

Editors Urge Federal Law to Protect Reporters

APR 14 1971

NYTimes

WASHINGTON, April 13 (AP)—The American Society of Newspaper Editors was urged today to press for a national law to protect reporters from court orders, fines and jailing to force them to disclose news sources.

The society's Freedom of Information Committee said there had been recent improvements in White House policy on news conferences. But it reported that there had been serious mishandling, and in one case "raw censorship," by the Defense Department of news on the Laos operation.

The report, prepared for tomorrow's opening session of the society's 1971 convention, criticized the effort of civilian courts and prosecutors to breach the confidentiality of news sources.

"The weapon most used against press freedom this year was the subpoena," the editors' committee said. "Its use reached epidemic proportions.

"Lazy law-enforcement types used the subpoena to try to force the press to do their investigating. Embittered legal types used subpoenas to harass the press. Some cynical government officials used the subpoena trying to force the press to act as lawmen."

The committee, headed by Robert M. White 2d, editor and president of The Mexico (Mo.) Ledger, said 17 states now had laws to shield newsmen.

It gave credit to Attorney General John N. Mitchell for issuing guidelines to curb the use of subpoenas by the Federal authorities, but it agreed with Mr. Mitchell's suggestion that only legislation will pro-

Committee Cites 'Epidemic' of Subpoenas Demanding Disclosure of Sources

vide the ultimate protection needed.

Of the several proposed shield laws introduced in Congress, the bills "coming closest to an ideal, practical and possible" law, the report said, are identical measures introduced by Representatives Edward I. Koch, Democrat of Manhattan, and Charles Whalen Jr., Republican of Ohio, with 31 co-sponsors.

The report said that after a White House meeting of media representatives on Presidential news policies, President Nixon "has opened himself up to several different sort of questioners."

Despite this recent progress, the committee said, "the limited number of Presidential press conferences during the year is a matter of deep concern."

Mr. Nixon will be questioned by a panel of editors at the society's annual dinner Friday night.

Mishandling of information on the unsuccessful raid on Sontay, North Vietnam, to release prisoners supposedly held there was reported by Wendell Phillippi, managing editor of The Indianapolis News. Mr. Phillippi served as a one-man subcommittee on military information.

The lesson taught by Sontay was that "getting the bad news out as quickly as possible is the best policy," Mr. Phillippi

said, but subsequent events in Laos suggested the lesson was not learned.

Reviewing the conflict between correspondents and the military authorities on the blackout of reportage of the Laos operation, Mr. Phillippi said it was two weeks before Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird gave permission for newsmen to cover operations aboard a helicopter.

"Newsmen said, and rightly so, that the action amounted to censorship," Mr. Phillippi said.