and less likely where the complainees was hostile or evasive. This suggests that *Sound Off* can overcome problems of communication and mild opposition by the complainees, but not determined resistance.

When complaint resolution was cross-tabulated with socio-economic background of respondents, it was found that the socially advantaged were generally helped *least* by the newspaper ombudsman, while the middle income, middle status consumers were helped most. These results are reported in Table 12. Only 25.7 percent of those with post-secondary education indicated that they felt *Sound Off* had helped them with their problem, as compared with more than twice as many (53.7 percent) of those with some high school. Similarly, 36.9 percent of those in the highest income category (\$11,000 and above) said they were helped, as compared with 76.5 percent of those in the middle income category (\$9000-10,999). Finally, 31 percent of those in the high occupational status category indicated that they had been helped, as compared with 49.3 percent in the middle status and 44.3 percent of those in the low status categories. 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. Those who are more socially advantaged would appear to come to the newspaper ombudsman with problems that are less capable of solution. Having tried all the normal coping methods without success, they then turn to the action columnist as a last resort. In contrast, those less capable of pressing their own case suffer more from problems of communication. The newspaper ombudsman can redefine this clients problem in the eyes of the complainees, from the routine to the unique. Bypassing normal bureaucratic channels, the newspaper ombudsman is able to assure that the complaint will come to the attention of one who is in a position to order a rapid disposition.

As previously noted, however, the socially advantaged may also be less easily satisfied by any solution to their problems, including that which the action columnist is able to obtain. In Goffman's terms, they are less easily cooled out and more likely to demand full compensation.

TABLE 12
 COMPLAINANT'S SATISFACTION WITH *SOUND OFF*'S RESOLUTION OF COMPLAINT
 AS EXPLAINED BY SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF COMPLAINANT

Complaint Resolution	Education				Socioeconomic Background				Occupational Prestige								
	Primary	Some High School	High School Graduate	Post-Secondary	Other	NR	<5,000	5,000-9,000	9,000-11,000	>11,000	NR	Low	Middle	High	Never Worked	Other	NR
Helped	42.9%	53.7%	48.1%	25.7%	52.7%	—	51.8%	41.8%	76.5%	36.9%	38.7%	44.3%	49.3%	31.0%	58.3%	59.5%	15.8%
Not Helped	23.8	17.9	23.4	35.7	23.7	100.0%	29.6	22.4	25.9	35.4	25.8	22.8	16.9	31.0	22.2	33.3	47.4
Don't Know Yet	31.0	23.9	22.0	21.4	18.4	—	16.7	27.6	14.7	23.1	29.0	29.1	24.7	27.6	13.9	7.2	36.8
Solved it Oneself	—	3.0	6.5	5.4	2.6	—	—	6.1	2.9	3.1	6.5	2.5	6.5	6.9	5.6	—	—
No response	2.4	1.5	—	1.8	2.6	—	1.9	2.1	—	1.5	—	1.3	2.6	3.5	—	—	—
Total	100.1%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	N=42	N=67	N=77	N=56	N=38	N=2	N=54	N=98	N=34	N=65	N=31	N=79	N=77	N=29	N=36	N=42	N=19

$\chi^2 = 14.550$
 $df = 9$
 $C = .2387$

$\chi^2 = 23.3681(.01)$
 $df = 9$
 $C = .2932$

$\chi^2 = 8.659$
 $df = 9$
 $C = .1949$

a. categories "other" and "NR" not included in analysis

V. THE NEWSPAPER OMBUDSMAN AND THE POWER OF CONSUMERS

Does the newspaper ombudsman significantly influence the power of the buyer in the marketplace? In structural terms, the answer is probably "not much." Although the action column appears to be relatively successful in bridging communication gaps between complainant and complaine, it is less successful in cases where the complaint has developed into a dispute. Since the newspaper ombudsman lacks legal power to influence outcomes, all he can do is to act as an informal mediator. However, the media ombudsman can help to mobilize public opinion in support of legislation favorable to consumers. In rare instances, for example, the *W.M.C.A. v. Lomenzo* case (377 U.S. 633, 1964), the media can even take the lead in stimulating judicial reform. Generally, however, the newspaper ombudsman makes the existing system work more efficiently, rather than changing the basic structure of that system.

Power, however, also has a psychological dimension. As Neal and Rettig (1967:63) have observed, "one should neither assume that men who occupy positions of power feel powerful nor that men who lack power by objective criteria feel powerless." Although the newspaper ombudsman may not alter the balance of power in the marketplace, he may serve a therapeutic function by reducing feelings of consumer alienation. To test this we sought to measure the belief of our respondents that they did or did not control their political and economic environment (see Neal and Seeman, 1964).¹⁵ When power-powerlessness was correlated with complaint resolution, it was found that those who were helped by the newspaper ombudsman (either fully or partially) scored lower in powerlessness (mean score = 3.53) than did those who were not helped at all (mean score = 3.85). This compared with a mean score of 3.56 for those respondents who were still in "limbo" over the resolution of their problem. Suprisingly, those few who solved their own problem (11 respondents) scored highest of all (4.00).

TABLE 13
POWERLESSNESS SCORE AND COMPLAINT RESOLUTION

Complaint Resolution	Mean Powerlessness Score ^a
Helped	3.53
Not helped	3.85
Don't know yet	3.56
Solved problem myself	4.00

a. A high score means greater powerlessness

15. For an elaboration of the specific methods used here, see Hannigan (1972).

These results suggest that taking one's problem to a third party *and* receiving positive aid from this source can act to limit, if not reduce, feelings of alienation. Conversely, where one cannot rely upon the power of the third-party intervenor alienation appears to increase. This clearly contradicts Friedmann's (1974:59) empirically based conclusion that "experience with complaining has no apparent impact on attitudes." However, one must be cautious in assessing the value of this for consumer protection. Our results suggest that the newspaper ombudsman may be performing a useful therapeutic function for clients. However, in doing so it may be treating short-run symptoms rather than focusing on long-range solutions.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The present study has sought to provide information about those who use the newspaper ombudsman and their attitudes toward this third-party mechanism. A basic finding was that the newspaper ombudsman works best as a communication "facilitator," but less well as a dispute "mediator." Furthermore, it was found that the socially advantaged are least benefited by this institution, presumably because they use it to try to solve more difficult problems. Finally, it is notable that almost three-quarters of the sample of users thought the service sufficiently valuable that they would use it again.

However, a number of significant research questions remain to be answered about the role of media ombudsmen and other such mechanisms in the process of complaint resolution. For example, under what conditions do aggrieved consumers choose this third-party channel rather than another complaint channel? How do such factors as cost, access, and social appropriateness interact in influencing the consumer's decision of where to go for help (and, more basically, whether or not to give voice to their problems)? And, finally, as Friedmann's (1974) findings suggest, why are courts so low on the list of institutions to which citizens look to help in redressing grievances and obtaining justice?

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