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Decision provides debate on ethics

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A recent Minnesota News Council public hearing on a complaint against the Duluth News-Tribune raised a question that can produce an important and lively discussion between this newspaper and our readers.

Journalists often rely upon codes of ethics that they have developed and followed for years. Sometimes, though, what seems fair to journalists does not seem fair to the public. These differing views create an opportunity for discussion and possible change. We invite you to think about the following question and to tell us your opinion. We'll publish our opinion, too, and see where the conversation leads us. We want you to know we value your thoughts on journalistic fairness.

Now, that question:

If you write a letter to the editor of the newspaper, do you think it's a fair journalistic practice for the paper to use parts of your letter in a news story before your letter is published on the editorial page? (Typically, news and editorial functions are kept separate to keep opinion out of news reporting.)

In the Duluth case, Rachael Martin, the director of a historical museum, complained that news coverage of an event she supervised had been so unfair to her that she wanted to respond in her own words on the editorial page. She was upset when the newspaper excerpted her letter and used it in a news story before the letter was published. She said she wanted her letter, in full, to be her statement to the community.

The News-Tribune's editors said that

they took extreme measures to be fair to Ms. Martin. She submitted her letter on a Friday, the day the first news story appeared. The paper did not publish letters on Saturdays, so it restructured the already-completed Sunday editorial page to include her letter. In this way the paper provided her with a timely response and a forum with the largest circulation. At the same time, the editors found her letter so significant that, to be fair to her in a follow-up news story on Saturday, they included excerpts of it.

Do you have a strong feeling about what's right?

The Minnesota News Council decided, by an 8-7 vote, that the practice should be considered unethical. Obviously, that's not a consensus, and even if it were it would not mean that news outlets everywhere should follow it. The News Council's role is not to order news outlets to do or not to do anything; its role is to generate a conversation like the one we are inviting you to join.

At the News Council hearing, public member Laurisa Sellers found the use of excerpts unfair: "I think of the editorial page as the place where I can have *my* say."

Media member Maureen Reeder pointed out that newspapers keep reminding the public that news and editorial functions are separate. She said the act of quoting from an unpublished letter would "lessen your trust of the editorial page." However, she said, she would not object if she got a call from a news reporter asking her permission to quote from her unpublished letter.

Media member Dave Hage, an editorial writer for the Star Tribune, said he was troubled by "leakage through the firewall (between news and editorial.*)" but he was satisfied that the Duluth News-Tribune was operating in good faith by trying to accurately present Ms. Martin's point of view. Other News Council members agreed.

What do you think? Please join us in this discussion.