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When advocacy is okay

Access is an acceptable journalist's cause

Journalists are taught not to get involved. But the rule doesn't apply when it comes to working for access to information needed to do one's job.

By Deni Elliott

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I've used this column to argue that newsrooms and journalists had no business cheering on the recent war; I've used it to show why no political or community cause, including United Way, belongs on a journalist's list of newsroom or extracurricular activities.

But, there's one kind of advocacy that I think is different from the rest. When it comes to keeping the public's business before the public, journalists and journalists' organizations have an obligation to take up the fight.

But carefully.

It seems like every other Freedom of Information committee, state press association, news organization and reporter is involved in a battle to protect or obtain access to governmental



Last spring the Colorado Press Association helped draft a proposed amendment to the state constitution that would extend the state sunshine laws to include local government. The amendment didn't get the 52,000 signatures needed to put it on the ballot. Critics say it failed because journalists and news organizations didn't circulate petitions and otherwise campaign effectively on its behalf.

"A lot of individual reporters were concerned that it was a conflict of interests to be that involved in politics," said Fred Brown. Brown is political editor of The Denver Post, who, after some soul-searching, did circulate petitions. "It was a non-partisan issue, a public access issue," he said.

"But," said Marty Tharp, the former ME of The Littleton (CO) Independent who protested journalistic involvement at the time, "no matter how good the cause is, as soon as we go out circulating petitions, we can't after that point appear to other people to be fair and impartial."

Halfway across the country and a half a year later, a coalition of news organizations and citizen groups called the Michigan Freedom of Information Committee sent an open letter to Detroit Mayor Coleman Young. The letter protested harassment of journalists and the general unwillingness of the administration to permit access to legally-allowed information. It requested a meeting with the mayor and was signed by some metro-area news organizations and individual publishers, as well as the committee. The mayor declined the invitation, calling the letter "self-important and self-serving."

While committee members said that it was good, in any event, to get the issue before the public, others disagreed.

Detroit Free Press publisher Neal Shine, who did not sign the letter, said that administrations have been trying to thwart the work of journalists for all his 41 years with the paper. He didn't think his readers would have been much impressed to see his signature at the bottom of that letter.

"Do you think that they are going to think that Mayor Young is a bad guy? No. What they're going to think about me is that I'm a crybaby."

"We have a newspaper with all of the power it possesses — the presses, the 640,000 subscribers. If we have something to say to the mayor, that's how we say it."

The Free Press as well as The Detroit News and other area organizations included news stories on the letter and the mayor's response.

Every journalist plays some part in the fight for access. Whenever reporters demand access to information that a public official declines to give, they are fighting on its behalf — as well they should be.



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to shy away from being publicly identified as advocates. Direct political actions like collecting signatures in the community or lobbying legislators are out of bounds.

No matter how important the issue, it's disconcerting for sources and consumers to see a reporter change hats from impartial analyst to advocate. It would be like seeing a judge do commercials to promote the death penalty. Such action can't help but affect credibility.

Because of the direct professional tie-in between access and the ability to gather the news, journalists can work behind the scenes, drafting letters to the mayor or helping to write proposed legislation. These journalists are certainly excluded from covering any story associated with the action or with people involved in the case. And, the signing of the letter, the lobbying for the bill should be left to professional organizations that speak with a collective journalistic voice.

There are a lot of interests to balance as journalists protect access to information, but none needs to be sacrificed. The key to pulling it off is a strong statewide organization that, as it takes on the fight for access, can both represent journalists, and take the heat for any complaints.

It's never easy to cover stories in which journalists and news organizations have a professional stake. Just ask anyone who's tried to cover their own JOA. But no one questions the need for the industry to protect its commercial interests and the need for reporters to cover it. No one should question the need for the industry to protect access, this most important of professional interests.

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