

Chair's Report

In May, 2006, the Manitoba Press Council office re-located to 101 - 2033 Portage Avenue.

In this past year we undertook to improve our external communications. A new website, designed by Winnipeg Free Press Council member, Gordon Arnold, was introduced and will be updated as appropriate. Also, new notice-style ads for use by member newspapers showing the Council's website address and new telephone number were almost ready by year end.

We were very pleased with the Canadian Senate Report on media released through the year. It supports Provincial Press Councils and gave the opinion that government regulation should be avoided. These were major points made by the Manitoba Press Council in our written presentation to the Senate committee. The report and our presentation are available through links on our new website.

A new citizen representative for Brandon, Mr. Bob Janz, was approved at our fall meeting. His experience with management committees, arbitration and community activity will be helpful to our Council.

As Chair of the MPC I attended a meeting of Canadian Press Councils in Lethbridge in September. This has taken place every second year with the purpose of comparing common ground. I was nominated to write to Saskatchewan newspaper publishers, on behalf of the councils present, to outline the benefits of self-regulation and offer help in starting a Press Council in Saskatchewan. This was due to a suggestion made in the Senate Report.

Three written complaints were considered by the Council during the year. One went in favour of the newspaper with a slight reservation, the second was settled between the newspaper and the complainant and the third was completed at year's end.

Respectfully submitted,
John Cochrane, Chair

Executive Secretary/Treasurer's Report

Complaint #05-5 Brandon Sun, September 2005

(received in 2005, resolved in 2006):The complaint was about several editorial pieces that had appeared in the Brandon Sun, alleging that the Sun had "initiated a hate document towards the Christian Community at large". The examples of words and phrases from the column cited by the complainant in his complaint did not occur all together or in one context. Some were used to designate a group, some described the form of the city council meeting, and some were opinions of what might take place at a Christian-run and publicly funded facility.

A reservation was voiced by some Press Council members that the latter opinions were perhaps unnecessarily insensitive and might not help the stated objective of The Brandon Sun, "to encourage rich public debate".

However, because a group of citizens at a civic meeting asked that the process of approving a Christian-run facility be slowed down and that the city council voted to defer the issue, all Press Council members believed that it was legitimate that any aspects could be examined in an opinion column.

As the Manitoba Press Council and other Canadian Press Councils have stated, we regard opinion columns to be an important manifestation of freedom of expression and therefore should be allowed wide latitude no matter how controversial or unpopular they may be.

Therefore, the Manitoba Press Council did not uphold the complaint.

Two written complaints were considered during 2006:

Complaint #06-01 Winnipeg Free Press

The complainant was of the opinion that an article printed in the Winnipeg Free Press, December 29, 2005, treated the Liberal Party unfairly. Mr. Bob Cox of the Free Press, answered the complainant directly, and the complainant was satisfied with the response. Therefore, the Press Council, which was copied on all communications, considered the matter closed.

Complaint #06-02 Rivers Banner

This complaint was regarding the publication of a letter to the editor under the heading “Islam - a demonic religion”. The complainant felt it “was clearly hate mail” and “should be considered a very serious matter”. The complainant also said they had written a letter to the editor of the paper indicating they “were outraged, demanding a public apology”.

Although the Manitoba Press Council does not normally consider complaints about matters of opinion, which it believes is an extension of the individual rights to freedom of speech, freedom of expression is not absolute and it is not an unfettered license to publish what are obvious factual errors in a letter to the editor.

In examining the letter in question, it was clear that there were many statements about Muslims that were derogatory and inaccurate. In the first paragraph alone, eleven of its fourteen sentences were of this type.

In the opinion of the Council, the letter should not have been published as is because of the overwhelming number of inaccurate statements that were unfair to many Muslims. While letters to the editor should be given wide latitude it does not mean that overwhelming factual errors should be ignored. If the paper felt it could not edit the letter or add context it should have scrapped it. It did not contribute to healthy community debate.

The council recognized that the paper, to its credit, immediately published a letter to the editor from the complainant and from two other readers in opposition. The council believed that in the interest of fairness newspapers should publish a reasonable reply and opposing points of view. This however does not completely mitigate the publishing of a letter which in the Council’s opinion was inappropriate.

Therefore, The Manitoba Press Council upholds the complaint against The Banner.

Respectfully submitted,
Diane Cullen, Executive Secretary/Treasurer