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New York Times considers defending itself more aggressively

The Boston Globe

By Mark Jurkowitz, Globe Staff | May 10, 2005

A recommendation that The New York Times respond publicly and more vigorously to its critics drew a mixed reaction yesterday from media and public relations analysts, who said the idea is understandable but potentially risky.

A Times committee examining how to increase readers' trust in the paper issued its report yesterday. One proposal suggests that the newsroom "establish a coherent, flexible system for evaluating public attacks on our work and determining whether they require a public response."

The report asserts that "critics, competitors and partisans can too easily caricature who we are and what we do."

The Times can be a lightning rod for critics, many of whom accuse the paper of having an ideological agenda. In an e-mail message to the Times staff yesterday, executive editor Bill Keller lamented "the clamor of

partisan critics on the right and left" as well as "the shouting heads who have made denunciation of the serious press part of their commercial shtick."

The recommendations range from minimizing anonymous sources to better tracking of errors, and Keller said he will take some time to decide which to adopt. But newspapers have not been particularly proactive and aggressive about responding to criticism, and observers say any Times decision to use its newsroom, marketing, and legal muscle to challenge detractors could be a tricky balancing act.

"I think that when the criticism is organized, when it's unfair, when it's patently political, any news organization has an obligation to respond," said Jeffrey Dvorkin, the ombudsman for National Public Radio and president of the Organization of News Ombudsmen. "The question is how to do that in a way that is productive and not defensive."

In an interview yesterday with the Globe, Keller said he asked the committee to examine the reader-trust issue last fall. "Because it was a really polarized election, a lot of heat was thrown in our direction," he said. "This was more in response to a broader attack on the credibility of what the bloggers call the MSM [mainstream media] from a lot of quarters."

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Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center, which conducts polls on public attitudes toward news outlets, said he understands the desire to fight back against critics given the level of antimedia animus. "I think there is a really poisonous atmosphere out there," he said. "What those Times people are reacting to are the attacks by partisans and bloggers. The environment is really pretty rough, and you have to be prepared to make your case."

Keller said yesterday that he had a "basically positive" reaction to the idea that the Times become more aggressive about defending itself. But he added: "I don't want us to get into the spin room, and I don't want us to get into a newsroom public relations operation. But I think a lot of times we ignore critics or react slowly, so that [the criticisms] ricochet out to the world without being addressed."

Assistant managing editor Allan M. Siegal, who chaired the committee that prepared the report, told the Globe that "the real change is that reporters whose work is being attacked will feel more of the process of deciding" how to respond. (The Boston Globe is owned by The New York Times Co.)

Larry Rasky, the CEO of the Boston-based firm Rasky Baerlein Strategic Communications Inc., said the Times would have to be careful in battling its critics. "I have to say this is somewhat akin to me to the old adage that a candidate should never be his own campaign manager," Rasky said. "The risk is you lose your role as a reporter and get drawn into the role of politician."

Another recommendation calls for the executive editor and the two managing editors to share responsibility for writing a regular column "that deals broadly with matters about the newspaper." Keller said that he fundamentally supports the idea but isn't sure how to execute it, and that he wants to discuss the matter with Barney Calame, who takes over as public editor from Daniel Okrent at the end of the month.

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