

# ALBERTA PRESS COUNCIL

*Enriching Newspaper Standards Within Alberta  
While Defending the Established Freedom of the Press*

Fall 2008

Vol. 1 No. 1

*'To serve as a medium of understanding between the public and the press.'*

## Message from the Chair:

*By Ed Kamps, chair, Alberta Press Council*

On behalf of the Alberta Press Council, I am pleased to launch this first edition of the APC newsletter.

The plan is simple – to increase our communication with our stakeholders, and the public in general, regarding who we are and what we do.

The newsletter will be electronic and available through our website. We will also email it out to a distribution list of interested parties, and anyone can ask to be included on the distribution list. We will also produce hard copies for use on display tables and other occasions where a paper copy would be useful.

We hope to publish the newsletter 2-3 times a year and include a range of contents that illustrate what APC is doing. We'd love to hear from you and get your suggestions regarding the newsletter.

Thanks to Colleen Wilson, APC Executive Secretary-Treasurer, for making this happen.



### CAJ Conference Dinner

Standing from left to right are: Dan MacEachern, press member, Fort McMurray Today; Dr. Jerry Petryshyn, public member, Grande Prairie; Dr. Joan Scott, public member, Red Deer

Seated left to right are: Ed Kamps, chair, Fort McMurray; Colleen Wilson, Executive Secretary-Treasurer; Doyle MacKinnon, press member, Lethbridge Herald

## PRESS COUNCIL PARTICIPATES IN 2008 CAJ CONFERENCE

The meetings of the Alberta Press Council (APC) include a professional development segment aimed at increasing members' knowledge and awareness of media issues. This is a particularly useful way for the public members of Council to have a greater appreciation for the various topics of importance in the world of news reporting.

At this year's spring meeting, the APC was able to arrange a significant professional development opportunity by scheduling its spring meeting to coincide with the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ), held in Edmonton, Alberta on May 23-25. The APC was able to participate through its associate membership in CAJ.

Examples of topics included Responsible Journalism and Defamation, Blogging, and Crime Reporting. Of particular interest was the panel discussion Human Rights & Free Speech: Where are the Limits? Featuring Ezra Levant, lawyer, and former publisher of the Western Standard magazine, Ian Fine, Canadian Human Rights Commission, and Liberal MP Dr. Keith Martin who is sponsoring a bill to revise the mandate of the Human Rights Commissions, this panel discussion was most interesting.

Alberta Press Council also had a display table and various materials available, and over the course of the conference had informal conversations with many of the 200 journalists from across Canada attending the conference.



### ***CAJ Conference cont'd***

Kerry Diotte, CAJ Edmonton national conference chair, and director on the CAJ national board, said he was very pleased that APC was able to hold our meeting at the same time and that many of our members attended the workshops. "It was a good opportunity for all involved."

Members who attended the conference prepared summaries of the sessions they attended, which Colleen Wilson, Executive Secretary Treasurer, then collated for the rest of the members who were not able to attend the conference or that particular session.

Ed Kamps, APC chair, will provide a report on the conference to the Canadian Association of Press Councils at its bi-annual meeting in October, and recommend that other Press Councils book their meetings to coincide with the CAJ conference when held in their province.

*Submitted by Ed Kamps, chair, Alberta Press Council*



### **Spring General Meeting, May 22, 2008**

Nigel Hannaford, press member Calgary Herald; Tanis Fiss, public member, Calgary; Dr. Jerry Petryshyn, public member, Grande Prairie; Paul Cashman, press member, Edmonton Journal

## **SPONSORING MEMBERS**

### ***ALBERTA WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS ASSOCIATION***

#800, 4445 Calgary Trail  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T6H 5R7

### ***CALGARY HERALD***

P.O. Box 2400, Station M  
Calgary, Alberta  
T2P 0W8

### ***EDMONTON JOURNAL***

P.O. Box 2421  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5J 2S6

### ***FORT MCMURRAY TODAY***

P.O. Bag 4008  
Fort McMurray, Alberta  
T9H 3G1

### ***THE DAILY-HERALD TRIBUNE***

Bag 3000, 10604 – 100 Street  
Grande Prairie, Alberta  
T8V 2M5

### ***LETHBRIDGE HERALD***

P.O. Box 670  
Lethbridge, Alberta  
T1J 3Z7

### ***MEDICINE HAT NEWS***

P.O. Box 10  
Medicine Hat, Alberta  
T1A 7E6

### ***RED DEER ADVOCATE***

P.O. Bag 5200  
Red Deer, Alberta  
T4N 5G3

## **WHAT IS THE ALBERTA PRESS COUNCIL?**

The Alberta Press Council serves to protect the public's interest in and ensures access to full, fair and accurate news reporting.

As a non-judicial, non-governmental Review Board the Alberta Press Council considers complaints from the public about the conduct and the performance of its member newspapers.

The Press Council serves to preserve the freedom of the press while providing a forum for greater understanding and communication between the press and the public.

### **Mandate**

To hear complaints about our member newspapers. To defend the established freedoms of the press. To protect against limitations on access to information in certain circumstances.

### **Who serves on the Alberta Press Council?**

One public member is selected by the Council from the circulation area of each daily newspaper and AWNA.

Public members can serve two three year terms. When a vacancy occurs, the position is advertised in the member newspaper and on the Alberta Press Council website.

The Publisher of each daily newspaper appoints one press member as a representative to the Alberta Press Council.



## EXECUTIVE SECRETARY-TREASURER VISITS THE UK PRESS COUNCIL COMMISSION OFFICE

I had the pleasure of being able to visit the Press Complaints Commission office while on a personal vacation in London, England this past February. Mr. William Gore, Assistant Director took the time to meet with me and it was a most educational and interesting visit.

Sir Christopher Meyer KCMG is the Chairman of a 17 member Commission, consisting of seven editors and 10 public members. The Chair is a former Ambassador to the United States. The PCC staff of 14 deal with the day to day work of investigating, resolving and ruling on specific complaints. Commission members are sought through advertising the positions and look for the “man on the street”. The Commission’s work also includes a host of other activity designed to promote high professional standards in journalism.



Mr. William Gore, Assistant Director, Press Complaints Commission, UK, Mrs. Colleen Wilson, Executive Secretary-Treasurer, APC

The Commission “is here to hold the press accountable”. We must be as transparent as possible said Mr. Gore. The PCC is a non government regulator.

Press members include all the national newspapers and 97% of the weeklies. The Commission operates a conciliation service to resolve complaints but also has an important function issuing formal public rulings through its adjudicated complaints.

They do not accept complaints regarding the web. “We have enough to do to sustain the work we are already doing” he said. (Example: in seven weeks last year there were 1150 complaints received). In 2007 there were 4500 complaints that a staff of 12 proactively worked through.

“Training the next generation of journalists”. “Since the success of a well-regulatory system is dependent upon the commitment of those working in the industry, the PCC recognizes the importance of teaching young journalists about the Code of Practice, knowledge of which is tested in the CNTJ’s professional exams. The PCC holds seminars and gives presentations to students from around 30 academic institutions. Real examples are used to illustrate the requirements of the Code and Commission’s approach to it.

The PCC also hosts evening seminars for working journalists. “These are informal and designed to stimulate discussion about the Commission’s approach. These focus on issues such as recent developments in privacy, newsgathering or how the Commission advises complaints should be resolved. Different seminars are devised for different disciplines – and have so far included news, features, picture, and online editors and journalists”.

Their website at [www.pcc.org.uk](http://www.pcc.org.uk) is worth a visit.

It was a pleasure meeting Mr. Gore. It is interesting to learn how other Press Councils deal with complaints, learn about their mandates and realize that all of us are receiving similar issues.

**Colleen Wilson,**  
Executive Secretary-Treasurer



## 2008 ESSAY COMPETITION

Ed Kamps, chair was pleased to announce in May that the Alberta Press Council had awarded the first place \$1500 scholarship to Caitlin Marie Fortier. The selection for the award is based on an essay contest with essays from grade twelve students in Alberta and is awarded to assist with post-secondary studies. The essays are judged by press and public members of the Press Council. The essay title and criteria for the competition is posted in December on [www.albertapresscouncil.ca](http://www.albertapresscouncil.ca).

Ms. Caitlin Marie Fortier, a high school student from Gibbons, Alberta attended Sturgeon Composite High School, Namao. She is pursuing a general science program at the University of Alberta. Caitlin's essay was titled "Treasure in the Trash: Why Society Needs Sensationalism". Caitlin's essay was judged to be the winning essay out of 41 submissions received on the topic of "Has Newspaper Reporting on Crime Become Too Sensational?"

*The text of Ms. Fortier's essay is attached:*



Ms. Caitlin Marie Fortier and Mr. Ed Kamps, chair APC

	2007	1972 -2006	Total
<b>Complaint Statistics</b>			
Carried forward from last year	1	1	1
Complaints received	25	297	322
<b>Total</b>	25	297	322
<b>About</b>			
Advertising	1		
News Stories	10		
Opinion/Editorial comment	7		
Letters to the Editor			
Headlines			
Other			
<b>Against</b>			
Dailies -Members	11	220	231
AWNA Members	11	69	80
Other	3	10	13
<b>Disposed of</b>			
By formal adjudication			
As inappropriate	2		
Not followed up by appellant	8		
Mediation	1		
Withdrawn for legal action			
Referred to other organizations	2		
Newspaper satisfied complaint	2		
Beyond 180 day rule			
Dismissed after due process	4		
Other			
Carried Forward	1		

## COMPLAINT STATISTICS

25 complaints were received in 2007 and 1 was carried forward from 2006.

Prior to 2003, the complaint statistics do not take into account complaints received about non-member newspapers and they do not reflect complaints about the print media in general. The categorization of complaints by 'ABOUT' and 'DISPOSED OF' was started in the year 2003 and a similar historical breakdown is not available. Because of personal information and privacy issues, the Alberta Press Council discontinued publishing the details of non-adjudicated complaints in 2003.

**Alberta Press Council**  
 PO Box 2576  
 Medicine Hat, AB • T1A 8G8  
 (403) 580-4104 • 1-888-580-4104 in AB  
 email: [abpress@telus.net](mailto:abpress@telus.net)  
[www.albertapresscouncil.ca](http://www.albertapresscouncil.ca)



# Treasure in the Trash: Why Society Needs Sensationalism

by Caitlin Marie Fortier

Whether they want to admit it or not, everyone loves to look at car crashes, tut-tut over a neighbor's private scandal or speculate wildly as to what the neighborhood youths might be doing when their parents aren't looking. In gawking at someone's misfortune or in creating juicy stories out of an insignificant incident we reaffirm our own sense of security and intrinsic goodness (generally by reflecting on someone else's lack thereof) while doing so can be an important source of entertainment. Therefore, does it not make sense that reporters, as faithful servants to the public good, should assist in this? If a "hack reporter" can make at least one person feel intellectually or morally superior, isn't he doing just as much good as a strict disciple of objective facts? By picking up on even the most mundane of petty thefts, drug busts or by endlessly repeating the same facts with slightly different theories or tragic accidents or murders, various news agencies are fulfilling two very important human needs at once: the need to be entertained and a certain thirst for knowledge. Lastly, spinning a human tragedy into a vast epic of good versus evil also enables us to create a modern mythology of villains, victims and heroes, although these stories tend to contain much more of the first two. With this information in mind, it becomes apparent that the question "is crime reporting too sensational?" can only be answered by a resounding cry of "why isn't it sensational enough?"

One easy way to make anyone feel better is to point out how unlucky, immoral or just plain stupid someone else is. Case in point: "Kentucky Prisoner Punches out Court-Appointed Council" (February 7, Edmonton Sun). Nothing makes even the more egregious everyday breaches of common sense seem almost intelligent quite like reading about someone "punching out" the person responsible for your defense while you're actually in the courtroom. True, this is a small incident happening far away that would probably not affect the average Edmontonian, but its irrelevance is more than offset by the fact that even someone reading this article in a jail cell can feel reassured by the contrast between the accused man in Kentucky and him or herself. In bringing to light these obscure instances of exceedingly poor judgment and low personal moral standards, the writer helps to reinforce the reader's own personal feeling of self-worth, which can most definitely have a positive affect or communities or society as a whole. After all, low self-esteem has been associated with a host of problems—alcohol and drug abuse, gambling addiction, eating disorders and suicide being only the tip of the iceberg—so by bringing to light and ridiculing such acts, much good can be done.

Often it is suggested that people today are less well-informed about their world than they should be. While it is important to be aware of the events taking place in our communities and around the world, sometimes it may be tiresome for some to wade through long print articles with dull headlines in order to gain this necessary information. Thus, snappy headlines such as "'Dr. Horror' Arrested in Nepal"<sup>1</sup> (The Hamilton Spectator, Feb 7/2008), attract the readers attention and lead them to read the story more easily than "Brampton MD Found in Nepal" (The Toronto Star, Feb 7/2008). Although both articles both involve the same instance of a doctor accused of heading an illegal organ-smuggling ring which "forcibly removed" the organs in question from impoverished victims, the Hamilton version of the story is more sensationally presented, and thus more appealing to the reader's desire to be entertained while still imparting approximately the same information. As attention spans decrease in children, this presentation will become even more important in the future when these easily-distracted youngsters become old enough to pay attention to the news, and require at least some entertainment value mixed with the information just to stay somewhat focused.

One important facet of any culture is folklore, which expresses and reinforces cultural values and lessons<sup>2</sup>. Like the ancient village storyteller, a sensationalist reporter can use a basis of fact in order to create a sort of modern folklore that captivates the viewer or reader, while revealing important socioethical rules of the culture it is a part of. Take, for instance, the famous murder of Laci Peterson by her husband. Although one way of

looking at this case is from the perspective that this is just a tragedy and crime, the way that this story was perceived and reported reflected the values of the culture. For instance, take this example from a story that ran in the National Enquirer:

***“In a bombshell death row confession, Scott Peterson has at last revealed how he mercilessly strangled his pregnant wife Laci as she happily watched a Martha Stewart TV show. Then the coldblooded monster calmly read “Playboy” in his fishing boat before dumping her body overboard” (Dec 12, 2007)***

Not only does this come from an issue published more than five years after the crime<sup>3</sup> (indicating that there is a definite public interest) but the writer has stated quite bluntly that Scott Peterson is a “coldblooded monster” and suggests that he is some sort of pervert by mentioning his choice of reading material. By contrast, Laci was presented in The Enquirer as a “pretty mom-to-be, filled with hope and dreams for the future”, solidly portraying her as a pure innocent. Although simplifying something as complicated as a murder case into “good vs. evil” will always sacrifice some of the objectivity and subtlety, by presenting the murder in a black-and-white manner, the story is easier to understand. When viewed in this way, the endless coverage and volumes of editorials devoted to this case and various theories as to what happened (no matter how sensational) are not the exploitation of a crime by the press, but simply a natural response to the case based on the cultural need for villains and victims to reaffirm our own beliefs.

Given the previous arguments, it becomes apparent that the sensational reports of crimes are desirable and beneficial. Turning a single event from just another murder into a tale of good and evil reaffirms cultural values, and by making the news more accessible greater viewership and/or readership can be achieved. By bringing out the most salacious aspects of a case, it can also reinforce the self-worth of the reader. It is simply human nature to enjoy a sensational story, and if there is one thing that tabloid news stories have to teach us, it is that no good can come with defying the natural order.

### Footnotes:

- 1) Dr. Amit Kumar, who has ties to Canada, has been deported to India by Nepalese authorities for allegedly being the leader of the organ-smugglers. The case is still on-going.
- 2) Folklore (Merriam-Webster def'n):
  - 1 : traditional customs, tales, sayings, dances, or art forms preserved among a people
  - 2 : a branch of knowledge that deals with folklore
  - 3 : an often unsupported notion, story, or saying that is widely circulated “
- 3) Laci Peterson died Dec 24, 2002 after being murdered by her husband, although her body was not found until April 13, 2003

### Bibliography:

- 1) “Kentucky Prisoner Punches Out Court-Appointed Council”, Associated Press, Edmonton Sun, Feb 7/ 2008
- 2) “Obesity Plus Low Self-Esteem may Lead to Risky Behavior in Teens”, Gay Frankenfield, RN, WebMD Medical News, 2000
- 3) “Dr. Horror Arrested in Nepal”, Spectator Wire Services, The Hamilton Spectator, Feb 7/ 2008
- 4) “Brampton MD Found in Nepal”, The Canadian Press and Toronto Star Staff, Feb 7/ 2008
- 5) “Is Excessive Television Viewing in Children Linked to ADHD?”, Colby Strong, NeuroPsychiatry Reviews, [www.neuropsychiatryreviews.com](http://www.neuropsychiatryreviews.com)
- 6) “Scott Peterson Finally Confesses”, National Enquirer, Dec 12/ 2007
- 7) “Laci’s Last Day”, National Enquirer, Nov 18/ 2003
- 8) Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Folklore”
- 9) “Laci Peterson”, Wikipedia