

The Future of Press Councils

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Merci, Beaujour, C'est un plaisir d'être ici et de pouvoir parler de Press Councils.

Introduction

What is the future of press councils? Perhaps the answer to this question depends on who is asking and why. While much of the Canadian public may not be aware of press councils, those who are aware support the aims and objectives and certainly everyone in this room is committed to these bodies.

There are dozens of press councils across the world, each with its own unique context and origins. The countries vary in size and power, ranging from developed countries such as Canada and the UK, to poorer countries such as Nepal. In the US, press councils are not as wide-spread, and tend to be media councils, rather than press councils. Several of the states have gone the ombudsman route, rather than press councils.

In Canada, there are differences across the provinces with respect to press councils, but these differences tend to be based more on procedures rather than on principle, as they all share a purpose of providing the public with a means to raise complaints and concerns about the news media.

Background

The formation of press councils in Canada, on a voluntary basis, and free of any government involvement, was a major recommendation of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media (also known as the Davey Report) which published its report in December, 1970. Press councils were seen as the best way to head off any government regulation, as well as offer a potential buffer from legal action. Several councils got their start in the subsequent decade, with the Alberta Press Council being established in 1972.

Before this, there was no mechanism for handling complaints from the public, other than letters to the editor or in serious cases, legal action.

Press councils were reinforced with the release of the Kent report of 1981. The Kent Commission was established in response to a growing concern about the level of concentration in the newspaper industry and its potential for "homogenization of editorial content in the news" and lack of diversity of perspective in national and regional issues. The Kent Report reiterated the role of press councils and after the publication of the report, press councils were initiated in several other provinces.

More recently, the 2006 Senate Committee on the Canadian News Media stated that press councils "can make a valuable contribution to the practice of journalism", although it noted that they are not well-known and tend to be reactive. The Senate Report recommended that "members of the press and other

interested organizations work to strengthen and enhance the work of existing press and media councils.”

Situation across Canada

We currently have six press councils, mostly organized along provincial lines, with the Atlantic Press Council more of a regional body. Press councils operate independently, although in the last year, the councils have had a couple of conference calls to share information. Even though press councils in Canada have a 30-35 year history, there is very little research into their structure, procedures, activities, or impact. There is no collection of data for national or regional trends, and historical records are not easily accessible.

The number of adjudications of public complaints in the country has declined in recent years. There are a number of possible reasons for this. While newspapers might suggest the decline in complaints is due to higher quality reporting and writing, it's more likely because readership levels continue to decline, the vast majority of readers do not know about press councils, or if they do, they do not feel it's worth their time and effort. As well, there seems to be a decline in the public's trust in newspapers. Newspapers are not seen to be the credible source of information that they once were. A 2003 survey by Canadian Media Research Consortium, and updated in 2008, found that public perceptions of accuracy have declined 7% in the last five years, one third think newspapers cover up their mistakes and only one third think the news is fair and balanced.

What is the future of press councils in Canada?

Press councils will continue to operate in some form or fashion in the near term at least, but the question is, what will they be doing? What will they be known for? And longer term, will they fade away out of neglect, or will they continue to exist, primarily for their insurance value, warding off government regulations, or activist Human Rights Councils? Or might they evolve into something new in terms of terms of their purpose, their structure and their processes?

Factors influencing future of press councils

The first main factor is the level of newspaper readership generally. In many regions across the country readership is down. While the need for press councils is not numbers-driven, a general decline in readership may mean a smaller pool of citizens who may wish the assistance of their press council. The act of reading the newspaper is no longer a regular part of the day for many people, particularly as many papers have discontinued home delivery. There is growth in on-line news readership, but will web versions of the news have same audience, and do they read the news in the same way?

A second factor is the knowledge of press councils by the public. Unfortunately, very few people know about press councils. In Canada the exception seems to be Quebec, perhaps due to a broader mandate which includes all the media, not just newspapers. In other countries, press councils seem to have a higher profile. For example, the Press Complaints Commission in the UK is quite well known. In

2008, the PCC traveled extensively throughout the country to meet with the public. In Canada, newspapers do not consistently advertise the existence of press councils in their region. The role of press councils is not included in the school curriculum, and there is little focus in journalism schools.

Third, very few people take the time and effort to voice their concerns, whether to politicians or press councils. Although every press council probably has its experience with a small handful of people who contact the council frequently, most people do not ever take action, particularly when they don't know what recourse they have. It seems people live busier lives, do not have the time to reflect on the complexities that confront them. Even our elections are witnessing lower turn-outs.

Another influence on the role and success of press councils is the level of financial support they receive. Creating public awareness takes time, effort, and money. However, funding for press councils comes from the newspapers themselves, except in Quebec where there is a broader base of funding sources. When times are tough, the news media, like any industry, looks at all costs quite critically. This is especially the case with new publishers who do not have the context or history of press councils. Currently there is no agreed-upon set of principles to guide funding of press councils. As well, the procedure for allocating the costs among the member papers varies from province to province.

A final factor influencing the future of press councils is their mandate and strategy. Will press councils be primarily passive, waiting for complaints from the public, or will they take on a more strategic and activist role, placing much more emphasis on educating the public and speaking out to government and other groups?

Recommendations:

First, Press Councils must become more proactive. For too long, councils have been content to wait for complaints from the public to come to them. In [Yesterday's News – Why Canada's Daily Newspapers are Failing Us](#), John Miller said of Press Councils: "They limit themselves to dealing, sometimes not very impartially, with complaints, filed by the relatively few members of the public who have the determination and stamina to wait up to six months for a hearing. Most councils do not undertake their own investigations, most deal with complaints on a case-by-case basis instead of drafting a comprehensive code of conduct for the press and publicizing it; none plays a role in training, research or development; nor, judging by the number of complaints and what happens to them does any council serve as much of a conduit for understanding or dialogue between the press and its public."

According to Don Sellars, former Ombudsman at Toronto Star and blogger at J-Source, a project of [The Canadian Journalism Foundation](#), Press Councils are "underpublicized, passive and largely ignored, press councils in Canada are falling off the public radar, and deservedly so. Their chairs are seldom

interviewed or quoted on big journalism topics of the day. As a result, their input on issues from press freedom to privacy is minimal.”

Second, the focus of Councils needs to be broader than just adjudicating complaints. For example, two other roles of press councils frequently mentioned are to promote freedom of speech and access to information. Yet we hear very little from any of the Councils on these topics, and there is little evidence in their websites to suggest that these are key strategies.

Third, how will we know if press councils are successful? Press Councils must develop measures or indicators of success. For example, how long does it take to deal with a complaint, and is that time period getting shorter? What is the cost per complaint? Success should not be based on adjudications alone. If public awareness is important, how many public education events were scheduled, how many people attended, and what increase in web traffic resulted?

Fourth, research and analyses of press councils needs to be strengthened. One key area worthy of analysis are the processes councils use to deal with complaints from the public. Greater efforts must be made to capture and make accessible the history and development of councils in Canada. Research into roles, activities and the impact of press councils would also be useful learning and a source for setting strategic priorities.

Fifth, press councils in Canada need to have a greater regional and national, and even international presence. This will only happen through greater collaboration among individual councils. On national issues and matters of federal legislation, the councils are not at the table, because they do not have a collective voice. No one speaks for them. Even at the regional level, press councils are generally quiet on issues dealing with the news media, freedom of expression or access to information.

Sixth, collaboration would increase the efficiency and impact of councils, by learning from each other, sharing effective practices etc. An ‘Alliance of Canadian Press Councils” would get greater visibility in campaigns to promote Right to Know Week, or Press Freedom Day, or in providing input into changes to the Canadian Human Rights Commission Act. An alliance of press councils (not a national press council) would allow for provincial or regional differences, but would be more effective in dealing with stakeholders such as the Canadian Association of Journalists or the Canadian Newspaper Association or individual newspaper chains.

Collaboration and interface with other relevant groups can go along ways to providing more relevance for Press Councils. Examples of other bodies with shared interests include the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, Reporters without Borders, and Article 19 (a human rights organization with a

specific mandate and focus on the defense and promotion of freedom of expression and freedom of information worldwide)

There should also be greater collaboration with schools of journalism. Press Councils need to be part of the curriculum in journalism and media studies programs.

In two years we meet again as a collection of press councils. What will be different? Will we have made any progress? If so, we need to take steps today.

Merci beaucoup. J'ai ot de pouvoir poursuivre la discussion.