

viewpoint

Readers question editorial decisions



mike clark

editorial page editor

Pulling back the curtain from the editorial board ...

Q. What better exemplification of misuse of the crushing power of yellow journalism than the front page of the Sunday Florida Times-Union.

The Times-Union has vacillated from several months of wanting to stand behind the mayors's proposed "VOTE YES" ballot to several weeks past raising the ongoing question of the mayor's resistance to any questioning at his forums.

The caption a couple weeks ago was the terming of the current tactics demonstrated to be the dangling of "The Carrot without mention of the Stick" or price to be paid if this tax is implemented.

The implication that to not vote for this "Band-Aid" is an injustice to our children is misleading.

In fact to vote yes for this intricate tax issue is to place the brunt of the debt squarely upon not only our children but realizing that it does not take real effect for 14 years (2030) and will truly place the debt on not only today's children but is a taxing of the unborn. This is a deceptive ruse at best.

It is an example of the lowering of the standards of this print organ to that of purest salaciousness.

Sunday's front page says it all. Like a tsunami, a headline in gigantic type, standing all out for the need to stand behind this greatest example of use of the power of the dominant local media print organ; with its heavy hammer of influence. — **Conrad Markle**, Concerned Taxpayers of Duval County

Dear Conrad: You combined news coverage in most of your references with the editorial that ran on Sunday's front page. The two departments remain separate.

The fact that you could not surmise a point of view in the news coverage is expected.

In contrast, as Editor Frank Denton explained Sunday, we run a front-page editorial less often than once per generation. In this case, the issue was absolutely important enough to justify it. Meanwhile, we have received heartwarming letters in support. See the next letter.

FRONT-PAGE EDITORIAL

Q. I loved it! I usually skim over the front page, but the way it was presented, it grabbed my attention. It was not buried somewhere in the newspaper, which I tend to skim over at times.

It was short and to the point, not with all the details and politics that could have been presented. The increased spacing between the lines was a plus. The spacing made it easier to read and keep my focus.

President Abraham Lincoln once said something to the effect, "I can speak in the language that lawyers and the elite can understand, but I rather speak in the language that the common man can understand."

You guys nailed it! Keep up the good work. I am in your corner.

Stan Kata, Jacksonville

SAVING THE NATION?

Q. Mike, do you feel it's your job to save the nation by promoting certain politicians and criticizing others, based on what you think is best?

I majored in business but I always thought the media had a sacred duty to be fair, not to save the country.

Why are you so petty? When it comes to the letters to post in the T-U, you don't take criticism well it seems. Is that appropriate for the only newspaper in our town? — **J.C.**

Dear J.C.: I actually believe in both being fair and being an advocate for a better Jacksonville. We can do both.

For instance, while the editorial board favors the pension sales tax, we gave critics of the plan plenty of space to make their case.

In addition, our own columnists Ron Littlepage and Tonyaa Weathersbee opposed the sales tax.

As far as running criticism, we regularly run letters critical of the newspaper. Recently, we ran letters critical of the editorial page for being too conservative on national issues and for the news pages for being too liberal.

Regarding "saving the nation," I wouldn't be so bold. However, we do feel an obligation to promote a better quality of life in Jacksonville for everybody.

On certain national subjects where we have invested years of study, such as health care and prison reform, we will weigh in.

But we never felt we were the only voice of reason in town, which is shown by building a great Email Interactive Group of about 4,000 readers. Our readers are our best advisers.

QUOTES ON GENE WILDER, COLIN KAEPERNICK

■ "There is some depth and some truth to what he was doing. I think he could have picked a better platform and a better way to do it, but every day they say athletes are so robotic and do everything by the book and then when somebody takes a stand like that, he gets his head chopped off."
— Seattle Seahawks star Richard Sherman on San Francisco 49ers' quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision not to stand during the national anthem to draw attention to police brutality.

■ "Gene Wilder was one of the funniest and sweetest energies ever to take a human form. If there's a heaven he has a Golden Ticket."
— Jim Carrey in a tweet after the "Young Frankenstein" and "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory" actor died at 83.

UNSIGNED EDITORIALS

I am an avid reader of the Times-Union and a supporter of print journalism as the best way to inform people about what is going on where they live.

I read about the Times-Union lawsuit over the closed negotiations on the Police and Fire Pension Fund and applauded the success of that effort to bring those meetings to light.

That is why it seems very strange to me that when I read an article under opinion, I am given no information about who wrote it. I want to know whose opinion I am reading!

"Editorial Board" is not specific enough. If someone has an opinion that they are sending out to thousands of people, they need to take responsibility for it.

I think that this is a system that needs to change, to keep up with the otherwise excellent journalism found in the rest of the paper.

I would like to hear why this system of anonymity continues in a paper that seems otherwise to be working on clarity and openness. — **P.S.**

Dear P.S.: Actually, "editorial board" is the most accurate description of the source of unsigned editorials. If we put one person's name under them, it would be a misrepresentation.

For instance, when I write an editorial, I am thinking of the Times-Union as an institution that has been covering news in Jacksonville for over 150 years. It's not the same mind-set as my personal opinion.

Think of it as writing on behalf of the business that employs you.

So far as transparency, we have plenty of it. The names of the entire editorial board are listed on top of the page every day. So far as the person responsible for the daily content of the opinion pages, that's me.

But remember, those unsigned opinions are institutional opinions; they are not necessarily personal ones.

MORE ON ENDORSEMENTS

Q. Personally I would rather all news media stay out of the endorsing process. The people can make up their own minds based on their own research. I know some people won't do that and that is what has led to the current problems with our government. They believe everything from the media is gospel.

But on the other hand, I don't need your inputs to decide on a candidate. I will do my own research and certainly not rely on local or major news media to sway me one way or the other. Let's face facts: The majority of the news media leans left, and that is the problem with your decision-making process. — **R.M.**

Q. The Times-Union should not take a position on candidates. All newspapers should report news and facts about candidates and let readers decide who they will choose. The newspaper itself should not become an opinion tabloid. — **H.F.**

Dear R.M. and H.F.: I disagree that people believe everything they read as gospel. I spoke to thousands of readers as reader advocate for 15 years and it was always the other guy who was being snookered. I give Times-Union readers more credit than that.

The Times-Union is given special access to the candidates and it would be a shame not to share our perspectives. In over 11 years as editorial page editor, I have seen the process in action. My job is to provide clear reasons for our endorsements and then let readers take over.

Sometimes we like all of the candidates, sometimes we're not impressed with any of them — there are all kinds of nuance in a typical endorsement editorial.

How strange it would be to give our opinions on major issues all year long and then drop out for Election Day. In any case, readers would guess who we support and their guesses would be wrong at least part of the time.

We are often surprised after meeting candidates directly.

PERCEIVED PARTISANSHIP

Q. As for the presidential election, what I'm seeing consistently in the Times-Union is that most of the writers and the paper generally lean left. That's sad. I can see that the paper endorsed Hillary Clinton months ago. It's evident in the biased articles. — **R.S.**

Dear R.S.: Your comment shows a basic misunderstanding of how the Times-Union and mainstream media work. The news pages are handled as objectively as humanly possible.

Fierce independence is built into the bloodstream of news reporters. They wouldn't be influenced by our editorials, and we wouldn't want them to be.

The opinion pages are free to offer opinions, but even then we seek to provide balance. We haven't endorsed anyone for president so far. Do you know that the editorial board recently endorsed Mitt Romney, Rick Scott and Lenny Curry?

reason midweek

The elephants in the room downtown



ron littlepage

times-union columnist

We can no longer afford to tiptoe around the edges of problems facing Hemming Park and downtown.

Those challenges are the homeless, decaying old buildings and money.

We will take them up in that order.

The Friends of Hemming Park, which took over operation of the park two years ago, has been criticized for how city money was spent with some of the complaints justified but not to the extent and manner in which they were delivered by some City Council members.

During hours of council hearings trying to set a future course for the park, it became clear that the old bugaboo that shapes people's image of Hemming is still there — the homeless.

That will continue to be a problem as long as so many homeless shelters and services are concentrated downtown.

When that is brought up, it produces nods, and then the conversation quickly moves on as if nothing can be done.

Other cities have found innovative ways to deal with the homeless population, but it won't happen here until someone — the City Council, the Mayor's Office, the Downtown Investment Authority, the Civic Council, someone — takes charge and doesn't stop until an answer is found.

And "those people" who many feel create an unsafe and unwelcoming atmosphere at Hemming often aren't homeless. Surveys done by the Friends of Hemming have verified that.

Call them what you want — ne'er-do-wells, malingerers, transients, panhandlers — their behavior will have to conform to park rules.

The Friends of Hemming mostly concentrated on bringing events and people to the park.

As the City Council begrudgingly gave the Friends money to operate the park this month and next month, it will now also focus on security.

The group will need consistent help from the Sheriff's Office to accomplish that, plus changes in city ordinances to make rules more easily enforced.

Even if Hemming Park becomes a success story, downtown will continue

to be dragged down by the old, decaying buildings that are unused and vacant that dot the city's core.

At some point — and this will make historical preservation buffs swoon — they need to be torn down.

Take, for example, the much bally-hooped Laura Street Trio. They have sat unused for decades and are beginning to resemble bombed-out buildings.

There have been many grand ideas to save them, but they always fall short.

Unless someone wants to commit to a serious act of civic philanthropy, nothing will get done because the cost to rehab such buildings doesn't make financial sense.

The city should set a deadline for action. If nothing is done, begin the process for demolition, in turn opening up valuable downtown property for new construction, which is less expensive.

Other old buildings — from former hotels to department stores to old courthouses — should be held to the same standard. Just because something is old, that doesn't mean it is historic and must be saved.

If a house next door to you sits vacant for years and falls into a state of disrepair, you would want it to be fixed or torn down.

The same should apply downtown. We are often told that visitors come to downtown Jacksonville and marvel how fortunate we are to have so many historic structures still standing.

Well, potential becomes a deterrent to downtown if the potential is never realized. That brings us to money.

There are some on the City Council who believe that Hemming Park is just another park and that it doesn't merit taxpayer support.

The city acquired the park 150 years ago. It was meant to be the city's public square. It has fulfilled that goal at times and failed at others.

It's not just another park the same as downtown is not just another neighborhood.

They both speak volumes about what kind of city Jacksonville is.

They deserve investment. In fact, some of that civic philanthropy I mentioned earlier would come in handy as it has in other cities with thriving downtowns.

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No, Obama has not banned the Pledge

Viral emails are circulating again that President Barack Obama has issued an executive order banning the Pledge of Allegiance in U.S. schools.

The facts: This fake news item is gaining credibility because it is linked to a story on ABC News. But it's not the real ABC news site.

The story reports that with the president signing Executive Order 13738, "it is now illegal for any federally funded agency to display the pledge or for any federal employee to recite or encourage others to recite the pledge while on duty.

This law also applies to federal contractors and other institutions that receive federal funding, such as public schools. Individuals who violate this order can face fines of up to \$10,000 and up to one year in federal prison."

The fake story goes on to say that the president explained that his decision to sign Executive Order 13738 was based



FACT CHECK

Want something checked out?

If you see or hear about something that needs a Fact Check, email carole.fader@jacksonville.com

on a personal belief that the language used in the pledge is "divisive" and "contrary to America's deepest held values."

There is no such thing as Executive Order 13738; you can check that out yourself here: archives.gov/federal-register/executive-orders/.

All of Obama's executive orders can be viewed there, the official National Archives website. It looks as if the recent perpetrators of this fake news just made up the number; the last real executive order signed by Obama is listed as 13737.

Adding fuel to the fire is that conservative websites such as Above Top Secret re-reported the story as actual news,

TruthOrFiction.com reported, incorrectly attributing the news to The Associated Press.

This is not the first time a hoax has centered on the Pledge of Allegiance.

Earlier this year, another viral email claimed that Obama removed the phrase "under God" from the pledge and banned it from government buildings.

That story made the rounds on social media after it was reported by the website TD Alliance, which called itself Fox News the FB Page, according to the news website Inquisitr.com.

The report claimed that Obama struck down the "under God" phrase through an executive order, and it even included a fake quote from an Obama official.

In any event, the latest claim is totally bogus, just an old hoax spread by a fake news site that tries to hoodwink readers into thinking that they are reading a legitimate ABC News report.

Questioning the Clinton Foundation

point of view

letters in brief

from the Clinton Foundation if Hillary is elected.

You've got to wonder to what extent has the corruption been going on in all previous years?

Don't forget a vote for Hillary is also a vote for "Slick Willy."

Can you trust this corrupt pair of lying, self-serving individuals, to run our country? No.

Joseph Sanzone, Jacksonville

NATIONAL DEBT

In 1986, the national debt was \$2.1 trillion. By the end of this year, the national debt will be over \$19 trillion. Essentially, this means that every American born today will start their life almost \$60,000 in debt

Is it fair that we have lived beyond our means and left our children and grandchildren with the bill? Anyone want to apologize to the next generation for "Alligator Arming" the check?

Scott Schleifer, Jacksonville

COLIN KAEPERNICK

Does the NFL settlement include Chronic Traumatic Idiocy?

David J. Gross, St. Johns

FEMINISTS AND HILLARY

A decision to choose a woman because she is a

woman would dishonor the women who fought so hard for equal rights and opportunity so many years ago. Let us not go backward by holding ourselves to the lower standards of the past.

Alyce Decker, Ponte Vedra Beach

TRUMP AND BANNON

The article about Steve Bannon, Trump's CEO, quoted the interview with his ex-wife about his physical abuse of her but failed to mention her reports of his history of anti-Semitic comments.

Both issues should be sufficient for him to fire Bannon.

If not, it says a lot about what kind of behavior he is prepared to accept from his subordinates and what it says about him.

Karen Steingarten, Jacksonville

EPI-PEN PRICES

An Epi-Pen has two basic components: the medication and the delivery system.

Competition, not coupons, will drive the price down.

Glenwick Elliott, Palm Coast