

A real press complaints council?

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Can you imagine a newspaper that *invited* a watchdog in to investigate allegations that its owners had influenced editorial? That's precisely what happened in Washington State thanks to the [News Council](#) set up there. Like our [Press Complaints Commission](#) it is voluntary but unlike our PCC it is extraordinarily interventionist and very transparent. One example. A company called Cowes controversially wanted to develop a shopping Mall in Downtown Spokane. It also happens to own the local paper [The Spokesman-Review](#). This looks like a classy paper with great online features. However, in its detailed report the News Council found that there had been a conflict of interests which had compromised its journalism. The

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report is detailed, careful and full of facts and practical and ethical suggestions. The paper's editor printed a brilliant reply which explicitly criticises his owners!:

"The council's findings are troubling, and in my view, they illuminate as nothing else has done why some in our community questioned our RPS coverage and why that story so wounded our credibility. In an accompanying column on these pages, Publisher Stacey Cowles says he rejects the report's findings of interference, direct or indirect. I can appreciate his viewpoint, though we come at the situation from different perspectives. Furthermore, I appreciate the freedom he extends me to draw differing conclusions. So, in the newsroom, we accept the findings. And we sincerely apologize for not adequately living up to our journalistic standards."

This is terrific stuff although it is not exactly the norm, even in Seattle, the land of the liberal. But I would love to see it replicated if only so that we could get a really open and honest insight in to the influence of proprietors as well as all the other people who order journalists around or try to influence their reporting. As this case made clear, the real threat was not direct influence but the temptation to self-censor.

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