

N.E. News Council focus: Enrich news experience for consumers

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A newly-financed New England News Council is beginning to take shape, and should be operating by November, with a prime focus on enriching the involvement of news consumers with their communities through the news media, Bill Densmore, director of the council, said.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation of Miami granted \$75,000 June 30 for the startup of the New England News Council, a nonprofit organization that hopes to promote good relations between citizens and the news media.

Densmore, Norm Simms and Ralph Whitehead, all professors of journalism at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, applied for the grant after the Knight Foundation decided to provide money for two new news councils in the United States. Plans were submitted and judged by the existing news councils.

The New England council will



become the fifth in the country. Councils had been established in Washington state, Minnesota and Hawaii, and the Southern California News Council was founded recently as a result of a Knight Foundation grant.

The New England News Council will be based in the journalism program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The mission of news councils is “to help maintain public trust and confidence in the news media by promoting fairness, accuracy and balance,” John Hamer, executive director of the Washington News Council, wrote in an editorial for the King County Journal of Bellevue, Wash. Washington’s council has been in operation since 1998.

Densmore said: “Our intent is to try and take the news council to a new, interactive level, using the Web to connect journalists and readers, listeners, viewers and users.”

Plans to connect news outlets and citizens include holding public forums to discuss such issues as public records law and why some stories make the news while others don’t; meetings with editors; using the council’s Web site to reach citi-

zen-journalists and hold online discussions about news-media fairness; and possibly offering an outsourced ombudsman function for news-media outlets, Densmore said. The council will include all types of news-media outlets throughout New England.

The other councils have panels of journalists and citizens that judge complaints. The New England council plans to take a different approach. That different approach will be undertaken before gradually moving toward public hearings.

Densmore said that throughout the fall he will be trying to enlist the help of editors and citizens to establish a Council of 100 Founding Friends to help found and determine the direction of the council.

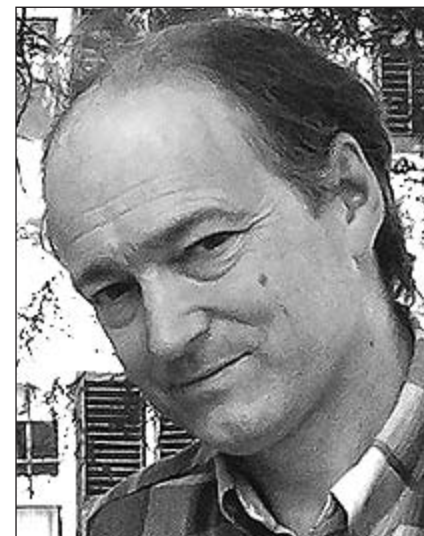
The board is seeking participation from news organizations, academic programs and a “diverse range of citizens who care deeply about the vital role of news media in a democracy,” as it says on the New England News Council’s Web site, www.newenglandnews.org.

Not everyone favors news councils.

“New councils are often in the impossible position of sorting out the complexities of disputes between news organizations and special interest groups. If the purpose of a council is to settle the dispute rather than come to a conclusion, then it might be useful. But if the name of the game is to declare a winner, then forget it,” said Bill Ketter, vice president and editor in chief of Eagle-Tribune Publishing Co. of North Andover, Mass.

“If the purpose of a news council is to improve the image of the media, then we are in real trouble. Each news organization is responsible for that mighty task,” Ketter said.

Densmore said that although there is a potential for the council to move to a hearing process in the future, the focus of the council will be much broader than individual complaints. Rather the council, when it hears a repeated complaint from members of the public about journalism, will convene a panel to look at



‘We’d like – in an ideal world – for more citizens to be more engaged with their communities and more engaged with the news.’

–Bill Densmore



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John Hamer