

# A Time To Think Of News Councils

By Reese Cleghorn



Reese Cleghorn, president of AJR, is dean of the College of Journalism of the University of Maryland.

*Minnesota's is a model for others, but not everywhere.*

In this year of great introspection among journalists, their "national conversation" has included cautious new interest in news councils representing news organizations and the public.

Gary Gilson, executive director of the Minnesota News Council, has two pieces of advice for anyone considering starting a news council: Keep the government out of it, and enroll news organizations as charter founders.

The Minnesota council and a less elaborate one in Honolulu are the only local or regional councils still active, though others existed after the idea was given momentum in the 1970s.

Minnesota's, especially, after nearly three decades of work, is a model for those who may want to consider one (see "Going Public," April 1997. A

forthcoming story will report on Honolulu's council).

Gilson was among 22 representatives of the press and public who met over three days in February at the University of Maryland to discuss "Journalism and the Public Trust."

Sponsored by AJR and funded by the Ford Foundation, the conference embraced a broader mix than usual for small, across-the-table deliberations about press responsibilities and accountability. It included newspaper editors, publishers and reporters; lawyers on both sides of the press' legal wars; an ombudsman; a philosopher; a conflict-resolution expert; and members of the public.

They were asked for "actionable ideas." An eight-page report on their discussions will appear in AJR in June.

No common sentiment emerged for a new National News Council, and just as well. There is no reason to expect that one would have more support now than did the one that expired in 1984.

A local council can be different.

Gilson says people in almost three dozen states have called the Minnesota News Council (612-341-9357) over time to say they would like to form news councils. He emphasizes that news organizations should share "ownership of the idea" because councils can be an alternative to lawsuits, an opportunity to show the public that news organizations are open and responsive to public concerns, a forum outside their own pages or air time to show that what they did was in the public interest, and a chance to understand gaps in the perceptions of fairness between the public and the news media.

Minnesota's council spends a bit more than \$200,000 a year and is funded 30 percent by news media, 30 percent by non-media companies, 30 percent by foundations and 10 percent by individuals and associations.

The council, founded by the Minnesota Newspaper Association but now independent, reviews complaints, conducts forums and works to resolve conflicts formally or behind the scenes.

Fifty state news councils? It would not work, or even be desirable, probably. Each locale and state is very different in ownerships, concentrations of power, rivalries and public institutions and impulses. But my guess is that there are now at least half a dozen areas where news councils could be effective and would serve the public and the press well. ●



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