Chapter 12
Social Inclusion and OmbudsOffice Websites in Canada

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ABSTRACT

The Internet and digital technology provide great potential for public sector organizations to broaden their scope of social inclusion and thereby better serve the populace. This is especially the case of the Ombudsman institution that exists to provide the public with an independent mechanism through which members of the public may seek redress of grievances of alleged administrative wrongdoings. However has the potential of what has been a reality in Canada been realized? This chapter takes a user’s approach to depict what users find when they go online to lodge complaints with OmbudsOffices, both federally and provincially in Canada. For the most part, Canadian OmbudsOffices have been relatively conservative by placing online information that is also found in printed format.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet and personal computer was accompanied with expectations for improvement in government, whether in terms of efficiency in the delivery of government services or enhancement of democratic accountability of political actors. Crucial to this line of thinking was the suggestion that social inclusion would be broadened because the new technology would make government more accessible to the public. However to what extent has reality met expectation? The Ombudsman provides a most interesting case study because this institution is charged directly with serving the public in respect to resolving grievances of alleged administrative wrongdoings. Sometimes called the “public defender”, the Ombudsman has had a long and proven tradition of being an independent intervener between administrators and members of the public, with an obligation to connect with and serve all sectors of society. In this context, we can see the possibilities for digital information and communications technology as a means to enhance the Ombudsman’s capacity to serve the public, but has the potential been realized?

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Our intent is to tackle this research question by examining Ombudsman websites in Canada from the perspective of social inclusion. Being a federation, Canada provides two levels of public sector for our consideration, that of the federal government centered in Ottawa plus the ten provincial governments and three territories (the territories do not share the same status of being full-fledged provinces). Moreover, our chosen case study is richly endowed by the presence of two main types of Ombudsman offices in terms of the scope of jurisdiction: the classical model with coverage for the whole public service and the specialized model for a specific administrative unit or service. The former is found in nine of the provinces (Prince Edward Island is an exception) as well as in Yukon Territory (Hyson 2009). By contrast, the central government does not have an all-purpose Ombudsman but possesses a number of specialty Ombudsman offices (Hyson 2011). Thus, in our later empirical discussion, we will present two sets of data: (1) an update of a previous examination of the websites of the ten provincial and territorial classical Ombudsman offices (Hyson 2010); and (2) an examination of the websites of eight federal specialty Ombudsman offices. Since Canadians have a reputation of being the world’s heaviest users of the Internet, it is appropriate to zero-in on Ombudsman websites. Our approach is to place ourselves in the position of the average person: what does he or she face when going online to express a grievance? Do the existing Ombudsman websites facilitate to the fullest the institution’s capacity to be a public defender? Does the OmbudsOffice make an effort to use modern digital technology to include social groupings that have traditionally been marginalized or excluded? (On a point of clarification, we will frequently use the term “OmbudsOffice” because the reality of the matter is that the typical modern Ombudsman incumbent works through an office of support staff.)

Prior to delving into our data, a brief description of the Ombudsman institution as found in Canada will be presented, to be followed by a comment on the use of digital information and communications technology by government. Discussion of these preliminary contextual factors will facilitate our later empirical assessment of Ombudsman websites.

The Ombudsman Institution

This is not the place to trace the evolution of the Ombudsman institution or to describe in exhaustive detail the Ombudsman’s role from its origins in Sweden through its spread around the globe including its arrival in Canada beginning in 1967. That journey of becoming a keystone of democratic administration as a public defender has been described many times elsewhere (see for example Gregory and Giddings 2000; Hyson 2009; Levine 2007; Reif 2002; Reif et al. 1993; and Rowat 1985). Rather, it suits our purpose in this forum only to mention the Ombudsman’s defining attributes as found in Canada in the early 21st century. We have already observed in passing the contrast between the all-purpose and the specialized OmbudsOffices, but this distinction in scope of jurisdiction is relatively minor. It is more significant to note the essence of the Ombudsman’s role, its mandated independence, and its decision-making procedures; after all, a new technology cannot be adopted willy-nilly but must be adapted to the structural dimensions of an existing public institution. The brief description that follows is based primarily on the original classical Ombudsman model.

In the most succinct terms, the Ombudsman’s role is that of a public defender in respect to the resolution of grievances of alleged administrative wrongdoings. What with the growth of the welfare state by the mid-20th century, with public administrators making more decisions directly impacting people’s lives, the propensity of grievances also increased. The Ombudsman institution was designed as a means to resolve quickly, inexpensively, and efficiently these grievances,
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