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# You are editor for the day

You run the paper. What would you do?

A room full of newspaper editors and reporters asked themselves that basic question at the Minnesota Newspaper Association convention last weekend in Bloomington.

Gary Gilson, the head of the Minnesota News Council, presented us with several real-life scenarios that contained ethical dilemmas. I'd like to throw three your way.

## 1. Flaming out

It's fun-and-games time in Salt Lake City -- the Winter Olympics of 2002.

The Tribune's veteran sportswriter, Dick Rosetta, has had a lifelong dream of covering the event for his hometown. He also has dreamed of carrying the Olympic Torch on the route to the stadium to start the games.

**If you were his editor, would you let him do both?**

Some people said there was a conflict of interest here, and that he should not do both. One person said that the Olympics has had plenty of scandal, with bribery topping the list, and that having a working reporter take part in the ceremony would create a perception of impropriety for the paper.

I disagree. People can wear multiple hats and still be fair. For example, I can write about the Askov Fair and still take part in it. "Flaming out" is the same thing on a larger scale. If some people perceive a conflict of interest, then they should raise that issue with the newspaper, and the newspaper can answer it. But newspapers -- or any business for that mat-

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## Behind the Lines

by David Heiller, Editor

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ter -- should not curtail their activities based on public perception. Let's give the readers credit for being intelligent people. Sometimes newspapers take themselves too seriously.

What do you think?

## 2. Busted

Rita Jensen was a reporter for a daily newspaper in Connecticut. She lived in Manhattan with her young daughter, and with a roommate, Barbara Edson, who also had a young child.

One day in 1981 Edson was arrested and charged with bank robbery and murder, carried out by members of the Black Liberation Army. She was correctly identified as Kathy Boudin, a former member of the Weather Underground, a revolutionary group active during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Boudin had been involved with the group in Greenwich Village, where a bomb factory they had been operating in a townhouse blew up. She and another woman were seen naked outside the wreckage, and they vanished into the subway. Boudin stayed hidden for 20 years.

When Rita Jensen heard about the arrest and saw the photo of Boudin she immediately told her editor she knew her and had been living with her and their children.

**• If you were her editor, what would you say?**

**• Next, if you were Rita Jensen, what would you do?**

The reaction by editors at the seminar varied a lot. One person had a great idea: He said he would have someone interview Rita Jensen and do a story on that. Others said that they would ask Rita Jensen to write a story about Kathy Boudin.

What was interesting about this situation is what really happened. The editor did ask Rita Jensen to write a story. She refused, saying that she feared for the safety of her family if she wrote it. The newspaper then fired her!

That was wrong, in my opinion. The editor crossed a line between the reporter's personal and professional life. To make a reporter write a story about a personal relationship was out of line.

## 3. He loves me not, he loves me even more not

A political reporter finds himself personally conflicted by the prospect of either candidate in a race for major office actually winning. Let's call them Joe and Bob. The reporter digs up some real dirt on Bob, but he thinks that if the paper runs with it, Joe will win. The problem is the reporter says he knows Joe is the worst kind of human being, who will do the city great damage if elected.

**What to do?**

We didn't have time to discuss this one, so I'll stifle my opinion and hope that some readers send in their suggestions. Send them to Askov American, P.O. Box 275, Askov, MN 55704, or e-mail to askovam1@ecenet.com.