The National News Council

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NEW YORK (AP) - The National News Council enters its fourth year encouraged by its success in raising funds for the new year's budget but still trying to carve a place for itself in American journalism.

In its first three years, which ended Aug. 1, the private media watchdog group sought to establish itself as deliberate and evenhanded as it weighed complaints against the national news media ranging from the trivial to the substantial.

By some accounts it has won that reputation. But a number of editors still have little enthusiasm for the idea of a review body like the council, and its biggest achievement may well be simply to have survived.

A published report last winter suggested that the council would fail financially before its fourth year. That was premature and greatly exaggerated, said William B. Arthur, executive director of the council.

He said that the council ended the third year in the black and is within $16,000 of meeting its fourth-year budget goal of $300,000, a 20 per cent increase over the last budget.

Formation of the council was recommended in 1972 by a task force, most of whose members were journalists. The purpose was to
investigate complaints of unfair or inaccurate news coverage by national news suppliers such as the networks, wire services, syndicates, news magazines and The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal.

Among the complaints it has upheld was one against The New York Times stemming from a story on the effects of herbal spraying in South Vietnam. The council found the Times report relied largely on information from those who disagreed with the majority conclusions in a report on the spraying.

It did not criticize the newspaper for its original story but said "The Times was remiss in not calling to the attention of its readers the information in the full report" when it was released later.

Another case involved a Jack Anderson column on the attitude of foreign students at a State Department police training school toward torture. The council found that quotations from the student's papers used by the syndicated columnist misrepresented their views as reflected in the full papers.

A third case that drew wide publicity involved a CBS "60 Minutes" report on the lives of Syrian Jews which the American Jewish Congress charged contained "excessive, inaccurate and distorted representations."

After investigation, the council withheld action when CBS said it planned a second look at the situation. A complaint from another group about the second program was found unwarranted, and the council commended CBS "for re-examining the matter in light of the controversy engendered by the first broadcast."

In all, the council has found only 13½ complaints warranted, 51½ were termed unwarranted and 24 dismissed after scrutiny.
From the outset, one problem has been the refusal of The New York Times and some other news organizations to cooperate by responding to complaints. The council investigates these complaints with its own staff nonetheless and has upheld the Times in most cases.

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NEW YORK: most cases

Times managing editor A.M. Rosenthal said in a letter to council director Arthur recently that the Times planned no change in its policy enunciated three years ago by publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger.

Sulzberger said then that he feared the council "would encourage an atmosphere of regulation in which government intervention might gain public acceptance."

Rosenthal said he had watched the council work for three years, discussed its operation with supporters and opponents, and "I really have seen nothing to change my mind.

"I have a strong feeling that the kind of thinking that led to the creation of news councils is the kind of thinking that leads to the creation of guidelines: a desire to sit in judgment on the press and on individual editors and tell them what they may
do and what they may not do."

The Times has responded to council inquiries about freedom of the press issues and did reply to a recent complaint about its policy of allowing paid advertisements on its Op-Ed page but has always refused to comment on complaints about news stories.

More typical is the approach of ABC News. Its president, William Sheehan, said ABC does not consider the council necessary because of legislative and regulatory checks but added: "Our position is when they ask us for any information we provide it. "It's a policy of benign neglect," he said. "They're trying to do a job. We just feel we don't care to bestow upon them any official status as the watchdog of news organizations."

Three years ago Benjamin Bradlee, executive editor of the Washington Post, said he was "something less than enthusiastic about the idea" of a council but would respond to questions. Today, Bradlee, said, his enthusiasm is "something less than that."

He said the council was "still picking on the best of journalism, not the worst" and added that "there's a lot wrong with the newspaper business that the National News Council never gets to."

An independent committee's evaluation of the council's first three years found it had "made a sound if not spectacular beginning... It has handled the complaints in workmanlike fashion."

The report recommended that the NNC seek greater visibility, enlarge its appointed membership and broaden its jurisdiction to cover national issues in all media, regardless of initial circulation. The council is acting on all these recommendations.

A subcommittee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors
which studied the council reported its members were "impressed with the deliberation and fairness," adding, "The council's integrity is beyond question."

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Robert Stiff, editor of the St. Petersburg, Fla., Evening Independent and chairman of the ASNE subcommittee, said he believes in the news council and would like to see it succeed.

"There's such a huge misunderstanding of the role of the news council in our industry it continues to amaze me," he said. "Eventually they will see what a force for good it can be. It gives people a place to go other than court who have some sort of problem with a newspaper.

"There are a lot of Neanderthal editors in our business ... who are very content to write editorials saying doctors and lawyers should police their own but who are not prepared to do anything of the sort in their own industry.

"I do think the financial support has to be broadened. The more you can broaden that the more you can broaden the philosophical support."

Stiff's subcommittee criticized the council's move to expand its scope beyond the national media and took a dim view of "the
new NRC policy of soliciting complaints from participants in controversial news stories."

Arthur said the latter point is a misunderstanding of the council's intent. "What the council has said is that when a subject matter emerges in the public press, gets a lot of attention, where there's a controversy ... that we should make it known that we are here as an impartial arbiter."

But he added emphatically: "The council is not going to get involved in ambulance chasing."

"That still sounds like ambulance chasing to me," Stiff commented. "I have a feeling that they need to solidify their position with what their original scope was before going out to fight new battles. My basic feeling is that they should start small and grow slowly."

Stiff said that he supported the council's attempt to get into a broad national question in October 1973, when then-President Nixon charged the three major television networks with "outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting" in connection with the Watergate case.

"That's was a bit of ambulance chasing too but Nixon had attacked the entire industry. I was glad they did that," Stiff said. The council was rebuffed in repeated attempts to get specific charges from the White House.

"Nobody in the media raised hell with us for doing that," Arthur said, nor was the council criticized when it sought and won more specific assurances from the Central Intelligence Agency that it would no longer use reporters as sources of information.

Whatever the council's findings in any case, it has no power beyond the weight of its opinion and it does not, so far, even
have any way of assuring that its opinion will be widely circulated.

There have been discussions but no decision about having the NNC findings printed in the Columbia Journalism Review. And there is some talk of using large mailings to get wider circulation of the council’s work.

Arthur takes some hope in the fact that for the first time there are significant media contributions to the next budget, including a $20,000 grant from the Frank E. Gannett Newspaper foundation.

The Minnesota Press Council, which has survived since 1972 by “passing the hat” among members of the Minnesota Newspaper Association, is largely funded by the media. It is the most active council in the country aside from the NNC. Several community press councils including those in Bend, Ore., and Riverside, Calif., have folded from lack of business, lack of interest or both.

Stiff, Arthur and other council supporters all note that the British press council was established 23 years ago in the face of widespread media opposition but has since become a well-respected institution that is funded by the British media.

“I’ve always said, inevitably, the council must get media backing, both financially and morally” for the long run, said Arthur.

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