

PUBLISHERS AND COMMUNITY PRESS COUNCILS

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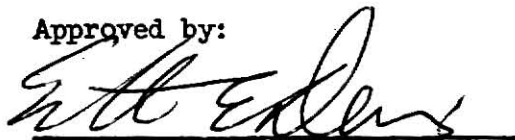
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I. THE PROBLEM

Some kind of public accountability on press performance seems inevitable and insofar as it keeps the press alert to new needs in the country it will be a mutual blessing for the news media and their audiences. If the press as a whole continues to refuse any part of this process of the accounting, then it will be done by others, and not always wisely.¹

Ben Bagdikian's warning to communications media is only one of many voiced within the past five years. Pollster George Gallup recently warned newsmen, "Your public is fed up with what they consider the excesses of the press, especially in the areas of sex, conflict, and the stimulation of controversy."²

In November, 1969, Vice-President Spiro Agnew's comments about the media carried live over national network television spurred an informal, voluntary polling of public opinion about the media. The Vice-President suggested that the broadcasting industry was especially at fault, with news and comment programs directed by a "closed fraternity of privileged men" in Washington, D. C., and in New York City. The media, he said, should be compelled by their listeners and readers to "represent the views of America."

These and other remarks brought widespread favorable comment from television viewers. Many called television and radio stations throughout the country to register their opinions. The New York Times on November 14, 1969, reported that a sampling of radio and television stations by the wire services showed that the callers supported Agnew by more than two to one.³

One of the few major actions taken to bridge an apparently growing gap between media and their publics has been in the form of four experimental community press councils established under sponsorship of the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press.

Of course, other attempts to help the situation have been and are being planned. For example, in 1969, Nicholas Johnson of the Federal Communications Commission proposed a board of critics to survey the electronic media only. Roscoe Drummond has stated that Freedom House publishing company is planning to create an institute to appraise the continuing performance of television and the press.⁴

In addition, the Association for Education in Journalism, an organization of college journalism teachers, established an ad hoc committee to investigate "means for the regular evaluation of the performance of mass communications in the United States at the local and national levels."⁵ At least one retired editor has high hopes that the AEJ action taken in August, 1969, in Berkeley, California, will result in the association forming and supervising a national press council. The editor, Houstoun Waring, wrote, "The AEJ stands as an informed group midway between the active journalists and the American public. If journalists were to appoint the National Press Council, the nation would suspect a whitewash."⁶

Amidst this continuing controversy about the method and value of media evaluation, it seems worthwhile to examine recent attempts already mentioned to establish evaluative councils, though they have been on a local rather than a national level. Publishers of the local newspapers were especially important to these community press councils, since without their cooperation and willingness to listen, any discussion the council held had no value.

To understand what has been done, keeping in mind the perspective of publishers, this paper will include a review of the literature plus responses from six publishers to an informally-phrased questionnaire. It will explore the impact of community press councils upon publishers and will attempt to deal with such issues as the value of opinions from council members unfamiliar with journalistic method and practice, the effect of a council upon a newspaper's editorial freedom, and others.

II. HISTORY

The idea of press councils and evaluative commissions is not new. In 1916, Sweden formed the Press Fair Practices Commission to act as a mediary between the press and the public. The British Press Council begun in 1953. and later revamped in 1963 to include members outside the journalistic profession is often regarded as a model when discussion in this country turns to the issue of a national press council. Currently, other countries around the world have national press councils which may have statutory powers or may have no powers other than their public influence as mediators between the public and the press.

Dr. Howard R. Long and Dr. Kenneth Starck of the Department of Journalism of Southern Illinois University and administrators of two experimental councils in Illinois, considered press councils to have two major functions:

1. By considering specific issues related to press performance, press councils have had a hand in crystallizing the concept of press responsibility, and
2. They have served as a two-way communicative link permitting both the press and its audience to better understand each other's needs and problems.⁷

Most press councils have been national in scope--for example, in Germany--with members from both the journalistic and from other professions. When looking at these examples, critics of the national press council idea here point out that the number of newspapers, apart even from other forms of media, is too large to be fairly evaluated by a central national body. Nonetheless, this has not halted the discussion about a national council that began when the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press issued its report in 1947.

Robert Hutchins, then chancellor of the University of Chicago, headed the commission and selected 12 men to serve with him, including ten college professors, a former assistant secretary of state, and a bank board chairman. He also chose four foreign advisors. The commission, which was financed by \$200,000 from Time Inc. and \$15,000 from the Encyclopedia Britannica, interviewed 58 working journalists and held 225 other talks with members of industries, governmental and private agencies concerned with the press. From their extensive probing, commission members issued a report which included thirteen recommendations for press improvement. Among these was one calling for "the establishment of a new and independent agency to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press."⁸ As one of its responsibilities, the agency would investigate cases of "persistent misrepresentation of the data required for judging public issues," the commission suggested.

Most press comment about the report was unfavorable. One prevalent criticism was that most commission members were educators; none were from the working press. George E. Sokolsky said in the New York Sun, "It strikes me that a jury of saloonkeepers to determine what is wrong with an irresponsible and immoral American education system would be just as competent as this jury of professors for the American press."⁹ Others complained that the facts cited by the report were not new and so were of little interest.

An agency to evaluate press performance was not established, just as other of the commission's recommendations were ignored. Yet the report stands as the catalyst for the current continuing discussion about press evaluation versus regulation.

III. THE MELLETT AND OTHER COUNCILS

One of the first recorded press councils in the United States began in 1946. Houstoun Waring, then editor of the Weekly Littleton (Colorado) Independent, had just completed a year at Harvard University as a Nieman fellow. Spurred on by what he had learned there and from the Hutchins Commission's information, he formed the Colorado Editorial Advisory Board consisting of eight Colorado Editors who met quarterly with eight experts from the fields of foreign affairs, journalism, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, human relations, and public opinion polling. During four-hour sessions, the press was criticized and current events were examined in depth. When the venture died after six years for lack of someone to coordinate it, Waring turned to an annual critics dinner, supplemented with weekly Sunday morning breakfasts with community leaders, who he pumped for their knowledge and opinions.¹⁰

Later, in 1951, Professor Chilton R. Bush of Stanford University helped the publisher of the Santa Rosa (California) Press-Democrat conduct a council that served for a year.¹¹

Recent Councils

Six newspapers have had press councils in their communities since 1967. (See Table I.) Four of these began as experimental councils, set up through funding by the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press, an independent fund established through a bequest from the late Lowell Mellett to the American Newspaper Guild. He requested that the money be used to increase the responsiveness of the press while preserving its freedom.

TABLE I.
COUNCIL DATA

council	members	selection	meetings	began	status
Bend, Ore.	9	suggested by publisher	monthly	10/67	active
Redwood City, Calif.	9	cross-sec- tion of community leaders	monthly	10/67	ended
Cairo, Ill.	15	1.active in commu- nity af- fairs; 2.collec- tively represent diverse interests	monthly	10/67	ended
Sparta, Ill.	15		monthly	10/67	inactive
Littleton, Colo.	10	various age and interest groups	every 4 months	11/67	active
Rosebud, S. D.	8-12	represent views of Indian people	yearly	5/68	inactive

Ben Bagdikian headed a board of trustees which decided to grant funds to two universities to operate community press councils in cooperation with local publishers for about a year. Dr. William Rivers of the Department of Communication at Stanford University and Dr. Howard Long, chairman of the Department of Journalism at Southern Illinois University, were bound by only two rules:

1. Each council was to be conducted by the university moderator who organized the council;
2. All community council members chosen by the university were to understand that their proceedings, which could take many forms, would include no power to change the content of the newspaper or to limit its editorial discretion.¹²

Donald Brignolo, in a Freedom of Information Report, noted that the objective of all four Mellett-funded councils was to promote a continuous dialogue between the representatives of the community and press, without infringing on press freedom, and to demonstrate the overall usefulness of a press council.¹³

Dr. Long, project director, and Dr. Kenneth Starck, field director and moderator, in October, 1967, selected two small cities in Southern Illinois: Cairo (population 9,348) and Sparta (population 3,452). They represented different socio-economic conditions, different newspaper situations, and both publishers--Martin Brown of the Cairo five-day-a-week Evening-Citizen and Bill Morgan of the weekly Sparta News-Plaindealer--pledged cooperation.

Dr. Rivers and William Blankenburg, a graduate assistant who wrote his doctoral dissertation about the project, selected Bend (population 12,000), a city in a rural part of Oregon, and Redwood City (population 60,000), a suburban city in California. Robert W. Chandler, president and editor of the six-day-a-week Bend Bulletin, and Raymond L. Spangler, publisher of the daily Redwood City Tribune, agreed to cooperate.

In addition to the experimental councils, two other local councils began about the same time. What is thought to be the first press council in this country to begin on a permanent basis was established in November, 1967, in Littleton, Colorado. Formed by editor Garrett Ray and editor emeritus Houstoun Waring, the council was composed of ten critics drawn from the trade territory.

A sixth council in the United States was organized in May, 1968, in Rosebud, South Dakota. Editor Frank LaPointe organized the press advisory council for the Rosebud Sioux tribe's biweekly newspaper after he heard about the Littleton council. He described it as a "loosely-knit council" of eight to twelve members which meets annually. Since the Rosebud Sioux tribe is the actual publisher, council discussions may include important policy changes.¹⁴

IV. FUNCTIONING: THE MELLETT COUNCILS

William Blankenburg defined a community press council as a group of interested laymen who volunteer to advise a local publisher on the community's information needs and to evaluate the performance of the newspaper. They recognize First Amendment guarantees of press freedom and acknowledge that their opinions are no more than advisory.¹⁵

In the case of the Mellett councils, citizens volunteered to serve only after being selected by the university administrators. In Bend, Rivers chose seven persons from a list provided him by Chandler, then recruited two others on his own. In Redwood City, the project director attempted to get a cross-section of nine community leaders, including a Negro and a high school student. It was decided that Bend council meetings would be publicized. In Redwood City, Ray Spangler preferred the council's existence to remain unpublicized in order to preserve his freedom of management, which extended even to his staff's knowing about the council.

Starck and Long used two criteria for membership on both Southern Illinois councils. They looked for individuals who were active in the community and who, collectively, represented as many diverse community interests as possible.¹⁶

Each Illinois council had 15 members. In Cairo, which remains in 1970 a racially divided and economically torn city, they avoided persons with militant racial positions.

All four councils met monthly. The Cairo press council operated with minimum local publicity and devoted its first three meetings to discussing the role and function of the press in society in terms of authoritarian, Soviet-

totalitarian, libertarian, and social responsibility theories. It was also to consider specific cases of newspaper performance and, upon request of a member, vote by secret ballot to register council sentiment. Actually, the council cast ballots only three times: to express approval of a front-page editorial, to request the newspaper to cover a specific meeting of the Cairo Human Relations Commission, and on the issue of printing the criminal record of a dismissed public official, to show even division.

Maximum local publicity surrounded Sparta press council meetings, as members took the initiative in discussion and search for the role of the newspaper in the community. Considering specific cases of newspaper performance was not a major function and no votes were taken.¹⁷

The Plunge

Publishers Brown and Morgan were admittedly apprehensive at their first meetings, as were Chandler and Spangler on the West Coast.

William Blankenburg, who served as secretary of the Bend and Redwood City council meetings, observed,

The two publishers came to their first working meetings with polite wariness. Like those who have speculated critically on press councils, they appeared ready for unwarranted attacks, impossible demands, and assaults upon their authority.¹⁸

Spangler at the first meeting in Redwood City retired into near-silence after reciting this couplet to the members: "In all our towns and all our cities/ There are no statues to committees." A week later in Bend, Chandler engaged in what was to be the first and last display of real anger in either council, in an argument with a long-standing critic of the Bulletin, who was now a council member.¹⁹

In Southern Illinois, Morgan and Brown agreed to attend the last half of council meetings, leaving the members to begin discussion without them. This practice began after interviews with council members revealed a fear that publishers' presence might inhibit discussion. (The custom continues today in the present organization of the Sparta council, with the approval of Morgan.)

But on the West Coast where publishers habitually attended the entire meeting, their occasional absences had a detrimental effect. When Chandler was absent for an entire meeting in Bend, the council lapsed into uncertain pondering of the reason for its existence. A similar episode occurred when both the editor and publisher were absent in Redwood City for a meeting. This aimlessness seemed to indicate to Blankenburg the strong necessity of publisher cooperation with the press council.

"A council is fruitless if it cannot in some way deal with the newspaper-- just as it flounders if it does not communicate with the public," he said.²⁰

In all councils' first meetings, members without a journalistic background displayed a desire to receive information about the operation of newspapers. In Bend and Redwood City, this had the effect of making Spangler and Chandler the authorities-in-residence, since their knowledge of the field obviously surpassed that of the members.

According to the report of Blankenburg, this may have lead the members on these councils to look at newspapers on the publishers' own terms, though through no instigation of Spangler or Chandler.²¹

Later, discussion centered on the nature of the council or opinions of the newspapers in both cities, with no balloting of members. Instead, the publishers, after discussions which Blankenburg reported were only incidentally

critical, would usually grasp a consensus and pronounce judgment. Rivers and Blankenburg also suspected some of the members' information-seeking to be a device to postpone or avoid stating a position.

Members' suggestions to publishers frequently came in the form of questions. "Such question-suggestions could be--and often were--perceived by the publishers as purely informational queries," said Blankenburg.²²

In Southern Illinois, the councils talked about issues which pertained directly to the newspaper, including questions about production and policy, and issues which related to the entire community, such as race relations. Starck reported the issues intermingled most of the time, the only difference being whether the entire community or the newspaper served as the discussion base.²³

In Sparta and Cairo, members received brief subscriptions to other newspapers to use as a standard of comparison. Several indicated they thought this was useful.²⁴ In Redwood City, Rivers supplied members with copies of the daily San Rafael (California) Independent-Journal, but no members referred to this or compared the Tribune with it.

Members readily introduced new topics for discussion in the Illinois councils. Starck reported that the month's interval between meetings generated new questions and new points of view among both members and newspaper representatives.

In Bend and Redwood City, agenda prepared in advance by Rivers furnished the principle direction of discussion for each meeting. Blankenburg reported a reluctance on the part of members to suggest topics for discussion. In addition, he saw a common discussion pattern in meetings of both councils,

"beginning with the introduction of an agenda item by the moderator and usually ending with a definitive position taken by the publisher." In between, members discussed but took few firm positions, perhaps indicating again that the information barrier between laymen and working journalists was formidable.²⁵

Publisher Morgan, after an early encounter with the Sparta press councils, said, "I've just been putting out a newspaper. I've never really thought much about why we do things--except that that's the way we've always been doing them."²⁶

Chandler was forced to defend his news standard when members of the Bend council questioned him on publicity policy. Both he and Spangler commented that the councils had stimulated them to think more about the quality of their newspapers' performances. Spangler remarked that "a council could well feed new ideas into tired newspaper minds."²⁷

Although directors of the West Coast councils noticed that a suggestion did not have to be good in order to stimulate publisher thinking, they also saw that acceptance of a valid criticism by the publisher did not necessarily mean the ill was cured for all time. This was true especially in the case of day-to-day practices performed by a number of persons.

Chandler, who prided himself on critiquing the work of new reporters and usually saw every employee daily, mentioned initial council criticisms to the reporter at fault and the managing editor. The editor, apprehensive over "having outsiders telling me how to run the paper," showed his displeasure and Chandler did not cite the council to him again.²⁸ Later, however, the managing editor attended two council meetings, was agreeably impressed, and won the gratitude of council members for appearing to be a willing listener to their comments.

Chandler reported council viewpoints during regular critiques to all but one long-time reporter sensitive to criticism.

Blankenburg concluded that the councils made few demands on the time of the publishers in Redwood City and Bend, although both men made genuine attempts to review and prepare to discuss agenda items before coming to meetings. Both invited council members to visit their newspaper plants and the council staff encouraged telephone calls and correspondence between members and their acquaintances about the council. Generally, members did minimal preparation for council meetings.

Results of Experimental Councils

Donald Brignolo in a Freedom of Information Center Report, found three intermingling effects arising from press councils:

1. The community press councils tend to lead the newspaper publisher to a greater awareness of the need for responsible press performance;
2. Community press councils serve a valuable public relations function: they allow the publishers to explain newspaper policy and practice to the readers and, at the same time, afford citizens the opportunity to make their needs known to the newspaper;
3. The sheer presence of community press councils increases the esteem and understanding of the newspapers involved in the eyes of council members and readers.²⁹

For example, the Cairo press council directed its most severe criticisms at the Evening Citizen for the lack of local news on the front page and the lack of locally written editorials. A content analysis revealed that during the last half of the experimental council's existence, more local news appeared on page one. In the last quarter of the council's life, a dramatic increase in the number of local editorials was evident. Publisher Martin Brown commented that the council "put management on its toes" and served as a "sounding board allowing for a free discussion of all the city's problems."³⁰

On the West Coast, a content survey of the two newspapers found policies and practices relating directly to council activity, such as horizontal makeup in the April 13, 1968, Tribune just two weeks after a council discussion of horizontal makeup. However, both publisher and editor insisted that horizontal makeup normally was used as content allowed, and thus was purely coincidental at that time.

In a letter to Donald Brignolo, Blankenburg cited four reasons for reluctance of West Coast council members to sharply criticize the two newspapers:

1. Members were ignorant of journalistic norms and techniques and had to spend much time educating themselves;
2. They felt constrained to be responsible and not to lash out without data, but they felt at the same time little need to gather data;
3. The publishers had good answers for most criticisms;
4. Neither the Tribune nor the Bulletin was a bad newspaper.³¹

The largest share of council suggestions, to Chandler and Spangler, represented no change from standard practice. They further estimated that 40 per cent were trivial and of little value.³²

Chandler commented, "I would guess that we are more aware of the need for accuracy and fairness than we were before the Press Council started, but I cannot point to anything we have done to improve our practices, and I think we were doing pretty well prior to the start of the Council."³³

One publisher in Illinois echoed the complaint about council members "spending too much time with the petty or small problems."³⁴

Regarding publicity for the councils, Blankenburg and Rivers have advised that publishers in the future would do well to publicly acknowledge the council and that staff members should be invited to attend along with the publisher and editor. Also, the members themselves should be required to publicize the council within their other groups and solicit comments.³⁵

The Sparta News-Plaindealer, in an editorial, announced the beginning of the press council and listed criticisms already voiced by its members, commenting, "We're learning, and are going to do our best to improve."

In the permanent council in Littleton, names of council members appear in the Independent's masthead. In addition, Blankenburg noted that the editor writes his impressions of each council meeting in his personal column where he may omit any conversational indiscretions and praise good discussions. Blankenburg said that this was a good way to handle meeting coverage.

According to Blankenburg, publicity of council membership affords prestige and a kind of reward for members' voluntary service. In addition, he found that newspaper readers in both West Coast cities who happened to know a press council existed in their communities expressed a higher opinion of the newspaper on a questionnaire than those who didn't know about the councils.

Current Status of the Mellett Councils

All in all, the experimental councils were a qualified success. All four publishers contemplated continuing the councils after the universities officially withdrew in October, 1968. In Illinois, councils and publishers asked Dr. Starck to continue as council moderator, which he agreed to do.

Of the four councils, Chandler's is the only one still actively meeting on a bi-monthly basis with an attorney as moderator. He said that lack of knowledgeable council staff and moderator, however, is an important limitation of the present council.³⁷

The Cairo press council was discontinued in the spring of 1969, after racial problems in the city dictated that martial law take over, according to Martin Brown. He did not explain the situation further.³⁸

William Morgan said that the Sparta council is continuing but at present is not active because one member moved and another has been out of town. The twelve-member council plans to meet quarterly with Starck as moderator.³⁹

In Redwood City, the press council wasn't continued. Ray Spangler, who relinquished his post as publisher in 1969, remarked that its chief value was in instructing the members in the ethics and practices of newspapering. "It would serve a purpose (to continue) if there were problem areas between the editorial staff and the reading public," he observed.⁴⁰

Publishers Reflect About Councils

The argument often used by editors and publishers against press councils is that they would violate the First Amendment guarantee of a free press unfettered by government laws or regulation. All publishers reported that they have received inquiries from other journalists about their experiences and one of the most frequently asked questions continues to be: "What about abdicating your editorial responsibility to a committee?"

As Blankenburg indicated, this objection was kept in mind when the Mellett councils were organized: all council members were specifically advised that their discussions were strictly advisory. Likewise, Howard and Long and Kenneth Starck reminded their councils of their limited advisory capacity.

After the councils' one-year experimental existence ended and Blankenburg was collecting final information for his report, he found that Chandler and Spangler laughed when asked if their press freedom had been abridged by the councils.

Chandler felt that any public attempts short of a boycott would not constitute an abridgement on his paper. Spangler was more conservative and held that a council should go unpublicized in order not even to give the appearance of a yielding of authority.⁴¹

In Southern Illinois, one publisher commented, "As a publisher, I would assure another publisher not to worry about the loss of control or any inroads as to management's decision which a press council might make."⁴²

When the councils ended in 1968, Spangler remarked to the Redwood City council, "You were much too kind."⁴³

Since Mellett councils have been widely publicized, much information about them could be obtained from published literature. However, their current status, along with the status of the two independent councils, was not known and other questions remained unanswered. Through a questionnaire mailed March 27, 1970, an attempt was made to find some answers. The six publishers who received the questionnaire returned the completed form within a week's time.

One of the questions included was: If the situation arose, would you form a special press council to advise you on one problem, such as election coverage?"

Only Ray Spangler said yes, because in periods of controversy, an editor may be misled by an organized campaign of letters to the editor which give the appearance of strong public opinion on one side of an issue. He said

We once favored allowing a known Communist to address the student body of the local junior college and were inundated by an organized writing campaign. A council in this situation could give the editor a broader view of public reaction if he had any doubts or misgivings. We had none.⁴⁴

Others replied that the existing councils could handle such issues, or that a time element would prevent organizing a special council.

Regarding changes made as a result of council suggestions, Spangler said, "We explained some, changed some, but none as a result of council comment...We do listen, but it just happened that the council was not effective in this area."⁴⁵

Chandler, while citing no specific changes in the Bulletin, remarked that he is more aware of some particular sensibilities in the small Oregon city of Bend. Morgan cited small changes made since 1968, such as grouping theater ads and exercising more care in reporting follow-up stories.

Of the six, only Martin Brown of the Cairo Evening-Citizen and Frank LaPointe indicated they may ask for council opinion before making major policy decisions. Brown indicated this would depend on the issue in question. LaPointe said he might query the council, "to find out if change will be controversial or taken in stride."⁴⁶

Asked on the questionnaire about important limitations of a community press council, one publisher remarked, "The effectiveness of any council is directly dependent upon the newspaper publisher."⁴⁷

Others saw as important the council members' inexperience in journalism methods and standards. Chandler, whose council is now headed by an attorney, said the lack of a knowledgeable council staff or moderator can be a limitation upon a council.

Asked to rank the most important benefit from meeting with press councils, the publishers' opinions varied. Morgan and Spangler thought that council suggestions which made them reconsider and question some of their newspapers' practices were most important. Chandler and LaPointe valued most the opportunity to learn about community information needs from the council members. Criticism which provoked consideration of the quality of his newspaper's performance was most important to Brown, and Waring cited increased esteem and understanding of the newspaper as the most important benefit he derived.⁴⁸

Four publishers said they favored publicity for a council. Spangler reiterated his early aversion of publicity, saying, "It creates a special class of readers above all others who may be presumed to have special importance in determining

editorial policy." Martin Brown, whose council also did not publicize its meetings, remarked, "I think it would depend on the community, its problems, and the particular issue in question."

V. SUMMARY

After a long discussion about press evaluative commissions, which began in this country with the 1947 report of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, the first organized experimental trial with such bodies came in 1967 through funding from the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press. About the same time, a permanent press council was established in Littleton, Colorado, and later a local press advisory commission was set up to serve in Rosebud, South Dakota.

In looking at these organizations from the perspective of the publishers and editors involved, one immediately notices the importance of their participation in the organization. The councils were all composed of laymen unfamiliar with newspaper operation and function, and most of the publishers, through no instigation of their own, served as their information sources about journalism. One of the experimental council staff members noted that this tended to make members view newspapers on the publishers' own terms.

The Mellett councils' membership and direction was decided by the university professors administering them. Consequently, they each had unique features. But in general, the West Coast councils discussed topics from an agenda provided by the moderator, Dr. William Rivers of Stanford University, at each monthly meeting. In Southern Illinois, moderator Dr. Kenneth Starck noted that members readily introduced new topics for discussion at monthly meetings in Cairo and Sparta.

The Illinois councils consisted of fifteen members each, chosen in order to get as many sections and interests of the community as possible. The councils

in Bend, Oregon, and Redwood City, California, each had nine members.

Publishers of all councils commented that questioning of their practices by the councils had stimulated them to think about and reconsider the quality of their newspapers' performances. There was little communication between publishers attending the council meetings and the rest of the newspaper staffs, however, except in Bend. Likewise, on the West Coast, council members did not exert themselves to discuss council business and potential discussion topics with other organizations or acquaintances. Councils that received publicity generally benefitted from it by gaining prestige in the eyes of readers, Blankenburg concluded from the results of a questionnaire.

At the end of the Mellett experimental councils in 1968, publishers noted that forty per cent of the councils' suggestions were trivial and of little value and that the largest share had represented no real change from their present practices.

Of the four Mellett councils, two have been discontinued, one is inactive, and one is still meeting. In addition, the two independently established councils in Littleton and Rosebud are still meeting, although the latter has been inactive recently.

When thinking about the year spent with the experimental councils, publishers laughed about their fears that a council could abridge their press freedom. However, this remains one of the points most frequently asked about in mail they receive from other publishers in the United States.

Through a questionnaire mailed to the six publishers and returned within a week by all of them, some of their current thinking about press councils was tapped:

- Five out of six would not form a special, short-term council, replying that either existing council could best advise them or that a time element would prevent it.
- Publishers cited only a few minor changes made as a result of suggestions from council members.
- Only two publishers indicated that under certain circumstances, they would ask for the opinion of a press council before making a major policy decision for their own newspapers.
- Publishers listed as important limitations of a council, first, their own lack of participation, second, the lay council members' lack of knowledge about journalism, and third, difficulty in finding a knowledgeable moderator and staff for the council.
- Benefits from the council meetings ranked high by the publishers included council suggestions which provoked publisher reconsideration of newspaper practices and a chance to learn about community information needs from the council.
- Four of the six publishers favored publicizing the council existence--the two who did not had participated in Mellett experimental councils which were not publicized.

Recommendations for Further Study

This paper did not include information about two summer councils sponsored by the Mellett Fund in Seattle, Washington, and in St. Louis, Missouri. It might be worthwhile to compare the operation and outcome of these special-purpose short-term councils with those discussed here. Most publishers here responded that they would not consider utilizing such a council, but possibly this is because they and others do not understand their purpose and potential value.

Obviously, discussing and exploring different means to evaluate the press will continue. Persons interested in this field--hopefully, most journalists are--will have no lack of material for further study and examination. The

developments coming from the AEJ ad hoc committee may be especially interesting: If a national council does develop, will it follow the British precedent or inaugurate new avenues through which to appraise and criticize?

Conclusions and Implications

The information presented in the body of this paper raises several questions about the operation and value of a press council. This section will speculate about those questions.

Perhaps the most important concerns the demise of the Cairo, Illinois, council which occurred just at the time when it would seem the council was most needed and could have served a valuable function--during a period of strife and racial discord in the community. Although editor Martin Brown did not elaborate on the reasons behind the decision to discontinue the council, several questions come to mind. Was a sense of mistrust underlying the relationship between the newspaper staff and the lay council members? Had discussions previously included predictions of the racial troubles yet to come? Did the imposition of martial law necessitate the disbandment of other community groups? The circumstances surrounding this community and its local press council might be the sole topic of another academic paper. Certainly more information about it would be valuable to future organizers of local press councils.

Another point which can be drawn from the Cairo experience is that the demographic and socio-economic circumstances of a community exert a strong influence on the nature of press council. In order that the problems of the community be recognized as a real force when selecting council members and also in council discussions, organizers might do well to enlist the help of a social scientist from a nearby university or college before the council is formed.

Although this paper did not list in detail what each council discussed, general trends were mentioned, as for example, the trend of West Coast councils to rely for discussion topics on the discretion of the council's moderator, Dr. William Rivers. In Southern Illinois, on the other hand, where an agenda was not set up, apparently, in advance, council members willingly volunteered topics. It would seem, then, that a wise council organizer would state from the outset that members as well as publishers were expected to bring possible agenda items to the attention of the rest of the council. And as others have mentioned, members should be expected to seek out comment and criticism from their acquaintances and organizations.

If the participating newspaper is equipped with or has available to it a public opinion polling service, the council might ask for this assistance in determining what issues are most on the minds of the subscribers. This, along with more participation at council meetings from reporters and other news staff, could greatly expand the range of council discussions.

From the information gathered about publishers and press councils, it is obvious that a major function of all the councils and of many of the publishers was to educate council members about journalistic standards and methods. Perhaps instead of regarding this as a limitation, as some do, it would be worthwhile to see this as a major public relations and public education function.

Leslie G. Moeller, professor of journalism at the University of Iowa, said recently,

In a 1967 survey of 603 students in 14 Colorado high schools, a Quill and Scroll research project, James R. Hickey and James E. Brinton found that 45 per cent answered "rigidly control" and 39 per cent answered "use only some control" to the question, "To what degree do you believe local, state and federal government should control the mass communications media with regard to derogatory statements about people."⁴⁹

Moeller considered this attitude among the young, besides obviously spelling danger for the concept of a free press , also points out the need for public education about the basis of a free working press and its role in society. He suggested that presently, the public is dissatisfied with the press and other media but may not have the soundest possible basis for that judgment.

Taking this into consideration, it seems that if a council does nothing else but educate its members so thoroughly that they in turn can educate their associates and organizations about the value and responsibilities of a free and responsible press, then it has accomplished a valuable job. This education would consist also of the responsibilities of local citizens whose concern and comment to the local newspaper should be welcomed by publishers and editors.

Thus far, education has not been a primary goal for the community press councils already established. But Spangler said that in his opinion, that was the main reason for the existence of a council in Redwood City. Although the council disbanded, presumably after the education of its members had been accomplished, the job of another council might begin in earnest at this point.

Finally, as mentioned by Dr. Kenneth Starck in his report to the Mellett Fund, organizers of a press council may wish to consider including non-subscribers in the council membership. Often such a constituency includes low-income community members who may be alienated from the economic and political mainstream but can see no way of entering to participate. When asked about the value of including such persons in the council membership, some publishers responded with comments such as, "If you go too far into the ghetto, folks are inarticulate," and "This takes away from the primary purpose of a press council." Few publishers favored the idea. Yet it can be argued that these persons, as community members

too often powerless within a monopoly press and media situation, are thus completely denied access to any means of communicating their plight.⁵⁰

As pointed out in various national commissions' studies, including the Kerner Commission on civil disorder, this repression or non-recognition of this part of society can be a dangerous mistake. Alternative ways of communicating about their situation may include rioting and demonstrating. It would seem that a community would do well to investigate its real composition (often community leaders may avow "We have no ghettos here" when, in fact, they exist but remain beyond "official recognition.") before establishing a council. Most publishers working with councils recognized the importance of a community cross-section. Certainly this low-income, too often "silent" portion of the community could be represented.

The Mellett experiments seem to have had modest success. The fact that two of them have died, however, indicates that local press councils may not be the final answer to appraising media performance nor to the need for better communication between public and press.

Blankenburg, who does not foresee community councils springing up in great numbers, instead predicts the council idea will take one of several forms, depending upon needs and problems of the media and publics involved. These could be one-medium, multi-medium, local, regional, lay, professional, short-term, one-problem, and general councils. Bill Rivers said that "a press council is not a necessity in every city. It would have its greatest utility in big cities where a significant portion of the population is at odds with the community power structure."⁵¹

Judging from publisher reaction, all recognized the value of a council. Martin Brown predicted, "If the press doesn't supervise itself and become

more responsible, we are asking the government to do so."⁵²

At least among the six men polled for their opinions in March, 1970, the consensus was that councils, despite their limitations, could be helpful to both the publisher and public.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Mellett councils, as mentioned by Donald Brignolo, was to demonstrate that a community press council can work effectively in the United States without infringing upon freedom of the press.⁵³

The search continues for other appraisal vehicles and procedures-- grievance committees, local ombudsmen, perhaps a national council. But the six pioneer councils, despite their limited success, represent the first steps toward responsible appraisal of the press and other media in this society.

FOOTNOTES

¹Ben H. Bagdikian, "The Press and Its Restless Public," The APME Red Book 1968, XXI (New York: The Associated Press, 1968), pp. 72.

²"Local Press Councils," Problems of Journalism, Proceedings of the 1969 Convention of American Society of Newspaper Editors (Washington, D. C., 1969), pp. 78.

³Linda Charlton, "Most Callers Back Agnew," New York Times, November 14, 1969, pp. 1.

⁴Houstoun Waring, "How to Form a Press Council," Grassroots Editor, January-February, 1970, pp. 7.

⁵Ibid., pp. 7.

⁶Ibid., pp. 7.

⁷Howard R. Long and Kenneth Starck, "Pilot Demonstration on Developing Community Press Councils in Southern Illinois," (Unpublished report to the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press, Southern Illinois University, October, 1968), pp. 1.

⁸Commission on the Freedom of the Press, A Free and Responsible Press: A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspaper, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 100-101.

⁹Judith Murrill, Hutchins Commission (Freedom of Information Center Publication No. 69, Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri, 1962), pp. 7.

¹⁰Rick Friedman, "The Weekly Editor," Editor and Publisher, April 20, 1968, pp. 95-96.

¹¹William Burl Blankenburg, "Community Press Councils," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1968), pp. 4.

¹²Bagdikian, Red Book, pp. 70-71.

¹³Donald Brignolo, Community Press Councils (Freedom of Information Center Publication No. 217, Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri, 1969), pp. 2.

¹⁴Frank LaPointe, response to an original questionnaire, March, 1970.

¹⁵Blankenburg, dissertation, pp. 1.

¹⁶Kenneth Starck, "Community Press Councils in Southern Illinois," Grassroots Editor, November-December, 1968, pp. 5.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 5.

¹⁸Blankenburg, dissertation, pp. 54-55.

¹⁹William B. Blankenburg, "Local Press Councils: An Informal Accounting," Columbia Journalism Review, Spring, 1969, pp. 14.

²⁰Blankenburg, dissertation, pp. 96.

²¹Ibid., pp. 86.

²²Ibid., pp. 50.

²³Starck, "Illinois," pp. 6.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 5.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 8-9.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 5.

²⁷Blankenburg, dissertation, pp. 83.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 58.

²⁹Brignolo, "Councils," pp. 4-5.

³⁰Long and Starck, "Pilot," pp. 26.

³¹Brignolo, "Councils," pp. 4.

³²Blankenburg, dissertation, pp. 72.

³³Brignolo, "Councils," pp. 4.

³⁴Starck, "Illinois," pp. 7.

³⁵Blankenburg, dissertation, pp. 99.

³⁶Blankenburg, "Accounting," pp. 16.

³⁷Martin Brown, questionnaire response, March, 1970.

³⁸Robert Chandler, questionnaire response, March, 1970.

³⁹William Morgan, questionnaire response, March, 1970.

- ⁴⁰Ray Spangler, questionnaire response, March, 1970.
- ⁴¹Blankenburg, dissertation, pp. 85.
- ⁴²Long and Starck, "Pilot," pp. 6.
- ⁴³Blankenburg, "Accounting," pp. 17.
- ⁴⁴Ray Spangler, questionnaire response, March, 1970.
- ⁴⁵Ibid.
- ⁴⁶Frank LaPointe, questionnaire response, March, 1970.
- ⁴⁷Martin Brown, questionnaire response, March, 1970.
- ⁴⁸Based on questionnaire responses.
- ⁴⁹Leslie G. Moeller, "A Free Press: How Can We Undo Misunderstanding," The Quill, March, 1970, pp. 9.
- ⁵⁰Ellis T. Baker, "The Troubles of (with) the Press," The American Federationist, April, 1970, pp. 14.
- ⁵¹Brignolo, "Councils," pp. 6.
- ⁵²Brown, questionnaire response, March, 1970.
- ⁵³Brignolo, "Councils," pp. 6.

APPENDIX

The questionnaire with cover letter which was mailed to each of the six publishers involved with local press councils in the United States is enclosed in this section. The questionnaire was prepared after an extensive search of the literature for points about councils which seemed important, yet needed clarification.

It was not designed, obviously, with statistical significance in mind. Rather, its purpose was to obtain information about the current status of councils and the current thinking of publishers and editors, some of whom have not worked with active councils for nearly two years.

The questionnaire was sent out airmail, special delivery, and an airmail stamped envelope was enclosed. This probably accounted for the quick (within a week's time of mailing) response and return of all the questionnaires.

5092 Waterman Blvd. Apt. 3B
St. Louis, Missouri 63108
March 27, 1970

William H. Morgan
Editor, Sparta News-Plaindealer
116 W. Main Street
Sparta, Illinois 62286

Dear Mr. Morgan:

As one of the pioneer newspapermen who has worked with community press councils in the United States, you probably have received many a request for help from graduate students working on research projects about councils.

This is no different!

As a student in the journalism department at Kansas State University, my master's research report is about publishers' reactions to press councils, past and present, with which they have worked. The importance of this seems obvious: without publisher cooperation, local press councils lose their reason for existing and become ineffective.

In order to get current reaction to existing local councils, I am coming directly to you. For information about the past, I have combed the published literature, including reports to the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press.

If you would take just a few minutes from your busy schedule to answer the enclosed questions, then shoot them back to me via the enclosed envelope, I'd be most grateful. If you add any additional comments that you think of, that would be a welcome bonus for me.

Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,



(Mrs.) Ann Buzenberg

Encl.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PUBLISHERS

March 27, 1970

Instructions: Some questions pertain only to councils now in existence. If a question does not apply to you, mark it NA. I've left space for brief answers, but you may write more, if you wish, on the reverse side.

Have other editors and publishers inquired about your experience with a local press council? If so, would you jot down a few of the specific details they have asked most about?

Has the press council in your community been discontinued? If the answer is yes, please jot down the date of termination and why it died.

If the situation arose, would you form a special press council to advise you on one problem, such as election coverage? (Please answer whether or not your community has an existing council.) Under what circumstances?

What are the most important limitations, do you think, of a community press council?

If your community has a local press council, would you supply some information about it:

number of members

moderator's name and profession

purpose of the council

method of selecting members

criteria for selecting members

frequency of meetings

date begun on a permanent basis

how topics for discussion are selected

Has the atmosphere at council meetings been more relaxed since the group became "permanent" instead of "experimental"? (This pertains only to councils begun under the Mellett Fund.)

Why do you favor (or not favor) publicizing council meetings and membership? If you are in favor, how do you do it?

Do you invite representatives from other local and regional media to press council meetings on occasion? Other special guests?

Do you think your work with the council since 1968 has been time well spent on your part? What changes have you made in newspaper coverage or makeup because of a press council suggestion within the past year?

questionnaire for publishers—second and last add

Please rank the following in order, number 1 being the most important and number 6 the least important benefit you would say comes out of your meetings with press council members:

- ___ Members learn about newspaper policy and practice.
- ___ Members have an opportunity to tell you about community information needs.
- ___ Suggestions from members make you reconsider and question some of your newspaper's practices.
- ___ Esteem and understanding of the newspaper increases among readers and council members.
- ___ Meetings provide a chance to meet with minority group representatives.
- ___ Criticism from members leads you to think more about the quality of your newspaper's performance.

When you think of making a major policy decision, do you ask council members for their opinions before finalizing your decision? Why?

Is it best for the newspaper editor or publisher to absent himself for part of the council meeting to allow free discussion to develop among members? Briefly give your current thinking on this.

Kenneth Starck, journalism professor at Southern Illinois University, asked in his report to the Mellett Fund: "Is it possible to involve (in local councils) that element of the citizenry which is alienated from the community, which is inarticulate and which doesn't even read newspapers?" Do you have any comment or suggestions?

Thanks so much for your time and help.

Ann Buzenberg
5092 Waterman Blvd. Apt. 3B
St. Louis, Missouri 63108

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PUBLISHERS AND COMMUNITY PRESS COUNCILS

by

ANN F. BUZENBERG

B. A., Kansas State University, 1965

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Technical Journalism

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1970

ABSTRACT

Although some publishers and editors remain skeptical about press councils, contending that they infringe upon the First Amendment freedom of the press, four publishers have participated on an experimental basis and two on a permanent basis with community press councils.

This report, based on a review of the literature and on questionnaires sent to the six men who represented local newspapers at council meetings, will discuss the local councils from the publishers' perspectives. Some councils differed in organization and administration because of the local publisher's wishes. The functioning of a council was closely tied to publisher participation and in some cases his personality. And the information and suggestions discussed in council meetings were useless unless the publisher attending thought them worthy of attention.

Each publisher took certain expectations with him into the first council meetings. Most common was a fear that council members would try to usurp editorial prerogative and to dictate what the local paper should print. The four publishers participating in the experimental councils organized under auspices of the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press said they saw no such attempts made by council members.

In terms of concrete changes resulting from council members' suggestions, however, publishers complained that many of the topics discussed at meetings were trivial. All four experimental councils spent a sizeable portion of time educating the members about the workings of a newspaper and about journalistic standards.

Questionnaires sent to the six publishers in March, 1970, requested information about the current status of the councils. Of the four Mellett councils, one is active, one is inactive, and two have been discontinued. Of the two independent councils, one is active and the other is inactive. Councils were discontinued, according to publishers, for reasons ranging from the enforcement of martial law because of racial disturbances in the community to the publisher's opinion that there are no problems existing between editorial staff and readers to be discussed.

According to publisher response on the questionnaires, most found positive benefits from attending local press council meetings. Generally, they considered being forced to reexamine their newspapers' established practices as one of the most important benefits. None, however, cited major changes they had made as a result of council members' suggestions.

The fact that several councils have been discontinued and others are inactive seemed to indicate that community press councils may not be the complete or final answer to what some journalists like Ben Bagdikian think is a current need for media evaluation. One publisher is of the opinion that small local press councils are not nearly so important as a national press council could be, patterned after the suggestions of the Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947.

But the current councils do mark a beginning toward a more elaborate structure of self-evaluation and regulation which can enhance, not limit, the media's freedom to offer fair, top-quality coverage about the events of the world and universe.