

Editors Reject Any Regulations To Block Legal, Crime News

Post
4/15/68
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The board of directors of the American Society of Newspaper Editors yesterday voted to reject any regulations that would "black out" large areas of information in the field of criminal and legal matters.

The ASNE board, meeting at the Washington Hilton, gave unanimous approval to a report by the Society's press-bar committee. This committee had made a year's study of complaints that press coverage of criminal proceedings is such as to deny defendants a fair trial.

The issue, an old one, has been debated with intensity since publication of the Warren Commission's report on the assassination of President Kennedy. Proposals to deal with it have come from Capitol Hill, the courts and the bar.

In its report, the pressbar committee of the ASNE said that convincing evidence that press coverage of criminal proceedings injures the chances of a fair trial for defendants was "almost totally lacking."

While rejecting outside regulation of news media as "impractical and harmful," the committee did make three other recommendations.

It called on the Nation's press to rededicate itself to the principle of reporting crime news with restraint, taste and a scrupulous regard for the rights of defendants; to reaffirm its obligation to provide the public with full information about law enforcement, and to undertake discussions at state and local levels with the bar, the bench, and law enforcement agencies for the purpose of correcting abuses and furthering both full news coverage and fair trials.

The committee noted that some of the proposals for reform call for regulation of the courts and the bar to assure fair trials. After commending

these, the committee said:

"The press has no wish to conduct 'trial by newspaper'; by the same token, it has no desire for lawyers and police to attempt 'trial by publicity.' It is well content not to further either headline-hunting or prejudicial activity by members of the court-police complex.

"But we feel that it is proper for the press to resist vigorously regulations of the bar and the law enforcement agencies that would black out large areas of information from the moment of an arrest until the beginning of a trial.

"The democratic community is not merely entitled to know promptly the facts about crime and the progress of law enforcement and the administration of justice; democracy's successful functioning is endangered by lack of such knowledge."

The press-bar committee

was made up of Creed C. Black of the Chicago Daily News, Herbert Brucker of the Hartford Courant, Alfred Friendly of The Washington Post, chairman, and Felix McKnight of the Dallas Times-Herald.

In dealing with the report of the Warren Commission—particularly its statement that premature disclosure of evidence against Lee Harvey Oswald would have jeopardized a fair trial for him had he lived—the press-bar committee said it thought the complaint was unfair.

Of another statement by the Warren Commission—that the public's "curiosity" should not have been satisfied at the expense of the accused's right to a trial by an impartial jury—the committee said:

"With all respect, your committee disagrees fundamentally with this statement. It was not mere public curiosity . . . that demanded satisfaction. The matter was as essential to the citizens of a democracy as any other that can be imagined. Particularly because of the history of Oswald—and it is not pleasant to think how it would have appeared if the inescapable revelation of it had been spread only by word of mouth through a furious and grief-stricken Nation—the most complete and exact information was required at once."

The American Society of Newspaper Editors opens its annual three-day convention at the Washington Hilton this morning, and about 500 editors are expected to attend.

They will hear talks by Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, and James E. Webb, head of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and five of his NASA associates.

The question of "Fair Trial and Free Press" will be discussed at the Friday morning session, when Attorney General Katzenbach speaks.