

Masthead February 2016

Staff cutbacks limit daily local editorials

Editors share ways of retaining, or enhancing, quality even with far fewer hands at work.

By **Bill McGoun**

The daily locally written editorial is becoming an endangered species.

Cutbacks have left more and more newspapers, even relatively large ones, with one-person opinion departments. Frequently, that person has other duties as well. Under those conditions, something has to give, and that something often is the daily editorial.

For example, in 2000 the Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times had a four-person opinion staff: the editorial-page editor, two editorial writers and a reader-submissions editor. Today the editorial-page editor is alone.

The Times Union of Albany, N.Y., also has just the editorial-page editor today where once it had three other people. There is, however, a reader representative who handles letters; and an associate editor writes some editorials, according to Editorial Page Editor Jay Jochnowitz.

Having fewer editorials is not necessarily a bad thing, according to two AOJ members.

“We only write four editorials a week, and have been doing so for three years or so. The editorials are of a much better quality as a result,” said Susan Parker, engagement and community content editor for the Delmarva Media Group.

In Tucson, “We have decided to publish fewer but better quality local editorials, rather than try to fill that well every day just to do it,” said Sarah Garrecht Gassen of the Arizona Daily Star. In addition to being a columnist and the paper’s only full-time editorial writer, Gassen is the newspaper’s apprentice/intern manager.

The Times Union has reduced its output from two editorials a day to seven a week, with two on Sunday and none on Saturday, Jochnowitz said. [The Chicago Sun-Times with plural ed-page people has long omitted Saturdays, but often does two editorials on other days –Ed.] The Citizen-Times runs locally-written editorials only an average of three times a week.

The Palm Beach Post in West Palm Beach, Fla., no longer uses in-house editorials on Monday and Tuesday.

Newspapers use the space freed up in a variety of ways. “On days when we don’t have a local editorial we will publish a syndicated or wire column daily, or sometimes another paper’s editorial on a national topic,” Gassen said.

On Mondays, Delmarva uses wire copy, Parker said. “But on Tuesdays, we have a big feature called In Their Own Words, written by various people ... Saturdays, we usually run either one of my own columns ... or we run some other submitted or wire op-eds.”

Both editors stress the need for local content in lieu of editorials. “We have filled in gaps by using specifically designed reader contribution features in their place,” Parker wrote.

Gassen said, "We make sure to have local content every day."

The Citizen-Times has no set schedule for local editorials. On days without an editorial, the space often is filled with a syndicated column, usually on state politics. Other days, the entire page is devoted to letters to the editor.

The Palm Beach Post runs editorials from other papers on Monday and Tuesday.

Another way newspapers fill the gap is by having retired editorial writers chip in. I write one or two editorials each week for the Citizen-Times.

Three other AOJ members have banded together to serve about a dozen newspapers of all sizes around the country.

"I run a business called Opinion in a Pinch," Christian Trejbal wrote. Others involved are former NCEW presidents Miriam Pepper and Dan Radmacher. "We write custom editorials that reflect the opinion of the editorial board." Trejbal said. "The paper we are writing for always determines the position and has complete editorial control."

The editorial page itself seems safe for now from extinction, but its form definitely is changing, and the shrinking number of local editorials is one symptom.

Bill McGoun is a retired editorial writer for The Palm Beach Post. He does free-lance writing, including work as a contributing editor for the Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times. He is the author of seven books and holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Florida.



[Some material for this article originated in posts to the AOJ members-only online discussion list in Google Groups, which allows members to vent or to share tips in a forum for free, frank, sometimes funny, often helpful, discussion among peers. We do not quote from it without permission. An article about the list, with instructions for getting onto it, stands online at <http://opinionjournalists.org/discussion-list> which is <https://aoj.wildapricot.org/discussion-list>

[If you are a member of the list and logged in to a Google service, such as Gmail, you can go directly to some archived discussions of this recurring topic at:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!searchin/editorialwriters/one-person>

--John McClelland, Masthead editor]

(Posted 2/24/2016 JM) (top of [article](#)) (top of [page](#)) ([index](#))