

E 12005

# National News Council would

The Minnesota News Council, one of only two such organizations in the country (the other is in Honolulu) which purport to oversee and scrutinize the press, has inspired Mike Wallace to call for a national council. That is a very bad idea.

The premise of such a council is that the watchdog press needs a watchdog itself. The Minnesota Council exerts its influence in the guise of improving the quality and accountability of journalism.

Simply stated, the news outlet is required to appear before an "impartial board" of "community leaders and journalism colleagues" along with the party claiming to have been injured by the bad reporting. In a recent example, Northwest Airlines complained about CBS-owned WCCO-TV in Minneapolis-St. Paul. The council eventually de-

ecided that the airline was injured through the reporting of an investigative story about maintenance procedures. WCCO and members of its award-winning Investigative Unit were publicly flogged through the dutiful reporting of "findings" in newspapers and on local television.

The decision of the council in this individual case is not the issue, but the process certainly is one which all journalists, indeed all citizens, should fear. It is one which the public should fully understand before succumbing to the elixir of press-bashing.

News councils give powerful institutions in America, private and public, further protection from public scrutiny and a big club to wield against the press. In the Minnesota case the TV station was facing one of the largest employers with one of the largest ad

budgets in the state. The airline was able to arouse public opinion through advertising channels, labor unions and competing media in a textbook display of a corporate power play. Any media outlet in Minnesota will think twice before taking Northwest on again.

The Minnesota News Council is voluntary. In fact two Twin Cities TV stations simply choose not to participate, ever. Yet they report the results when critical of a competitor. Keep in mind these stations said their decision not to participate was based on a philosophical disagreement with the concept. They feel the process is unfair and biased, yet such feelings are missing on the day the competitor's ox is gored.

## According to whom?

Finally, the credibility of the council itself is an issue just as it

# lead to more timid press

is with the press it purports to judge. Who is to determine whether individuals are unduly influenced by the "injured party"? What safeguards are in place to guarantee that competitive juices aren't the driving force behind the do-gooders' actions?

How is it determined that perceived wrongs from the past aren't the motivating factor for the thumbs-down vote in the present? In a dispute involving multiple truths and no simple right or wrong, whose truth will prevail? Perhaps a Council of Councils would be required for appeals.

News councils seek to tighten the restrictions on the press, thus weakening First Amendment freedoms. They seek to provide relief for parties who dispute the reporting of a story and who may not prevail in a court of law. A

news council scoffs at the freedom we hold dear as journalists and citizens.

The hell with 15 "community leaders" and assorted colleagues sitting around a table voting yes and no on questions that are not so black and white. It's the job of journalists to cover journalism — good and bad. And it's the entire community that should sit in judgment, not a select few.

I'm convinced that the idea is gaining momentum because journalists do a bad job covering journalism. We're giving ourselves a skate, looking the other way. We cite competition as the reason for our hands-off approach to our colleagues and ourselves. Let's face it, journalism gets a free ride from journalists. And because of that, a news council sounds tempting.

Now imagine a news council

on a national level. Consider the delight at Phillip Morris knowing that a cozy relationship with the chairman of a media conglomerate may not be enough to kill an important story. Take it to the National News Council.

Creating tighter controls on the vigorous activity of a free press will indeed reduce mistakes. At the same time it will cause all members of the press to think twice before acting. Effectively it becomes a protection for the mistakes made by the powerful at the expense of the powerless. America does not need a more timid press, rather the opposite — particularly with regard to coverage of itself.

— John Lansing, who served as news director of WCCO-TV from 1990 to 1994, is the station manager of WXYZ-TV in Detroit.