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Press Council Study Launched

TORONTO - A study to examine options for the future of Canada's press councils has been launched.

The study will be conducted by Ryerson University's journalism research centre at the request of Newspapers Canada, the national body representing news organizations which, in turn, fund provincial press councils.

Ivor Shapiro, Ryerson's chair of the Ryerson School of Journalism and an ethics professor, will oversee the study and present initial findings at a national newspaper conference April 28 in Toronto. The research will be conducted by Lisa Taylor, a lawyer and multimedia journalism instructor at Ryerson.

"The study will explore and compare existing models for press councils in Canada and beyond," Shapiro said. "It will also seek a deeper understanding of councils' purposes according to their various stakeholders, and explore how those stakeholders view the councils' effectiveness."

Press councils consider complaints from the public against member news operations in Ontario, Quebec, Atlantic Canada, Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia. However, decreased membership and funds have threatened the viability of some press councils, established to uphold freedom of speech and to consider complaints about questionable journalistic practices.

Shapiro described the study as "timely and appropriate," considering press councils have been operating in this country for 40 years and were established at a time when newspapers' work was delivered almost exclusively in print and to local readers.

"Today, some provincial councils are no longer active, and there appears to be disparity from one council to the next with respect to policies, procedures, and codes of conduct," said Shapiro, who is also chair of the ethics advisory committee of the Canadian Association of Journalists. "Meanwhile, information that may start out as local news instantly reaches a national and international audience. On the other hand, the rise of the social web means that members of the public no longer depend on press councils as their only recourse for holding news organizations to account."

Beyond collection of information, the study's broader goal is to examine options for ensuring that public concerns about the practice of journalism are heard and addressed.

John Hinds, CEO of Newspapers Canada, said publishers on the national boards of the daily and community newspapers have endorsed the study and anticipate that its findings will help them undertake a fresh look at the way press councils function and are funded.

"The bottom line is that we recognize news operations must operate ethically under journalistic practices acceptable to the public and that there is an independent mechanism to help resolve

complaints when they occur. We anticipate the research study will help us determine what is needed to ensure news organizations' accountability."

The study will be supported by an arms-length personal donation by John Honderich, chair of the board of TorStar.

"It is time to consider better ways to deal with issues involved in the way journalists do their job, based on ethics and accountability to the public," said Honderich, whose father, former Toronto Star publisher Beland Honderich, was instrumental in launching Ontario's press council in 1972.