

EXCLUSIVE: Journal Sentinel Permanently Eliminates Editorial Page

The Gannett Company bosses of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel have told employees that the paper will no longer run locally produced editorials, except in rare cases. The newspaper's opinion page is instead going to be something called an "ideas lab." The following is from an internal memo sent to J-S employees yesterday and obtained by me:

"As our opinion pages evolve into the Ideas Lab, we've been publishing fewer and fewer traditional political commentaries – focusing more and more on reported articles that evaluate ideas and best practices based on evidence. We will continue speaking out on important issues where we can have impact, such as the First Amendment, the public's right to know and public records. We'll continue striving to ensure that the public has the knowledge they need to stay in charge of their government. And we'll continue to stand for equal rights and justice for all citizens."

The newspaper is apparently also planning to virtually eliminate letters to the editor. The reference in the passage above says the paper will instead use "news stories" to lay out what the paper believes is the best approach on policy issues. In other words, they are coming right out and saying they are getting rid of the opinion page because they are going to be inserting their opinions in the news pages.

The decision is the latest move in deemphasizing any real local content in the paper since its purchase by Gannett, the owner of USA Today. USA Today branding now routinely appears in J-S pages, both in print and online.

Journal Sentinel Editor George Stanley responded to my inquiry about this. He denies that the shift is the death of the editorial page. Below is the verbatim response sent to me by Stanley.

George Stanley responds:

No, Mark, it doesn't mean either of those things. This was a local decision, made here in Milwaukee.

What can we offer that nobody else in Wisconsin can offer? Political opinions?

Spin around the radio dial; flip through cable TV; political opinions saturate the airwaves.

We do have a unique ability to report on best practices that evidence shows are working to solve pressing problems facing our community and state. As we did when we looked for places that were doing a better job on newborn screening (Iowa), on housing people with severe mental illness (Columbus, OH), on getting people with no or poor work histories into the work force (Cleveland Cooperative), on reducing infant mortality (Harlem), on reducing teen suicides (Appleton West). We have the ability to bring people together, including experts with a record of success, to discuss programs that really work in civil forums. We're going to concentrate

more on doing that, to help our community, than on offering our institutional opinion on every political issue that's popping up.

Our editorial page will still speak out on matters where we have unique expertise or authority -- First Amendment, open records, public's right to know, keeping the citizens in charge of their government. As when state officials tried to gut our open records laws over the 4th of July weekend a few summers ago.

Our editorial page will also work to ensure that people who are not in the majority on various issues do not lose their voice. So if a candidate arises who would seek to stifle opposition voices, the editorial page will speak out so the good people of Wisconsin can prevent that from happening.

We're adding an evidence-gathering reporter to the editorial pages, NOT an opinion writer to the news pages.

George

George Stanley
Editor

Mark Belling
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