

... And Against

Interviews by CJR's Evan Jenkins

major news organizations and big-time journalists. In the interview with Wallace excerpted here, "Walter and Abe" are Walter Cronkite, an opponent of the old council who now says a new one might be worth looking into, though he remains very wary, and

A.M. Rosenthal, now a New York Times columnist, who adamantly opposed the council as executive editor of the paper and still has no use for the idea. Nor does the Times's current executive editor, Joseph Lelyveld, as he made clear in his own interview.

LELYVELD

On the desirability of news councils:

This newspaper took a position on it the last time this idea came around just under a quarter of a century ago, and that was we weren't going to play. We think it would compromise our independence. We have a deep concern that voluntary regulation can lead, bit by bit, to more serious kinds of regulation, and while we're very interested in the whole subject of the standards of the press and do our damndest to uphold the standards that this paper has always had, we think that's our job and we don't want to be monitored by a lot of self-appointed people. That's not to say we don't welcome press criticism. We get a lot of it. I welcome it all. It tests you. It makes you think.

On the low esteem in which the public holds the media:

You know "the media" is a very big term. It includes *Hard Copy* and super-market tabloids and *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*. I have my own guesses about why we're in bad odor. I think it has something to do with all the talking heads on television. What people see of journalists is very often highly opinionated people who are eager to put their opinions between events and the people consuming the events. There's also a great audience for that, so people watch it and react negatively to it, but they go on watching it. I don't see where a press council solves that problem. There's been a striking decline in basic coverage of basic institutions of our society — what state legislatures do, what local councils do. There's a tendency to look for quick hits, sensational take-outs. I don't see any way in which a press council addresses that.

I think the problem of the American press in general is that it has become too docile, that in too many places it's not



doing its job. A press council would be just another reason for not vigorously engaging with basic day-to-day tough reporting of what's going on in the institutions of our society. And the ones who would get the action would be the ones who are trying to do the job right, not the ones who aren't doing the job at all.

The practical side of it is something I can't get my head around. Presumably in every state or large locality — and if you really believe in this idea, nationally — there should be a news council. There would be a whole new profession investigating the press. I don't really see where that answers the general complaint that some segments of the press are elitist and arrogant. We feel that if we're responsible to anybody for our performance, and of course we are, it's first of all to our readers and second of all to our own sense of the traditional standards of this newspaper.

I do fear, on the practical side, being enmeshed in a kind of endless series of arbitrations where there can be no victories but you are just fighting for your reputation all the time against perhaps large, well-financed corporations with public-relations departments which could just find it useful to tie you up in hearings, or against partisan groups which would have their own motives in undermining your reputation. All of it, it seems to me, would have a chilling effect on the spirit of free inquiry.

On potential savings to news organizations if news councils replaced the courts as arenas for grievances:

That seems to me a fairly narrow reason for establishing such an elaborate apparatus. Look what happened in Britain. They started out with a form of voluntary regulation through a press council and then a few years ago when there was one of these flaps over the privacy of the royal family, an official was appointed to study the effectiveness of the press council and produced a report calling for statutory governance of press excesses. Now, Britain doesn't have a constitution and we're not Britain, but I think that would be the drift. As a form of libel insurance it just doesn't seem to me an adequate motive for setting up such a mushy body and process.

On the newsworthiness of a news council's findings:

We certainly wouldn't bar mention of the news council from our pages. [But] we certainly wouldn't report it the way we report the federal district court or court of appeals or the Supreme Court because it's fundamentally not a court. It's a kind of glorified town meeting, but it's not even the town. Talk about elitism! Who gets on these things, and the people who sit there, how hard do they work at it? Is it their job or is it a gig?

We know very well from our own work how expensive and time-consuming it is to do a major investigative job on a complicated subject. Now somebody comes in to judge how well we did it. Their effort should be somewhat on a par with ours, it seems to me. By the very nature of the thing it can't be. I find it hard to imagine a process that one could respect. I'd rather take my chances in court. ♦