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# Fed up with media? Support news councils

Nobody needs to be told, these days, that our national media — both print and electronic — are under heavy attack. The most common charge is one of liberal bias, which allegedly caused the media to pull their punches in reporting the various scandals that have erupted around President Clinton. Given the fact that, according to one careful survey, 89 percent of Washington reporters voted for him in 1992, that is hardly surprising.

But there is also no lack of attacks on the media for sheer sloppiness having nothing to do with bias, and for unfair tactics against targets chosen without reference to their politics. The problem is made infinitely worse by the fact that, short of a successful libel suit (which is almost impossible in the current state of libel law), there is no effective recourse for anyone badly used by the media. Wrapped in the comforting folds of the First Amendment, they simply laugh at their critics.

That is why there has always been a substratum of support for a National News Council, comprised of experienced journalists, lawyers and other experts, that would hear complaints against the media and render judgments without the force of law but with, presumably, a certain moral force that would ultimately influence media practices.

Such a tribunal, the British Press Council, has long existed in Britain, and at the state level in this country the Minnesota News Council has a respected record.



**William  
Rusher**

an estimable record of complaints heard and carefully adjudicated.

But the National News Council never won the sort of general media support that it needed to do its job. Its deadliest foe was Abe Rosenthal, executive editor of the *New York Times*, a man of famously imperial temperament who scorned the idea that any outside group could presume to sit in judgment of the *Times*. (In this he was simply extending a point made years ago by the late Willmoore Kendall: "For the *New York Times* to criticize itself is ontologically inconceivable.") And over in the field of television the war-drums of opposition were regularly beaten by Don Hewitt, the longtime producer of "60 Minutes."

But today, 14 years after the National News Coun-

cil expired, voices are again being raised in support of the idea that animated it. According to a recent Harris Poll released by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, 85 percent of Americans support the creation of "national and local news councils" to investigate citizen complaints.

Journalists would do well to listen carefully to the criticism implicit in such an idea. It is true that nobody is compelled to watch a particular television program or read a particular newspaper or magazine, but it is a fact that our sources of national and international news are extremely limited. Given the journalistic herd mentality that often leads to an important story being treated by all the media in the same way, or (worse yet) not covered at all, the available options are frequently all too few.

Still worse is the plight of the individual or group that is abused by a news organization. What recourse has he (or she)? A letter to the editor, which may or may not get printed? A correction or retraction, if the TV station feels like it? A libel suit, as already noted, is just about out of the question.

There is an issue of elementary justice here, which I hope the media are at last ready to recognize.

William A. Rusher is a nationally syndicated columnist.