

## Who's Watching the Watchers?

was little reported about the financial troubles plaguing, not only Seattle's fledgling venture, but established sites as well. Though one cannot draw with ease a causal connection between the establishment's support for the measure and the media's silence on some issues, the synchronicity does invite speculation. One fact is clear, however. Having taken the role of convention center advocate, the industry failed to give the public a complete picture of the risks.

In sum, the symbiotic relationship between the media and the power structure is real and as Shar remarks is, "likely to limit and color the information available to us."<sup>1</sup> If the interests of those being served are benevolent, or at least benign, the media, may console itself that it does no harm; but we, as members of a free society must object. Democracy cannot survive if we are to be the targets of *hidden persuaders*. Vital to our way of life is the assurance that what passes for news is not merely based upon fact but that the selection of those facts is balanced. At the moment, we cannot be certain this is the case.

But, how are we to bring this powerful giant—the—media to heel? As an industry, it has grown so bold that it shuns its role as mere chronicler, performing instead as a player—one that, by the peddling of influence, which passes for news, dares to determine who shall succeed or fail in politics.<sup>2</sup> And, more importantly, if we should embark upon a course of correction, would the "ill" cured, be greater or less than the one we might create in trying to impose standards upon a free press? In sum, dare we tamper with an industry so inextricably linked to one of our highest values—free speech?

Several attempts have been made to hold the media accountable, most of them unsuccessful because the industry, grown accustomed to noninterference, has been hostile to them. There has been one notable exception, however,

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not in this country but in England. In 1953, the Parliament, after putting much political pressure on the industry to participate, created the British Press Council. This is an independent body which serves as a conduit between the media and the public. It receives complaints of

unfair or deficient performance and investigates them. Its powers are not punitive, but merely those of making its findings public. Such review, however, seems to have a salutary effect. A report on the effectiveness of the Council draws the following conclusions.

In Britain, the Press Council seems to have served a constructive purpose. Despite imperfections, it has become a forum, reasonably acceptable to the public and press, in which grievances against the press can be aired. Only a few of its findings have not been published by the media adversely judged, and important actions receive enough publicity to have impact. (*Twentieth Century Fund*, "A Free and Responsive Press," p. 57.)

The reason why the British Press Council has worked while similar efforts in the United States have died are varied. For one, public concern about the media's lack of standards was wide spread and growing in England. For another, the Parliament, while not engaging itself directly in the reform, did join the public outcry and passed enabling legislation. Finally, and importantly, many representative of the industry were willing to participate in the experiment and to exert influence on their reluctant members. That influence was possible since Britain's press corps is fairly homogeneous, comprised of 110 newspapers, including nationals and weeklies, and has a limited broadcasting enterprise.

Press Councils have been tried in the United States, but for the most part has been met with strong media resistance. The gist of the argument against is that the system is doomed to fail because those who would become involved are those least in need of reform. In a sense, the Council would be preaching to the converted. Financial support for the venture also is a problem. A National Press Council was begun in the 1970s but died in the 80s when private foundation funds evaporated.

Two regional councils met with more success, one in Hawaii and the other in Minnesota. The Hawaii council was born out of a bitter feud in 1969 between Mayor Frank Fasi and the Honolulu *Star-Bulletin*. It grew so rancorous that Fasi wouldn't allow city employees to be interviewed and barred reporters from setting foot in his office. Fasi defended his position by saying he hoped the outcome of the dispute would "be an answer to the question: Can a medium throw scruples and ethics out the window and still have the right to cry violation of freedom of the press?"<sup>3</sup>

As a precursor to these two regional Councils, smaller experiments dealing with local press were begun in 1967. Lowell Mellett, the first editor of the Washington *Daily News* left the American Newspaper Guild a sum of money to encourage responsible performance by the media without infringing upon the First Amendment rights. From this resource, city press councils were formed in Bend, Oregon; Redwood City, California; Sparta and Cairo Illinois.

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As a result of these regional and local experiments enough has been gleaned to warrant revisiting press councils and the following recommendations have been offered by experts<sup>4</sup>:

- ▶ First, sufficient public support for the council must be created so that the industry is encouraged to participate.
- ▶ Second, the councils must defend the rights of the media as well as monitor them.
- ▶ Third, the censured paper, radio or television station must agree to publish the adjudication against itself.
- ▶ Fourth, funds for the establishment of such councils must be from varied and independent sources.
- ▶ Five, membership on the councils should represent intellectual leaders in a number of fields, members of the media and interested citizens, including students.
- ▶ Six, these councils should have regularly established meeting schedules.
- ▶ Seven, the council should be of modest size, although the Hawaiian council works well with 31.

(continued next page)

1. Shar, Robert, "News Media Locked into Established, Rigid Stucuture," Forum Section, *The Oregonian*, October 31, 1988, B7.

2. (For a discussions of the media's view of it's power to "break" a politician, see "Media's Election Role Widens, Writers say" by Bryan K. Houson, *Oregonian*, 6/5/88, editorial section)

3. Rivers, William, Blankenburg, et al. *Canfield Press*, *Backtalk: Press Councils of America*, 1972, p. 121)

4. Murray, George, *The Press and the Public*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Ill., p. 174.