The Formation of the National Press Council, Radio and Television Publicity, December 1972

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The Twentieth Century Fund

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BIAS

HAL GOODWIN: The Twentieth Century Fund has called for the establishment of a national press council, to examine and report back on complaints about bias in the news media. A special 14-member task force, set up to study the problem claims that public disaffection with existing institutions in our society has spread now to the news media. The task force reports that fairness and the credibility of the news media have been called into question and that such questions threaten the freedom of journalism.

To counter the skepticism, the task force wants the establishment of a national independent council. It would of course, have no enforcement powers, but it could look into charges concerning news coverage and then make public its findings.

The Twentieth Century Fund is a non-profit research foundation. It has already set up a committee to draw plans for such a council. Named to head the Committee is Roger Trainer(?), a former chief justice of the California State Supreme Courts.
LOOK INTO PRESS BIAS TO BE MADE

NEWSCASTER: A national press council is being put together to look into the charges of bias in reporting by the news media. The 20th Century Fund, a non-profit research group, has been studying public confidence in the press for some time. A special 14-member task force has come to the conclusion that public disaffection with our institutions has now affected the press.

To counter the trend, it says, the press council will be set up. It will be able to look into complaints about slanted reporting and to make public its findings. The council will have no enforcement powers. The special committee has been established to help form the press council that will be headed by Roger Trainer, the former Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court.
20TH CENTURY FUND STORY

NEWSCASTER: The 20th Century Fund Task Force has announced plans to establish a press council to monitor the fairness and accuracy of the national news media. The council is expected to go into operation next year and will examine complaints on news reporting in the United States. The council will be composed of journalists, public officials, educators and jurors and will have no enforcement powers, but will rely on publicity about its findings.
NEW COUNCIL SETUP

ART VAN HORN: A National News Council is being set up to investigate complaints from the public and politicians about the major news media, print and electronic. A member of the Task Force for the 20th Century Fund is Lucy Benson, who is also president of the League of Women Voters. Lucy Benson told ABC News about the planned news council.

LUCY BENSON: I think it's quite likely that when the council is established and becomes operational, really gets organized and gets to working and receives complaints and handles them well, thoroughly and competently, that anyone who has problems will turn to the council and thereby have a -- well, it's really having an outlet for a grievance or an outlet for a complaint.

VAN HORN: Lucy Benson said the news council will also initiate inquiries on its own into threats to the freedom of the press.
COUNCIL TO LOOK INTO NEWS MEDIA

STEVE PORTER: A national group is planning to look into what is the news media doing or what isn't it doing. Bob Honig reports.

BOB HONIG: A National News Council has been formed to investigate threats against freedom of the press and also to probe public complaints against the media. The Council is expected to begin its work sometime in the coming year. It was set up under a Task Force created in the middle of 1971 by the Twentieth Century Fund. It will focus on major news suppliers to the local media, similar groups already exist abroad and in some areas of this country.

The fifteen member Council budgeted at four hundred thousand dollars will have no coercive powers and according to a Task Force statement, will not try to solve all the problems facing the present broadcast news media but will try to make those media accountable for the public and lessen the tensions between them and the government.

Bob Honig, New York.
NEWSCASTER: The 20TH Century Fund has named a task force from what will be called the National Press Council. The Council will have the job of, as the fund spokesman put it, lessening the creditability gap between the media and the public. The Council will be set up to hear complaints about media coverage and fairness and accuracy of reporting.
PRESS COUNCIL RECOMMENDED

NEWSCASTER: A Twentieth Century Fund study panel has recommended the establishment of a national news council to investigate both public complaints against the press and press complaints against the government and other forces pressuring against its freedom. The press council would concentrate its efforts on the major news providers such as the two wire services and the three television networks and a few major newspapers. The council would have a $400,000 budget, provided by several foundations and would be established as an independent body to hear complaints. The study panel notes, however, that the new press council, if it were to be founded, probably could not solve all of the press's problems, which is probably accurate.
NATIONAL NEWS COUNCIL

NEWSCASTER: A proposal from the New York based Twentieth Century Fund to create a national news council that would investigate public complaints against news media has caused some division of opinion. Bob Honig has more on that.

BOB HONIG: A poll conducted by United Press International shows that the ABC and NBC TV Networks disfavor the idea while CBS is for it. Both major wire services, UPI and the Associated Press, say they have always answered legitimate complaints. Among the major newspapers, The New York Times according to its spokesman is against the plan while the Christian Science Monitor is for it. Edward Murray, Associate Editor of the Detroit Free Press and president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors came out for the council. But his boss, Free Press Editor Mark Efrage (?) Jr., says he's against it. And a survey of the editors group with four hundred five of its seven hundred forty-four members responding, shows a four-to-one margin against the proposal.

Bob Honig, New York.
WJR INCIDENT A MISTAKE, SAYS TAPE SERVICE OWNER

DAVE WHITE: Daniel Johnson, owner of a tape service whose representative offered Business Editor Smidebush ten dollars to run a portion of a speech on a newscast, says it was all a big mistake. Johnson's assistant made the offer in connection with an address by a Senior Vice President of the Iron and Steel Institute on Monday, saying he would send a ten dollar check in exchange for evidence that the portion of the speech was used on a WJR newscast. Johnson said the money was to be used to cover expenses, but his assistant made no such reference in talking with Smidebush.

The tape service, DHJ Audio, was hired by the Hill and Knowlton Public Relations firm to get the speech covered by radio stations in major cities. Hill and Knowlton Account Executive Bob Churnoff said any advance monetary offer was unauthorized, and the practice would be stopped.

Only last week, the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force proposed the establishment of a National Press Council to receive, examine and report on complaints about the fairness and accuracy of the news media. The New York based firm pointed to the public disaffection with American institutions, including the media and the threat to Freedom of the Press.

WJR's Rod Hansen asked Twentieth Century Fund Founder, M. J. Rossent, to comment on an attempt by a public relations firm to buy its way onto a newscast.

M. J. ROSENT: Whether it's going on on a small or large scale, I think that anything that is disguised as news that isn't news is really publicity, and paid for is reprehensible. It's real interference with, I think, the freedom of information.

DAVE WHITE: M. J. Rossent added that he hopes no newsmen took advantage of any monetary offer, but pointed out that the broadcast industry will have to police itself on such matters.
EDWIN DIAMOND COMMENTARY - ENTER THE OMBUDSMAN

December 6, 1972

The Twentieth Century Fund, a non-profit foundation, has helped establish what could be a major new development in the history of the press in this country. It has formed a National Press Council to act as the ombudsman for any individual or group with a complaint against the press. For example, if the Native Americans, who occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs recently, believe that their story was unfairly or inaccurately reported by CBS or Time magazine, they could complain to the new National Press Council and get a hearing. In time, the Press Council ombudsmen would issue a public report, taking up the charges. Presumably, either the record would be corrected or the credibility of the news media upheld.

The press council idea has been tried in other countries, such as Sweden and Great Britain, with some degree of success. There are, however, major obstacles to success here.

First of all, the Press Council ombudsmen plan to monitor only the national news suppliers, the networks, wire services and news magazines. It would skip local outlets, where there are also bad habits.

Secondly, not all news executives want this kind of monitoring and the Press Council can hardly investigate the handling of a story without some cooperation. And what about the confidentiality of the council proceedings? The Justice Department has shown great interest in learning reporters' sources. Would news people talk to the ombudsman if they knew the records could be subpoenaed?

Finally, there is the matter of who will serve as ombudsmen. Will they be really knowledgeable journalists who have been in the ranks themselves? The Press Council, like the media, can only be as good, as honest, and as strong as the people who work for it. Let's wait and see the men and women who become the press ombudsmen.

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