

Editors Oppose Crime News Curbs as Dangerous

WASHINGTON, April 14 (AP)—Directors of the American Society of Newspaper Editors said today that rigid official curbs on crime news coverage would be impractical and possibly dangerous.

The society's directors also rejected a Warren Commission proposal that the press adopt a professional code of conduct intended to assure accused persons a fair trial. Their report said a voluntary code could be "more harmful than the evil complained of."

A clash of opinion on the issue seems likely at the society's annual convention, opening tomorrow. Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, who will speak on Friday, is expected to announce some new curbs on what Federal law-enforcement officers may tell reporters.

The report of the society's special "free press-fair trial" committee, headed by Alfred Friendly, managing editor of The Washington Post, said pre-trial reportage frequently furthered the ends of justice.

"In a community, for example, where crimes against a given race or group are traditionally tolerated, publication of the facts about the crime and the suspect may be the instrument that forces rather than obstructs justice," the report said.

"Much the same is true where the malefactor has friends in high places or is closely aligned with the political structure of a community.

"And when similar forces are

bent on railroading an innocent man, his protection as well as the proper ends of justice are served by publication."

The report urged that the press rededicate itself to the principle of reporting criminal affairs "with restraint, good taste and scrupulous regard for the rights of defendants" and to undertake continuing discussions with the bar, the bench and law-enforcement agencies on fostering fair coverage and correcting abuses.

The findings of the committee were accepted and endorsed by the society's board of directors at a convention-eve meeting. The board recommended that society members seek to implement the recommendations wherever possible.

The issue has agitated the legal and journalistic professions particularly since the Presidential commission headed by the Chief Justice Earl Warren criticized the press for its conduct after the assassination of President Kennedy and the slaying of Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin, in Dallas.

The commission, which conducted an inquiring into the assassination, said the news coverage was partly responsible for "groundless rumors and public confusion" about the events at Dallas. This the editors' committee denied today, saying that the press had originated no false reports and, in fact, could take pride in the accuracy and completeness of the information it reported.

As for the Warren Commission's statement that "neither the press nor the public had a

right to be contemporaneously informed by the police or prosecuting authorities of the details of the evidence being accumulated against Oswald," the committee commented:

"With all respect, your committee disagrees fundamentally with this statement."

The report said:

"It is worth letting the imagination run for a moment on what the consequences would have been to the persons and property of both right and left-wing groups in the United States, to Oswald's widow, and indeed to the public attitude about relations with the Soviet Union, had any areas in the whole ghastly episode been hidden behind a curtain of official secrecy during the first 24 to 72 hours after the fatal shots.

"For the public to have been left speculating, guessing and ultimately inventing for the several weeks, or more probably months, before Oswald could have been brought to trial would

have been a course fraught with the greatest dangers."

The committee concluded that the proposals most frequently made for barring pre-trial reporting or repressing information "would not only cause a forfeiture of the public's credence in their news media but would withdraw the essential safeguard of public awareness and scrutiny from the processes of justice."

The committee members, besides Mr. Friendly, were Creed C. Black, managing editor of The Chicago Daily News; Herbert Brucker, editorial-page editor of The Hartford Courant, and Felix R. McKnight, editor of The Dallas Times Herald.

Vice President Humphrey is scheduled to address tomorrow's luncheon meeting of the society. Secretary of Commerce John T. Connor will be the luncheon speaker Friday, and Secretary of the Treasury Henry H. Fowler will address the luncheon Saturday.