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By WILLIAM A. WELT

In the following question-and-answers taped interview, Alfred Balk, editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, gives his views on the national news council proposed by Joe Twentieth Century Fund. Mr. Balk served as researcher for the fund's news council task force.

Q: What exactly is the national press council proposed by the Twentieth Century Fund?

A. The press council is a private body of men and women from both the press and outside the press who have the responsibility of hearing complaints about the fairness and accuracy of specific press coverage. The council will decide the validity of the complaints and speak out in defense of freedom of the press.

Q: How did the Twentieth Century Fund — founded in 1919 and endowed by Edward A. Filene to be a watchdog over American institutions — come to propose a press council?

A. The Fund convened a task force about two years ago to study the problem of press credibility. The crescendo of political attacks on the press at the national level had been escalating and the task force was formed to investigate what could be done to ameliorate the situation, which (the Fund) felt, could become a threat to the basic freedom of our society. Among the council members was a private press council emblazoned with the name of the national news suppliers, rather than all the nation's media.

Q: How will press council members be chosen?

A. They have been chosen by a working committee that included members of the task force not connected with the national news suppliers and representatives of foundations which are being asked to fund the experimental, three-year operation of the press council.

Q: When might we expect a working national press council?

A. The council expects to begin operation this year. It originally thought it would begin in the spring, but there have been some delays. It's a complicated thing to set up and they want to get it set up right. They're thinking now of announcing the membership and the charter sometime this summer or early in the fall.

Q: What has been the reaction of the national media suppliers — by that phrase, I expect the Fund means the big newspaper syndicates such as the New York Times, Washington Post and Los Angeles Times, the national news magazines, the two wire services AP and UPI, the three television networks, and national newspapers like the Wall Street Journal and Christian Science Monitor.

A. That's right. The national media has been somewhat divided, and this is not unexpected. All of them were approached informally at first. The most vehement press council opponents, I would say, have been the managing editor (A.M. Rosenthal) and publisher (Arthur Ochs Sulzberger) of the New York Times.

Q: What is the reason for their opposition? I believe they have stated that the Times will not cooperate with the press council.

A. Most of the national news suppliers have said they either favor the council or have deferred to a wait-and-see attitude. The Times has several main objections. First, it should be stated that the Times is not a monopoly and John Oakes, editor of the Times editorial page, was a member of the task force. Mr. Rosenthal and Mr. Sulzberger have said they think a press council would be a distraction from what they feel are the main problems of the media. They feel it would create a climate of excessive regulation, even though it is a private body with no power except the power of publicity. And they feel — if I'm interpreting them correctly — that this would hurt the credibility of the press, and become a sounding board for people who want to attack the press.

Q: How important is the official cooperation of a national news supplier such as the Times to the success of the press council?

A. The council doesn't need the endorsement of the media, it only needs information from them. I think the council could operate in some fashion with no cooperation from any of these news organizations. Our Columbia Journalism Review has been able to get information with expression of approval. Of course, the press council is intended to air both sides of a dispute and it would be far better for the council — and the public and the press — if it could get information directly from the news organization. If I had to predict, I think that once the council is established, it has shown its credibility and the caliber of its membership, that it will be impossible for any media organization to fail to respond to the simple questions the council will ask without looking very bad. On the other hand, if the press council proves to be inept and made up of foolish people, the council will die anyway.

Q: You said the council would seek to be an ombudsman.

A. Yes, an "ombudsman" or third party to help both sides who have met an impasse and feel they have nothing more to say to each other and nowhere else to go. Especially these days a lot of us feel that the council is worth a try believe that that's the kind of situation the press can't afford. It's an arrogant, I'm talking to a discussion to just say, "We have no more to say to you. We say we're right, you say we're wrong, that's the end." It's not in the press' self-interest to have that happen. The other side would be encouraged to go to the political arena, to go to government to complain and talk about how arrogant the press is being. Some members of the press are arrogant, of course, and they need to come down.

Q: The press council then, would be more mediator than arbitrator of disputes?

A. That's correct. It should be understood that the council would not act as a prosecutor, nor would it try to meddle in situations that don't require a third party. A requirement is that before a complaint can be considered from an individual, there has to be evidence that effort had been made to solve this complaint with the organization involved. Secondly, before a complaint can be considered, the individual has to sign a waiver of legal action so that the council would not be used as a tool to gather evidence for somebody's law suit. If they intend to bring legal action, they should do it and not take the press council route.
Q. How would the council deal with the question of newswoman's privilege and confidential sources?

A. The council rules say it is not to inquire into any confidential sources. It feels it can do its work without even getting into that area.

Q. If the council attempts to mediate a dispute and is unsuccessful, what will it do then?

A. It will write a report, which will not say simply 'guilty' or 'innocent' of the charge, but will explain what the views are on both sides and include the council's finding, or opinion, saying that the news organization did as well as it could have, or should have done better. All that's asked, after this, is that some media organization — and I suspect our Columbia Journalism Review would be one — would publish this finding. It is hoped that the media organization in question would also make known the council's finding. But that's not required. There's no sanction, and none is desired.

Q: Britain is among several nations that have active national press councils. In Britain, does the media organization that is a party in a mediated dispute publish the council's findings, even when it is against the organization?

A. That has been the case in all but a few instances. Britain, however, is a bit of a different situation because the publishers themselves set up the press council and they support it with their own money.

Q: You have said the council will not get involved in the
question of newsman's privilege. What kinds of disputes will it become involved in?

A: The council will concern itself only with the fairness and accuracy of news stories, and not other areas such as editorial comment.

Q: Is it correct to assume that you personally are an advocate of this press council — or National News Council, as the Fund calls it?

A: Well, I am now. I must say when I went into this I was very skeptical about the whole idea and, as I had the good fortune to be able to do research and talk to people on both sides, I could examine the idea. I became an advocate of the position that the council is worth a try. I became convinced that the main arguments used against it come from people of inexperience who simply don't know, or are so overprotective that they don't want to try anything new.

Q: George Reedy, former press secretary to Lyndon Johnson and now dean of the College of Journalism at Marquette University, has written an article for (More), a New York journalism review, opposing the press council. In that article, he says that "The Twentieth Century Fund report that proposed the council appears to assume a breed of man and woman that I have never seen — faceless human beings who are not subject to the passions that sway the rest of us." His point is that he doubts the ability of council members to be less biased than the two parties in a press dispute. How do you respond to that?

A: I'm sorry that he even brought up this straw man. No institution expects to operate only with perfect people. There aren't any perfect people, that's why the council expects to have a wide spectrum of men and women, geographically and politically, providing checks and balances on each other and who have one thing in common above all — that they are trying to address themselves to an objective view of a situation. They will fall short of perfection, but perfection is not required in order to function in a society of checks and balances.

Q: Mr. Reedy also says that while a press council could check facts, most press disputes today are political in nature and the council could not handle them. How would the council deal with a complaint, say, that charges the Associated Press or the Los Angeles Times with slanting its Vietnam coverage?

A: There would be such complaints, but the press council's franchise is only to deal with factual accuracy of reports and with the willingness of a media organization to make corrections when errors are brought to their attention, which would be a matter of fairness. There is no effort to try to make every media organization into a conservative or a liberal or a broad centrist with no fire to it—and I'm surprised, again that Mr. Reedy raised this point.

Q: Mr. Reedy says he wonders if the public would assume that the council has been fair if it finds against an individual and for a media organization. How would the council build public trust?

A: The beauty of that problem is that it's self-regulating. If the council does not have credibility, by definition it won't be respected. The only way it will get credibility is if there is evidence it is willing to consider all sides of an issue and come to some fair, mature, sophisticated kind of judgment. Merely by setting forth what it has found, it will educate the public about the problems of press coverage.

Q: Mr. Reedy says that "basically, the proposal for press board is an effort to do indirectly what cannot be done directly — to regulate the press by centrally controlled 'persuasion' when it cannot be regulated by law."

A: The council doesn't want to regulate anybody. All it wants to do is publicize what it feels are, in specific cases, points needing publicizing. If these points make sense, the public and the press will accept them. If they do not make sense, and are shrill and seem an effort to bring conformity, then the press and many of the public sector will blow that council off the map.