

Press Accountability, Hawaiian Style

Back in 1969, while the mainland's media debated the feasibility and necessity of news councils, newspapers on the Hawaiian island of Oahu were in a turmoil of their own.

Dissatisfied with the coverage he received in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Honolulu Mayor Frank Fasi's office wouldn't let the afternoon daily's reporter attend his press conferences. The paper filed suit. Next the mayor's office banned all reporters who worked for the Star-Bulletin and the Advertiser, the morning daily, and granted only broadcast reporters access. The Advertiser also filed suit, and the dispute with City Hall grew.

A local church rector, troubled by the stunted flow of government news, contacted the two papers' editors and the mayor's communication director. Out of those talks and a subsequent University of Hawaii conference on the public and the press, the Honolulu Community-Media Council was born, November 16, 1970.

The twist—that the council was founded out of concern for the press' access to information rather than the public's complaints about the press—prompted this news council to handle both types of complaints. Though the focus today is to resolve claims of unfair or inaccurate coverage, the council also becomes involved on the freedom of information front.

For example, Dick Miller, HCMC president and professor emeritus at the University of Hawaii School of Law, says he's trying to preserve the Office of Information Practices, a government body that resolves conflicts over

public access to information. "We're all big First Amendment types and hope to improve journalism," he says.

With an admittedly informal operation, little funding and no actual office, the Honolulu council meets monthly to discuss ongoing issues and to throw "kudos and darts" at the local media.

Describing the council's mission, founding member and Secretary Ah Jook Ku, who was the first Asian woman reporter for both the Honolulu Star-Bulletin and the Associated Press, cites former Advertiser Editor George Chaplin: "The fact that there is a watchdog has made the media more conscious of First Amendment issues and more accurate in covering things."

Perhaps the Honolulu council would handle more than its standard three to six cases per year if more people knew about it: It has no listed phone number (it says the media often provide Ku's number to unhappy readers and viewers). But a publicity committee is in the works as are efforts to run notices in the newspapers and revive the council's newsletter.

With \$25 annual dues from its 51 members—which include journalists and members of the public—and sporadic foundation and business support, the council owes its existence to volunteers.

Miller considers the council preventive medicine. "We have a prophylactic effect in a way," he says. "But we haven't caused something not to be said that should've been said."

But the editors of Honolulu's two dailies, both members and backers of the council, don't consider it absolutely essential.

John M. Flanagan, editor and publisher of the Star-Bulletin, says the council is a "useful forum" and that it provides an "opportunity to meet with people who are interested in news coverage." But it's been five or six years since

Minnesota News Council, which has the advantage of established funding. There is also the volunteer-run Northwest News Council, which operates in Washington and Oregon, and another brewing in the Tampa-St. Petersburg area.

The Honolulu council encourages complainants to contact the news organization first. If a resolution cannot be reached, like in

the case of labor union leaders who claimed the Advertiser's coverage was unfair, the council steps in and tries to mediate without a hearing.

The process is an alternative to legal action; complainants waive the right to sue.

During a hearing, council members listen to the parties' views and



Honolulu Media Council President Dick Miller and Secretary Ah Jook Ku

his paper has been the subject of council mediation.

"We are far more critical of our performance than the media council," he says.

Advertiser Editor Jim Gatti has a similar take. If the council fell by the wayside, he says, "our intention to be fair and accurate wouldn't change."

But supporters of the council, which has handled more than 100 grievances over the years, say the media need reminders of what ought to be fixed.

"It seems to me that any enterprise as powerful and as unregulated—thank God!—as ours could use a little examination," says CBS correspondent Mike Wallace, a strong proponent of news councils.

The National News Council was launched in 1973 and lasted just over a decade. The most prominent version today is the

vote.

The HCMC, like other news councils, has no legal authority to impose penalties, but argues that the public airing of the complaint has an effect. "We're perfectly happy to deal with the limited power we have," says Miller. "The media are very defensive. That [media coverage] is a deterrent without legal power."

While Miller and Ku agree the council probably wouldn't exist without the original controversy with Mayor Fasi, they feel, after 28 years, its future is solid.

"There's a lot of hostility against the media," Miller says. "It's good to have some group that is watching the media that gives a place for the public to complain."

Lori Robertson

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