

March 4, 2025

***VIA EMAIL DELIVERY***

Chris Fitzsimon  
Publisher and Chief Executive Officer  
States Newsroom  
1414 Raleigh Rd #127  
Chapel Hill, NC 27517

Dear Mr. Fitzsimon:

We write today with serious concerns about the operation of the Daily Montanan, its ethically questionable structure, and the resulting negative impact on readers. Since the Daily Montanan's inception, the editor has chosen to intertwine the organization's news and opinion departments, undermining the integrity of what should be an impartial product and regrettably rendering it little more than a progressive blog.

Reputable, well-established news organizations maintain and honor the long-standing tradition of keeping their news and opinion departments separate and independent. Newsrooms occasionally grumble when editorial boards, publishers, and owners publish their opinions. Still, the firewall between the news and opinion departments exists.

At the Daily Montanan, though, it does not. The editor wears multiple, conflicting hats: an editor, assigning stories and editing them; a reporter, writing stories; and an opinion columnist, publishing opinions on the very stories he assigns, writes, and edits. On at least one occasion, the editor's column was not classified as commentary, but alarmingly as news. Destroying the well-established firewall between news and opinion departments further leads a reasonable reader to question the impartiality of a purported news source and further erodes trust consumers have in the mass media, which is at a historic low.<sup>1</sup>

The absence of a firewall between news and opinion departments appears to be a feature, and not a bug, of the States Newsroom model.

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<sup>1</sup> Megan Brenan, "Americans' Trust in Media Remains at Trend Low," Gallup, October 14, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx>.

That element, and the source of States Newsroom’s initial and ongoing funding, may be one reason the nonpartisan, nonprofit OpenSecrets published the following in a story that focused on States Newsroom, among others: “At a time when trustworthy journalism is more important than ever, political operations are pouring millions of ‘dark money’ dollars into ads and digital content masquerading as news coverage.” OpenSecrets further reported that “multiple States Newsroom affiliates fail to meet ‘basic standards of credibility and transparency’ according to NewsGuard.”<sup>2</sup>

Alarming, Axios reported just last year that “[t]he number of partisan-backed outlets designed to look like impartial news outlets has officially surpassed the number of real, local daily newspapers in the U.S., according to a new analysis....Many of those sites are targeted to swing states — a clear sign that they’re designed to influence politics.” As of June 2024, Axios reported there are 10 “dark money or misleading local news sites” in Montana, including from States Newsroom.<sup>3</sup>

In 2020, the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, whose mission is “to promote and elevate the standards of journalism,” referred to States Newsroom as one of many “hyperpartisan sites...masquerading as local news.”<sup>4</sup>

Thankfully for Montanans, there are news organizations that do not muddy the ethics waters, and instead either maintain a strong firewall between news and opinion departments or refuse to have a commentary section at all.

As a result of the intermingling of what should be independent news and opinion departments, our offices – and where applicable, any agencies, boards, and commissions attached to them – will not engage with the Daily Montanan or with States Newsroom.

We did not come to this decision lightly, but an organization that so clearly commingles news and opinion does a grave disservice to readers as they “intentionally masquerad[e] as local news sites for political purposes.”<sup>5</sup>

We will reconsider our decision once the Daily Montanan’s chief operational and ethical deficiency is resolved.

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Massoglia, “‘Dark money’ networks hide political agendas behind fake news sites,” OpenSecrets, May 22, 2020, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/05/dark-money-networks-fake-news-sites/>.

<sup>3</sup> Sara Fischer, “Dark money news outlets outpacing local daily newspapers,” Axios, June 11, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/06/11/partisan-news-websites-dark-money>.

<sup>4</sup> Jessica Mahone and Philip Napoli, “Hundreds of hyperpartisan sites are masquerading as local news. This map shows if there’s one near you,” Nieman Lab, July 13, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Fischer, “Dark money news outlets outpacing local daily newspapers,” Axios, June 11, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/06/11/partisan-news-websites-dark-money>.

Of course, under the State's constitutionally-provided right to know, staff of the Daily Montanan, like anyone else, may request public records of all public bodies or agencies of state government and its subdivisions.

Finally, we copy the leadership of the Montana Newspaper Association and Montana Broadcasters Association to this letter. The reputable news organizations that constitute their membership may not know the standard ethical firewall that separates news and opinion departments, which they maintain, does not exist at the Daily Montanan. They, and their news consumers, deserve to know this and that, as a result, we will not engage with the Daily Montanan.

Sincerely,

Sean Southard  
Director of Communications  
Office of the Governor

Matthew H. Lloyd  
Deputy Chief of Staff/Communications Director  
U.S. Senator Steve Daines

Tate Mitchell  
Communications Director  
U.S. Senator Tim Sheehy

Heather Swift  
Chief of Staff  
U.S. Congressman Ryan Zinke (MT-01)

Beau Brooks  
Communications Director  
U.S. Congressman Troy Downing (MT-02)

Emilee Cantrell  
Communications Director  
Office of the Attorney General

cc: Dewey Bruce, President and CEO, Montana Broadcasters Association  
Erica Yakawich, President, Montana Newspaper Association  
Brian Allfrey, Executive Director, Montana Newspaper Association  
Jim Strauss, Communications and Development Director, Montana Newspaper Association