

Watching the Press

By Lester Markel

The press, by tradition the "all-seeing" eye for the public, is afflicted with myopia. It is so occupied with discovering the defects in the optics of others that it fails—or refuses—to see the mote in its own. New evidence of this malady is found in the current debate over a press council. Even though the public displays little interest, it is a discussion of large public concern.

That public attitude is another manifestation of widespread mistrust or lethargy about the press. Justified or not, a "credibility gap" exists between editor and reader; the press is attacked for inaccuracy, for bad reporting and sensational editing; for irresponsibility (for disregard of the public interest); for reluctance to adequately correct errors (or even admit them); for inaccessibility (for refusing to provide sufficient voice for views contrary to its own).

The press generally rejects these criticisms. It questions the charges of error and prejudice; it contends that it is blamed for the blackness of the news, as though it were the creator rather than the reporter of that news; it insists that the real threat is the Government campaign to intimidate the press.

Now there is no doubt about the grave menace of the Nixonian assault on the press: the investigation of newsmen, the attacks on broadcasters, the prohibition on public affairs discussion on Public TV, the use of subpoenas and other devices to straitjacket the media. All this is brazen, unprecedented and cannot be condoned.

But in the light of the size of the thrust and the need to safeguard the First Amendment the public reaction is shockingly mild. This threat to basic freedom should have stirred the public to a storm of protest. Instead, despite the outraged cries from the press itself, there has been measurable reaction only from a small, intellectual minority.

Of the possible remedies, a press council, modeled after Britain's (and one recently set up in Minnesota) can be the most effective—an unofficial panel of representatives of public, management and editorial staff, which receives complaints from readers, passes judgments on them after the medium has rejected requests for correction, and makes its findings public, with no obligation on the part of the press to publish them. The British council has proved its worth; without coercion and without power of enforcement it has won the confidence both of the public and the press.

Something called a "press council"

has been proposed by a task force set up by the Twentieth Century Fund. This body would limit its reviewing to news reporting by the "principal national suppliers of news"—such as the wire services, the syndicates, the broadcast networks and the news weeklies; "individuals and organizations would bring complaints to the Council."

But there are two vital differences between this kind of body and any genuine press council; first, the proposal to deal with "wholesale" rather than "retail" news is grossly inadequate; just as important as, and possibly more important than, the kind of news received by a news medium is the use of that news, how much of it and in what form it is published. Second, few, if any, users of the "retail" news—those invited to bring grievances—see the "wholesale" news.

The plan is a weak compromise that distracts attention from the real thing; in the long run it is likely to hurt rather than aid the cause of better journalism. A genuine press council is urgently needed. Obviously a council on the scale of Britain's is impossible here because of the country's size and the great number of publications. But a series of regional press councils would surmount these difficulties; they could bring about better communication between reader and editor, greatly diminish the credibility gap and, most of all, alert the public to the threat to itself that is inherent in the attack on the press.

Why does this not happen? Because the press, pretending to believe that there is no credibility gap and asserting its near-infallibility, countenances no effective supervision of its operations; it has adopted a holier-than-thou attitude, citing the First Amendment and in addition the Ten Commandments and other less holy scripture. For example, the American Society of Newspaper Editors recently voted more than three-to-one against the establishment of any grievance committee, even one under its own auspices.

Thus the stalemate: the public favors some kind of press council; the editors will have none of it. Question: What has happened to *pro bono publico*? Sooner or later the press must recognize that it has a semipublic status and should be subject therefore to the same kind of scrutiny it applies to other public and semipublic institutions; and, most of all, it must realize that it must be responsible as well as free because only if it is responsible and responsive can its freedom be assured.

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