

# FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER



## THE MEAN AND THE SPLENDID ♦ ♦ ♦ OUR RIGHT TO KNOW

**A**lmost daily — by telephone and mail — the questions trickle in:

"What states have laws respecting the rights of newsmen to inspect public records and attend meetings of public bodies?"

"I am greatly in need of information on the subject of voluntary codes governing press coverage of criminal proceedings. Can you help?"

"What is the legal definition of a newspaper?"

"Can you give me a run-down of recent Supreme Court decisions on obscenity?"

By the end of every year, the service files of the Freedom of Information Center at the University of Missouri School of Journalism are bulging with such requests. The inquiries come from all parts of the country and even the world — from private organizations, businesses, newsmen, broadcasters, professors, students,

public officials — in fact from anyone who is concerned with some aspect of the free flow of information in modern society.

Each question of serious intent gets a considered answer, within the limits of the Center's ability to provide pertinent data. A search of the files, for example, will provide helpful background information to a state legislator who is introducing an "open-meetings" bill in his assembly. A listing of a basic bibliography may be of sufficient help to a high school student who is undertaking research on the right of privacy. Whatever the nature of the request, if the Center feels that it can legitimately be of service, it is willing to devote hours — even days — to the task.

The Freedom of Information Center was established in 1959 upon the advice of leading

figures in the communications industry. Its principal function is to serve as a clearing house of information about information. To be more precise, it documents materials concerning information's movement and content, and reports and comments on the actions of government, society, and the communications industry which affect the acquisition, presentation, and dissemination of information.

There is an underlying principle, implied in its name, to which the Center adheres: the individual's right to be informed of the purposes and activities of his government and of the many non-governmental organizations which seek to manipulate information in ways they believe to be in the public interest. This principle does not automatically commit the Center to a position favoring the claims of news media in every instance as against those of government. Rather, the Center recognizes that freedom of information frequently involves a complexity of issues and competing rights which make "easy" answers unattainable.

At the heart of the Center's operation are its files, which within their special province are unequalled by any in the world. Since its inception, the Center has been collecting on a day-by-day basis information culled from 15 major newspapers and several hundred periodicals, as well as from other sources which come to its attention. It also serves as the repository for files of several organizations, including those on book censorship from the American Book Publications Council and others from the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the National Press Photographers Association. Presently, some 800 separate files are being maintained on subject matter ranging from the control of billboards to the activities of such organizations as the Citizens for Decent Literature. In a very real sense, these files are the Center and provide the basis for all of its activities.

In addition to servicing requests from indi-

viduals and organizations, the Center produces monthly reports on topics of continuing interest, usually written by graduate students, and the bi-monthly *FoI Digest*, a summary of new developments in the field. Approximately 2000 subscribers, including many libraries, receive these publications, which are available at a cost of \$3 per year. The Center also publishes a series of special reports which are sent to a list of about 500 "sustaining" members — business organizations and individuals who provide basic financial support for the Center through annual contributions.

Since 1959 the Center has supplemented its continuing programs by sponsoring nine national conferences on topics in the field of freedom of information. During these two-day meetings, speakers of prominence in government, the communications industry, the professions, private organizations, and the universities have come to Columbia to discuss such matters as freedom in the film industry, news coverage of racial problems, and, most recently, freedom of information in the marketplace. The proceedings of a number of these conferences have been published in book form.

For the tasks which it undertakes, the Freedom of Information Center's permanent staff is small. From the beginning the Center has been under the direction of Dr. Paul Fisher, professor of journalism, who must divide his time between Center affairs and teaching. He is assisted by a full-time administrative assistant and a secretary. The posts of assistant director and publications editor are presently being filled on a part-time basis by two graduate students. Other graduate students provide invaluable assistance as researchers and writers for Center publications. The Center's activities have increased in scope to the point where it would like to add a full-time legal specialist to the staff, should sufficient funds become available.

Growth also has created the need for new facilities. The Center now occupies a modest room and two offices on the second floor of Walter Williams Hall, where the clutter of files, books, and desks testify to the lack of adequate space. Plans are under way for the construction of a Freedom of Information Center building, and the University of Missouri has offered to

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*Dennis Brown, assistant director of FoI, was assistant director of the University's Office of Public Information in 1966-67. Working on a Ph.D. in journalism, Brown also has degrees from Harvard and the University of Iowa.*



Mike Stein, left, chairman of the Department of Journalism at New York University, and Bud Schauerte, right, director of community relations of Continental Oil's North American Petroleum Operation, of Houston, Texas, visit with Center director Paul Fisher. Alumni of the Journalism School, both Stein and Schauerte are on the 20-member Center Advisory Committee and were pictured at a student coffee in the J-School's student lounge. Pictured at far right is Dean Earl F. English.

provide a site — tentatively to the west of the School of Journalism across Francis Quadrangle. Realization of these plans, however, awaits the contribution of funds. A Freedom of Information Foundation has been established to receive such gifts.

As presently envisioned, the new Center building would contain space for a library, offices, seminar rooms, file and mailing rooms, and an auditorium affording students an opportunity to attend some of the events which the Center will be sponsoring. Estimated cost of the facility would be about \$1 million.

When the establishment of the Center was

first announced, the University began to receive a few unsolicited donations. The first of these was a letter postmarked, Broken Arrow, Okla. It contained a check for \$10 and a slip of paper carrying this statement from Francis Bacon:

"For whatever deserves to exist deserves also to be known, for knowledge is the image of existence and things mean and splendid exist alike."

The Freedom of Information Center continues to support the proposition that a free society must always make known both the mean and the splendid. —Dennis Brown