

The Status of Editorial Writing in Australian, Canadian, and U.S. Weekly Newspapers

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Like other traditional aspects of weekly newspapers, editorial writing faces pressure as staffing cuts shrink newsrooms. This cross-cultural reporting project found agreement among editorialists, publishers, newspaper associations and academics in Australia, Canada and the U.S. that the practice of editorial writing is in decline, particularly among chain-owned weeklies. Editors may attempt to substitute personal columns, but columns often fail to provide the “institutional voice” that starts or shapes community conversations.

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Barry Wilson was cajoling the crowd at the membership meeting of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors' 2104 annual conference in Durango, Colo., talking up the group's meeting two years hence in his hometown of Melbourne, Australia. Wilson allowed that he was planning for the 2016 ISWNE event to coincide with the annual conference of the Victoria Country Press Association, the trade group for weekly newspapers in the Australian state of Victoria, for a deeply felt reason. He was hoping, he said, that ISWNE's emphasis on editorial writing would rub off on the Victoria contingent. Too few editors of Australia's country newspapers, Wilson said, regularly write hard-hitting editorials that live up to the opening words of ISWNE's mission statement: “The object of this organization shall be to encourage and promote *wise and independent editorial comment*, news content and leadership in community newspapers ...” [emphasis added] (ISWNE, 2014). There is nothing in Australia's state-level Country Press Associations' activities like the editorial critiques central to ISWNE conferences. The critiques, which take months of planning and occupy a full afternoon during the conference, “are what I keep coming for,” Wilson, the group's current vice president, said (personal communication, June 27, 2014).

Editorial writing hasn't vanished from Australia's weekly newspapers, but it's not occupying a central role in the industry, either. Among Country Press Australia and its six affiliated associations, only two groups, in New South Wales and South Australia, give annual awards for editorials (Country Press Australia, 2004). Nor do weekly newspaper groups in North America, to which Wilson has traveled five times for ISWNE and its editorial critiques, consistently celebrate editorial writing. The National Newspaper Association, a U.S. community newspaper trade group with 2,200 members compared to ISWNE's 265, does not give annual awards for editorials (National Newspaper Association, 2014). ISWNE gives 12, its “Golden Dozen” and its

top award, the “Golden Quill” (Grassroots Editor, 2014); in fact, the organization was born at a 1955 conference of weekly newspaper editorial writers (Long, 1977). The Canadian Community Newspaper Association gives nine prizes each year for local editorial writing — first-, second-, and third-place prizes for newspapers in three circulation classes (Canadian Community Newspaper Association, 2014).

At weekly newspapers in Australia, Canada, and the U.S., three nations linked by a history of expansive European settlement and the establishment of weekly newspapers in frontier towns, changing technology and staffing cuts have challenged the tradition of editorial writing. To use an ecological metaphor, editorials at weekly papers aren't extinct, nor do they belong on journalism's endangered-species list, but they could reasonably be called threatened. Interviews with weekly newspaper editors and publishers, academics and officials of press groups in these three countries found agreement that the practice of reporting and writing weekly editorials that take stands on local issues has lost ground, particularly when chains acquire once-independent newspapers.

Scholarship on editorials in community newspapers

Journalism scholars have devoted little time to studying editorials in community newspapers. Looking at newspapers overall, scholars have explored editorials on events such as the Iraq war (Nikolaev & Porpera, 2007; Mooney, 2004); examined the impact of political endorsements (St. Dizier, 1985; Counts, 1985); and studied the role of editorials at various moments in history (Strom, 2004; Tanner, Burns & O'Donnell, 2012; Thornton, 2014). Waldrop (1967) wrote that the newspaper editorial serves a vital role in fostering deliberation in a democracy while holding public officials accountable:

For the newspaper, the editorial page is: (1) a source of personality, of “conscience, courage, and convictions”; (2) a means of demonstrating that “A newspaper is a citizen of its community,” a statement which appears in the editorial masthead of the Eugene *Register-Guard*; (3) “a leaven and a guide to the whole newspaper operation.” (Waldrop, 1967, p. 9)

Most of the published scholarship on editorials examines influential daily newspapers. No research could be found documenting how many newspapers, daily or weekly, run traditional editorials, or the correlation between circulation size and editorial pages or between type of ownership and editorial pages, on a national or international basis.

In an unpublished study presented at the 2008 National Newspaper Association convention, Al Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky, and Elizabeth K. Hansen, then a visiting scholar at the institute; examined 102 Kentucky weeklies in September 2007. That month, 28 of these weekly newspapers

had no editorial page at all, 53 ran an editorial page each week, and the remaining 21 fell somewhere in between. The larger a paper's circulation, the more likely it was to run editorials.

Are editorials in decline?

In the absence of data, nevertheless, there is a sense among editorial writers and some scholars that the glory days of weeklies' editorial pages are over, replaced by personal columns or noncontroversial statements from a newspaper chain's regional office that fail to address local issues head-on. Gone, they say, are the days of driven country editorialists such as William A. White of Kansas and Australia's legendary E.C. Sommerlad.

White (1868-1944) owned *The Emporia Gazette* from 1895 until his death and was nationally known for hard-hitting editorials such as "What's the Matter with Kansas?" (1896) and "To an Anxious Friend" (1921), a paean to free speech (University of Kansas, n.d.). Sommerlad (1886-1952) wrote that it was "a thrilling experience deliberately to set about achieving a certain end through the use of the press, and to feel your reading public react to the lead given them. To me it is like sitting at the controls of some mighty machine ..." (Sommerlad, as cited in Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 12). New South Wales named its annual journalism awards after Sommerlad (Country Press Australia, 2004).

"When he was editing the *Glen Innes Examiner*, Sommerlad would sometimes put a banner across the front page, below the masthead, declaring, 'The "Examiner" Does Not Shirk a Clear Cut Editorial Opinion,'" Rod Kirkpatrick, a journalist, academic, and historian, wrote (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 12).

In an email, Kirkpatrick himself minced no words on editorials' decline: "Australian country non-dailies (weeklies, bi-weeklies and tri-weeklies) publish editorials on an irregular basis and even when they do publish them, the editorials say little," he wrote (personal communication, December 2014). "They are motherhood statements. They basically say the obvious: isn't it a good thing that we are having a festival this weekend to tell the world how interesting our little town is; isn't it bad that the [name your facility] is closing."

Asked in a subsequent video chat to name anyone in Australia's provincial press who consistently produces powerful editorials, Kirkpatrick was silent for a long moment.

"There's just enormous pressure," particularly at chain-owned newspapers that have experienced major staffing cuts, "just to get the jolly paper out, just to get it filled," he said at last (personal communication, December 2014). "If you're the journalist in charge, you're doing all the news," leaving little time for the research, writing, and revision a good editorial needs.

Kathryn Bowd, a senior researcher in media at the University of Adelaide, said in a video chat that Australia's top-down, centralized government — states and territories, not local communities, run the public school and hospital systems and provide police services — makes it easy for editorialists to condemn, even to campaign against, decisions made in Canberra and the capital cities (personal communication, December 2014). "The regional impact [of such decisions] can be quite severe," Bowd said. "Campaigns around federal or state issues often get a strong response." Issues of local concern frequently get short shrift to avoid antagonizing powerful local interests (Bowd, 2007).

But Kristy Hess, senior lecturer in journalism at Deakin University's Warrnambool campus, struck a note of optimism. In a video chat, Hess said she has seen a resurgent interest in edito-

rial writing among practicing community journalists who study at Deakin each year as part of Australia's largest university-industry partnership for regional newspaper reporters (personal communication, December 2014). She has administered this program since 2008. "The ideal fell by the wayside" as weekly papers struggled with the challenges of the digital age and endured an exodus of senior writers with deep community knowledge, she said. Now, though, "There absolutely is the desire of these newspapers to run editorials."

Like Hess, Vern Faulkner, a prize-winning editorialist in New Brunswick, Canada, mourned the experience lost to buyouts and layoffs and what that has meant for strong editorial pages as well as news coverage. "Today's newsrooms have largely been gutted of veteran talent," he said in a telephone interview (personal communication, December 2014). "The newsrooms are filled with young people. I've seen papers where they have letters in the editorial spot. The old-school readers are going, 'What the heck?'"

Another threat to the locally written editorial may come from readers who prefer bylined, often first-person columns to editorials that use what John Thompson, editor of the *Yukon News* in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, called, "the stilted, affected 'we.'"

"The most widely shared stories on big newspaper sites are never the editorials," Thompson said in a phone interview, adding, "and if you were to ask readers on a wide-ranging poll what their favorite part of the newspaper is, I don't think editorials would be very high on the list" (personal communication, December 2014).

In 2014, Thompson won the Canadian Community Newspaper Association's top prize for a local editorial at a weekly newspaper with a circulation between 4,000 and 12,499. His winning entry, "New Meaning to Low Standards," chastised members of the Liard First Nation for choosing as their leader a man who had served a prison sentence for an hours-long violent assault (Canadian Community Newspaper Association, 2014). The piece fulfilled a definition that New York University Professor Hillier Krieghbaum proposed for editorials in 1956: "a critical interpretation of significant, usually contemporary, events so that the publication's typical reader will be informed, influenced or entertained" (p. 21).

Thompson offered his own definition: "At a community newspaper, an editorial is something you do on the corner of your desk when you're not being interrupted." Though modest about the general popularity of editorials, he added, "I like to think people find mine interesting now and then" (personal communication, December 2014).

In community newspapers like the *Yukon News*, the popularity of editorials among the readership may in fact be greater than at big-city papers. "In these smaller communities, editorials are still very relevant and very meaningful," Alan Bass, a professor in the Thompson Rivers University journalism program in Kamloops, B.C., said in a telephone interview (personal communication, December 2014). "People writing editorials in these small communities are writing about people they're likely to meet in the supermarket. ... You can live in Toronto and never run into the people who are written about" in the *Toronto Sun* or *The Globe and Mail*.

Further, at smaller newspapers, editorials are usually written by one person, not by a faceless, anonymous editorial board, Bass pointed out. And at many smaller papers, including the *Yukon News*, editorials are initialed or signed. When people know whose opinion the editorial is expressing, he suggested, they are

more likely to want to see what that person has to say.

"It's almost more like an individual column," Bass said (personal communication, December 2014).

Editorials versus personal columns

Bass was making an important distinction between traditional editorials and columns, a distinction that observers from one side of the globe to the other see as essential. Kirkpatrick, the historian of Australian rural weeklies, was so critical of columns replacing editorials that his harrumph practically burned through the computer screen (personal communication, December 2014).

"Some editorials in our local daily (in Mackay in north Queensland) are written in the first person and sound like an item for a chatty column about 'my schooldays' or 'when I had my first bike riding lesson' — something like that," he wrote (personal communication, December 2014).

In St. Stephen, New Brunswick, about 20 miles inland from the mouth of Canada's Bay of Fundy, Faulkner fulminated with equal passion. "I have judged community newspapers in Canada for the nationals and in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in my career," Faulkner, editor of the *St. Croix Courier*, said in a telephone interview (personal communication, December 2014). "That gives me a chance to see what other people are writing about. A lot of writers don't understand the difference between a column and an editorial. A column is personal. So when I'm looking at editorials, I see a lot of 'I,' 'me' ... That's not to say that an editorial shouldn't have emotion. But an editorial should have a calm, rational analysis," or what Bernard L. Stein, who won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Writing for his work at *The Riverdale Press*, a Bronx, N.Y., weekly, called "writing in an institutional voice" (personal communication, March 3, 2015).

Faulkner said he prefers to base his own editorials on a structured, numerical analysis, bringing emotion to play when appropriate but remaining dispassionate. "People should be made to feel smarter when they pick up a newspaper," Faulkner said, "and a persuasive essay is one of the ways to do that" (personal communication, December 2014).

Chain ownership

Faulkner works for one of the three independently owned community newspapers in New Brunswick, which has a population of more than 755,000. The other 23 community papers are owned by Brunswick News, a privately held company, according to Newspapers Canada, a joint initiative of the Canadian Newspaper Association and the Canadian Community Newspaper Association (Newspapers Canada, 2014).

Kim Kierans, a journalism professor and vice president of the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, links chain ownership to the failure of many provincial newspapers to hold companies and government officials accountable. Kierans wrote her 2004 master's thesis, "Endangered weeklies," on three weekly newspapers in the Maritime Provinces, looking in part at "the effects of corporate ownership and how that limits democratic debate" (Kierans, 2004). Brunswick News owns the New Brunswick paper that Kierans studied.

The billionaire Irving family, which owns Brunswick News, is reportedly the second- or third-richest family in Canada. The Irvings also hold major interests in oil, sawmills, paper, transportation, and other industries and employ an estimated one out

of 12 residents of New Brunswick (Valdmanis, 2014).

"There is a real sense that anything connected to their business is not being looked at in a critical way" by Irving-owned papers, Kierans said (personal communication, December 2014). "When talking about local issues, they can have some good editorials, but there's a lot of boosterism, without that sense of wanting to hold people accountable."

On environmental issues, for example, she senses "a certain kind of self-censorship," she said.

Across the country, Black Press Group, owned by businessman David Black (no relation to Conrad Black, the convicted former media magnate), holds a looser grip on the scores of weekly papers it owns in Canada's western provinces. Thompson of the *Yukon News*, which Black Press purchased from a family owner in 2013, said that readers constantly question him about interference from company executives (personal communication, December 2014).

"That's the one question I get from people today: 'So, what meddling do they do? I'm surprised your editorials are still good,'" Thompson said (personal communication, December 2014). "I can't speak for Black Press, but I think they're happy as long as *Yukon News* is still making money."

Thompson said a perception that Black Press interferes with editorials stems from an incident in 1999 when David Black issued an eight-point directive to his editors ordering that they not run editorials in favor of a government land-claim settlement with the Nisga'a Nation (personal communication, December 2014). Other elements of the directive made clear that Black Press papers could publish letters and columns supporting the treaty and that news reporting should not be affected. Still, the British Columbia government filed a complaint with the British Columbia Press Council, a self-regulating industry group. The council found that the papers had carried a diversity of opinion and that "the ultimate obligation and right to direct editorial policy rests with the owner" (British Columbia Press Council, 1999).

In Kentucky, researcher Al Cross pointed to Landmark Community Newspapers, a company owned by the Batten family that publishes daily and weekly papers throughout the U.S., as a model corporate owner, one that encourages editorial writing but leaves its journalists alone (personal communication, Dec. 11, 2014).

Benjy Hamm, editorial director of the Shelbyville, Ky.-based company, said that Landmark's philosophy is one of editorial independence, even leaving it up to local staff whether to brand a particular paper as Landmark-owned (personal communication, December 2014).

"We do not dictate from the central office what they cover or what they write on the editorial side," Hamm said in a telephone interview (personal communication, December 2014). "We do not get involved except for the basic elements of fairness and how you are addressing the needs of the local community."

Some of Landmark's 18 Kentucky weeklies are tiny, with circulation as low as 500. Most have circulations between 3,000 and 9,000. Some of the smaller papers, Hamm said, may run an editorial only every other week, alternating with a personal column by the editor.

A passion for editorials

The role of the locally focused editorial is "to either join the conversation or start the conversation," Bernard L. Stein, the

Pulitzer-winning weekly editorialist, said in a phone interview (personal communication, March 3, 2015). Weeklies' editorials do best, he continued, when they cover a local topic, or a national or international topic that has a local angle.

"For example, the editorial that got us firebombed," he said, referring to a 1989 attack that destroyed the paper's offices, "had a local hook" (personal communication, March 3, 2015). That editorial chastised national bookstore chains as cowards for pulling Salman Rushdie's novel "The Satanic Verses" from their shelves and praised an independent shop in Riverdale for keeping it after Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini urged followers to kill Rushdie and threatened others involved in the book's publication.

"It was a local editorial in the sense that I was comparing the courage of the local store versus what I saw as the power of the chains," Stein said (personal communication, March 3, 2015).

Tim Waltner, a former ISWNE president and publisher of the *Freeman Courier*, a weekly newspaper in the farming and manufacturing town of Freeman, S.D., population 1,300, has been called "the conscience of ISWNE" (G. Sosniecki, personal communication, October 5, 2014), and he has organized and championed ISWNE's annual editorial critiques every year but one since 2007.

"I am passionate about the importance of community newspapers in helping drive discussions and conversations in the community," Waltner said in the first of two phone interviews (personal communication, October 9, 2014, December 6, 2014). "If we don't do it, no one else will, or it will be left to Facebook and coffee talk."

Waltner begins organizing the ISWNE editorial critique sessions months ahead of the annual June conferences. His goal is to bring participants together well prepared to offer constructive criticism. Tone, topics, photos, cartoons, design, layout, even font — no subject germane to the reader's experience of the editorial page is off limits.

He has tried, he said, to make the experience less brutal than it used to be.

At the first ISWNE conference he attended, in 1993, Waltner recalled, "I [had] inherited an editorial page from the previous publisher that included a display ad, and I was roundly, roundly castigated and challenged about that" (personal communication, October 9, 2014, December 6, 2014). The ad was from a prominent local bank, and it took Waltner two years to move the ad to a spot equally satisfactory to the bank president.

And since then, he said, "There has not been a single conference that we have not made some tweak in the editorial pages."

Waltner, a self-described product of the '60s who began writing to letters to editors while a teenager, brooks no arguments about lack of time or fear of alienating people as reasons not to research and write editorials. "I've said to people: 'You would not think of not running a photo on the front page. We make time for that. We make room for that. We should make that same commitment to having a community voice, to prod people into thinking in new ways, to provide some context, some analysis to help people think through these community issues'" (personal communication, October 9, 2014, December 6, 2014).

That context and analysis are, in the end, what editorialists say a community loses when editorials disappear from its newspaper. "What it's losing is a goad to be thoughtful," Stein, the Bronx newspaperman, said (personal communication, March 3, 2015). What Stein, Waltner and others who hold fast to the virtues of weekly editorials share is a belief that in this age of ever-briefer

attention spans and ever-faster media production and consumption, society can ill afford to lose opportunities for considered thought.

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