

Sunday, May 3, 1998

The Message From Minnesota's News Council



ELISSA PAPIRNO

The 28-year-old council, born in the rich civic culture of Minnesota, is one way of resolving disputes between the public and the news media. It is the only established news council in the country, funded by corporations, foundations, community groups, individuals and news media organizations.

I went to see how non-journalists would evaluate the press and what standards they would use in resolving tough journalistic dilemmas. Instead, I saw the same kinds of polarized disputes that confront me every day in my job as reader representative — standoffs that could be avoided if journalists were more willing to acknowledge their mistakes.

The case before the news council was unusual because it involved an editorial, an expression of opinion. Editorials take stands and by their nature are biased and unfair.

The case was complicated because the editorial — deriding the researchers for their minority views on global warming — was marred by a major factual error.

The scientists, meanwhile, refused to submit for publication an article defending their position that no significant global warming had occurred. Why respond in a newspaper that had urged its readers not to believe anything they said? “Know that their ideas and opinions have been careful-

ly considered by a host of climate scientists and found to be without merit,” read one of the passages that prompted the complaint.

After presentations from both sides, the questioning began: What was the intent of the editorial? Do a host of scientists, in fact, find the researchers’ ideas without merit? Why did the scientists accept funding from industry groups? How did the factual error occur? What is the purpose of an editorial from the scientists’ point of view? Did the editorial cross the line between fairness and unfairness?

An alternative to going to court.

That, of course, was the key question and impossible to answer without defining fairness in the context of an opinion. Such a discussion never took place. Instead, council members expressed their individual conclusions, then voted.

I could not have decided this case without first settling on a definition of fairness. And, yes, the researchers were stubborn, had accepted industry funding, and had crossed into politics. The adversarial nature of the process also seemed to promote winner-take-all competition over commu-

nication.

Still, the editors could have prevailed had they not defended their opinions as fact, admitted that the editorial was poorly done, and then championed the value of unfettered debate in democracy’s self-correcting marketplace of ideas. Instead, they dug in their heels and “stood by” what they had written.

That unwillingness to listen and acknowledge mistakes occurs in newsrooms every day and only serves to widen the credibility gap between the public and the press.

Most journalists will not literally find themselves before a court of public opinion, and a council nurtured in the grassroots democracy of Minnesota probably would not survive transplanting to another state.

Still, the harsh judgments that result when journalists fail to respond to legitimate questioning of their work extend beyond one public hearing room. Such losses in credibility are far more serious than any victories or losses before the Minnesota News Council.

Elissa Papirno is an associate editor of *The Courant* and its reader representative. Readers may reach her at 241-3900 (or from outside the Hartford area at (800) 524-4242, ext. 3900) or by e-mail at readerep@courant.com.

Did a newspaper editorial unfairly characterize the reputations of two scientists?

Thirteen journalists and public representatives on the Minnesota News Council grappled with that deceptively simple question last month. The complaining out-of-state scientists and defending editors from the Minneapolis Star Tribune made their cases, watched and waited for vindication.

After three hours, one side would win and the other leave unhappy. The council decides by voting, and the scientists prevailed, 9-4. Some of the news media members of this public/journalistic body had sided against the newspaper.

The editors described themselves as bloodied. The scientists were jubilant, sending the results back home by cell phone. I asked one how he would have reacted had the council voted against them. That journalists just protect other journalists, he replied.