

Publishing Politics – Part A

(This case was prepared by University of Georgia journalism student Megan Ernst for JOUR 5170, Advanced Studies in Journalism, based on secondary sources cited below.)

Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich's popularity had been stagnating, and his reelection campaign seemed less hopeful each day. His party's convention was set to begin on June 8, 1990, only four days after Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was scheduled to visit the state on invitation from Perpich. The visit was a huge hit, and Perpich was able to ride that success to a victory at the convention, securing his party's nomination.

He didn't do it alone, though. A good friend and longtime supporter, Roger Parkinson, helped to finance the Gorbachev visit. Such a big loan, in fact, that he put up a \$300,000 letter of credit on his business's account. Parkinson was a well-known community member, the publisher of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune.

Discuss:

What is the role of individuals in the political process? Does that role change if that individual is a journalist or representing a newspaper? Can journalists and publishers separate their jobs from their politics? Are there any policies newspapers should have regarding this kind of activity? Do you think Parkinson's support of the governor affects the impartiality of the Star-Tribune?

Publishing Politics – Part B

Parkinson directed the governor's task force for coordinating Gorbachev's visit. Parkinson was a known civic booster. In 1985, he worked to bring the All-Star Basketball Game to Minneapolis. Then he served as a member of the governor's task force to bring the 1992 Super Bowl to Minnesota. He was chair of the U.S. Olympic Festival which brought the event to the Twin Cities earlier this year – and was part of the attempt to secure the 1996 Olympic Games.

Additionally, Parkinson's staff was mistrustful of his commitment to them because of last year's contract talks. Despite record profits, Parkinson demanded that wages be frozen. All of this, and the Gorbachev task force was shaping up to be another example of how out-of-touch he was journalistically. In protest, the threat of a reporters' byline strike swept through the newsroom a week before Gorbachev's arrival. The reporters felt as though Parkinson's involvement made it difficult for the paper to be an effective watchdog and claim objectivity.

Discussion:

Do you think Parkinson's civic engagement is a professional conflict of interest given his position at the paper? If you were a reporter at the Star-Tribune, how would you feel? Would you be inclined to join the byline strike? How could you, as a reporter, resolve this perceived conflict of interest?

Publishing Politics – Part C

Reporters were concerned not just with their ability to do their jobs, but also with perceived objectivity. Parkinson controlled the newspaper's editorial board, and the board was faced with endorsing a candidate in the fall. The reporters worried that there wasn't a way that the paper could endorse a candidate without it looking like Parkinson's relationship with the governor played a role in the decision.

But the reporters weren't sure that a byline strike was the right option. By a narrow margin, they voted against the strike, worrying that it would harm the paper's image. They didn't want to embarrass their paper in front of other national reporters, even though their publisher had embarrassed them.

Paul McEnroe, a Star-Tribune journalist assigned to the San Francisco leg of Gorbachev's trip, had to make a personal decision. He knew if he was going to refuse to write the story, he would have to tell his editors before he left, rather than after flying on a plane and sleeping in a hotel that his paper paid for. He wanted to respect his paper and didn't want to tarnish its reputation, but he also felt strongly about the lack of objectivity the Star-Tribune had in this matter. He wondered if Parkinson had considered the position he was putting his reporters in.

Discussion:

Do you agree with the staff decision not to strike? Do you think the totality of evidence about Parkinson's allegiances put him in a compromising situation? Do you think it effects the objectivity of the paper as a whole? If you were Paul McEnroe, would you individually turn down the trip to San Francisco to cover the story? Do you feel like his reporting would be compromised by Parkinson's relationship with the governor and Gorbachev's trip?

Publishing Politics – Conclusion

McEnroe decided not to go on the trip in protest of what the publisher was doing. His executive editor was furious, saying he was making a conscious decision to harm his paper's image. McEnroe instead stayed in the office during the Gorbachev visits, helping to copy edit stories. He said he was making the decision to stand up for what he believed in.

When Gorbachev visited, Parkinson rode alongside the governor in the lead limo of the motorcade. Parkinson never acknowledged his perceived bias or its effects on the credibility of his newspaper. He continued his relationship with the governor and engagement in civic activities. The Star-Tribune readership generally considers this a “new low” in Minnesota journalism.

Discussion:

Did McEnroe make the right decision to protest his publisher's involvement in this situation? Was McEnroe's decision courageous? Why or why not? Going forward, knowing the allegiances of your publisher, what would you do if you were a Star-Tribune reporter?