

Editorials

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LETTER OF THE DAY

Television would taint the judicial process

Attorney Bryan Leary argues that Minnesota judges oppose cameras in the courtroom because of their dread and fear of public scrutiny ("Why is Minnesota judiciary camera-shy?" Aug. 16).

I have spent 16 years on the Minnesota trial bench, eight of those years as an elected assistant and chief judge. During that time, I have known a majority of the judges and justices in Minnesota. They do consider public perception of the judicial institution and think it important. They are thoughtful and often courageous. I have never seen one act motivated by dread or fear.

The issue of cameras in the Minnesota trial courts has been considered for a very long time. I believe it was close to happening when I was a member of the Conference of Chief Judges.

Then the O.J. Simpson criminal trial occurred. It was televised from arraignment to verdict with the permission of Judge Lance Ito, the trial judge. This previously competent judge lost control of the lawyers and the process. The trial became a drama, without judicial parameters; with performers rather than participants, and an outcome based on emotion, not careful consideration. Television can do that. The medium is that powerful. Few remember the second O.J. trial, the civil one. That presiding judge did not allow cameras. The trial lasted a couple of weeks. The outcome was expected, given the evidence of which most of us were aware.

The proximity of television cameras affects the consciousness, demeanor and language of everyone, including judges. It is a powerful presence in whatever moment it chooses to attend. This is most likely in those humanly interesting and highly emotional judicial proceedings that attract the visual media.

To their credit, most Minnesota judges oppose television in the courtroom. They recognize the larger and more important good of a careful and considered judicial process — a process in which outcomes would not be affected by the addition of the passion and emotion that are the chariots of the television gods. The judges in this state care very much about the integrity and fairness of the matters over which they preside.

R. JOSEPH Quinn, Anoka; retired chief judge in Anoka County