Littleton's Unique Press Council

Donald E. Brown

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.uchastings.edu/publicity
Part of the Judges Commons, and the Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Commons

Recommended Citation
Donald E. Brown, Littleton's Unique Press Council (1972). Available at: http://repository.uchastings.edu/publicity/79
Four candles will be burning brightly on the community's fourth birthday this year, the Littleton Press Council. The principal celebration will be held on Sunday, April 24, 1971. It was established in its present form in November 1967, and the first meeting of the council took place the following month. It is actually a quarter of a century old in that Denver suburban city.

Back in 1946, Houstoun Waring, who was the former president of the Littleton Tribune and the Arapahoe Herald, semilegionary editor, said that there was a need for a council to represent the journalistic community. The idea of a press council was actually a quarter of a century old in that Denver suburban city.

Although the present council is only four years old, that is a longer life span than most other local councils have had. Of six other community press councils founded the same year, only one survives. However, the local press council was emphasized in its first year because it was founded on an experimental basis for a one-year period. Those experiments have shown that financial support from the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press, which is placed under the guidance of university experts in journalism, can be successful.

During that period, it was seen that those councils were reviewed with favor by many of the laymen members and by a majority of the newspaper editors and publishers, five of the groups were not kept alive after outside funding ended. The reason was that there was no exception was Bend, Oregon. Robert Chandler, editor and publisher of the Bulletin, said that Sigma Delta Chi, an international professional fraternity, had sponsored the council. The Bulletin was founded under the guidance of university experts in journalism.

During that period, it was seen that those councils were reviewed with favor by many of the laymen members and by a majority of the newspaper editors and publishers. However, funding and other assistance ended. The one exception was in Bend, Oregon. Robert Chandler, editor and publisher of the Bulletin, said that Sigma Delta Chi, an international professional fraternity, had sponsored the council. The Bulletin was founded under the guidance of university experts in journalism.

During that period, it was seen that those councils were reviewed with favor by many of the laymen members and by a majority of the newspaper editors and publishers. However, funding and other assistance ended. The one exception was in Bend, Oregon. Robert Chandler, editor and publisher of the Bulletin, said that Sigma Delta Chi, an international professional fraternity, had sponsored the council. The Bulletin was founded under the guidance of university experts in journalism.

During that period, it was seen that those councils were reviewed with favor by many of the laymen members and by a majority of the newspaper editors and publishers. However, funding and other assistance ended. The one exception was in Bend, Oregon. Robert Chandler, editor and publisher of the Bulletin, said that Sigma Delta Chi, an international professional fraternity, had sponsored the council. The Bulletin was founded under the guidance of university experts in journalism.

During that period, it was seen that those councils were reviewed with favor by many of the laymen members and by a majority of the newspaper editors and publishers. However, funding and other assistance ended. The one exception was in Bend, Oregon. Robert Chandler, editor and publisher of the Bulletin, said that Sigma Delta Chi, an international professional fraternity, had sponsored the council. The Bulletin was founded under the guidance of university experts in journalism.

During that period, it was seen that those councils were reviewed with favor by many of the laymen members and by a majority of the newspaper editors and publishers. However, funding and other assistance ended. The one exception was in Bend, Oregon. Robert Chandler, editor and publisher of the Bulletin, said that Sigma Delta Chi, an international professional fraternity, had sponsored the council. The Bulletin was founded under the guidance of university experts in journalism.
'a constructive role in change'
Reprinted with permission from Editor & Publisher Magazine, Nov. 20, 1971

In answer to queries from other newspapermen who may fear there is some danger of encroachment upon the treasured rights of a free press, Ray feels no danger whatever; in fact, he feels there is a greater appreciation of the role of a free and responsible press in a democracy.

"Are they trying to tell you how to run your newspaper?" is the question fellow editors frequently raise. His answer is that council members realize their role is strictly advisory.

"Isn't it true that laymen don't know anything about professional problems?" Ray answers, "and this helps the whole community better understand our problems."

Whether the original impetus came from a reader voicing a specific complaint, a council member suggesting a change, or the editor asking for council reaction to a proposal, all participants agree the council has had a constructive role in helping to bring about some beneficial changes in the papers.

For example, when council members suggested the papers were giving too much space to routine society news, the news staff accepted a recommendation that this be reduced and increased attention be given to broader social issues and public affairs.

In similar vein, the council judged there was little interest in detailed publication of church handouts on Sunday services. The council reasoned that church members had already received such information in their respective church bulletins, and many of the details had little or no interest to other readers. Acting on council advice, all ministers were notified that this type of advance story on services would be reduced in favor of fuller coverage of newsworthy church projects, in-depth reporting of significant issues in the world of religion, and occasional guest editorials by ministers or church laymen.

Technical changes involved the dropping of column rulers, greater effort to improve the quality of picture reproduction, and better wording of obituary headlines.

The papers were the target of some sharp criticism on two regular features—"Police Blotter" and "Sheriff's Log" columns. Council members came away from a spirited discussion of those columns with better knowledge of the laws of libel and an awareness that lively reporting with occasional touch of humor sparks reader interest. The editor, in turn, became more aware of the need to exercise discretion in writing about the foibles and misadventures of his fellow men.

Coverage of local elections, youth problems, drug raids, land development, teacher tenure, and creation of new public parks are among major issues the council has studied thoughtfully. Members have scrutinized such issues in terms of community needs and in terms of how the newspapers can best serve the community in dealing with them.

Why has the Littleton council succeeded so well?

"Receptivity is the key word for the editor," according to Houston Waring, the man who founded the original Colorado Editorial Advisory Board 25 years ago. At that time, Waring primarily wanted the advice of experts in such fields as economics, sociology, and education. If an editor really wants the advice of experts or the opinions of people active in community affairs, he will listen to them, weigh their ideas carefully, and adopt suggestions that are feasible.

"For a press council to succeed, the newspaper must have a good responsive editor," said Prof. Miliken.

"It is absolutely essential that we have a receptive editor," Chairman Poettmann echoed. And he added that the council in Littleton works so closely with the editor and his staff that it would be very difficult to separate the two when trying to decide who should be given credit for much of the progress that has been made. He concluded, "It's like the old expression, "It takes a village to raise a child.'"

How is the Littleton press council organized and how does it operate?

Unlike the other councils founded with the financial support of the Mellott Fund, which had university journalism professors brought in from outside the community to serve as organizers and moderators, the chairman of the Littleton group is a local man. Although he has no journalism background, Dr. Poettmann is a capable five-year newspaper organizer, deeply interested in local issues, and firmly convinced that a progressive newspaper is one of a community's most valuable assets.

Among the total of 12 members, those not previously mentioned include a high school teacher, a vice president of the Gates Rubber Co., an artist, a housewife active in civic affairs, a professor of industrial relations, two high school students, and the owner of a restaurant serving Mexican-American food.

Key people on the newspaper staff choose the council members, striving to select a diverse group of people active in community life. Care is taken to avoid appointing friends or people with whom the staff ordinarily come in contact. Present members of the council are invited to suggest names of candidates to fill vacancies.

Original plans called for members to serve three-year terms, but the council in general agreement now that three years is probably an optimum length of time. Turnover, with terms expiring on a staffed basis, provides for both continuity and fresh viewpoints.

Meetings are held three times a year. Other press councils have tended to meet more frequently, but most Littleton members feel that three meetings a year have been adequate. Two favor more frequent sessions. Those members who consider three adequate say they can communicate with each other or with the editor between meetings, and special meetings can be called if they are ever necessary.

The fall meeting each year is a dinner meeting at a local restaurant for orientation of new members. Other meetings are held at the home of Chairman Waring. Poettmann believes the informal environment of home meetings with coffee and cookies being served is conducive to a relaxed attitude and fruitful discussion. The fall meeting usually lasts from two and one-half to three hours.

Editor Ray often brings one or two staff members with him, and as many as five key persons from the newspapers may attend the annual dinner meeting.

When the original plans were formulated, it was announced that the council would hold two meetings each year at which there would be no representatives of the newspaper. It was thought this would encourage free discussion—that members might be reluctant to criticize the editor or discuss the newspapers' shortcomings in the presence of staff members.

That idea was soon abandoned. Council members let it be known that they would not be afraid to speak their minds, and they strongly preferred to have representatives of the papers present to answer questions and to supply information pertinent to any problems under discussion.

Very little expense is involved in the operation of the council. The Littleton newspapers pick up the tab for the annual dinner. They also pay for the only other expenses—postage and the light refreshments served at meetings.

Ray and Waring believe the returns are great for the small investments of time and money that are involved.

Waring once said, "Suburbs are not naturally communities. They must be made so by the newspaper. Our goal is to help people understand the environment, hoping that the right person will jump in to make changes—with our help if need be."

"The Press Council helps produce a better paper and a better community," Ray added. "I have learned that people believe it is a healthy sign for us to be open to criticism. People in the community now realize that I really do care what they think."

In accord with this, Mrs. Rita Zimmermann, an artist and housewife, expressed pride in the council and its role in working with the editor. She said, "A good feeling I have is that the council backs the editor. He has to make difficult decisions, and it is good for him to know we are supporting him."