

Why I think the news council idea is nonsense

We have a better system to prevent distortions and to achieve responsibility and accountability; what we have is competition

BY STANLEY S. HUBBARD

In my opinion, the idea of a press council is nonsense.

The idea of a press council (or "news council," as it's called here) is nothing more than an attempt by people who are not actively involved in reporting to somehow make themselves involved.

In short, I think the press council is a busybody activity for people who could more constructively spend their time doing other things.

Many thoughtful people would suggest that the most precious freedom of all is freedom of speech. These same people would suggest that the First Amendment is more important to the preservation of our way of life than any other single facet of our society's fabric. It is my opinion that press councils or the idea of a press council could at some time



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endanger our important right of freedom of speech and of the press.

I believe there is a great deal of misunderstanding on the part of the public and, indeed, on the part of many journalists regarding press councils.

When a press council holds a "trial" to determine whether or not a newspaper, magazine, television station, radio station, or network reported properly, what it is really doing is attempting to foist censorship upon the media involved. What business do people, who are not directly involved in a story, have in trying to establish themselves as a vigilante committee to pass on the manner in which a story was reported?

True, every individual has the right and every group has the right to raise questions about anything that anyone, including the news media, does; but do we have to participate? Of course not.

In America we have a far better system to prevent distortions in the media and to force responsibility and public accountability. What we have is *competition*. That is to say, if a television station, for example, were to attempt to distort the news, its competitors — the newspapers, radio stations, other television stations and magazines — would be quick to point out any such indiscretion.

We don't need a self-appointed vigilante-type organization to look over our shoulder. Our society provides as a court of last resort the court of law. We all know what can happen if news organizations libel someone. They will be sued in a court of law, and a court of law is far better qualified, through its powers of subpoena and through its swearing of witnesses, to get at the truth in case of an indiscretion on the part of a news organization.

As has always been the case in journalism, the best way to avoid criticism is to go out of your way to see that every responsible opinion on any side of an important question has an airing. In other words, be fair; and you can't lose.

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Here's why Kentucky said no to a news council

Editor's Note: Last February the Kentucky Press Association voted 67 to 20 against a state-wide news council despite a report that cited Minnesota's happy experience. John Carroll, editor of *The Lexington Herald-Leader*, was a strong opponent. Following are some of his objections, published in *The Kentucky Press*, the Kentucky Press Association's monthly newspaper:

The marketplace of ideas in this country was never intended to be tidy and simple. To the contrary, it was intended to be chaotic, a place in which the truth — constantly shifting, constantly under challenge — emerges imperfectly from many voices and many pens. . . . The idea of a news council implies that a panel of wise, independent citizens can capture the truth like a butterfly in a net and pin it to the wall. One wonders why the Founding Fathers didn't think of it.

The reason, of course, is that they knew better. . . .

One argument for news councils is that, by showing the news media's sense of responsibility, they build public support for the First Amendment.

That may have been one motive underlying the National News Council, but there was another one, never admitted: to elevate a slightly disreputable craft into a "profession" policed (much like doctors and lawyers) by solemn standard-setters.

The windy self-importance of the National News Council was more than an attempt to foster good journalism; it was a statement of social aspiration. And as such, it was likely in the long run to widen — not narrow — the gap between journalists and the rest of society.

The main reason a citizen should want