A Comparative Study of the Korean Press Ethics Commission and the British Press Council

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I. Purpose and objectives

The ultimate goal of the journalist is to establish and maintain a free and responsible press in a society. One of the ways to develop such a press system is to realize the idea of a press council as a self-regulatory organization. For this reason the idea of a press council has been widely adopted by most countries, but the operation of the council has turned out differently, depending upon the various socio-economic and politico-cultural circumstances in which a country exists. The British Press Council is the product of British experiences and the Korean Press Ethics Commission is the product of Korean experiences.

With this general purpose, the present paper has five specific objectives for investigation:

1) What are the socio-economic and political circumstances in which the Korean Press Ethics Commission and the British Press Council were established in both societies?
2) What are some of the obstacles these two press councils have encountered in conducting their self-regulatory activities?
3) Does the development level of the press system as a whole make any differences in the function and operation of each press council in each country?
4) What are some of the differences in the type of complaints each press council has disposed of in each society?
5) What aspects of the British Press Council operation can the Korean Press Ethics Commission emulate as a model for its improvement?

II. Background and Circumstances

The British General Council of the Press was first established on July 1, 1953, and held its first inaugural meeting on July 21, 1953. This independent voluntary

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professional organization was a direct outcome of the Royal Commission which investigated during the period of 1947-49 all aspects of the British press, particularly its ownership.

The Royal Commission was initiated by the National Union of Journalist (NUJ), representing the majority of working newspapermen in Britain, and materialized when two NUJ members who were also the members of the Parliament proposed the following motion on Oct. 29, 1946:

That, having regard to the increasing public concern at the growth of monopolistic tendencies in furthering the free expression of opinion through the press and the greatest practicable accuracy in the presentation of news this House considers that a Royal Commission should be appointed to enquire into the finance, control, management and ownership of the press.¹

The motion was carried out and the Royal Commission was set up in 1947 as an independent body of 15 distinguished persons from various walks of life. In a report, the Royal Commission recommended that the press itself regulate its regulations with the community to avoid having them regulated by the government.² This idea was the basis of the British Press Council.

Concerning the main socio-economic and political circumstances in which the General Council of the Press was organized in the early 1950's, J. Edward Gerald points out two major forces in British society. They are: first, feeling on the part of members of the Labor Party, one of the two major political parties, that the press is biased in character and that Labor's candidates and its program have been denied a fair hearing; second, sustained criticism of the amorality of some of the largest newspapers and magazines by groups that have in common little more than parallel attitudes toward mass media content.³

Prof. Gerald bases his arguments on only two aspects of circumstances—political and social. The economic factors such as finance, control, management and ownership of the press were completely neglected by his study.

For clarity's sake, the circumstances in which the British Press Council was born in the early 1950's can be summarized as follows:

1) Economic factors—excessive monopolistic tendencies of the press, severe competition among big newspapers for circulation, ownership concentration and control, the need to improve production efficiency and poor finance of the press;

2) Political factors—power conflict between the Labor and Conservative Parties, general press biases toward the ruling Labor Party, and the Labor Party's attempt to exert its influence through the press;
