

Why the Minnesota News Council is alive

It was started by journalists but it's balanced by an equal number of public members and they all refrain from pushing too hard or laying down rigid rules

BY ALICE OLSON

What makes the Minnesota News Council so different? After all, news councils have not exactly thrived in this country. The National News Council expired in 1984 after 11 precarious years and local councils have been tried and died in 20 places. Meanwhile the state-wide Minnesota News Council has survived in good health for 14 years thanks to the convergence of factors with a distinct Minnesota flavor: a durable organization set up by farsighted founders who won over most — though not all — critics; members who refrained from pushing beyond what constituent journalists will accept by way of review; and dedicated staff work on a shoestring.

It was Pentagon Papers time, those first years of the state council's life. The press was under harsh criticism by national political leaders; key players in Minnesota's journalism community, taking the criticism seriously, looked for a constructive way to head off abridgment of First Amendment freedoms. They were good politicians, those journalists who gave the council a good start. But a heaping measure of credit belongs to the public members. It could not have worked without them.

It was born "The Minnesota Press Council" in 1971. The founding fathers were a small group of leaders — like Phil Duff, then editor of *The Red Wing Republican Eagle*, and Bob Shaw, then manager of the Minnesota Newspaper Association (MNA) — who got unanimous support for a council

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from the association's board of directors. That support gave the council legitimacy that the self-created National News Council never enjoyed. Still, J. Edward Gerald, a now retired University of Minnesota journalism professor, who was council secretary in its early years, speculates that the course of events might have been different if the proposal for a state-wide news council had been put before the MNA members in a referendum. The Minnesota council, in other words, was established before opposition could be organized, as it was later in Oregon, Wisconsin and Kentucky.

The Minnesota founders also knew that it could succeed only if it had the cooperation of the two major Minnesota newspaper organizations, *The Minneapolis Star and Tribune* and *The St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch*, then four separate newspapers. Care was taken to overcome any opposition those two news organizations might voice.

The council began with 18 members, nine representatives of the press, nine from the public. It was chaired at the outset, as it has been ever since, by a member of the Minnesota Supreme Court. Its first members included the state's attorney general, the president of the University of Minnesota, and a veritable "who's who" of the state's civil and media leaders. (See accompanying list.) The first grievance case gave the council credibility. It was filed by a state legislator, (who

under the rules waived the option of a libel suit) against the labor-operated *Union-Advocate*, and the council found for the legislator. It was proof that journalists were capable of critical self-examination.

The council's membership has grown to a current total of 24. Although some critics think it is too large to work well, the equal division between media and public members continues to enhance its reputation for fairness. But there has been a significant change in the media representation. Originally conceived as a forum for grievances against the print media, in 1977 the council decided to receive and determine complaints against radio and television news departments.

This, Gerald holds, changed the nature of the council. The new pattern, as he points out, retired half of the print journalists and replaced them with news broadcasting personnel; and since the major Twin Cities broadcasters refused to join up, the caliber, rank, and achievement level of council membership changed. Radio and television personnel on the council, Gerald thinks, are not representative of broadcasting as a whole. Instead of ready acceptance of complaints and willingness to deal with them, both of which had characterized newspaper journalists' responses, the broadcasters offered "opposition, refusal to deal, stonewalling" of council initiatives and correspondence. This, Gerald says, has persisted.

Inclusion of electronic news in its purview is the major change in the council's 14-year life. Its work has been steady and sure in assessing the more than 700 complaints that have come to it. Along the way the council moved from the volunteer, part-time staff

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work of its secretary, Gerald, to a full-time professional directorship, a post now held by Tom Patterson. None of the original council members continues to serve, though the succession has brought in capable and respected members.

Within the Minnesota newspaper community the council enjoys considerable support, although a few of those who opposed it at the outset continue to do so. Radio and television stations outside the Twin Cities metropolitan area have accepted the council's non-binding oversight and regularly appear at hearings to explain themselves. But the major television stations in Minneapolis and St. Paul have a mixed record of responses to complaints filed with the council.

Although the council has received more than 700 complaints since its founding, only fifty-four have made their way to final decision. First notice of a complaint comes when a reader contacts the council. This is generally a phone call or letter to the council office.

"Often this step is the last step because I am able to offer suggestions about how to approach newspapers with complaints and what kind of response or redress they might reasonably expect," Director Patterson says. Miffed readers often don't know what to ask of their local paper; when they are encouraged to seek corrections or to try letters to the editor, they are satisfied. The council's voluntary services — which include voluntary mediation to avoid hearing contests — carry no fees or costs. Compared to libel suits, council procedures are a real bargain.

Complaints actually heard by the Council do not fit a simple pattern, but there are quantifiable characteristics. Sixteen of the 54 determinations resulted from complaints by public officials or candidates for office: complaints of a paper's unwillingness to cover their campaigns, errors of fact, misleading characterizations and unfair political advertising policy. Ten complainants objected to coverage given to political organizations and nine to letters-to-the-editor policy or prac-

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tice. Seventeen cases have required that the council look at news gathering or reporting practices; and recent determinations relate to newspapers' corrections policies.

The result has been a case-by-case approach rather than the development of guidelines for media performance, a list of ethical standards that apply in every case.

Hence the council must be content with the benefits its work now derives: the voluntary internal review it generates in the newsrooms of the state, the vindication its complainants feel after having been heard, and the opportunities that determinations offer to get the state's journalists to think about how particular cases might apply to the way they do their work. These are no small achievements, they are well worth the investment in time and self-control on the part of council members and money on the part of the council supporters.

So what does it prove, this Minnesota News Council? Gerald again:

"First of all it proves that journalists are intellectually competent to constitute a council of this sort; that they're temperamentally suited to do so; that they're courageous and direct and forthright in the administration of the council. It's a demonstration of the integrity of the journalists who constitute the council. It also demonstrates that there's not a threat, but rather an advantage, to freedom of the press to have such a council. It really puts to rest the fears that you've heard. And it demonstrates that there are intelligence, character, courage in the newspaper people; and that Twin Cities radio and television people deny their own validity in opposing it." □



In its 14-year history, the Minnesota News Council has had only three chairmen, all State Supreme Court Justices, and all currently on the Court: (left to right) Justice C. Donald Peterson, the Council's first chairman; Justice John E. Simonett, current chairman; and Chief Justice Douglas Amdahl.

The Roster of The News Council

COUNCIL MEMBERS, 1985

Kerry Ashmore, Publisher, *Northeast* bi-weekly newspaper, Minneapolis
Beth Bednar, Executive News Producer/Anchor, KAAL-TV, Austin
George L. Brooks, President, Broadcasting III, Inc., Red Wing
Don R. Casey, Editor, *St. Cloud Daily Times*
Harold Chucker, Economics Writer, former Associate Editor, *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*
Dr. Jane Earley, Dean of Arts and Humanities, Mankato State University

Linda Falkman, Manager, Minnesota Newspaper Association
Mike Foley, News Director, KBJR-TV, Duluth
Mary M. Forsythe, State Representative
Gary Gilson, Producer, KTCA-TV, St. Paul
David Graven, Attorney at Law, Minneapolis
Harold Higgins, Executive Sports Editor, *St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press*
Thomas E. Holloran, Chairman of the Board and President, Inter-Regional Financial Group, Inc., Minneapolis
Jean King, President, Citizens League, Minneapolis
Ruth A. Myers, Co-Director, American Indian Programs, University of Minnesota-Duluth School of Medicine
William Pearce, Corporate Vice President, Public Affairs Department, Cargill, Inc.
Mary Peek, Writer and Education Consultant, St. Paul
Charles B. Persons, Former Owner, KOBR-AM Radio, Brainerd
Bob Ryan, News Anchor, Minnesota News Network, St. Paul
Nancy Selby, Vice President, American Association of University Women
John E. Simonett, Associate Justice, Minnesota Supreme Court

Louise Sundin, Vice President, Minnesota AFL-CIO, First Vice President Minnesota Federation of Teachers, an English teacher at Southwest High School, Minneapolis
John Warder, Vice President, Urban Development, First Bank, Minneapolis
Mary Ziegenhagen, Newspaper Consultant

The three newest members in this list were elected February 22, 1985. They are King, Sundin and Warder. The members they succeeded are:

Bernard Brommer, Secretary-Treasurer, Minnesota AFL-CIO. He served one term of three years and decided not to run for a second term.
Evelyn Fairbanks, Workshop Facilitator, Minneapolis. A two-term (six-year) member, she was not eligible for re-election.
Emily Anne Staples, Director of Development, Spring Hill Center, Plymouth. Also a two-term (six-year) member, she was not eligible for re-election.