The Formation of the National Press Council, Newspaper Publicity, Part II, December 1972

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Media Council Could Support Public Interest, Press Freedom

SOME PROFESSIONALS of the news media may be alarmed by the recent proposal made by a citizens task force that a national press council be established. We are not.

Far from being inimical to the freedom of the press—as some newspaper executives have contended for years—a public (as opposed to governmental) body charged with evaluating press performance and threats to free expression can be a further bulwark of freedom.

THE PROPOSAL CAME earlier this month from a task force of the Twentieth Century Fund, a non-profit research foundation, after 15 months of deliberation. The task force was headed by Lucy Wilson Benson, national president of the League of Women Voters, and included attorneys, public officials, educators, editors and broadcasters.

They suggested—and the Twentieth Century Fund is trying to bring about with money from a variety of foundations—the establishment in early 1973 of an independent national council. It would investigate citizen complaints against the media, and media complaints of threats to their freedom to gather and report the news.

THE NEWS MEDIA are not above criticism, anymore than any other institution is in our society. Supporters of the idea have been trying to have such a council established in the United States ever since a commission on press freedom led by Chancellor Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago recommended in 1947 an independent annual appraisal of press performance.

Most publishers and editors feared it would become a vehicle for pressure groups to narrow the press' freedom to convey information.

But the concept took root in Britain, which has had a national press council for about 18 years now, and to a lesser degree in a few local councils established in the United States in the past five years or so.

One of the pioneers in establishing local councils is Houston Waring, editor emeritus of the Littleton (Colo.) Independent, who reports that the periodic exchanges between community leaders and executives have helped enhance the paper's standing with its public.

However, Waring, a thoughtful and scholarly man, sees the processing of complaints as a relatively minor matter for such a council. He says its great potential, especially on a national level, is to alert the public to broad threats to its right to know, such as foreign ownership of U.S. information media, increasing monopolization, absorption of publishing and broadcasting firms into conglomerates involved in other kinds of businesses, etc.

IN BRITAIN, most observers agree that the council works for the good of the press and the public, although on the face of it the machinery seems cumbersome.

According to Noel Paul, secretary of the British Press Council, the body has been successful because it has confined its attentions to "ethical improprieties"—screening out the trivial or unsupported criticisms—and has avoided interfering in matters involving the expression of opinion. And when the council does find fault, its report is carried, as a moral if not a legal requirement, in the offending journal.

But Paul, like Waring, emphasizes the council's other role in support of freedom of the press, for he says one of its functions is "to keep a watchful eye on pending legislation which may involve interference with the performance of the press."

A NATIONAL press council such as proposed by the Twentieth Century Fund can work, first of all, if it has no connection with government (which would be antithetical to the First Amendment concept of freedom); if it is not beholden to any of the media; if its staff is knowledgeable about media problems and functioning; and if the council members who make the findings are of sufficient stature. Most important of all, it can work if there is a will among media and council members alike to make it work—in the public interest.

The objective that should be kept in mind at all times is that the American people be insured of the freest possible press. That is the best practical guarantee that they will keep the rest of their freedoms.
The Media Council Might Work

Members of the Twentieth Century Fund task force think that readers, listeners and viewers will have more confidence in national news media if an independent, non-political council is formed to hear complaints and publicize proved violations of fairness and accuracy.

The fund will establish such a council and start it in business next year.

We're inclined to agree with the idea. It is worth a try on the national level after several local and one statewide experiment (the latter in Minnesota). We have reservations about details, but we have enough confidence in the strength and flexibility of our profession to believe that it can only profit from informed criticism.

The Plain Dealer will not be directly involved, since the council's "targets" will be national news services and syndicates, news magazines, national dailies and broadcast networks—not local newspapers. But the PD carries the national services' product and would be directly affected by acceptance of the task force's recommendation for local and regional councils.

The task force sees the council idea as "the effort to make press freedom more secure by providing an independent forum for debate about media responsibility and performance, so that such debate need not take place in government hearing rooms or on the political campaign trail."

The national council also will be charged with defending the right to gather and report news, an equally valuable public service. The council will have no coercive powers except the right to make its findings public.

The task force, which included journalists, notes that, "The press of the United States is among the best in the world and still improving, but it fails to meet some of the standards of its critics, among them journalists."

The report hints that the council may not be warmly received, and it is dead right. A poll of the American Society of Newspaper Editors came out 3-1 against a council founded by the ASNE and 4-1 against one started by anybody else.

The poll was taken by an ethics committee headed by William B. Dickinson, executive editor of the Philadelphia Bulletin. Dickinson, who favors the council himself, summed up the opposition this way: "They just don't want anybody to be messing around with their ethics."

But there's not exactly any way to avoid that anymore and we'd rather see a responsible council do it than nonprofessional and highly motivated critics such as the vice president.
Interesting Experiment

Plans for creating a press council to monitor the performance of national broadcast and print media have, of course, stirred controversy. Many editors and broadcasters are opposed, or at least distrustful. They note that the press is already under much pressure and a press council, though begun in innocence, might eventually foster government control of the news.

These concerns are understandable. The press, as purveyor of information for a free society, must guard its liberty. At the same time, however, the mass media need to experiment with new ways in which their performance as a major social institution can be evaluated and audience grievances can be heard. This is why The Journal and some other newspapers have designated a special editor — in our case he's called the reader contact editor — to investigate reader complaints. This is why some versions of a press council are being tested locally in several areas of the nation.

The new national council, which the Twentieth Century Fund expects to have in operation early next year, seems prudently conceived. It will be strictly nongovernmental. Indeed, it emerges largely from the press, having been recommended by a task force with a majority of journalist members. The council itself also will draw its members from both journalism and the public. It will not seek to be omnipresent, but rely instead on co-operative media to make its findings known. And, when necessary, it will defend the press against attempts by government and other forces to constrict the flow of news. It adds up to an interesting and needed experiment.
Press Council No Threat

The news media is reportedly sharply divided over a proposal by the Twentieth Century Fund for establishment of a national press council. Purpose of the council would be to investigate complaints made by citizens or organizations about major news coverage.

The council would focus on national news media operations such as major wire services, large metropolitan newspapers and TV and radio networks. The organization would have no authority over the media but would intend to be an influential force in monitoring the nation's communications media.

Assuming that the council would do an honest job and a thorough one, media opposition to it is somewhat difficult to understand. The media opponents seem to see in the council some threat of censorship but is this real or illusionary?

It would seem to us that such a council offers the media some advantages that, perhaps, it has not thought about. One of the major problems of the media is that too much of the public simply does not fully understand the news business.

The council could turn out to be an invaluable ally in gaining better public understanding of what the news media is trying to do and where its responsibilities fall. How many people, for instance, really understand the distinction between reporting the news of the day and making the news?

How many understand that news may or may not be fact, that it is what people do and what people say, whether that is right or wrong? How many readers and listeners understand the news media is not supposed to serve as the moral conscience of society but is meant, editorial content aside, mainly to depict the moral conscious as it exists?

How many people understand that when they do not trust the news media it is really the news sources that they should be distrusting? Then, there are such things as the complexities of news gathering, the difficulties of production, the realities of economics and others that, if better understood, would contribute to far more good will between the media and the general citizenry than now exists.

The council actually offers the media a new opportunity for improved understanding and greater public confidence and should be encouraged on those grounds.
Free press, independent council

There is to be a national press council, tentatively to be called "The Council on Press Responsibility and Press Freedom." Like the task force whose study ended with the recommendation of such a council, it will be composed of people from within and without journalism. To be funded by a consortium of foundations, it will be independent of both government and commercial interests.

The council's direct concerns will be the accuracy and fairness of the so-called "wholesalers" of news, and the freedom of the press generally.

The principal and supplemental wire services (the latter the subsidiaries of a few large newspapers), the weekly news magazines, the major broadcast networks, commercial and public -- these will receive the attention of the council with the realization that they are, directly or indirectly, the major suppliers of most of the national and international news that Americans get. (No such supplier will be represented on the council.)

The council is meant to investigate complaints brought by both the public and the press and to defend the latter when either government or public sources threaten the constitutional freedom to gather and report the news.

The idea of such a council is not new. In recent years, however, it has received more urgent general consideration because of the "credibility gap" said to exist between the press, broadcast and printed, and the public and more urgent consideration from within journalism because of a growing feeling that there is all too much effort by government, at various levels and in various ways, to constrict the broad freedom of the First Amendment.

Even some newspapermen and broadcasters who are not wholly sympathetic to the idea of organized and critical second-guessing of professional judgments by outsiders, however well-meaning, have come to feel that a prestigious buffer, such as the projected national press council, between press and government -- courts included -- might be a useful, even necessary, thing.

This projected press council, careful as its planning has been and will be, is very much experimental, the national press councils of no other country really offering a wholly valid and applicable precedent. It counts heavily on the cooperation of the aforementioned "wholesalers," it counts heavily on professional and public interest.

But on all scores it is certainly worth trying, with all parties, public included, remembering that the council is wholly advisory and educational, with publicity and persuasion its only powers for influence.

All rights and responsibilities — and even the right to be irresponsible — remain where they have been, and must be, if the press is to be free. There is, and should be, no surrender of independence.
Accountability In The Press

In a public appearance here last week, John Oakes, editor of the editorial page of the New York Times, warned that pressures from government and the courts are eroding basic freedoms in ways that are all the more dangerous because they are subtle.

Among the signs, he said, are government hostility toward the news media and judicial harassment of newspapermen through use of the subpoena power.

In a private talk session with a group of Oregon editors, Oakes expressed his belief the media will be in a better position to defend themselves against such threats if they keep their own houses in order from the standpoint of responsibility and accountability.

The Timesman has been serving on a Twentieth Century Fund task force (Robert Chandler, publisher of the Bend, Ore., Bulletin, is also a member), which has just recommended creation of a new national institution designed to serve the public by promoting accurate and fair reporting by the press.

The new national council will also have the function of defending the press when either government or public sources threaten the freedom of the press.

Oakes revealed to the Oregon group that many of his fellow editors and publishers are opposed to what the task force calls the "ombudsman" role of investigating complaints brought against the media. But he was firm in his own view that review and accountability are necessary if the media are to exercise their freedoms responsibly and if they are to defend themselves effectively against threats to those freedoms.

The new council will have no coercive power but will rely solely on the cooperation of the public and the media in making known the findings of the council. The new institution will limit its investigations to the national print and electronic media.

The idea of setting up local, state and regional councils has been considered, but this would pose insurmountable problems in administration, considering the numbers and diversity of the newspapers and magazines and radio and television stations.

This newspaper has always believed in the principle of accountability, and we have never believed that the press should be immune to criticism. We have sometimes thought and have stated that some leaders in the communication industry have been excessively self-righteous and have overreacted to criticism. The Journal has taken the position that since newspapers dish out plenty of criticism, they ought to be able to take criticism.

Historically we have done so. We have provided space for reactions by public officials and by the public to what we say.

Whether the council conceived by the Twentieth Century Fund ever goes beyond the rather limited function immediately planned, the communication industry and each member of it needs to be sensitive to the idea of responsibility and accountability.

By doing so they will be in a stronger position to resist threats to their freedoms.
A National Press Council

A task force assembled by the Twentieth Century Fund has proposed that a national press council be established to investigate complaints against the mass media and to guard against threats to freedom of expression. Funds to support the new agency have been pledged by several foundations, and the press council is expected to become operational early next year.

Press councils have been in existence for years in Great Britain, New Zealand and other countries. Creating an American counterpart has been discussed, but the idea has never made much headway until now. The usual objection to following the foreign example has been that Britain and other countries have a national press that lends itself to monitoring by a national body, whereas the press in this country is primarily local in character.

The Twentieth Century Fund task force meets this objection by proposing a national press council concerned with that part of the press that is national in character — the wire services, national newspapers and news chains, national weekly news magazines, broadcast networks and public television and radio. Persons who believe these agencies have not dealt fairly with them could lodge complaints with the press council. The council's sole power in such cases would be the power to issue statements of findings.

The council also would be authorized to initiate studies on infringements of the right to report the news and to investigate complaints by the press about threats to press freedom.

The proposed press council, to be headed by a former California chief justice, will have public and media representation, with public members being in the majority. The organization will be entirely non-governmental in character. The Twentieth Century Fund task force hopes the example set by the national press council will spur efforts to establish similar councils on a regional, state and local basis.

The Twentieth Century Fund deserves commendation for its press council efforts. Most news organizations attempt to respond to complaints, but the complainant has no recourse short of a libel suit if he is dissatisfied with the response.

The proposed press council would function as an ombudsman. It would provide readers and viewers with a disinterested forum for airing and evaluating disputes with the media. By the same token, the council would be a forum for airing the media's grievances about obstacles to the free flow of news.

The communications media have nothing to fear from independent, responsible evaluation of their performance. If the planned press council lives up to the standards set for it in the task force report, formation of the council will be in the interests of a free and responsible press.
U.S. editors and judges urge independent press council

NEW YORK (Special-AP) — A task force of editors, judges and political scientists yesterday proposed the formation of an independent press council to hear complaints about the accuracy and fairness of news media in the United States.

The council would also launch studies on problems involving freedom of the press.

"What is envisaged here is a new independent institution with its own staff and headquarters and which would make its own way," said M. J. Rossant, director of the Twentieth Century Fund, a New York-based foundation which sponsored an 18-month study that led to the recommendation.

The council on press responsibility and press freedom would concentrate on the principal U.S. suppliers of news. The task force defined these as major wire services, the largest supplemental news services, weekly news magazines with national circulation, national newspaper syndicates, national daily newspapers and the broadcasting networks.

The 15-member council, which is expected to begin operations early next year, would receive, analyze and report on complaints about accuracy and fairness of news coverage. A grievance committee would meet 6 to 12 times a year to screen public complaints.

The council's membership would be drawn from journalists and non-journalists, but none from principal news operations. The Ontario Press Council, whose members are The Star and seven other provincial dailies, includes both newsmen and members of the public and was set up by the papers involved.

"The core of the media council idea," the task force said in a 65-page report, "is the effort to make press freedom more secure by providing an independent forum for debate about media responsibility and performance so that such debate need not take place in governments' hearing rooms or on the political campaign trail."

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National press ombudsman

Plans for a national press ombudsman, announced this week by a Task Force of the Twentieth Century Fund, are much broader in scope than the original proposal for a national press council that other groups have considered. The prospectus says the “national council,” or whatever it is finally called, will “serve the public by promoting accurate and fair reporting by the nation’s press” and will “defend the press when either government or public sources threaten the freedom of the press to gather and report the news.”

This is a novel and refreshing departure from proposals that such a council act solely as the watchdog of the press.

We can’t exactly agree, however, with the Task Force finding of “an apparent unresponsiveness to public pressure and criticism” on the part of the press. It has seemed to us that every meeting of newspaper executives, regardless of title, has reflected an increasing awareness of their public responsibilities.

Nevertheless, it appears that a national press ombudsman will come into existence and its main function will be to investigate public complaints against national print (newspapers, wire services and magazines) and electronic media. We have long felt and frequently said that because of the sheer numbers of print and electronic media in this country, and because of the local nature of most of them (in contrast to the national newspapers in other countries) the task of such a council would be formidable. It all depends, of course, on whether complaints against media are real or imagined, substantive or inconsequential. Therein will lie the answer to whether such a council is necessary or not and whether it will work or not.

Viewing versus reading

The Television Bureau of Advertising has trotted out another survey comparing average viewing time with newspaper reading time. The statistical trick should be obvious. TVB claims the average working woman watches 88 minutes a day and the non-working woman 125 minutes. So what? Advertisers are interested in who’s watching while those 30-second commercials are on the air.

What we need is another “flush survey.” Remember almost 20 years ago when the Water Commissioner of Toledo, O., discovered the strange phenomenon of a drop in the city’s water pressure every time the television commercials came on?

How many times has the husband or wife called to the spouse in the other room: “I’ll do it when the commercial comes on?” and, so forth?

Don’t relax

Two prominent contempt of court cases involving a New Jersey newsmen and a Harvard professor have ended because the Grand Juries which indicted them have been terminated. That does not eliminate the issues, however, and newsmen should not relax. Reporter William F. Farr of Los Angeles has been put back in jail by a judge, not a grand jury, who insists on using the newsmen as a tool to enforce his own gag order against attorneys and witnesses.
A listener to angry voices

UP TO NOW, a citizen or group treated unfairly by a national news organization has been almost powerless to lodge an effective complaint. There may be muttered under the breath. An angry letter may be written to the editor of the local newspaper or the manager of the local station which used the story, and that's about all. If the unfair story originated with a wire service or a network, the ill-treated person's chances of getting to those really responsible are pretty slim.

This is one of the unfortunate results of that bigness that now characterizes so much of our society. Long past is the day when an angry citizen could walk into a newspaper office, cane the editor, and be reasonably certain that he was venting his wrath on the man responsible for his misery. Today most major newspapers and broadcast stations are owned by chains, whose top executives often live somewhere else and may be completely out of touch with local issues and problems. The top officials of our main suppliers of national news—the wire services, the broadcast networks, the national newspapers and news magazines—are hidden away in Manhattan towers, often remote from and unresponsive to the huge constituencies that consume their organizations' products. This is one of the reasons why criticism of the news media—much of it justified—has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years.

But early next year, a new national press council, financed by several foundations, will offer the citizen a place to bring his complaints and will serve as an arbitrator of grievances against the press. In the words of the Twentieth Century Fund task force that announced the plans for the council, its purpose will be "to receive, to examine and to report on complaints concerning the accuracy and fairness of news reporting in the United States, as well as to initiate studies and report on issues involving the freedom of the press." The council staff will investigate complaints and try to settle grievances without formal council intervention. If that fails, the council will investigate and issue a report.

Since employees of national news organizations will be excluded from membership on the council, and since laymen will occupy several of the council seats, its impartiality should be assured. If it lives up to its mission as "an instrument of education, education of the public—education of the press," it will perform an essential service for us all.
Editor's Corner

A beginning to press accountability

As an elected official, you have about as much chance of winning a libel suit against a newspaper (or any other medium) as Jack the Ripper.

The United States Supreme Court, in The New York Times vs. Sullivan case, and in subsequent decisions, made you fair game because you willingly accepted a public role. You voluntarily jumped into the crucible of public comment and examination.

As an organization leader or public citizen or leader of a political group, what do you do if the press, in your view, treats you unfairly, repeatedly denigrates or ridicules your work or consistently, in your opinion, destroys public credence in the valuable works you intend?

You cannot sue the publication, or print the censure. So far, in the few cases that have gone against the press, the guilty paper has published the British Council's rebukes.

As an elected official, you have to support, copies of pleadings you have to print or delays you must endure. Once in court, you could even try to persuade the press, which in your mind has maliciously maligned your worthy efforts, to report on the proceedings.

In actuality, none of these countermethods has worked very well.

Britain thought up a new one. Similar arrangements to Britain's have been devised on this side of the Atlantic. Wisconsin group has launched an effort a la the British but Wisconsin's experience is too brief to prove much at this point.

The British scheme is called a "press council." The Council is a body of prominent, reasonable people, none of whom are affiliated with journalism in any way. The Council receives complaints from individuals and groups who feel aggrieved about the treatment a publication has dealt them. The complainants agree that they will not sue the publication, or other medium, on the basis of what the Council discovers in its thorough, dispassionate and lengthy investigations of the situation complained about.

Obviously, the Council agrees to investigate only major incidents. It cannot be an agency for adjusting minor disputes. It hasn't that much time or money.

If it finds that the complainant has been unjustly served, it issues a report, censures the offending publication and expects the publication to print the censure. So far, in the few cases that have gone against the press, the guilty paper has published the British Council's rebukes.

Now the Twentieth Century Fund of America plans to form a council in this country.

I applaud the move. We need some institution beyond government, something other than shallow minded vice-presidents of the country, to examine specific complaints against the media and make judgments apart from politics and self-interest.

Naturally, I think most such investigations properly and thoroughly pursued will not only vindicate the motives and products of most American newspapers but educate the public at the same time in the ways and purposes, under a democratic system, of a free and people's press. This has been the case in Britain and it will be here, as well.

In the beginning, the council expects to review the performance, probably only in response to formal complaints, of the national press, such as the wire services and the special papers of national distribution. That's a start, and the country will benefit.

Sylvan Meyer

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20001

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The national news media in the United States are finally to be subjected to the watchful eyes of a citizens council, despite long-time opposition to such a critical agency from an influential segment of the press. Scheduled to begin operation early in 1973, the planned national press council represents a salutary development that owes its start to the Twentieth Century Fund, which organized a task force to study the feasibility of the project.

Since 1947 when a privately endowed independent agency to appraise and report annually on the performance of the press was proposed by the Commission on Freedom of the Press (financed by Time, Inc. and the Encyclopaedia Britannica), the idea has been put forward in many forms and from many responsible quarters. And yet its implementation has up to now been aborted, largely because of the objections of media executives who say either that external criticism is not needed or that a press council would threaten freedom of the press.

Neither of these negative media reactions is warranted. No human institution, including the press, is so infallible or so punctilious in dealing with complaints that it should be immune from institutionalized investigation and criticism. The major purpose of the projected council, to be composed of 15 members, would be "to receive, to examine and to report on complaints concerning the accuracy and fairness of news reporting." Since the council would be non-governmental and would have no coercive powers, it could hardly constitute a threat to liberty of the press as understood by some of its most celebrated champions, which means freedom for the maximum dissemination of information and ideas.

By their role in helping to establish a national press council, the media members of the Twentieth Century Fund's task force are acting in accordance with the check and balance tradition of the American system. As a powerful force in public affairs, the press itself should be subject to the educational check and balance of an agency which would both help to redress grievances and vindicate the media when they are unfairly castigated.
Press Council

Some news people may not like it, but the press council that the Twentieth Century Fund is establishing is a good idea.

In fact, the real shortcoming of this arrangement is that there aren't more press councils to study complaints, monitor news-gathering performance and defend the press against threats to its freedom.

The council offers no threat to press freedom. It has no legal enforcement powers; its tool is information and advocacy. The council is founded on the premise that some news operations do a lousy job dealing with complaints, and they're right. Some newspapers and radio and television stations also do lousy jobs of reporting, though performance varies widely. And many perform exceedingly well.

Now that the foundation is setting up its press council, some other respected groups ought to do the same thing. For example, similar press monitoring councils could be established by a university and a publisher's association.

The councils would be improved by plurality, just as the press is. No one council should take on a god-like image simply because it is the only one around. A number of councils would create a better mix of issues and lend more power to publicize faults that all councils might agree are dangerous to the integrity of the news profession if not to the nation,
Watchdog for the Press

The watchdog is getting a watchdog. The press, which has long performed a monitoring service for the public in such areas as government and consumer interests, will soon find its own performance monitored.

A consortium of foundations, acting on a Twentieth Century Fund study, will create a national press council to investigate complaints against the news media and work to preserve press freedom.

No one likes a critic watching over his shoulder, but The Journal finds no compelling reason to oppose this particular effort. It only hopes that it is implemented and operated with care and objectivity. For it has the potential to perform valuable public service, improving the credibility of the news media and easing growing tensions between the press and government.

To be established some time next year, the council will focus on major news suppliers — national wire services, television networks and large newspapers. It will have no enforcement powers, but rather work as a kind of ombudsman, probing complaints and publicizing its findings. Its power really will be equal to the merit of its own criticism.

Press councils are not a totally new idea. They exist in other countries, and on a local or state basis some places in the U.S.

Two objectives appear vital if the council is to be successful. First, it must be free from either journalistic or governmental influence — truly independent, in other words. And, as the task force recommending it said, its findings should not be used by government agencies.

Second, the council will need to give as much attention to preserving and promoting press freedom as to investigating complaints of how the press uses that freedom.

Obviously, failures on the part of the media deprive the public of accurate, fair information necessary in a free society. But inroads on press freedom — and recent Supreme Court attitudes and jailings of newsmen certainly suggest inroads are occurring — equally threaten the public's right to be informed about what is happening in society.

The council cannot hope to prevent or solve all disagreements among the press, the public and the government. But if it works to keep press freedom at a maximum and misuse of it at a minimum, it can make a worthwhile contribution to American life.
How do you regulate something that must be free?

This is the puzzling question that years ago resulted in bodies called press councils. There now are such things in Britain, Sweden and New Zealand — and some American cities.

If a proposal of a Twentieth Century Fund task force is adopted the concept will get its most significant test yet. The dozen task force members, mostly news- men, want a national press council for the United States.

And they have a fascinating modification to offer. Traditionally, press councils have been critics of the press, examining charges made against newspapers and broadcast stations and seeking to reform by publicizing the findings. The Twentieth Century Fund group also would charge the U.S. council with defending the press when either government or public sources threaten the freedom to gather and report the news.

Can a press council be both critic and defender? We don’t know, but it’s an interesting concept. It could make the institution far more meaningful than it ever has been.

One of the three Westerners on the task force is Bob Chandler, publisher of the Bend Bulletin. He’s a founder of a press council in Bend, and a leading proponent of the idea.

As proposed, the national council would confine itself to national publications, the wire services and national broadcast networks. Hopefully, it would become a model upon which local and regional council’s could be patterned.

We like the task force’s proposal. Not only should the press be chastened for irresponsibility, laziness and just plain dullness, but it should be given support when threatened by repressive bureaucracy, as it is now.

No institution is its own best defender, and it certainly is its own worst critic.
A National Press Council

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The council also would be authorized to initiate studies on infringements of the right to report the news and to investigate complaints by the press about threats to press freedom.

The proposed press council, to be headed by a former California chief justice, will have public and media representation, with public members being in the majority. The organization will be entirely non-governmental in character. The Twentieth Century Fund task force hopes the example set by the national press council will spur efforts to establish similar councils on a regional, state and local basis.

The Twentieth Century Fund deserves commendation for its press council efforts. Most news organizations attempt to respond to complaints, but the complainant has no recourse short of a libel suit if he is dissatisfied with the response.

The proposed press council would function as an ombudsman. It would provide readers and viewers with a disinterested forum for airing and evaluating disputes with the media. By the same token, the council would be a forum for airing the media’s grievances about obstacles to the free flow of news.

The communications media have nothing to fear from independent, responsible evaluation of their performance. If the planned press council lives up to the standards set for it in the task force report, formation of the council will be in the interests of a free and responsible press.
Sir: The most hope-inspiring item of all time appeared in the news of Dec. 1. It was titled "Monitor Placed on New Media" and conveyed this delightful, though surprising, message: "The Twentieth Century Fund announced plans Thursday to set up a 15-member council to monitor the performance of the national news media and investigate complaints by the public." NIEA would be happy to assist them in this noble crusade—its files are bulging with material to get them started.

Incidentally, a poll of 70 newspaper editors produced a 3-to-1 vote against the idea. Who's afraid of "Accountability?"

Although the pros and cons of Dr. Markburger's responsibility for an appointment have ceased to be newsworthy at the moment, the repercussions will continue, and your treatment of the issue bears censure. True, in reporting you must print what is given to you, although you may delete what doesn't serve your purpose, and you may also afford more space in those whose opinions you tend to espouse—which in this case is anyone other than teachers. Not content with this, you resort to irresponsible editorializing.

In emphasizing only those facts of an issue which you consider most newsworthy you have consistently ignored those of most importance to teachers. It would be futile to attempt detailed rebuttal of the numerous allegations directed at NIEA. It would probably be ignored. As you have ignored the position paper of NIEA, containing documented explanation of every stand we have taken relevant to Dr. Markburger's unsuitability. It was "TRUTH," a commodity which you have little interest since you accept unquestioningly statements which decry NIEA as being "vicious, power-hungry, racist, self-seeking, divisive, untruthful, etc." without presenting one specific instance on which this dishonorable evaluation could be based.

In your two recent scathing editorials, insulting and tabloid-like in tone, you put all others to shame. You manage to disregard logic completely and reach your conclusions much more simply and succinctly—"The best reason for supporting Dr. Carl Markburger was the good that wasn't supporting him. Anyone who earned the undying antagonism of the NIEA is doing something right, if not everything." In a contest for uttering insane statements, yours would win. Mild by comparison were the words of Governor Cahill and the legislators, who deemed him worthy of support as he seemed "adequate" and had done nothing "immoral" or "illegal." Using your kind of thinking, we could make an equally illogical and irresponsible statement: that nothing you print can be believed.

You must hate teachers, Mr. Editor, since the tone of your editorials repeatedly implies: "If teachers are for it, it must be wrong." But in spite of the obstacles which you, and others, may place in our path, we shall remain tenacious and unyielding in our campaign for fair play and continue our quest—hopefully.

Margaret C. Roberts, President
Mercer County Education Assn.

(Editors Note: These may be one or more somewhere who might take mild exception to President Roberts' declaration that the proposed monitoring of the news media is "the most hope-inspiring item of all time." We would put it somewhere below the birth of Christ, the concept of love, the teachings of Plato, and other hope-inspiring items. But to each his own. Certainly, formal monitoring of the press—like the informal monitoring that goes on every day—is something the press should welcome rather than fear. The only thing to fear is what might happen after the monitoring—like an attempt to silence the presses or to silence people, such as President Roberts, who attempt to speak through the press. As for our editorial position on the NIEA-Markburger affair, it should be noted that we were most interested in changing the result the NIEA desired. It should also be noted that when opposing the organization that professes to represent teachers and the cause of education we are not opposing the represented but the representer. The NIEA is regardless of what the NIEA would like the represented to believe.)
In short, there is some truth on both sides of the press debate. The press cannot be above criticism but those in power should not try to intimidate the press either. Like all other institutions in the society today, the press is getting its lumps, some deserved and some not.

Last week the Twentieth Century Fund in New York released a report of a task force, which included journalist, educators and public figures, that has been working for almost two years on the problem of press freedom and press responsibility. The report recommended the establishment of a “national media council,” a non-governmental, independent agency. This council would hear grievances and complaints against the national suppliers or wholesalers of news and, secondly, fight any encroachments upon press freedom.

This council would have basically the same objectives as the well known British Press Council which was established in 1953. The Rt. Hon. Lord Pearson, chairman of the British Press Council in a recent speech said that the twin objectives of the council are “to defend the freedom of the press and to maintain press standards which justify that freedom.”

The proposed national media council would be concerned solely with news reporting. Everyone concedes the right of the editors to their own opinions in their editorials. It is clear that inaccuracies and bias in news reporting represent the basic cause for much of the disenchantment with the mass media today.

Public exposure of irresponsibility is the only “muscle” that the council would have. It would have no punitive power.

It was my concern as a member of the task force that the proposed council should have black representation and become a truly representative body.

I do not believe that the establishment of such a council will automatically end the debate over the media. But I think it is a step in the right direction. It would help take press criticism, as Richard Salant of CBS said, “out of the hands of the people who have an axe to grind — put it into the hands of systematic investigators.”

To me, this makes sense.
Interesting Experiment

Plans for creating a press council to monitor the performance of national broadcast and print media have, of course, stirred controversy. Many editors and broadcasters are opposed, or at least distrustful. They note that the press is already under much pressure and a press council, though begun in innocence, might eventually foster government control of the news.

These concerns are understandable. The press, as purveyor of information for a free society, must guard its liberty. At the same time, however, the mass media need to experiment with new ways in which their performance as a major social institution can be evaluated and audience grievances can be heard. This is why The Journal and some other newspapers have designated a special editor — in our case he’s called the reader contact editor — to investigate reader complaints. This is why some versions of a press council are being tested locally in several areas of the nation.

The new national council, which the Twentieth Century Fund expects to have in operation early next year, seems prudently conceived. It will be strictly nongovernmental. Indeed, it emerges largely from the press, having been recommended by a task force with a majority of journalist members. The council itself also will draw its members from both journalism and the public. It will not seek to be omnipresent, but limit itself to the national media — the big wire services, TV networks, national news chains, major news magazines. So as not to imperil press freedom, it will have no coercive power, relying instead on co-operative media to make its findings known. And, when necessary, it will defend the press against attempts by government and other forces to constrict the flow of news. It adds up to an interesting and needed experiment.
Press Needs Self-Scrutiny

Washington—The people who report, write, edit and present the news for newspapers, magazines and broadcasting stations are bothered by increasing criticism of their work by the public and by the Nixon administration. It's clear that the public believes us less at a time when the need for effective communication is great, Amen.

So there's plenty of talk about how audacious self-criticism in the form of “press councils” would help restore our credibility. Along comes the Twentieth Century Fund, with its ample resources, to establish a National News Council to monitor what the big, bad, national media is up to, and darn, the big media doesn't like it.

The New York Times haughtily announced it would have no part of such self-inquiry, and officials of NBC and ABC networks voiced skepticism that the National News Council is even necessary. The most interesting argument against the council came last week from the New York Times columnist, Tom Wicker, who intoned that “Self-censorship may well be a graver threat to a free press in America than anything the government is able to do.”

Well, Wicker, who pants regularly for some alleged underdogs, is wide of the mark. Self-criticism is not “self-censorship” and when Wicker sees danger in institutionalizing self-scrutiny, he contradicts dozens of his own past liberal arguments.

Press councils at the national and local level will at least serve to air grievances about the press by the public and the press alike. We in the press see plenty of examples where bad work was done, and it is the accumulation of such bad work which reduces our credibility.

One of the most honest admissions of our shortcomings was delivered in late 1971 by James Borman, then news director for WCCO, Minneapolis, at the Radio-TV News Directors Association conference in Boston. He said the loss of credibility in the media had become “an American epidemic,” one we couldn't be complacent about.

Borman blamed what he called “advocacy journalism,” the kind CBS's Alex Kinerick praised when he urged reporters to get involved and report what they “feel inside.” Borman condemned the advice and said: “It is simply outrageous to think that we as modern practitioners have any rights or duties or privileges to deal more lightly with the truth than the journalists of another age may have had.”

Examples abound: The welfare protest which looks authentic because the reporter purposefully refreshed from mentioning that out-of-town organizers stage-managed the demonstrations; reporters going to Ralph Nader, and Nader only, when a consumer controversy develops; pernicious use of “hearsay” without checking the principals involved; jettisoning the time-honored practice of phoning both sides in a dispute.

Complaints don't all fall in the area of reporting. The Minnesota Press Council, using a grievance procedure, censured the publishers of two papers, and employed the sanction of putting its findings on the state's wire services, thus publicizing the censure. In fact, it is in the area of local press councils where the most good would probably result.

Meanwhile, the Twentieth Century Fund's National Press Council can at least stimulate a greater sense of responsibility in the press. The council's chairman is Roger Traynor, former chief justice of the California Supreme Court, and its members will include six working journalists and nine people with experience in journalism.

The National Council will be open to complaints about the networks (NBC, CBS, ABC and Mutual); Public Broadcast; Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report;