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Sometimes finding good words to say on public figures wouldn't hurt media



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all of the time.

Rick, our increasingly loquacious 3-year-old, is showing early signs of following in his father's questionable footsteps.

Last weekend, as his 21-month-old brother Charlie and I were tossing a tot-sized football around the family room, Rick declined to join in. Declaring that he would be the "speaker-man," Rick took up a position atop the back of our sofa and proceeded to offer the play-by-play.

Rick was kinder and gentler than his father tends to be. After each toss of the ball, he descended from his imaginary press box to exclaim, "Good job!" and offer a congratulatory handshake for good measure.

Those of us in journalism are good at reporting on the performance of players in government, politics, business, sports and other arenas. And we're even better at pointing up their shortcomings.

Members of the news media have an essential responsibility in a free society. We are the eyes and ears of citizens who don't have the time or expertise to patrol the corridors of Congress, the state Capitol or city hall. Our job is to find out what is really going on — to provide citizens with the information they need to monitor government and other institutions, and hold them accountable.

In journalism school, they called this the "watchdog function" of the press. However, to many of our news sources and readers, we frequently seem more like the vicious attack dog than the trusty watchdog.

Take the last political campaign, for example. Despite all of our promises that coverage of this campaign would be "dif-

ferent," news organizations expended huge amounts of space and resources pursuing irrelevant stories about the personal lives of the candidates. And, once again, we spent too little time dissecting the candidates' proposals to resuscitate the economy, reduce the budget deficit, reform health care and improve education.

Far too often, we race into print or onto the air with stories that are incomplete and potentially in error, often for the worst of reasons — "competitive pressure." We are afraid we will be beaten on a story by another news organization and are willing to take the risk we might be wrong.

In the last campaign, for example, the voters would be better served if news organizations had done a lot more digging before deciding what — if anything — to report about Bill Clinton's and George Bush's alleged extramarital affairs, and Clinton's efforts to avoid the draft.

But such errors in judgment come with the territory. Each day, reporters and editors race to meet deadlines in reporting the most complex stories of our time, offering what will serve as the first draft of history.

Today's journalists are unquestionably better educated and better prepared than ever before. But today's stories — whether they involve economics, science, medicine or social policy — are more complex than ever. Inevitably, some of our "first drafts" will contain errors, omissions and misinterpretations. When such errors occur, they must be promptly corrected.

For the last six years, I have had the

opportunity to sit on the Minnesota News Council, a non-governmental body of 12 journalists and 12 public representatives. The council attempts to mediate complaints against news organizations from subjects of stories who feel they have been mistreated, and have been unable to obtain satisfactory redress from the news outlet involved.

During my time on the council, the last year as its president, I have been struck by how many grievances could have been resolved if an editor or reporter had been a little more willing to listen to a complaint and acknowledge that it might be valid.

Many of our hearings are very contentious, with the parties sharply disagreeing about the facts or what constitutes fairness. But at a hearing earlier this year, the editor of a major state newspaper began with an unusually candid admission. He acknowledged that his paper should have tried harder to contact a state university professor for his response before going to press with a story in which the professor was accused of racial discrimination.

The editor apologized for this unfortunate professional lapse and offered to make amends. But this apology could just as easily have been extended five months earlier, when the professor first lodged his complaint with the newspaper.

If we are to serve the public well, journalists must do a better job of focusing on stories that are truly significant, recognizing the impact those stories can have on the individuals involved, reporting and editing those stories with greater care, and owning up to mistakes when we make them.

Contrary to the views of some, it is not the role of the news media to serve as cheerleaders for people in high places. But every so often, it would not hurt if those of us on the editorial page emulated my 3-year-old and handed out a few commendations. After all, our leaders and institutions can't be wrong all of the time.