

## Was letter handled fairly?

A woman wrote a letter to the editor, expecting it to appear word for word on the editorial page.

Instead, the letter appeared in a news story. Albeit, it was printed nearly in its entirety. Still, the writer felt blindsided.

Did the newspaper — specifically the Duluth News-Tribune — act

unethically in its news treatment of the letter without asking, or at least notifying, the writer? Yes, ruled the Minnesota News Council on an 8-7 vote earlier this month.

The question was the second of a two-part complaint filed by Rachael Martin, director of the Fairlawn Mansion and Museum in Superior, Wis. She contended the newspaper was unfair to her in its coverage of an allegedly racist incident at a holiday event last October.

The event was a murder mystery dinner at which public members were invited to dress in period costumes and recite nursery rhymes reflecting life in the United States in 1918. A white woman came dressed in black-face and recited a poem called "Ten Little Nigger Boys."

### Letter still printed

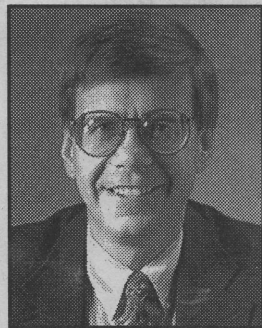
The council voted 14-1 that the coverage was fair, but narrowly upheld Martin's complaint on the use of the letter in the news article. As a News Council member, I supported the paper's treatment of the story as well as the letter.

The biggest concern of those who sided with Martin was that it lessened readers' trust of the editorial page. As one member said, "I think of the editorial page as the place where I can have *my* say." They believed the letter's effectiveness was diluted in the news story.

The concerns are valid. At minimum, the newspaper should have asked, or at least notified, Martin regarding its intentions. If used in the news columns, it should have been given special prominence as her statement.

But I believe the News-Tribune was justified in its use of the letter due to other important elements:

- Martin and the newspaper were



embroiled in an argument over whether the story was "news" in the first place, even though Martin, a white, admitted she was outraged over the incident. When the reporter contacted her for a second follow-up report, she informed him that she had mailed a response. Though it was unclear whether Martin intended

that to be a statement for a news story, it could have been interpreted as such.

- Martin submitted her letter on a Friday. At that time, the News-Tribune had a longstanding policy of not publishing letters on Saturdays. Sunday's editorial page, in order to meet production deadlines, already was put together. However, editors restructured the Sunday page to print the letter in its entirety. At the same time, editors found her letter so significant that, to be fair to her in a news story Saturday, they included excerpts. Her letter actually received double exposure.

### News, editorial fire wall

The case illustrates that the greatest benefit of the News Council is its function as a learning ground for public and media.

In this case, Martin, as a public official, must be cognizant that any comments in whatever form might be interpreted and used as a public statement.

The newspaper, on the other hand, must recognize that most readers perceive a certain fire wall between the news and editorial pages. They're troubled — even suspicious — whenever that barrier is crossed.

What do readers think? Let us know.