

# grassroots editor



*A journal  
for newspeople*

Published by the  
International Society  
of Weekly Newspaper Editors

## Letters to the Editor:

*Insights, guidelines  
and suggestions from  
the gatekeepers*

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Welcome to this special issue of *Grassroots Editor* focusing on letters to the editor. The ISWNE board of directors believed LTEs were important enough to dedicate an entire edition to the topic. To that end, several ISWNE members — including three board members — were invited to share their expertise and common practices.

The accompanying articles describe personal and newspaper philosophies on generating more letters, editing letters that are full of egregious spelling and grammar mistakes, handling letters produced by public advocacy groups but signed by local residents, dealing with anonymous letter writers, verifying authorship of letters, handling announcements disguised as letters, limiting prolific letter writers, publishing thank you letters, placing limits on the length of letters, and deciding whether to add an editor's note beneath a letter.

Some newspapers take letters to the editor for granted; others believe that LTEs are a measure of a paper's vitality and should be handled personally by the editor. As one writer puts it, "It may be humbling for journalism professionals like us, well-trained and long-experienced in our craft, to admit it, but some of the most important words in our newspapers are written by amateurs in letters to the editor."

Surveys indicate that obituaries and LTEs are the best-read sections of a newspaper. We devoted the Fall 2001 issue of *Grassroots Editor* to obituaries and believe letters deserve the same treatment. If you gain one idea from reading these articles, then perhaps we have succeeded.

— Chad Stebbins, Editor

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# Letter writing began in the colonial period

By Don Brod

A merchant in Maryland sat down one day in the mid-1760s and wrote a letter to his local newspaper, the *Maryland Gazette*. A copy of that paper, through the usual system of exchanges, was shipped across the Atlantic and was reprinted in the *Public Ledger of London*. Then a copy of the *Ledger* crossed the Atlantic again, and the Maryland merchant's letter was printed in the *New-York Journal* on January 1, 1767.

This head-spinning example illustrates a couple of things about early American newspaper editors and letters to the editor: (1) The editors, most of whom were printers rather than journalists, took their content wherever they could find it, and (2) many letters were reprinted a number of times, often in distant colonies and on both sides of the ocean. However, it was rare that a letter made its way from Baltimore to New York by way of London.

Letters in the colonial and early federal periods came from three sources: contributors, the editors themselves, and eventually from letter writers as we know them today.

## Contributors

Well crafted essays, often called letters, appeared in the early British newspapers.

Regular contributors writing over pen names such as "Cato" were eagerly awaited by readers. Such letters on political and philosophical subjects were reprinted widely on both sides of the Atlantic.

As the political controversy between Britain and the colonies heated up, many of the contributors to English newspapers wrote about the American situation. Since a great number of them were sympathetic to American demands for better treatment by the Crown, they inevitably found their way into colonial newspapers. Other writers sidestepped the middleman and sent their letters directly for American distribution.

For an early example of a homegrown series of letters, we turn to teenaged Benjamin Franklin, apprentice to his older brother James, who was the proprietor of the *New-England Courant*. Young Ben had some things to say, and he knew his brother was not interested in printing them, so he slipped his contributions under the door.

They were signed "Silence Dogood," supposedly an elderly widow. Fourteen of the "Dogood Letters" appeared over a period of six months.

While the "Dogood Letters" were charming and sometimes humorous, the same cannot be said about the "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies." Twelve installments published first in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* demonstrated the unconstitutionality of British action, particularly taxes, against the colonies and argued for the rights of "free-born Englishmen." John Dickinson, a lawyer-politician, was later revealed as the author of these "Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer." Benjamin Franklin was so impressed with Dickinson's series that he arranged to have it published as a pamphlet in London. Franklin, of course, eventually disagreed with Dickinson's middle-ground approach.

Dickinson seemed to be interested in a peaceful solution, but Samuel Adams was preaching revolution. Writing in the *Boston Gazette* and other papers, using the pen name "Candidus" and more than 20 others, Adams called on the colonies to "Form an Independent State — An American Commonwealth." Jonathon Sewall, the attorney general of Massachusetts, engaged in a heated exchange using the name "Philanthrop" while Adams responded as "Vindex."

Several months before he published his famous pamphlet "Common Sense," Thomas Paine contributed a letter to the *Pennsylvania Journal*, writing as "Humanus," calling not only for independence but also the abolition of slavery.

The need for such public letters did not end with the American Revolution. Next there was a constitution to ratify. A series of 85 letters addressed "To the People of the State of New York" appeared first in the *Independent Journal* of New York City and then in papers throughout the states. All were signed "Publius," but they were written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. Political science students still read the collected Federalist Papers today.

## Editors

Some of the early British editors were

graceful writers and contributed to their own publications. Richard Steele and Joseph Addison were popular with the *Tatler* and then the *Spectator*. And Daniel Defoe, who edited *Mist's Journal* from 1717 to 1720, might have been the period's best journalist.

In the colonies, on the other hand, editors were mainly mechanics and not writers. It was not until the second generation of American editors that one finds writers contributing articles of grace and style to their own papers — editors such as Benjamin Franklin of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and Noah Webster of the *American Minerva*.

The Revolutionary War ended, but there was no official peace until Jay's Treaty with England in 1795. The opposition party, Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Republicans, bitterly denounced it, but Webster, staunch Federalist that he was, defended the treaty with a series of 12 letters, signed "Curtius," in his *American Minerva*. Rufus King, another defender of the treaty, said the Curtius letters "had contributed more than any other papers. . . to allay the discontent and opposition to the treaty." Webster, who went on to become our best known lexicographer, apparently had a way with words.

If Webster supported the Federalists, strong opposition came from Benjamin Franklin Bache, who started his *Aurora* just six months after the death of his namesake grandfather. He went so far as to do the unthinkable — attack George Washington himself in two letters headed "From a Correspondent." For this he was the target of great wrath and lived up to his nickname, "Lightning Rod Junior."

## Letter writers

The practice of publishing letters from ordinary citizens may have begun in 1690 in London when John Dunton started the *Athenian Mercury*, a paper that included questions asked by readers and answered by the editors. Entire issues were filled with questions and answers about love and marriage. One might imagine a collection of "Dear Abby" or "Ask Amy" columns. The first publication for women, the *Ladies Mercury*, came along three years later and was devoted completely to such questions and answers.

Letter writers on this side of the Atlantic seemed to be concerned with more serious matters, and they didn't necessarily find newspapers to be the best medium to convey their thoughts. James Franklin is said to have launched the first newspaper crusade in America in 1721 when his *New-England Courant* vigorously attacked the growing practice of inoculation for smallpox over a number of issues. Supporters of inoculation wrote in response, but instead of answering in the pages of the paper they published a broadside in letter form addressed to the "author" of the *Courant*.

It is interesting to note that Franklin printed that broadside. A charitable person might assume that Franklin wanted to afford both sides an opportunity to express their views. A more practical (and more likely) motive would be that the struggling printer needed every job he could get.

The use of broadsides or pamphlets made the exchanges of opinion more immediate than if the writers waited for the next issue of the weekly newspaper.

However, as more papers increased their frequency to daily publication, more "letters to the printer," as they were known, began to appear.

Political figures, of course, also continued to write letters to the papers. As Hamilton and Jefferson, the founders of the forerunners of our two major political parties, battled over the direction the government should take, Hamilton sent anonymous letters to the *Gazette* of the United States defending his positions and attacking Jefferson. President Washington intervened and asked for peace between his two

cabinet members. Jefferson responded in a letter to Washington that he had not written any letters attacking Hamilton in the opposition *National Gazette*. Washington might have been suspicious because Philip Freneau, the paper's editor, was employed by Jefferson's State Department as a translator.

Since most modern newspapers require the name of the letter writer, there is little chance that anyone who fires off an intemperate letter for publication will be able to deny it — just in case the President of the United States is interested.

We don't have much trouble identifying the three sources of opinion in today's papers. Contributors provide local and syndicated columns; editors write editorials and columns; and letter writers, well, they write letters.

But things were not always so clear-cut. The infamous Stamp Act of 1765 that England imposed on the colonies required all legal papers, official documents, and newspapers to be printed on special stamped paper that carried an extra tax. There was general unrest, but the groups affected most — lawyers and newspaper editors — stirred up outrage among the people. No one would deliver the stamped paper on the day the law was to go into effect.

John Holt went ahead and published his *Gazette* and *Post-Boy* in New York, including an anonymous letter that he *said* he had received threatening death if he suspended printing his paper. With that excuse he continued to publish until the law was eventually repealed.

But did an anonymous reader write that letter? Or did the editor do it himself? Only John Holt knows, and he has been dead for almost two-and-a-half centuries.

*Don Brod, a member of the ISWNE board of directors, was chairman of the Department of Journalism at Northern Illinois University from 1976 to 1981 and from 1987 to 1992. He can be contacted at donbrod@earthlink.net.*

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# Letters a telling measure of a paper's vitality

By **Bill Schanen**

Letters to the editor are contributions, but like gifts to good causes, they don't just happen — they need to be encouraged and nurtured.

This is worth doing, because letters to the editor are a telling measure of a newspaper's vitality. Healthy letters pages indicate a readership that has been informed and engaged by the newspaper and thinks highly enough of it to grant it status as a public forum for the discussion of important issues.

The two primary requisites for strong letters pages are the same as the requisites for strong newspapers — aggressive reporting and vigorous editorial writing. The former turns up information, often about government, that is the raw material for letters to the editor. The latter presents opinions that provoke supporting or opposing responses from readers.

Letters to the editor are important enough to merit an appointed editor. One of his or her jobs should be to solicit letters. At *Ozaukee Press*, we call experts in various fields in our readership area, citizens who have made articulate presentations at public meetings, even local, state and national elected officials and invite them to submit letters to the editor on issues of local relevance that are in the news. If their responses are particularly interesting, we may present them as an op-ed piece that we label "In My Opinion."

The letters editor's main job, of course, is to edit. That's even more important for letters than for other newspaper content, and editors shouldn't be bashful about using a decisive hand. This means doing more than verifying the authenticity of letters, fixing misspellings and bad grammar and identifying and removing libelous language. Letter writers often are

not good writers, and editors should help them make their points by improving syntax and sentence structure. The obvious caveat is to do nothing to change the meaning of the letter.

To encourage readership of letters, which in turn encourages more readers to write letters, letters should be given generous display on carefully laid out editorial pages, with strong headlines that reflect the opinion of the letters. Every effort should be made to eliminate barriers to letters. It should be easy to get a letter in the paper. In a prominent box on the editorial page, we tell readers we welcome their letters and give them instructions on four ways to get them to us — e-mail (preferred, of course, in this post-typesetting era), fax, snail mail and hand delivery to our office. We don't list off-putting rules for letters and have no policy restricting letters that may be sent to a number of newspapers. A letter should stand on its merits. If it's relevant to our readership, it should not be rejected because it may be published in other newspapers, even if it's part of a blanket mailing.

Consistent with our belief that the editorial pages should be a free market of ideas, we publish unsigned letters. I know, this is anathema to many of my fellow publishers and editors. Some have told me, "If a letter writer doesn't have the courage to sign their name to their opinions, I don't want them in my newspaper." That's an easy position to take, but it fails to account for the whistle blower. There are people, employees of school districts or police departments, for example, who have may something to say in a letter about their employers that is a matter of public importance, but because it could mean losing their job, don't have the option of being brave enough to sign their names. The door to the newspaper's forum should not be slammed in their faces.

That said, we work hard to avoid publishing unsigned letters. We contact the writers (complete identification and contact information is required to even consider the letter) and urge them to publicly sign their letters to give them more credibility and influence. Most agree. If those who don't agree can convince us their reasons for anonymity are valid, we run their letters over the words "Name withheld" and the writer's city or village of residence. We take more care editing unsigned letters, even though, as far as liability is concerned, they are no different than signed letters. With or without the names of the authors, newspaper are responsible for the content of letters to the editor.

Signed or unsigned, letters to the editor are vital — to the newspaper and to the communities it serves. Letters to the editor are elements of a dynamic facilitated by newspapers that can effect change in service of the public interest. Time and again I've witnessed situations in which a controversial issue develops through news stories and in-depth, analytical reporting, gains traction through editorials and builds to a critical mass with letters to editor. A tipping point is reached and action is taken. To mention only two examples involving *Ozaukee Press*, this process resulted in a pristine natural area being saved from development and an oil company being found negligent in the deaths of three commercial fishermen.

It may be humbling for journalism professionals like us, well-trained and long-experienced in our craft, to admit it, but some of the most important words in our newspapers are written by amateurs in letters to the editor.

*Bill Schanen is publisher of the Ozaukee Press in Port Washington, Wis. He can be contacted at [bschanen3@ozaukee.com](mailto:bschanen3@ozaukee.com).*

# Our goal is to provide a forum that is as open as possible

By **Jim Painter**

Since its beginning in April 1986, the *West Valley View* has had a very lively and dynamic letters section. We're proud to publish a newspaper in an area where the citizens take their right of free speech very, very seriously.

The people responsible for founding and publishing the *View* are adamant in their belief that one of the most important functions of a free press, whether small community weeklies or large metropolitan dailies, is to provide an open forum for the free expression of the ideas and opinions of the citizenry — and the more open the better. The people of this nation need such forums so they can speak out about the issues that affect us all, or to comment on the actions of our government and elected officials, from local school boards to the White House.

The opinions sections of community newspapers offer a snapshot of the collective mindset of the people who live in that particular community, offering insights into whether the community as a whole is predominantly conservative or liberal, tolerant or bigoted, thoughtful or shrill. Granted, gadflies are likely to pen letters to the editor more often than those who are content with the status quo, but still, gadflies and "screamers" perform an important service in society by bringing to light (often stridently) issues that need to be openly debated. In the free marketplace of ideas, the truth will eventually win out (at least that's the theory).

As the "gatekeepers" of the ideas expressed on our opinion pages, the editors of the *View* have tried to offer as few restrictions as possible to the flow of opinions from our readers. However, as the community grows and more and more people submit letters, there may come a time when we have to be more selective of the letters that are published.

We soon might not have enough space to publish all of the letters we get, therefore we might have to impose additional restrictive guidelines. If we do, it will be with

great reluctance, because we firmly believe that our letters forum should be as free and unrestricted as possible.

If we must impose restrictions, one idea would be to limit the number of letters a person may have published every month. Currently, we have no limit on the number of letters a person may submit (although we publish only one letter per person per issue).

Civil discourse is the cornerstone of a free society. The key word, of course, is "civil." We ask that letter writers refrain from submitting opinions that attack other individuals. They should be free to attack the ideas, but not the person behind the ideas. Letters that refer to other individuals, races or religions in gratuitously negative terms are not likely to be published.

When we started 20 years ago, we did not place a limit on the length of letters. However, as the letters section grew, we had to impose a length limit in order to ensure that as many people as possible could get their opinions published each week. Now, letters that exceed the 300-word limit, even by one word, or that do not include the author's full name, city of residence and phone number (to be used only for verification purposes, if necessary) will not be published.

As the volume of letters increases, the labor involved in copy editing letters also increases. Our editors are likely to reject letters that are written in all caps, all lower case or without any punctuation at all. Most e-mail programs now come with a spell-check tool, and we politely ask our letter writers to learn how to use it.

As always, we welcome our readers' opinions of our policies and any suggestions they might have to make our letters pages, or our newspaper in general, better. We want to know what our readers think.

How can a community newspaper attract more letters?

First and foremost, editors should strive to publish compelling editorials and news stories. Don't back away from tough, controversial issues.

If your editorials state your case boldly and clearly, you can rest assured that someone out there will be more than willing to put pen to paper to challenge your intelligence and question your ancestry. They might even address the issue in their own terms.

Once a newspaper has established the fact that it's confident enough not only to take criticism, but also to publish criticism of its editorial positions, other readers will be encouraged to write in and blast away as well. Soon, your defenders will pitch in. After a while, you might even start to see letters saying such things as: "I rarely agree with your editorials, but I have to give you credit for having the courage to publish opposing opinions."

Once the letters start rolling in, a snowball effect can take place. A recent *View* letters section was typical: Of 12 letters, six challenged the opinions presented by other letter-writers in previous issues.

Earning your readers' respect is important — especially the respect of those who disagree with your editorials.

If the flow of letters starts to slow, write editorials about the importance of citizens' expressing their opinions in a free society. Suggest topics for letters to the editor: "We'd like to know what our readers think about (insert local issue here)."

Make it easy for readers to submit letters. Most of ours come in by e-mail nowadays because it's easier (and cheaper) than writing a letter by hand, sticking it into an envelope and driving it to the local post office. Encourage people to use e-mail, but demand solid ID — full name, address and phone number.

Which letters should not be published?

Although we want to keep the letters forum as free and open as possible, there are, of course, letters that we will not publish. Obviously, we don't want to be sued, so we screen all letters for possible libelous statements.

Ours is a family newspaper, so we won't publish profanity.

Some newspapers print anonymous or

unsigned letters, but we do not. Anonymity seems to make people a little more willing to express opinions that they wouldn't be inclined to express if their family, neighbors and members of their church knew who was behind the opinion. Our philosophy is that if you're not proud enough of your opinion to put your name on it, then it's probably not worth publishing.

In our 20-year existence, we have published only one letter signed "Name withheld by request." We knew the identity of the author, and felt that his personal safety would truly be at risk if we published his name. However, the issue was an important one that needed to be brought to light, so we made an exception in that one case.

We do not publish letters that either praise or criticize local businesses, unless the business happens to be at the center of a public debate. In the past two years, several proposed Wal-Mart Supercenters were debated vociferously in public meetings and we received many letters either favoring or opposing the new centers. We published those letters because the Wal-Mart issue was a legitimate news topic.

On the other hand, we sometimes get letters complaining about the service at a local restaurant — the food was cold, the waiter was surly — or lauding the same restaurant. Since we have no idea of the writers' true motives for submitting such letters, we don't publish them. The complainant might be the owner or employee of a competing business, and the lauder could be someone looking for a sneaky way to get a free ad in the paper at our expense.

We don't publish letters that are part of mass mailings. Those used to be pretty easy to spot. A few years ago, we were briefly inundated with scores of identical postcards with a political message written as if it were a letter to the editor, but each postcard was signed by a different person.

E-mail and the Internet have made it harder to spot such letters. Both major political parties have Web sites that contain boilerplate letter templates on various issues. All the party faithful have to do is copy and paste one of those letters into an e-mail and send it to the local newspaper with their own name on it as the author. If you suspect a letter might be one of those, copy a sentence or two and Google it. I did

that several times during the last national election campaign and sometimes found the same letter that had been sent to me had been published in 20 or more newspapers across the country — each time with a different author's name at the bottom. Be suspicious.

How much editing should we do? *View* publisher Elliott Freireich and I have been debating this question for about as long as we've known each other, which is a long, long time.

I LONG to publish unedited letters WRITEN LIKE THIS. BUT MY BOSS WONT LET ME!!!!!! DO you .....think THATS RIGHT??!!!!?

I sometimes think we do our readers a disservice by correcting spelling, grammar and punctuation. I have received several letters over the years from teachers and school district superintendents touting the virtues of a quality education (and often arguing for higher salaries for teachers). Some of these letters contained egregious spelling and grammar mistakes that obviously weren't mere typographical errors.

I argued that by correcting such errors, we were perhaps hiding the fact that some of our educators aren't very well-educated. Parents feel comfortable when they think their children's education is in the hands of people who can spell lawsuit without putting an "E" on the end of the word. I felt that by editing the letters, we were giving the public a false sense of security.

Elliott, on the other hand, argued that we should afford the same courtesies to our readers that we do to our own employees. We edit our own reporters' stories and correct their spelling and grammar mistakes, so why shouldn't we do the same for our letter-writers? I can see his point — usually (I'm sure this very article contains a grammatical error or two). However sometimes — sometimes — I think we do our readers a disservice by correcting every single error in grammar, spelling and punctuation, because that gives the person behind the idea expressed in the letter much more credibility than he or she might deserve.

Just last week I got a letter from a reader criticizing some of the positions of Arizona senators "John Kyle" and "John McCaine." I couldn't help but wonder how

many published articles this person had actually read about the senators' positions when he didn't even know how to spell their names correctly (Jon Kyl and John McCain). However, I dutifully corrected the spellings before the letter was published, thus eliminating the possibility that same doubt might be raised in the mind of anyone else who read the letter. I admit it's possible that in this age of talk radio, many of the opinionated people in our communities get the bulk of their information from the broadcast media and therefore haven't necessarily ever seen the names of their elected officials in their written form. So, does it matter that we make the letters seem better-written and the authors better-informed than they really are? I wonder. I'm sure Elliott and I will continue to debate this topic until we both retire.

Should the editor respond to letters? The *West Valley View's* first editor frequently wrote an editor's response to letters, often challenging the facts presented in the letters. Whether an editor chooses to do this or not, of course, should be left up to the individual editor.

However, we have concluded that such responses probably discourage people from writing letters out of fear that the editor will hold them up to public ridicule.

Among my favorite quotes by famous people is one by former Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter: "One of the prerogatives of American citizenship is the right to criticize public men and measures — and that means not only informed and responsible criticism, but the freedom to speak foolishly and without moderation."

Even if you know that the "facts" presented in a letter are wrong, fight the urge to challenge them in an editor's response. Leave it up to other letter writers to correct the factual errors. That's what an open debate is all about. I think we get more letters by keeping ourselves out of the debates. Our job is merely to provide a forum for the debate.

The letters forum is for our readers, not for us; our forum is the editorial column.

*Jim Painter, a member of the ISWNE board of directors, is managing editor of the West Valley View in Litchfield Park, Ariz. He can be contacted at editor@westvalley-view.com.*

# 'Letters from Readers' a more appropriate heading

By **Ross Connelly**

An old lead slug sits on a shelf above my computer. I rescued it from a box of many blocks of photos and fillers that once graced the pages of *The Hardwick Gazette* when it was printed in the basement of our building on a single sheet Cottrell Press. This slug has a small drawing of a quill pen resting on three sheets of paper, with the words "LETTERS FROM READERS" molded in the lead.

I was pleased to find that old slug years ago, and remain pleased. I give it a prominent place at my desk because, in my mind, it represents one of the foundation blocks of journalism in a democracy and a bedrock reason why I am a journalist. Part of my responsibility as the editor of this newspaper — a big responsibility — is to give space to readers to share their opinions, and I do.

I look at that old lead block and think of the meaning of those words

"LETTERS FROM READERS." The block does not say "Letters To The Editor" or "To the editor," even though that is the salutation I put on each letter we publish. The block gives prominence to the reader, not the editor. The editor — me — is there to foster the reader, to provide space for the reader to have their say.

A newspaper, particularly a small, weekly newspaper in a rural area, has to be, in my mind, a mirror. The newspaper needs to reflect back to a community who is in it and what those citizens do and think. We fulfill part of the responsibility by fair and accurate reporting. We also fulfill that responsibility by giving citizens a forum to share their thoughts and views with each other, unfettered (to a large extent) by journalists. There's nothing but white space on the newsprint roll each week before the newspaper rolls off the press. I know I've made a good dent on my weekly tasks if the editorial and op-ed pages fill up with letters from readers.

*The Hardwick Gazette*, with a paid circulation of about 2,700, covers 10 rural towns having a total population of between 10,000-12,000 people. The closest town to Hardwick, at least a town that offers more than a convenience store, is about 12 miles away. The closest large towns are 25 miles

over the hills. We're spread out.

We're in the poorest area of the state, but also one of the most beautiful. People here farm, work in the woods, commute to blue and white collar jobs, run and work in mom and pop businesses or retail stores, but there aren't a lot of jobs and money so some people don't work at all. There is a blend of native Vermonters and transplants. The education levels run from dropouts to a few Ph.D.s and M.D.s. Somehow, they manage to live in harmony despite their often divergent political views. In non-partisan local elections, voters elect candidates who lean toward the philosophy of Republicans and Libertarians. It is not unusual in legislative, statewide and national races for Democrats to get the nod. Perhaps, because an appreciation for independence is shared, the area residents get along. They also write letters to the editor.

We're a broadsheet, seven SAU columns. We run 12-14 pages each week, but should only publish 10 if we stuck to a strict ad-to-news-hole ratio. We don't because there's news to report and the letter writers have opinions to share. The letters start on page four, our editorial page, and usually fill page five. Sometimes they carry over from there.

The *Gazette* published almost 700 letters last year, averaging 13 a week. The low was six at the end of July, there were several issues with seven, but 41 of the 51 issues published had 10 or more letters. The high was 24 letters in a mid-February issue — pre-Town Meeting — and five of the issues had 20 or more; 17 issues had between 15-18. June and July generated the fewest letters, but issues with letters in the teens occurred in every month of the year.

In January this year, we had 15 letters one week, 11 the next, and 13 the week after that. We ran 21 letters the first issue in February and 16 in both issues of the second and third weeks. The numbers balloon before elections; one year we published an all-time high of about 50 letters a couple of weeks before voters went to the polls.

All of the letters are written by local residents although the topics are near and far. My wife and co-publisher says some of the letters should be run as news releases. Perhaps an invitation to the public to attend

a spaghetti supper before a local high school basketball game or a sign-up call from a coach for Little League should not be letters to the editor, but I don't have a problem with them. My view is the readers are using the newspaper as a forum, which is what I want them to do. Plus, the occasional announcement letter is too short to bury on some back page, and I doubt the individual or group would spring for an ad.

For the most part, the letters deal with substantive issues, ranging from budgets, bonds and bombs, to cell towers and pot-holes.

Recently, a letter writer criticized a Select Board for cutting the library budget while increasing the police budget. The sentiment was echoed by another reader. A letter called on kids to sign up for a Knights of Columbus foul-shooting contest. A reader took exception to the need for a school bond to expand facilities when the school has a declining enrollment. The issue generated a number of views. Four or five readers over two-three weeks offered different opinions about an anti-military recruitment ad that ran in a local high school's student newspaper.

In other issues this winter, a reader expressed concerns about the U.S. Supreme Court appointment hearings held by the Senate Judiciary Committee. A reader reported on a recent select board meeting in a nearby town, and a person wrote about a senior citizens program and appealed for participants. At least two writers took exception to a prison sentence handed down in a state criminal trial. A town clerk reminded voters of the approaching deadline for filing petitions to run for local offices. A slew of letters were generated in February about a proposal to locate a residential mental health facility in a grand old inn in a nearby town. Some were for the proposal and others were against it. And the list goes on.

The letter writers seem to be a cross section of the population. They come from the 10 towns covered by the *Gazette*, with more letters from the towns we cover the most. They range from students to nursing home residents. The writers work, are retired, are in the military, have civilian jobs and no jobs. There are those from whom we expect to hear on various topics: the anti-war and the support-the-adminis



tration factions have their voices who write, if not frequently, at least enough so their views are familiar. Repeat writers also include those who want to target the police or skewer a town's government.

About 400 people wrote the letters we published in 2005. About 130 people wrote at least two or more letters. Of that group, about 60 wrote two letters, 20 wrote three and then the numbers fell. Of course, there were those who wrote all the time, or so it seemed. One person wrote 22 letters last year — they were his notes of a select board meeting; a town clerk wrote 16 — mostly reminders to voters of registration deadlines, dog license due dates and such I'd have rather she put in paid ads, but doubted she would. Better to keep the newspaper a public forum than residents devoid of civic information is the way I rationalize that one.

Do letters from readers reflect the views of the broader population? Or do the letters merely come from a select few who are civic minded or who want to grind an axe? From a numbers point of view, 400 people who stand up and make a public statement in an area population of 11,000 works out to almost 4 percent of the population. On my optimistic days, I lean to the view the letters are representative; my pessimistic days have me thinking they are not.

Perhaps, the questions need to be addressed in the context of a newspaper's role and responsibilities in a democracy. A newspaper can and should advocate and push on the editorial page. On the news pages, however, a newspaper needs to report fairly and accurately. My view is good reporting and thoughtful opinion, dare I say provocative opinion, provide information and generate thought — civic awareness. It's up to the citizens to do with that what they will.

I cling to the belief a newspaper exists because the public has the right to know the truth and our responsibility as journalists is to provide accurate information and reasoned opinion. Let readers sift through it all and then act. Some choose to send in a letter to the editor. Others speak their mind at a town meeting. Some just vote. Informed readers make informed decisions — I hope.

I am convinced good reporting generates letters. Letters also generate letters. When my wife and I bought the *Gazette* 20 years ago, one of my first tasks was to try to figure out how to get the readers involved with the newspaper — to put their opinions on paper and mail them in for others to read. I wrote that in an early editorial and have done that more than a few times since. We

put small filler boxes on various pages inviting readers to write. Whenever anyone calls to complain about something that was in the *Gazette*, or stops in the office to voice an opinion, I invite the person to put pen to paper and send in a letter.

One December, lacking an idea for an end-of-year editorial, I went back through all the letters to the editor from that year and made a list of the writers' names. I wrote a short introduction acknowledging the writers and then listed all the names. We had to use agate type. The list was impressive in its length.

I don't remember any reaction to that "editorial," but I still believe it is important to tip one's hat to readers who take the time to write and share their views with others. Respect the readers and letter writers and maybe they will respect the newspaper. Maybe that's the best way to generate letters from readers.

I keep our op-ed pages available for our readers. Our policy is to publish letters from residents of the towns we cover, from subscribers, no matter where they live, and from those outside our coverage area who are addressing an article that appeared in the *Gazette*.

All letters must be signed and have an address and telephone number.

We don't publish letters that are libelous or slanderous.

Over the years, I'm sure we received letters filled with hate. On the one hand, I believe the letters should be published if that is what the writer believes, but, on the other, I find my own sense of decency says otherwise. I think, publish them and let the letter, metaphorically, shine a light under the writer's own rock to expose their filth. That doesn't make me comfortable, either. I have to read each letter and make an individual decision rather than make a blanket statement.

Some weeks, I could print a number of letters from the people who opine on everything and send those musings to every newspaper in the state. Come election time, I could fill the pages with endorsement letters from people in distant towns for every statewide candidate whose name will appear on the ballot. I could use up a lot of ink printing letters from interest groups from other parts of the state and from around the country that want to influence local opinion. I don't print any of those letters. They are not local. We are. That's my guide.

A reader once told me he often disagreed

with my editorials, but he knew I would always publish letters from readers who took exception to what I wrote. He told me he knew the *Gazette* provided a forum for differing views, and because of that he values the *Gazette*. Every so often, he writes letters to the editor and also contributes occasional articles recounting distant travels. I take those contributions and comments as indication we're doing something right. I am complimented by his words.

A reader once told me I shouldn't publish long-winded letters. He referred to an occasional writer who sent in lengthy and detailed commentaries about efforts — which proved successful — to rip up railroad tracks that ran through our town. I replied I was willing to give the person the space if he took the time to put his efforts into the letters. I did not see it as my role to restrict what he said.

No, we don't limit letters to a set word count. The letters one week in February this year went from about 250 words to almost 1,000. Sure, some of the letters are too long, in my opinion, but obviously not in the opinion of the writer. Seldom does this cause a problem, and the page is for letters from readers, after all, not opinions from the editor. I know there are a lot of readers who think my editorials are too long, too, and, in fact, shouldn't even be printed. They are welcome to share their opinions.

In line with the above, seldom do I add an editor's note beneath a letter. On rare occasions, when a letter is flat out wrong in accusing the newspaper of printing something it didn't or claiming we reported something in error when we didn't, I follow two paths. My first response is to call the letter writer and point out their error. I offer them an opportunity to change their letter. If they don't want to do that, I offer that I will add an editor's note explaining their mistake. Perhaps a bit blunt but letter writers have a responsibility to be fair and accurate, too. Otherwise, my view is the opinions are the writer's and they stand as is.

Beyond the above guidelines for what letters to publish, from whom and the length, other areas I address are thank you letters and political letters.

We don't publish thank you letters on the op-ed pages; they go on the religion page and we charge for them. Thank you letters have probably caused me more headaches on a consistent basis than anything else printed in the newspaper. Some of them thank organizations, most of them thank individuals after an illness or death. They are important, but they are not opinion and,

generally, are not addressing a public issue. That is why I don't think they are appropriate to print as letters to the editor. It is fair to say most people who submit thank you letters accept this reasoning, but those who don't, watch out. They can get nasty.

We decided a few years back to stop publishing endorsement/political letters in the issue before an election. We didn't think it fair to give one writer that last shot with no chance for another writer to respond. Now letter writers send their salvos sooner and take a week to unwind before they cast their ballots.

Letters to the editor in the *Gazette* must be signed and include a telephone number and address for verification. We print the writer's name and town of residence under the letter. Occasionally, we receive a typewritten letter with a person's name but no signature. I call the letter writer to make sure the letter is theirs. I also explain a signature is needed to protect them from having a letter they didn't write printed over their name, and the newspaper for inadvertently publishing a letter over the name of a person who never wrote. Invariably, the letter writer thanks me for calling.

We accept letters by e-mail, with the same requirements about address and telephone number, but obviously there is no signature. If there is something fishy about a letter I will call the sender for verification. I can't remember ever printing a letter that someone told me later they did not write. Perhaps that's a luxury only available in rural America or in a small circulation newspaper.

Sometimes, but not frequently, a letter writer will ask me to run a letter with no name. I take this as a chance to give a minicivics lesson. I tell the person we require a name because the newspaper is a public forum. If one enters a public forum they need to be public about who they are. Speak up and speak out. That's how a democracy is meant to work. Most times, the person

agrees to have their name used. If they don't, they leave with their letter.

Most letters are fairly well written. Some are not. Some writers ask me to be sure to correct their grammar and spelling, which I do. When not asked, I correct spelling, and egregious grammatically errors. Also, I do divide letters into paragraphs when needed. I will take out profanities beyond the occasional damn and hell.

Last spring, I stopped writing editorials. Instead, I started publishing the names of the American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan — one could say an editorial statement in and of itself. Around Memorial Day, for two or three weeks, I printed the names, in agate type, no ages, addresses or units, of all those who had been killed. I was able to list all the names of the soldiers who had been killed up to Memorial Day 2005 in that time span.

As I read through the list on various websites each week, I was struck at how I was affected. The names, the ages, the hometowns, the ranks, the military units and the cause of death all gave me a sense of loss. I decided to publish the names each week and include that information. They appear in the two column, 10-inch editorial space, in 11-point type, under an In Memoriam head. I thought I would easily catch up and get ahead of the casualties in a few weeks. I'm still three months behind.

I mention this because I don't know how it is received by readers. One person told me last summer he appreciated me giving the space to the names.

Another reader this winter seemed to take exception to printing the list. That person sent their own letter to the editor, which included a letter they received from a soldier in Iraq who reported on his success. A veteran of the war in Afghanistan asked me about the editorials several weeks ago. He wondered if I were making a political statement. He then answered his own question by saying readers could take the lists of

casualties any way they chose.

I have noticed a decrease in the numbers of letters to the editor we receive each week since I stopped offering my opinions. We averaged 15 before I started printing the soldiers' names; the average for the rest of the year was 12 letters per issue.

I wondered if stepping back on my part gave readers an incentive to think for themselves and send their own letters, which some people around here call "editorials." Perhaps, it does not. Other newspapers in the state — both weekly and daily, rural and urban — have many letters from readers; my impression is more each day or week than this time last year.

As I mentioned earlier, the *Gazette* printed almost 700 letters in 2005. In the 12-month period of September 2001 through August 2002, the newspaper printed 462 letters. Said another way, we printed 48 percent more letters in the 12 months of 2005 than were printed in the 2001/2002 12-month period. Our audited paid circulation in October 2002, which reflected that previous 12-month period, was 2,736. Our audited paid circulation in October 2005 was 2,633, a 3 percent drop.

Maybe more people are paying more attention to civic society and expressing their opinions about what they see and experience than they did a few years ago, even if fewer are reading their local newspaper. That's a topic for another study.

I look at that small type block sitting above my desk — the block that says "LETTERS FROM READERS." It took us 20 years, but at the beginning of February this year, we changed the headings above the letters we print from "Letters To The Editor" to "Letters From Readers." I wonder if someone will write in about that?

*Ross Connelly is the editor and co-publisher of The Hardwick Gazette in Vermont. He can be contacted at HdwkGazett@aol.com.*

# An open editorial page with few restrictions works best

By Robert Mihalek

“Hey coward, you don’t dare address me publicly, because you know I’ll carve out your rectum with my steel-toed boot. Here’s my answer, you pathetic Republican quivering: What does being a blood donor have to do with anything? Obviously it doesn’t count in your books, but then, you Republicans are a selfish, self-serving lot....”

People read letters to the editor that are interesting, informative, funny and, at times, provocative. People do not want to read letters that are insulting, derogatory and... Well, OK, people might read those letters, but most newspapers are not going to publish such submissions, just as I didn’t when my paper, the *Yellow Springs News*, recently received the letter that contained the above quote.

The letter was from a Yellow Springs resident who frequently contributes letters to the editor that are almost always provocative and strongly worded — but sometimes, as in this case, are harmful and abusive. I know that many people read his letters. I have talked to this letter writer several times about his habit of generalizing his opinions of groups of people, such as people who believe in creationism or Republicans, telling him that it is inappropriate. At times, I’ve had to tell him to turn down the rhetoric, stop calling people names and desist with personal attacks, and instead address broader issues or subject matter. The letter that the above quote was taken from was also inappropriate to publish because the writer was responding to one individual who sent him an anonymous note. The letter writer’s beef was not a public issue.

Although I am often uncomfortable with his language or extreme views, I usually publish this writer’s contributions, as well as letters from others who express strongly worded, even extreme, opinions. What has worked for many years at the *Yellow Springs News* is to have an open editorial page with few restrictions. I think that our readers in general prefer that we publish letters of controversial topics, even if they contain harsh language, rather than censoring people’s opinions. The letters that people seem uncomfortable with, and tell me that

go too far, are ones that contain personal attacks. I do allow more latitude for letters that criticize public and elected officials, than for letters that criticize private citizens.

My paper covers the busy, well-educated community of Yellow Springs, in southwest Ohio, the home of the liberal Antioch College. Most of our readers are over 40, well-read and opinionated. At times, it seems as if every member of our community has an opinion — and each opinion is the right one. Our readers are engaged in community activities and local (as well as national) politics. They pay attention to what our Council is doing, they care about what’s going on in the schools, they root for the underdog, and they love a good controversy.

The *Yellow Springs News* publishes on average six to eight letters a week on the opinion (broadsheet) page, which we call “Community Forum.” I try to publish every letter that we receive each week. Like most newspapers, the number of letters and pages of letters we publish increases at various times during the year. The most obvious example is elections. Last fall, when we had local elections, the *News* published 18 letters over two pages two weeks before the election. The week before the election, we published every letter submitted for that issue: 34 letters on races and ballot issues over three pages, as well as eight non-election letters on a fourth page.

During and after the 2004 presidential election, the *News* had no choice but to expand the number of letters to editor it published almost each week. We regularly published 15 to 20 letters a week, on two pages. Since Ohio was a pivotal swing state, we also received many letters from out-of-town writers, none of which we published, since most appeared to be mass mailed. Many of these out-of-town letters looked the same and used similar language, and were probably generated by advocacy Web sites.

This doesn’t mean that all letters, or even every word of every letter, are published. We do have a few rules. Letters are limited to 350 words. Anything longer can be cut, at my discretion, to fit the space available. The *News* does occasionally print columns, which we call “Other Voices,” that are lim-

ited to about 700 words. These columns are usually published when space allows. In fact, I like to publish letters before longer columns, preferring to run more voices rather than louder voices on the editorial page.

There are, of course, exceptions. When Coretta Scott King, a graduate of Antioch College, died in February, I made space for two columns, written by readers. The columns were timely, well-written, and added to the *News*’ coverage of the death of a prominent Antioch alumna.

The *News* gives preference to letters from its readers and community members, and very rarely publish letters from people not from Yellow Springs. If we do publish a letter from someone from out of town, it’s because he or she is a reader, a former Yellow Springer or someone who went to school here. After we were burned last spring by the publication of a letter written by someone using a pseudonym, I stepped up the *News*’ efforts to verify letters and submitted columns.

The *News* has a policy of not publishing letters by writers using pseudonyms, anonymous letters and letters by writers who ask us to withhold their names. I don’t believe it’s appropriate to ever publish an anonymous letter. If the subject matter of a letter is important to the community, but a writer does not want to sign his or her letter, the topic could be addressed through an article written by a member of our staff.

At the *News*, we do lightly edit letters, making changes that conform with the paper’s style and for some grammatical and punctuation errors. However, my approach to editing letters is not the same as my handling of announcements and staff-produced articles. And because our readership is well-educated and well-read, most letters do not need editing. I don’t think it’s appropriate for a newspaper to edit the meat of letters, especially without permission from the author. If a letter is edited in a more heavy-handed manner, it’s because it contained offensive, libelous or inappropriate material or language. If a letter contains offensive language, that portion is cut. I usually consult the writer and explain that part of the letter is inappropriate. The writer is offered

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# Letters are best-read section of newspaper

By David Cox

A reader once complained, with no sense of irony, that the letters to the editor are too opinionated.

To complain that letters are too opinionated is akin to complaining that news stories are too factual.

Yet it does raise an important question: should we publish only letters that are non-controversial? That is, light on opinion? It would certainly save editors a lot of headaches.

But the other, entirely predictable result of such a policy would be that no one would read the letters anymore. Readers read letters BECAUSE they are controversial. That's sort of the point.

Despite the headaches, editors always wish they had more letters. Letters attract readers. In fact, readership of letters is higher than just about every other item in the paper.

This was borne out in an extensive (though unscientific) reader poll we took a few years ago. According to the poll, letters to the editor were read by a whopping 96 percent of the 175 readers who responded to the poll.

Letters edged editorials (95 percent) and obituaries (90 percent) and easily outpolled everything else in the paper except front page stories. Readership of regular columns ranged from 49 percent to 88 percent. A sampling of other features: calendar of events (65 percent), comics (57 percent), weather (54 percent), crossword puzzle (48 percent), TV listings (20 percent).

We provided space for poll respondents to write suggestions, which helped us adjust our letters policy. For instance, 60 percent of respondents thought there were too few letters to the editor, compared to only 11 percent who thought there were too many. At the same time many respondents thought the letters were often too long, while not a single respondent thought the letters were too short.

Wrote one: "Some people tend to ramble on — please edit them more." And another: "Can't some that don't make sense be edited? Or left out?"

We already had a word limit but

enforced it only on rare occasions when we couldn't get all the letters to fit. We now enforce it more strictly — but still not absolutely.

Readers complained about the writers whose letters appear frequently, a couple suggesting that writers be limited to a single letter each month. That was actually the policy already, but we have since restricted it even further; we don't publish letters from the same writer on the same subject in back-to-back letters, even if they are a month apart.

At one time a reader in Cherokee Village wrote at least one letter a week, sometimes two or three, despite the fact that we published only one a month. He never complained and actually thanked us for the letters we did publish. We have always suspected he wrote for therapeutic purposes more than to get published.

While we encourage readers to use the opinion page to voice their opinions, we do require that they abide by certain policies, which are usually listed at the bottom of the page. That policy, with comments, follows:

- Preference is given to original letters not previously published.

We won't publish letters we recognize as produced by public advocacy groups but signed by local residents. Nor will we publish letters — which often appear at election time — that appear to be part of an organized letter writing campaign.

- We reserve the right to edit all letters.

We are careful never to alter a writer's intent, but we do sometimes correct spelling, punctuation and style errors. We might also cut portions that are repetitious or on topics not germane to the subject of the letter.

- We refuse publication of letters which contain profanity, vulgarity, libelous statements or unsubstantiated accusations.

This is the issue that causes editors the most headaches; someone who has a personal grudge against another and wants to use the newspaper to exact revenge is often so consumed with anger he cannot listen to reason. We have been cussed out many times for refusing to publish letters that could land both the letter writers and us in jail for criminal libel — even though the

writers were "willing to vouch for every word" of their rants. Our policy is not to publish any letter critical of any specific private person or entity — unless it is critical of us, in which case we do publish it. We do publish letters critical of public figures and public agencies.

- Writers should limit submissions to no more than once a month.

But if they submit more, it gives us a choice of which one to pitch.

- Letters should not exceed 300 words.

They often do, and we make no apologies for slashing them. However, on that rare occasion when we deem a writer particularly articulate or insightful, we bend the rule. But be forewarned, writers who try too hard to be articulate or insightful tend to be merely wordy and pretentious.

- Letters must include the name and phone number of the writer for verification.

Anonymous letter writers are the most reckless in their accusations against others, since they don't have to take responsibility for what they write. Still, we would break the rule for a writer we thought was making an important statement but who could be endangered or needlessly embarrassed by publishing his or her name. We have yet to see a letter that qualified. As for verification, we don't promise to confirm authorship of every letter, but we do attempt to verify authorship of every letter with controversial content.

- Letters must be typed or printed legibly. If it's not important enough for you to make your point clearly, why should it be important enough to us to decipher it?

Newspapers have a rich tradition of facilitating public debate on issues of importance in communities across the country through the letters to the editor section. Responsible editors try to provide objective leadership on issues through editorials, but honest editors also recognize there are many viewpoints on any issue, and the public good is served by airing those viewpoints even when — perhaps ESPECIALLY when — those viewpoints are contrary to the editorials.

*David Cox is editor of Areawide Media in Salem, Ark. He can be contacted at roundhouse@centurytel.net.*

# Letters are so important that I handle them myself

By Dick Drysdale

A couple of years after I bought *The Herald* from my father in 1971, he asked, "How do you get so many letters?" It was a memorable moment especially because it was clearly true that *The Herald* was publishing more letters to the editor than my father had generally done in his 26 years at the helm.

My first answer (to myself, not him) was that I almost never said "No." I remembered over the years that my father had complained about various letter writers whose ideas were just too off-the-wall or irresponsible to print or who just had little to contribute. Little by little that reluctance to print almost everything affected the tone of the column. The paper lost not only the letter that was turned down but the one that might respond to it, or the one that might respond to that one.

Thus, my motto became, "print 'em all." So seldom did I turn down a letter that it took me years to informally codify the ones I wouldn't use. We still continue to use almost everything we get, sometimes even teasing a letter to the editor out of a personal communication.

Of the 250-350 letters we receive a year, I turn down maybe eight or 10. The letters column is extremely important to the paper. They may be the best-read section of the paper. They give my readers a feeling of ownership over their paper, and they give the readers a window into other people's worlds. Many are funny, a few are outraged, others are informative. Some are downright odd. We welcome them all.

They are so important that I, as editor and publisher, handle all the letters myself. On the rare times, such as vacations, that others handle them, there are always a few letters that are put aside as being a little doubtful by a staff that wants to be careful. Usually, when I return, the letters go into the paper. Because I am handling the letters myself, I get to know my readers. I also occasionally respond directly, asking for clarification, or cuts, or suggesting that certain material is really not appropriate. When a letter writer gets a response from The Editor himself, he or she is usually gratified

and a closer connection to the newspaper is forged.

In handling letters, my basic principle is respect for the writers. Whether or not I agree with them is beside the point. Anyone writing to my newspaper — even if it's a furious letter — is paying *The Herald* a compliment. As a result, I try to put myself inside that person's head in dealing with the letter, to really understand the argument or the point of view. When and if I have to cut, I do it carefully, doing no damage to the writer's thoughts, often making it better by sharpening it. I've seldom if ever received a complaint about my infrequent cuts, in 34 years.

Another mark of respect is to write headlines that accurately reflect the writer's concerns and, if possible, his or her tone. We use two-line single-column heads. I think they're better than one-line label heads because they pique interest in the letter, just as if it were an article. Never must one write a headline that casts sarcasm or a questioning eye on the writer's material.

That's especially true when the editor is being criticized. We should glory in critical letters. They show that people are reading our work, and they are our proof that to readers that we are willing to be fair and publish all sides. This week, after we wrote an editorial entitled "Shameless," a writer took us furiously to task. Our headline on his letter reflected his anger. It was "Talk About/Shameless!"

And this is the response we got to publishing the six critical letters last week. A reader wrote:

"You got what you deserved for the misguided editorial regarding Sanders and Venezuelan oil ... But you also deserve the credit for printing the more eloquent responses in this week's edition which observed its misguidance. Thanks for that, and thanks for all of the efforts associated with putting together a decent weekly paper."

And now we'll put THAT letter in the paper. You couldn't ask for better publicity!

And as most ISWNE people know, it's generally a no-no to append an editor's note to a letter. Just because it's your newspaper, you do NOT get to have the last word.

Sometimes an editor's note can amplify something the writer has said, or point to other information, but it should never be critical.

Also under that category of respect is our editing. Some of our writers hardly know how to write at all, even when they have a valuable point of view, so we help. We fix grammar and of course spelling, and occasionally we'll change a phrase to make it more reflective of what we know the writer means, but we don't change enough to lose the tone or the flavor. We've been tempted to leave in the bad grammar in a letter from, say, a teacher or a politician, but we seldom have done so.

Editorial tone can be important. A slash-and-burn editorial can get a big response (6 this week for my editorial of last week, 5-1 against me). But in the long run a thoughtful approach in the editorial column elicits thoughtful letters from thoughtful and intelligent readers, people whose letter do credit to your newspaper and benefit your readers. Humor is important, too.

Despite the fact that we turn down very few letters, we actually have quite a few informal rules. In enforcing these rules, we very frequently contact the letter writer directly and he or she is able to change something and make letter acceptable. Usually they are very cooperative and understanding. Here are some of our rules:

- No more than one letter per month for the same person.

Of course, no libelous letters. You are as responsible for libel in a letter as in a news article you wrote yourself. Ironically, the better you learn the libel laws the more permissive you can be, because you don't have to leave things out "just in case" they may be libelous.

Even if the material is not legally libelous, we do not allow insults, a personal attack, or an attack on business practices. If the reader has a legitimate beef with a business, it could be the subject of a news story, so that all sides can be told, not just the reader's.

- No poor taste. This is our mark of respect for our readers.

No "Thank You" letters. This is a tough one, but we do not want our letters column

filling up with boring lists of people to be thanked for their good works. We will use such a letter when it contains substantial information along with the thanks — the amount of money raised, who did what, etc. and sometimes we ask the writer if we can rearrange it a little bit so that it is not obvious a thank-you letter. If there's no way to fix it, we send a letter (now an email) saying why thank-you letters are impermissible and suggesting they take an ad. We remind them how much it would cost to send out 6,000 Hallmark cards. Often an ad does result. (If anyone wants a copy of the letter to modify for themselves, email me at [editor@OurHerald.com](mailto:editor@OurHerald.com). It's a good letter.)

- We will often shorten letters if they get over 300 words. Very subjective this; sometimes very long letters are permitted. When we need to shorten a lot, we often send it back to the writer and let him or her do the job if they prefer. Otherwise we cut ourselves — carefully. We're getting more sensitive about length than we used to be.
- No letters that are answering something they read in another newspaper.
- With a few exceptions, no letters sent out to several newspapers.

Sometimes we'll use one, though, if it is informative and coming from a knowledgeable source that I think can benefit my readers. We just carried one from the governor of Hawaii.

- If a letter comes from our circulation area, or if we have reason to believe the writer is a subscriber or former resident, we will run the letter. Otherwise, letters from far away we don't usually consider legitimate.
- No letters that are just a second chance at a press release for an event.

- Just one or two letters from foreign exchange students during their exchange.

We actively solicit these letters and get a lot of them, but a few kids get carried away, so we had to establish a policy.

- No dragged out exchanges between letter writers. After each has had two shots, we call a halt.
- No anonymous letters.

For a while we allowed a letter not to be signed if we knew who the writer was, but we dropped that with no ill effect. When a letter is written by an organization, we generally insist that at least one person's name be part of the signature. About every five years or so, we do find a legitimate reason for an anonymous letter, and we explain it with an editor's note.

- Finally, and I hesitate to admit this, but it's true: over the years, there have been a very few people whose letters we just won't accept. Right now there are two on that list. We know from experience that their "facts" are likely to be wrong and frequently skirt with libel and, more importantly, that they are consistently negative and want merely to stir up mischief. They just don't have anything constructive to offer our readers.

What do our writers write about? We did a quick survey from the last seven weeks, during which we published 47 letters. Of those 47, 10 were about state issues (Vermont is a small and very close-knit state). Six were about national issues, five about local issues, several were informative about programs, and three were about individual people. The others were sort of uncategorizable. For instance there was the one that revealed that a former Randolph skier was the ski instructor who

had "discovered" Bode Miller as a young teen and had given him his first pair of demo skis. That one could have gone on page one, but we like to keep good news disclosures in the letters, too.

Of the 47 letters in those seven weeks, some 16 came as direct response to a story in a previous issue. Four came as a response to editorials, and four were responses to other letters.

In closing, here's an anecdote about Helen Smith.

Helen grew up on a farm a LONG time ago and now lives in a community on the outskirts of our coverage area. Every month, she sends us a little critique of various articles in the newspaper, which often recall for her some scene from her childhood or some Bible verse. They're all handwritten and are harder and harder to read. They are a bit trite, and one associate editor tried to get me to throw them all out.

What we did instead was to send a reporting intern to visit with Helen at her home. He wrote a story about her and her long life and her compulsion to write letters. It was a delightful story. Just recently, the reporting intern, now 28 and living in London, was married and his photo was in the paper. Helen's letter to the editor arrived promptly, exclaiming at the handsome young man who had come to visit her so many years ago and how well he had turned out, and how many thanks were due to God. We winnowed a few useable sentences for the letters column and sent the original off to London. It made us all feel more a part of a big family.

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# Current issues regarding letters to the editor

By **Bill Reader**

## Introduction

Nearly all newspapers in America will publish letters from readers — even newspapers with vestigial editorial pages filled with canned copy and low-rate syndicated columns will still at least offer space for letters (though it's no surprise that such pages get few, if any, meaningful letters). More importantly, many community newspapers to whom the editorial page is the soul of the paper will devote considerable time, effort, and resources to cultivate and maintain a healthy and robust letters section. Those letters sections are used in many different ways by both writers and editors. Writers use the forums to participate in public discourse, to promote their views and causes, to complain about or heap praise on the work of newspapers, and many times just to vent some steam. Journalists use the letters to get reader feedback on the job they do, to get a pulse of what issues matter most to readers, to give readers a sense of inclusion in the newspaper production, and sometimes to even make editorial decisions.<sup>1</sup>

It's with those devoted newspapers in mind that I have pursued several different studies related to "LTEs," from studies about who writes letters to inquiry into how and why journalists select letters for publication. This paper is a summary of that research, and I hope the findings will be useful to newspaper editors who are committed to their LTE sections.

Many of the findings in that research have reinforced many assumptions journalists have about LTEs and have supported the findings of research conducted throughout the 20th century. Specifically, the findings suggest that letters editors view their LTE forums as important community service tools, as important forums for democratic discourse; at the same time, editors acknowledge that LTEs are not always good representations of public opinion, although they like to believe that their LTE sections are forums for diverse opinions from the community.<sup>2</sup> Some newspapers have experimented with some changes to how they

manage and present LTEs, but most of those changes have been minor — providing a bit more space, a bit more editing, more but shorter letters published each day, special forums for letters on specific topics, etc. None of that is revolutionary, and the few attempts that truly are revolutionary — such as giving up space for staff editorials and columnists to letter writers, which a few papers tried in the 1990s — have not led to widespread reform. But while LTE forums have changed little since the mid-20th century, the world discussed in those letters have changed considerably. Newspaper readership patterns have changed, attitudes about public discourse have changed, and the role of LTEs in professional campaigns has become more solidified and more complex. Talk radio and Web-based forums provide alternative outlets for public discourse, leaving editors to wonder whose voices they are "losing" from their LTE forums. Meanwhile, the Internet has added a whole new dimension to the letter-writing campaign, providing people with high-tech tools to spread prepared statements and make them look like home-grown letters from readers.

The research findings summarized below are intended to help editors to consider those changes as they continue the "holy work" or providing forums for public discourse. In summary, those findings indicate that:

- The most likely letter writers are over age 45, have incomes above \$40,000, and have attended college.
- Among those who have not written letters, 35.1 percent said they would send letters if their names would not be published. Women, city-dwellers, people aged 18 to 44, and racial minorities all were more willing to write letters if their names would be withheld.
- The ethical arguments editors use to justify "must sign" letters policies contradict established ethical tenets and procedures, specifically: they ignore facts about the historical role of anonymous speech in American democracy; they do not thoroughly apply ethical principles such as fairness, balance, and giving "voice to the voiceless";

and they allow personal biases against anonymity to affect professional decisions.

- About a third of special-interest Web sites that encourage supporters to write LTEs provide text for would-be letter-writers that can be copied and incorporated into letters, a practice journalists call "astroturf." Most of such groups, however, encourage supporters to write letters to the editor by following the guidelines newspaper editors now provide, such as length limitations, authorship requirements, civility, and the like.

## Who writes?

In 2003, we conducted a national telephone survey of just over 1,000 American adults and asked them about their letter-writing habits.<sup>3</sup> The survey was inspired by earlier, limited attempts by scholars to discern the demographics of average letter writers, which had suggested that most letter writers have above-average incomes and education levels, are middle-aged or older, and tend to be politically or ideologically conservative.<sup>4</sup> The problems with those earlier studies is that they focused on limited geographic regions and only counted people whose letters had been published — in essence, the "sample" for those studies was highly localized (in some cases, just a single town was studied) and was affected by the subjective selection criteria of a few letters editors. We wanted to overcome those limitations by drawing a national sample and by including people who may have written letters but had not had them published.

We started with a premise that there are three distinct stages in the life of a letter to the editor: authorship, selection, and publication. Past research had focused on the latter two stages — how editors select letters, and (as mentioned earlier) the demographics of those who have had letters published. We argued that the greatest limitation on earlier "who writes" studies was, by far, the second stage, since the selection process involves so many different variables (such as letter length, topic, the news of the day, restrictions on "thank you" and other specific forms of letters, even editors' mood shifts

from hour to hour). Compounding those variables are the individualistic and institutional preferences of each editor and each newspaper — some are fairly libertarian in their approaches, allowing many different views (including controversial views) to be published, while others may be fairly conservative, restricting letters to only certain topics and blocking certain viewpoints (for example, a newspaper I worked for early in my career would not publish, on direction of the publisher and the executive editor, letters that criticized the newspaper). In essence, a “who writes” study based on actual letters written would have to begin with a collection of all the letters submitted to a large number of newspapers, including the letters that were not published, and then contacting all of those writers. For obvious reasons, such an approach would not be feasible, and even if it were, we would have no idea of who might want to write letters but did not for some reason. So we decided on a telephone survey.

In May 2003, we surveyed 1,017 U.S. adults. In addition to gathering typical demographic information (age, sex, race, income, education, etc.), we asked each respondent questions related to their newspaper reading habits, whether they had recently written LTEs, and whether their letters had been published. About one third of all the respondents had written letters. We then ran statistical tests on the data to look for significant correlations. Here is what we found (keep in mind that all percentages are “within group,” such that they indicate a percentage of all of the people within the stated age group, income bracket, etc., and not a portion of people of all ages, incomes, etc.):

- **Middle-aged people are most likely to be letter-writers.** People between the ages of 45 and 64 were much more likely than other age groups to have written letters (42 percent of respondents between ages 45 and 54 had written, and 35 percent of respondents aged 55-64 had written). About a quarter (24 percent) of people aged 35 to 44 had written, and slightly more than a quarter of people over 65 (28 percent) had written. College-aged respondents (18-24 year olds) were slightly more likely to write than 25-34 year olds, 18 percent to 13 percent. Among those who had written letters, again the 45-64 group was most likely to have had their letters published (about 22 percent), compared to 17 percent for those over age 65, 13 percent for those 35-44, and below 10 percent for those 18 to 34.

- **Successful letter-writers are most likely to have above-average incomes.**

Those earning \$80,000 or more per year were the most likely to write letters and have them published (40 percent wrote, 25 percent got published), and those with incomes between \$40,000 and \$80,000 were the next most active and successful group of letter-writers (about 30 percent of them wrote, and about 19 percent of them got published). Although people with incomes below \$10,000 were more likely to write than middle-income people (36 percent of those earning less than \$10,000 had written), they were not nearly as successful at getting published — just 13 percent had been published. Only about a fifth of those earning between \$10,000 and \$40,000 (about 21 percent) had written letters, and only about 11 percent had been successful in getting their letters published.

- **Education levels correlate directly with both letter-writing activity and letter-writing success.** We found that a higher education level increase the chances of letter writing and getting letters published. Those with only some high school were least likely to write and to get published (8.8 percent and 4.4 percent, respectively); those who only finished high-school wrote about twice as much (17 percent) and were twice as likely to get published (9.2 percent); those who had some college were, again, more likely to write and get published (29.3 percent wrote, 15.2 percent got published); nearly a third of college graduates (32 percent) had written, and nearly a fifth (18.5 percent) had gotten published; and those who pursued or completed post-graduate degrees were both the most likely to write (44.7 percent) and the most likely to get published (27.3 percent).

- **Community size affects letter-writing.** Rural residents were slightly more likely to write than people living in suburbs or cities (small or large), with 32 percent of rural residents having written compared to 28 percent of suburbanites and 26 percent of both large- and small-city dwellers. Rural residents also were the most successful at getting published (20 percent, compared to 15 percent for suburbanites, 14 percent for folks in small-cities, and just 10 percent for those in big cities). That wasn't surprising, given that many small-town, suburban, and rural newspapers are likely to publish a higher percentage of the letters they receive than are larger newspapers.

- **Letter-writers are frequent readers of newspapers.** Just over a third (33.8 percent) of those who read newspapers at least four times a week had written letters, compared to 19 percent of those who read zero to three times a week. The success rates between the two groups was striking — only

about 8 percent of those who read three times or less per week had their letters published, compared to about 20 percent among those who read four times or more.

- **Ideology and partisanship have little bearing on letter-writing.** Our data showed that Republicans were only slightly more likely than Democrats to have written (29 percent vs. 27 percent), and that liberals were somewhat more likely than conservatives to have written (33 percent vs. 27 percent). Publication rates were similar as well — Republicans got published 16.5 percent of the time, Democrats 15.9 percent of the time, while liberals got published 18 percent of the time compared to 14.7 percent for conservatives. All of those findings were within the margin of error and, as such, the differences cannot be considered statistically significant.

- **Whites are much more likely to write than non-whites.** Among white respondents, 31.4 percent had written letters, compared to just 11.2 percent of racial minorities. And 28.5 percent of whites had their letters published, compared to just 4 percent of minorities.

- **Sex and religion do not affect letter-writing.** There were no significant differences in letter-writing and letter-writing success among men and women or religious affiliations.

All of the above led us to conclude that while letter writers are diverse in certain ways — by sex, by political views, and by ideologies — they are not diverse in terms of race, age, income, or (especially) education. As was done by past research, these findings pretty much shatter the myth that LTE forums are true “community forums,” and rather reinforce the assumption that LTEs are just for the white, middle-aged, highly educated middle class.

## Who wants to write?

One additional question we asked in that survey was related to newspapers' “must sign” policies. Previous research has shown that nearly all newspapers (95 percent) automatically reject unsigned letters, and the vast majority (85 percent) require names to be published with letters.<sup>5</sup> Now, to be clear, I believe that editors are well founded in their arguments that “must-sign” policies are a deterrent for many irresponsible, vulgar, and even potentially libelous letters, but having been a letters editor myself, I know for a fact that such letters still make their way to the mailroom (it's amazing what some people will sign their names to). My hypothesis, then, is that relaxed “must-sign”



policies would simply result in more diverse letters, including high-quality letters from people who otherwise would not write letters.

In the survey, we wanted to see if those “must sign” policies had any kind of chilling effect on the general population, so we asked those respondents who had not written letters (about two-thirds of those surveyed) whether they would write letters if their names would not be published. We had some surprising findings:

- **The desire for name-withheld letters is quite high.** A full 35 percent of those who had not written letters (about 250 out of 725 people) said they would write letters if their names would be withheld. That suggests that “must sign” policies do, indeed, have a chilling effect on a large portion of the non-writing public.

- **Women were more likely than men to desire anonymity in letters.** Among the “haven’t written” group, 37.5 percent of the women said they would be willing to write if their names would be withheld, compared to 30.5 percent of men.

- **People who live in large cities are more likely to desire anonymity than people living in small cities.** About 44 percent of city-dwellers said they would be willing to write letters if their names would be withheld, compared to 30 percent of those living in small cities.

- **Younger people would be more willing to write if their names wouldn’t be published.** Among the 18-44 year age group which writes relatively few letters, 44.5 percent said they would be willing to write if their names would be withheld. Among the 45-64 year olds (the age of most letter writers), the desire for name-withheld letters dropped to 35 percent, and the desire dropped even further to about 20 percent among those older than 65.

- **People with very low or very high incomes were more likely to desire anonymity.** About half of those with incomes below \$25,000 and of those with incomes above \$80,000 said they would write letters if their names would not be published.

- **Racial minorities were more interested in writing name-withheld letters than were whites.** Nearly half (46 percent) of the minorities who had not written said they would write letters if their names would not be published, compared to about 35 percent of whites.

An earlier research project of mine looked at the evolution of those “must sign” policies, and found that they evolved in the mid-to-late

20th century due to editors’ desires to streamline the selection process (basically, it was easier to cull potential letters by rejecting certain types from the start, including unsigned letters) and to improve the readability of the letters forums (the assumption being that signed letters would be more carefully crafted and, as such, more enjoyable to read.<sup>6</sup> Over time, many journalists have come to view those “must sign” policies as moral imperatives, arguing, in essence, that people who aren’t “willing” to sign their names “don’t deserve to have their say,” and that to publish unsigned commentaries would somehow be a violation of the democratic principles of free speech.

Certainly, anonymous letters can be vehicles for unfair attacks, but editors’ fear of publishing unfair attacks and disdain for “cowardly speech” has created a blind spot toward the potential value of anonymous letters in democratic speech. Ironically, the right to anonymous speech was an important freedom demanded by the proponents of the U.S. Bill of Rights (some anti-Federalists argued that requiring names to be printed with opinions in newspapers was a “despotic scheme of government” and that, as a writer called “Detector” wrote in the *New York Journal* in October 1787, the practice would “reverse the important doctrine of the freedom of the press” and was “the introduction of this first trait of slavery into your country.”<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice William Rehnquist has upheld anonymous speech as an important tradition in American democracy (a key ruling was *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission* in 1995, in which the Court upheld the right to anonymously distribute political fliers).<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the legal right to anonymous speech, newspapers’ “must sign” policies also can contradict several ethical standards of journalism. Consider the following tenets from the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists:

- *“Journalists should ... identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources’ reliability. ... Always question sources’ motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.”* While some might read the above as a prohibition against anonymous letters, others might see that the tenet is an outline for accommodation of anonymity. Certainly, a “signed” LTE will have more credibility in the eyes of some, but a signature alone doesn’t assure an editor that the information in a letter is reliable, nor does it necessarily reveal

the motives of a writer. More importantly, the tenet suggests that sometimes promises of anonymity are essential to journalistic practice, not just in news gathering.

- *“Journalists should ... tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.”* Again, both anonymous letters and the newspapers that publish them likely would come under fire from many directions, but if publishing such letters allows more diverse voices to be heard on the pages, shouldn’t newspapers be willing to take the criticism?

- *“Journalists should ... examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.”* If many journalists believe that public speech is reserved only for those willing to identify themselves, then aren’t they imposing their values on others when they deride and/or ignore those who want to speak anonymously?

- *“Journalists should ... support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.”* Again, if journalists think anonymous LTEs would result in “repugnant” letters, or if they think anonymity itself is repugnant, are then not violating this tenet by blocking such letters from their forums?

- *“Journalists should ... give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.”* As the evidence from the survey suggests, what if the only barrier for some of the “voiceless” is a “must sign” policy.

Now, I’m not suggesting that editors simply repeal the policies altogether. But if editors truly want their LTE forums to be open marketplaces of ideas, they can make a few modifications to attract new customers:

- First, choose letters based on the quality of their content more than on whether or not the writers are willing to have their names published. When selecting letters, editors should start by looking for the most poignant, the most original, and the most diverse. Also, consider whether the identity of the writer is essential information — in many cases, the ideas in letters are what matter, not the writers’ names. That alone would circumvent the unhappy situation in which an editor must publish a so-so letter instead of a great letter that was unsigned.

- Second, evaluate “name withheld” letters the same way you evaluate “anonymous source” requests. That is, make sure the person is known to the newspaper, that the person agrees to being identified in some descriptive manner, and that the person might have a legitimate reason for remaining

anonymous.

- Third, publicize your criteria. Editors do this all the time in terms of how long letters should be or what kinds of topics might not be published (poetry, thank-you notes, etc.). Perhaps a line suggesting: “The editor will consider requests to publish letters without names if the opinions expressed are deemed worthy of such protections. Abuses of anonymity, such as unfair attacks, incivility, or false claims, will not be considered at all.

With a little trial and error, editors might find that relaxing their “must sign” policies might not prove to be as onerous as they predict, especially when you consider that requiring names to be published with letters doesn’t guarantee that the content of the letter is reliable — or even that the person signing the letter wrote it in the first place.

### “Turf”? Or “astroturf”?

The third aspect of LTEs I’d like to address is the relatively recent concerns among editors related to “astroturf.” “Astroturf” is the term many journalists have applied to letter-writing campaigns in which special interest groups provide pre-written letters that supporters can sign their names to and submit as original letters. The practice gained national attention in 2003 when it was found that the same letter extolling the economic policies of George W. Bush was published in at least a dozen newspapers across the country, each signed by a different person from a different community.<sup>9</sup> Since then, several newspapers have published editorials condemning the practice; some have modified policies to reject such letters; and members of the National Conference of Editorial Writers routinely use their e-mail listserv to share suspect letters. Meanwhile, several special interest groups have adopted the practice, many with considerable sophistication (for example, the Bush-Cheney campaign used an interactive feature on its Web site to help supporters “build” letters using several prepared passages from which to pick and choose; the Web site also had an automated system for even packaging and mailing the letters on behalf of their supporters).

To campaigners, the practice certainly has a lot of appeal — it’s a great way to get a carefully prepared message published verbatim and for free, and to give it the appearance of a “grass roots” movement (in fact, the fake “grass roots” aspect is what gives the practice the nickname of “astroturf”). Some have defended the practice as enabling people to participate in the democratic process. Editors, meanwhile, seem to be especially disdainful toward the letters, perhaps due to

their general disdain for campaign operatives, more likely due to the deceptive nature of the practice.

Regardless of the motives for and reactions to “astroturf” letters, one big question that had not yet been answered is how widespread the practice really is. To that end, I developed a content analysis study that would focus on special-interest groups that encourage supporters to write letters to the editor, what suggestions they give to would-be writers, and whether those groups go so far as to facilitate “astroturf.”

I limited the study to Web sites that included the phrase “How to write a letter to the editor.” I drew a random sample of 200 such Web sites from all the active links returned from the three most popular Internet search engines: Google, Yahoo!, and MSN.com. Duplicates and journalism sites were discarded (for example, several newspapers’ Web sites offered suggestions to would-be writers). On each site, I looked for different suggestions each group offered to would-be writers, from general guidelines related to length, frequency, tone, etc., to the degree to which each group encouraged “astroturf” letters. Here are some of the key findings:

- **Political groups are most likely to encourage supporters to write LTEs.** Ignoring the “astroturf” issue for a moment, the findings give an overall sense of what kinds of groups encourage supporters to write LTEs. Exactly 50 percent of the groups from the sample were political groups, or groups that were specifically promoting candidates, ballot initiatives, or changes in government policy. The next largest group (27 percent of the sample) was classified as “health/environmental” groups, or groups promoting research or civil action to address health problems and/or environmental degradation. The third-largest group (14 percent of the sample) was classified as “professional/educational,” or organizations that were simply interested in spreading awareness about certain professions, hobbies, ethnicities, religions, and the like. Web sites with no clear motives were classified as “other,” and constituted just 8.5 percent of the sample.

- **For LTE campaigns, special-interest groups target newspapers in general, and small newspapers in particular.** The findings show us that special-interest groups recognize that letters to newspapers are somehow more valuable than letters to other media, such as magazines, broadcast news stations, even the Web. About 93 percent of the sample suggested “targets” for LTEs, and 93 percent of the sample specifically suggested sending LTEs to newspapers — in

other words, those groups that promote LTE campaigns almost all want those letters published in newspapers. The next most frequently suggested “target” was magazines, which was mentioned a scant 11 percent of the time, then TV/radio stations, which was mentioned just 6.5 percent of the time — again, indicating that newspapers are seen as “the” target for letters. Suggestions to send LTEs to “local/small” newspapers occurred 67.5 percent of the time, often with comments that such newspapers were more likely to publish an individual’s letter than were larger or metro papers (only 11 percent of the sample suggested sending LTEs to metro papers).

- **Most special-interest groups recognize certain “rules” newspapers impose on letter writers.** Past research had shown that most newspapers impose certain limits on letter writers, the most common being letter length, frequency (as in, how frequently one person can be published), and (as discussed earlier) the writer’s name. Those criteria are recognized by many (and, sometimes, by most) of the groups that encourage supporters to write LTEs. About two-thirds (65.5 percent) suggested that letters be short, and many even gave specific word lengths, the most common being between 200 and 300 words; 57 percent reminded writers to sign their names to letters (and 41 percent explained that the newspapers would call to verify authorship); 48 percent suggested that the writers respond to specific articles published in the target publication; and from 26 to 29 percent of them recommended that writers read published letters policies, that writers be “civil” with their writing, and that newspapers will likely reject letters that are not originals. Those findings suggest two things that are important when considering the “astroturf” issue — the first, that at least two-thirds majority of the groups in question recognize that newspapers have “rules” for letters; the second, that nearly 30 percent recognize that newspapers routinely reject letters they suspect of being “duplicates.”

- **Only a small percentage of groups actively promote “astroturf,” and only about a third facilitate it. Most ignore it.** For this part of the analysis, I determined the degree to which each group promoted “astroturf.” Groups that specifically promoted use of prepared text as original letters accounted for just 15.5 percent of the groups. About 18 percent provided “sample text” but gave no mention of whether writers should or should not copy-and-paste the text into their own LTEs (I categorized those as “implying” astroturf, since they provided the text). Together, the “promoters” and the “impliers” accounted for 33.5 percent of the sample —

essentially, one third of the sample could be likely sources of “astroturf.” Conversely, just 6.5 percent of the sample warned writers to not copy text from other letters (that is, they “opposed” the practice). The rest — a full 60 percent — simply “ignored” the topic altogether, providing neither sample text nor any mention of copying text.

• **A surprisingly high percentage of “promoters” also warn writers to “be original.”** Finally, I compared those groups who recognized that newspapers reject “astroturf” to those groups’ attitudes toward “astroturf.” Not surprisingly, the vast majority of opponents encouraged originality (92.3 percent), and a large majority of both “impliers” and “ignorers” made no mention of originality (78 and 79 percent, respectively). What was surprising and puzzling, however, was that 41.9 percent of the groups that “promote” copying LTEs also recognized that newspapers reject copied letters. That seemingly contradictory condition prompted me to go back and look at the originals. As it turns out, many of those sites encouraged writers to “add your own stories” or to only use only a paragraph or two from the prepared text in an otherwise “original” letter. A few noted that adapting the text into original letters would circumvent newspapers’ “originality” requirements — basically, they encouraged writers to “cheat.”

For the optimistic, the findings suggest several things. First off, the evidence shows that special-interest groups recognize the importance of LTE forums in newspapers over all other media, suggesting that LTEs are an information service in which newspapers are superior to other news outlets, even the Internet. The study also shows that most groups that encourage supporters to write LTEs probably have genuine “turf” in mind — they simply want people to speak out on an issue, in their own words. And the majority of such groups recognize (some might even respect) newspapers’ guidelines for LTE submissions, at least in terms of length limits and “must-sign” policies.

For the pessimistic, however, the findings point out that nearly a third of the groups that encourage LTE writing can facilitate “astroturf,” and more than two-fifth of the groups that actually promote “astroturf” might be knowingly engaged in deception against newspapers. The findings also suggest that such groups also promote a blending of “astroturf” and original letter writing, meaning that editors who want to keep “astroturf” out of their papers might have to start looking for duplicated sentences and paragraphs rather than whole letters. While that “cheating” group is a very small percentage of the

whole — just 6.5 percent of the whole sample — it does seem to represent editors’ worst fears about “astroturf”: that some special-interest groups are knowingly abusing access to LTE forums.

## Conclusion

There can be no question that newspapers take LTEs seriously, or they wouldn’t commit so much time, energy, space, and money to providing, editing, and printing the forums. But when it comes to modifying and updating their content, newspapers seem to be stuck in the mid-20th century when it comes to conceptualizing their LTEs.

For starters, LTE forums clearly aren’t used by a cross-section of the community, something that hasn’t changed much since the mid-20th century. Rather, most LTE writers are white, middle-aged, educated, and upper middle-class — perhaps suggesting that those demographics are predictors of newspaper readership, but also suggesting that those people are the most comfortable with expressing their opinions in print. Perhaps LTEs have always appealed to such people, or perhaps the forums have evolved over the decades so that other groups of people have lost interest in the forums. It could also suggest that confidence might be a factor in letter-writing, since most letter writers are people who are in their peak work years, with advanced educations and comfortable salaries.

The survey offers no suggestions for attracting more diverse voices to the LTE forums, except in terms of the “must sign” policies most newspapers initiated in the mid-20th century. Those policies might be ready for some reform. Several newspapers across the nation have experimented with anonymous commentary from the public — such as the anonymous call-in forums many papers launched in the 1980s and 1990s — but research suggests those forums are significantly different from true LTE forums, as many are seen more as entertainments than venues for “serious” discourse.<sup>10</sup> But few editors seem willing to even think about relaxing their “must-sign” policies, even when faced with evidence that more women, racial minorities, and young adults might submit letters if their names could be withheld. The vulnerability of women and minorities to harassment, and the insecurities of young adults just beginning their work years, might help explain such findings. Perhaps if editors begin selecting letters based solely on their quality, and insist that writers reveal themselves to the editors if not the reading public, they might attract more diverse writers.

Another consideration is that requiring signatures does not preclude deception, in the case of “astroturf” letters. But considering the findings that relatively few groups promote the use of “astroturf,” the industry buzz about the problem might be overreaction to a few egregious cases of abuse. At minimum, editors who do routine Web searches to “catch” such cheaters might be wasting their time. Perhaps a better approach would be for a group such as NCEW to maintain a public list of organizations that are known to promote “astroturf,” and categorize the list by the issues such groups are focused on — that way, editors who get a suspicious letter have a quicker means of determining if it might be a “fake.” But as with anonymous letters, I think editors might do well to not be so quick to judge the letter writers who submit “astroturf” — after all, to a culture accustomed to expressing their feelings with pre-printed greeting cards and bumper stickers, the idea of signing a pre-written LTE isn’t necessarily problematic, and may, in fact, be considered preferable to a “home-done” letter. An “astroturf” letter is better than no letter at all, and it represents a willingness of somebody to participate in the discussion. With a little encouragement, such a person could become a writer of genuine “turf.”

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## Endnotes

1. Ernest Hynds, “Editorial Page Editors Discuss Use of Letters,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 13 (Winter-Spring, 1992): 124-136; David Pritchard and Dan Berkowitz, “How Readers’ Letters May Influence Editors and News Emphasis: A Content Analysis of 10 Newspapers, 1948-1978,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 68 (Autumn 1991): 388-395; Suraj Kapoor, and Carl Botan, “Studies Compare How Editors Use Letters,” *The Masthead* 44 (Spring 1992)
2. Steve Pasternak, “Editors and the Risk of Libel in Letters,” *Journalism Quarterly* 60 (Summer 1983): 311-315, 328; Paula C. Renfro, “Bias in Selection of Letters to the Editor,” *Journalism Quarterly* 56 (Winter

1979): 822-826; Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, "Letters to the Editor as a Forum for Public Deliberation: Modes of Publicity and Democratic Debate," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (September 2001): 303-320. David L. Grey and Trevor R. Brown, "Letters to the Editor: Hazy Reflections of Public Opinion," *Journalism Quarterly* 47 (Autumn 1970): 450-456-471.

3. See Bill Reader, Guido H. Stempel III, and Douglass K. Daniel, "Age, Wealth, Income Predict Letters to Editor," *Newspaper Research Journal* 25, 4 (Fall 2004).

4. Sidney Forsythe, "An Exploratory Study of Letters to the Editor and Their Contributors," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1950): 143-44; William D. Tarrant, "Who Writes Letters to the Editor?" *Journalism Quarterly* 34 (Fall 1957): 501-502; Gary L. Vacin, "A Study of Letter Writers," *Journalism Quarterly* 42 (Autumn 1965): 464-465.

5 Suraj Kapoor, "Most Papers Receive More Letters," *The Masthead* 47 (Summer 1995):18-22

6. Bill Reader, "Should 'A Citizen' Have His Say? A Historical Argument for the Publication of Unsigned Commentary in 'Letters to the Editor' Forums," (paper presented at AEJMC Washington, D.C., August 2001)

7. John Kaminski, J. and Gaspare Saladino (1981). *Documentary of the Ratification of the Constitution*, v.13. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin: p. 318.

8. McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission (1995). 514 U.S. 334; 115 S. Ct. 1511; 1995 U.S. LEXIS 2847

9. Bill Reader, "Who's Really Writing Those 'Canned' Letters to the Editor," *Newspaper*

*Research Journal* 26, 2-3 (Spring/Summer 2005): 43-56.

10. James Aucoin (1997). "Does Newspaper Call-In Line Expand Public Conversation?" *Newspaper Research Journal*, 18 (3-4): 122-140.

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## An open editorial page with few restrictions works best *from page 10*

a chance to rewrite the letter, otherwise the inappropriate portion is edited out.

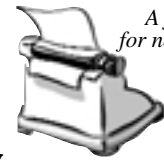
Lately, the *News* has been receiving more letters inviting readers to events, such as fundraisers or political or community meetings. Many of these also express an opinion. We use the information from the letters (about the event only) to produce announcements, which we place on our calendar page. Invitation letters are published on the opinion page when space is available. However, such letters do not receive preferential treatment over more traditional letters, especially if the invite letters contain no hint of opinion whatsoever. I'm not sure why the *News* has seen an increase in invitation letters, although I assume it's because our readers know the opinion page is widely read and because we actually publish these letters.

In 2003, I changed the letters policy by allowing the publication of thank you letters. This was done as a compromise after many readers told the paper that they wanted to use the *News* to say "thanks" publicly. Thank you letters, or what we call "letters of appreciation," must pertain to a subject of public interest, such as community events and organization and public institutions. We require more personal letters of thanks, such as those thanking an individual for an act of kindness, to be expressed as advertising. Traditional letters to the editor, which are an expression of readers' opinions, still take precedence over letters of appreciation.

One feature that we publish at the end of the year is to list the name of every person who contributed to the *News* by writing a letter, column, review or article during the year. In 2005, we listed 335 people. This feature, which was started by a previous editor and which I'm proud to continue, serves as a great way to thank readers for writing to the *News*, and gives us a chance to brag about the number of people who helped make our editorial page an active community forum. If your newspaper does not have such a tradition, I suggest you start doing this, at the end of 2006.

*Robert Mihalek, a member of the ISWNE board of directors, is editor of the Yellow Springs News in Ohio. He can be contacted at [rmihalek@ysnews.com](mailto:rmihalek@ysnews.com).*

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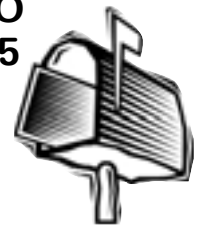
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