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Subject: Letter of Concern: The Ombudsman's Role in the Digital Era

Dear colleague Ombudsman,

It is likely that your attention is currently taken up by numerous complaints and investigations, and that your schedule for the coming months is already filling rapidly. Opportunities for international exchange are limited, while local engagement and specific contacts often demand our focus.

Nevertheless, I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the **role of the ombudsman in the digital era**. I raise this topic among our international community because, while the digital transformation affects some of us more directly than others, it is inevitably a challenge we will all encounter—whether working with the police, municipalities, or national governments. The questions surrounding digitalisation are fundamental to the people we serve, and I do not believe any of us can fully address them alone. They require specialist knowledge, time, and resources. Meanwhile, technology, government and society continue to evolve rapidly—and citizens, too, are starting to use artificial intelligence when submitting complaints, to name just one example.

That is why I believe we should explore this theme **collectively** and support one another. The ombudsperson's role is unique and often solitary, which makes peer dialogue even more valuable. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to exchange ideas on how our offices might position themselves regarding digitalisation—protecting individuals from potential harm, while also promoting technologies that enhance public service delivery.

In my own experience, citizens rarely complain about digitalisation as such. Rather, they complain about its manifestations: repetitive algorithmic checks or inaccurate responses from chatbots that the government fails to correct. These issues expose the deeper ethical questions of our time.

I am concerned that, as ombudspersons, we tend to respond reactively. Yet this domain may require a **more proactive and responsive approach**—an investment of time, money, and expertise now to prevent greater harm, or irreversible developments, in the future. Emerging technologies bring profound ethical implications that deserve broader discussion within our global ombudsman community. Ours is an institution that stands above vested interests, well placed to **facilitate reflective dialogue** and to guide safe experimentation, for example in **digital “sandboxes.”**

Across jurisdictions, legislators are creating new rules and supervisory bodies. Those rules and supervisors play an important role in safeguarding public values and digital human rights. But this raises a question: what is the **ombudsperson’s role** in relation to such regulators, as well as to civil rights movements, political actors, tech corporations, and smaller innovators guided by ideals? Should we as institutions collaborate, remain independent, act like quasi-judges, or adopt a more activist stance?

Traditionally, the ombudsperson is a last resort for complaints, maintaining a reflective function that contrasts with today’s fast-paced political debates. Yet digitalisation may be changing that landscape.

In the Netherlands, we observe that technology can have disempowering effects — distracting attention, impairing emotional regulation, and even weakening literacy. Public authorities can also struggle when their systems trust computers more than citizens, creating barriers to genuine human contact.

New digital technology shifts power structures. A government enabled to constantly monitor its citizens could, under certain conditions, drift towards authoritarianism, justified by efficiency or progress. To address such risks, I have invited several Dutch thinkers and ombudspersons to join a conversation on the matter.

As a follow up I propose developing shared **“Ombudsman Principles for Digital Dignity and Fairness (Amsterdam Principles)”** - a working framework that ombudspersons worldwide could adopt or refine. These principles would underline our collective commitment: to protect people from the excesses of digitalisation while promoting its benefits. A draft framework of these principles is enclosed for your consideration.

By integrating such principles into our practice, and by voicing them at institutional levels, we can — together with other oversight bodies — help identify and mitigate negative consequences of technology before they take hold. None of us holds all the answers, and there is much we can learn from one another. Scandinavian colleagues

may already be leading the way, while developments in Asia, from India to South Korea, unfold at remarkable speed. Understanding diverse experiences enriches our own perspective and sharpens our approach.

Beyond cross-cultural learning, we must also focus on practical tools we can apply in our own offices. Formulating shared baseline standards could be a meaningful first step. As **guardians of fairness** and controllers of power, ombudspersons everywhere share the mandate to ensure that authority respects human **dignity**. Digitalisation directly affects these power dynamics — and whether we respond or remain silent, our stance will shape the balance of power in the digital age.

I therefore invite you to join us, developing the principles further. Together with the help of **Digital Rights House Foundation** I started a consultation group to not only come up with the first draft of the principles but also to organise several upcoming consultation sessions, helping us find our collective position as ombudspersons.

I hope our collective efforts will inspire and strengthen your own office's approach to digitalisation during your tenure. Together, let us take the first step toward shaping an ombudsman framework for the digital era. You can send your input to me personally at munish@ombudsmanmetropool.nl. Thank you in advance for your thoughts and contributions.

Please find attached the draft **Ombudsman Principles for Digital Dignity and Fairness (Amsterdam Principles)**, to be discussed and refined.

With warm regards,



Munish Ramlal
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