

How edit boards outdo shrinkage

Changes in the industry and staffing lead to creative coping, 'making it work' across the country

By Nancy Ancrum

We could even do a little navel-gazing.

That's how leisurely, in retrospect, of course, was the pace of things on the Miami Herald Editorial Board two decades ago. We had time.

- Time to attend city commission meetings -- staying all day.
- Time to fly -- fly! -- to Central Florida to tour sugar cane fields and hear Big Sugar's side of the story.
- Time to take a day or two to report an editorial.
- Time for daily editorial board meetings for the fullest discussions of the issues.
- Time to publish three editorials a day.
- **Time to think.**

And we did do something akin to navel-gazing in those days, too, occasionally resulting in little gauzy thought pieces that we called "tone poems."

We had a letters editor and a page designer. That's all they did.

We were six writers strong. Then, 20 years later, we weren't.

Fewer folks

The Miami Herald Editorial Board now has three writers; one is also its social-media guru and puts copy onto one of the two templated editorial pages.

The newsroom's design desk does the op-ed page now. My administrative assistant is also the letters editor.

More tasks

We write keywords, SEO-friendly headlines, post content on Facebook and Twitter.

We Periscope Editorial Board meetings with local officials and organizations to our Twitter followers -- and we have fewer of those meetings; to those who request face-to-face, we offer conference calls instead. They're briefer, to the point and just as informative.

So-long, Saturday

We scuttled the Saturday opinion pages altogether -- saving money and effort.

And we still report and write, but we publish one editorial a day now, including the occasional "guest editorial" from another publication. These are **the "hamburger helper" of the opinion pages.**

None of these is itself a huge task, but in terms of time, they suck up a lot of it. Still, we make it work.

Indeed, editorial page editors across the country are confronting doing the impossible, and making it work.

Our team of four might even sound somewhat luxe to others.



"Our editorial staff is essentially two people – me and the cartoonist," says **Sarah Garrecht Gassen**, opinion writer and apprentice/intern program manager for the Arizona Daily Star. The paper's top editor and the publisher pitch in at times. That top editor, however, recently left. Though there is no named editorial page editor, that could change under new leadership, she says.

Gassen has an extremely full plate: "I write a weekly column and the staff editorials, edit letters and daily guest opinion pieces, select wire, attend edit board interviews, proof pages."

The cartoonist, by the way, "draws for the editorial department and features, and also has a weekly column," Gassen says.

"We both post on social media and speak to groups when asked. I also manage our internship and apprentice program for the newsroom, and am an adjunct at the University of Arizona."

A growing number of editorial page editors are having to perform similar juggling acts:

Dick Hughes joined the opinion pages of the Statesman Journal in Salem, Oregon, in 1990. "Back then, we ran two or more short editorials every day, most of them written by the editorial page editor," he says. "Don [Scarborough] was amazingly prolific and organized. He came to work about 8 a.m., worked hard all day, did a bit of reading/research while eating his sack lunch, turned off his computer about 5:30 p.m. and headed out the door. He rarely worked weekends that I know of.

"I've never been able to emulate him."

It's a new world

And he probably couldn't, no matter how prodigious his skills. The landscape has changed dramatically. Hughes took over the opinion pages about 20 years ago. Until a few years, ago, he also had an editorial writer.

"Today I am the editorial page editor, but my title is that of 'content coach'," he says. "I supervise, loosely, the reporters who write for sports, features and outdoors (meeting individually with them each week); and I coach reporters on stories and edit some of their work. I put together the daily opinion pages (one page on weekdays and two on Sunday). I write a Sunday column. For several months I was the Saturday editor."

There's more, of course: "I write our editorials. We've gone from 14 editorials a week to usually about three a week."

With so many balls in the air, editors rightly are concerned about making their editorial voices as relevant and valuable to their readers as possible. They have become more careful curators of the issues they address.

At the Miami Herald, for instance, readers would have to dig deep into the archives to find an editorial comment on, say, Putin and Ukraine. After all, they can find ample information and hefty opinions on the topic without leaving their laptops. Plus, are President Obama and Vladimir really waiting breathlessly to read what we have to



say?

Local focus leads

Our focus leans more toward local and state policy, hitting homelessness, overdevelopment, social services, municipal corruption, the environment, inequality.

When addressing national and international issues, it's with an eye on who our readers are. That's why we frequently weigh in on Haiti, Cuba, Venezuela, Israel and the Mideast. And elections, always elections.

Susan Parker, engagement and community content editor for The Daily Times and DelmarvaNow.com, two Gannett outlets based on Maryland's Eastern Shore, also has skewed her pages' content.

"In our hyper-local world these days, I rely less and less on syndicated columns, with the exception of pulling USA Today opinion material when I need filler," she says.

"The ideal is to fill my pages and or website with as much local content as possible, and I believe we do a decent job of it. That includes the opinion section. We rarely have used editorials that are not local and written by staff in-house."

A new source

As editorial boards' "staff in-house" becomes stretched, further reduced or just goes on vacation, Chris Trejbal has jumped in to fill the void.

In 2013, when his wife got an attractive job in Portland, Oregon, Trejbal left his editorial writing position at the Roanoke (Virginia) Times and headed to the Pacific Northwest.

He was pretty clear-eyed about his chances of finding a similar position. "The Roanoke Times had already gone through downsizing. I saw papers reducing editorial staff and I knew it wasn't going to happen [for me] at the Oregonian," he says.

"All these papers are having smaller staffs, but have the same size editorial hole to fill. I figured it was a hole I could step into.

Trejbal founded Opinion in a Pinch.

Though the same budget crunch that has forced editorial boards to shed staff sometimes prevents them from hiring Trejbal to help fill space, he is building a solid base of clients [*and has other veteran writer talent on tap, such as former AOJ president Miriam Pepper, retired from the Kansas City Star editorial page --Ed.*].

And he can write opinions to the left, he can write them from the right, or he can opine straight down the middle, he says.

"When I worked for the [Bulletin, in Bend, Oregon], it was very conservative. I was the most liberal person on the board. Then I went to Roanoke, and I was most conservative person on the board," Trejbal says.

"You wind up writing editorials you don't agree with. They're challenging and they're fun and make you think about issues from different perspectives."

He says his experience is his strongest lure: "I know editors don't want some random schmo writing their editorials."

Or doing any navel-gazing.

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More Masthead editor's notes:

Doing more with less is a recurring theme of mutually supportive exchanges on the AOJ members' discussion list. The coping that some describe here has been going on, and listers have been discussing it, for more than a decade. We anticipate that the list will not just survive, but will thrive, after AOJ's merger into the American Society of News Editors. For an essay on the list, its archives, and application (which is separate from but depends upon AOJ membership), see <https://aoj.wildapricot.org/discussion-list>.

For a graphic look at how overall newspaper staffing in particular has declined since 1990, as online-only jobs have grown, see the chart in this Bureau of Labor Statistics report or read Harvard Nieman Labs' take on it (also with chart):

<http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/employment-trends-in-newspaper-publishing-and-other-media-1990-2016.htm>

<http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/06/there-are-now-more-americans-working-for-online-only-outlets-than-newspapers/>

--JM

Nancy Ancrum is editorial page editor of the Miami Herald. Her Herald online bio says she is "a native New Yorker who has finally come around [for]... sunshine and palm trees." She has been a foundation trustee of AOJ since early 2015 and is co-chair of the transition group that will form ASNE's opinion journalism committee.

(top of [article](#)) (top of [page](#))

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