

News Council to pursue Nixon's tv news complaint

By Margaret Cronin Fisk

The National News Council has decided to pursue its investigation of President Nixon's charges, made in his October 26 press conference, that the network news programs contain "outrageous, vicious and distorted" reporting—despite White House refusals to provide the council with specific charges.

The Council, established in August as a national press ombudsman, had launched its investigation shortly after the charges were made. In early November William Arthur, executive director for the Council requested specific charges from the administration.

At the time Ken Clawson, deputy director of communications said the White House would comply with the request.

However, despite several phone calls, telegrams and even meetings with White House officials, no specific charges were made. General areas of discontent with network reporting were discussed. Some of these areas included the ITT settlement, Bebe Rebozo's finances, and the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam.

No time to cooperate

But specific offending broadcasts were not outlined. On December 7, White House deputy press secretary Gerald Warren said the administration "simply doesn't have the staff or the time . . . to join in any cooperative research study."

However, the council does not consider the investigation closed. Associate director Ned Schnurman noted that Zeigler "invited us to come back." Sometime next week Schnurman and Arthur will meet with Zeigler again to further request specific instances of "outrageous and vicious" reporting.

Arthur said, the investigation would continue "until we finally come to the point that the White House refuses to provide us with specifics." In going back next week, the Council staff will take to Zeigler logs of network broadcasts covering the sensitive areas discussed in previous meetings and interviews.

Not endless

Schnurman said "the next meeting is the critical one. We're pursuing this as far as possible." But, he added, the council would "not endlessly go down to the White House with hat in hand."

The decision to continue to pursue the investigation was made at a national meeting with the Minnesota Press Council December 10 and 11. Schnurman said the Council decided to pursue because the President's charges were "very serious."

He added, "We're not here as an agent of the media but as a public organization examining things. There is a tremendous amount of skepticism on the part of the public as to the motives of the press."

A complete investigation of the Nixon charges, Schnurman noted, does not have

to be anti-media. If the next meeting with Zeigler is still unproductive, Schnurman added, "we can issue a strong report about the White House not cooperating."

Second study

The Nixon charge against the networks is the second major investigation undertaken by the council. The first is a study of access to the media, spurred by the recent *Miami Herald* case in which that paper was ordered to provide right or reply space to a local politician.

For that study, the council commissioned Columbia University law professor Benno C. Schmidt. Arthur estimated that the Schmidt's study would be completed next month.

Both of these major investigations have been initiated by the council. The council also hears grievances against the national media. (The by-laws preclude complaints against local media in order to limit the council's purview to a manageable size.)

Few Grievances

The number of grievances against the national media—networks, wire services, Washington bureaus of newspapers, magazines—has been fairly light. Arthur partially attributed this to the "professional level" of the national media.

Schnurman said "our correspondence is in the hundreds, but substantive complaints are probably only 25-30 out of that." And about a "dozen" of those are ones the council were able to pursue. "Some drop by the wayside because the complainant doesn't pursue," he said.

Before considering a grievance, the Council rules require that the complainant first complain to the news medium involved.

Arthur said that "most letters are merely emotional," with vague complaints against the whole press.

For example, one recent letter that arrived in the Council office asks the council to "do something about the irresponsible (sic) way the media (both air and press) are treating our president."

Then the letter calls for a law which will send a newsman to jail for "reputation murder" if he's unable to prove something he wrote.

Another letter writer wanted the Council to investigate why ABC News anchorman Harry Reasoner "sneers every time he mentions President Nixon's name," Schnurman added.

Even the complaints that are pursuable seem petty. Accuracy in Media, a conservative media watcher group complained to the council in September of CBS commentator Eric Sevareid's use of the word "heavily," in describing media coverage of the Hue massacre in Vietnam.

After three months of correspondence the council sent a letter back to AIM announcing its decision—that Sevareid

was within his rights in using the word because he is a commentator.

Arthur said "any complaint that comes in is worth our effort to respond. We will hear complaints from every part of the public—even AIM."

Serious complaint

A more serious complaint was one recently lodged against *Newsweek* complaining of coverage of the recent Chile coup. *Newsweek* put one figure on the body count following the coup and other media differed. The *Wall Street Journal* went so far as to run an article countering the *Newsweek* article and running a rebuttal by the *Newsweek* executive editor, Ken Auchincloss. Schnurman called this "an unusual case where the press itself is holding a public hearing."

The Council has not come to any decision on that grievance. The Council decisions have no legal binding on the media. The Council "depends solely on publicity for its effectiveness." It can't compel evidence or force compliance with its findings. And Arthur assures that the Council will never ask a reporter to reveal his source.

The Council was established in August following a study by the Twentieth Century Fund. The Fund now provides 25% of the Council's budget, The John and Mary Markle Foundation provides another 25%. The following foundations provide the rest of the funding: The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the William Benton Foundation, the Pauline and Louis Cowan Foundation, Patrick and Anna M. Cudahy Fund, the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press, the Jane and Leo Model Foundation, the Poynter Fund and the Ernest D. Van Loben Sels-Eleanor Slate Van Loben Sels Charitable Foundation.

The council is funded for three years with an average budget to \$400,000 per year. The first year budget is \$350,000. Costs are expected to go up in the second year's as complaints and investigations increase. The council expects to hold public hearings on some cases in the future.