

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Not all letters run

Part of my job is making the call on publishing a letter to the editor. We strive to verify letters with a phone call to the writer, so when someone does not include a contact number or does not return a voice mail message, that letter is not likely to run.

That can be a bummer when a letter writer makes a good or interesting point.

I'm fine with running letters critical of The Observer's news coverage, but I don't tend to give the green light to letters that advocate for unsubscribing. And I won't run letters that factually misrepresent our coverage. One recent letter we received, for example, called out the newspaper for having "filtered" news that made the paper come off as a "six page editorial."

I don't know what "filtered" news is, but the person asked The Observer to report the news without political bias. As an example, the writer claimed the newspaper ran front page stories about President Barack Obama "at least every other day," and in contrast, just one story about President Donald Trump made the front page in six months.

I called the writer and left a couple of messages but did not hear back. We've not run the letter. I've been editor now about seven months, and we ran two front page stories on the president in that span. The first was when the House of Representative impeached the president (Dec. 18, 2019, edition). The second was when the Senate acquitted the president (Feb. 6 edition).

I checked some of the bound volumes of The Observer from when Obama was president.

The Observer in early 2009 ran several 1A stories featuring Obama and his administration. All the stories were down page. The front page stories ebbed during the eight years he was in office. At one point, I found only a couple of Obama stories in the span of six months.

I did not look through every edition of the newspaper for those eight years, but if we ran that letter as is, we would not have been publishing only an opinion but an inaccurate statement.

I also don't feel an obli-

gation to continue all the practices of past editors. And maybe The Observer a decade ago was the best source locals had for getting national news. I don't see that as our mission today.

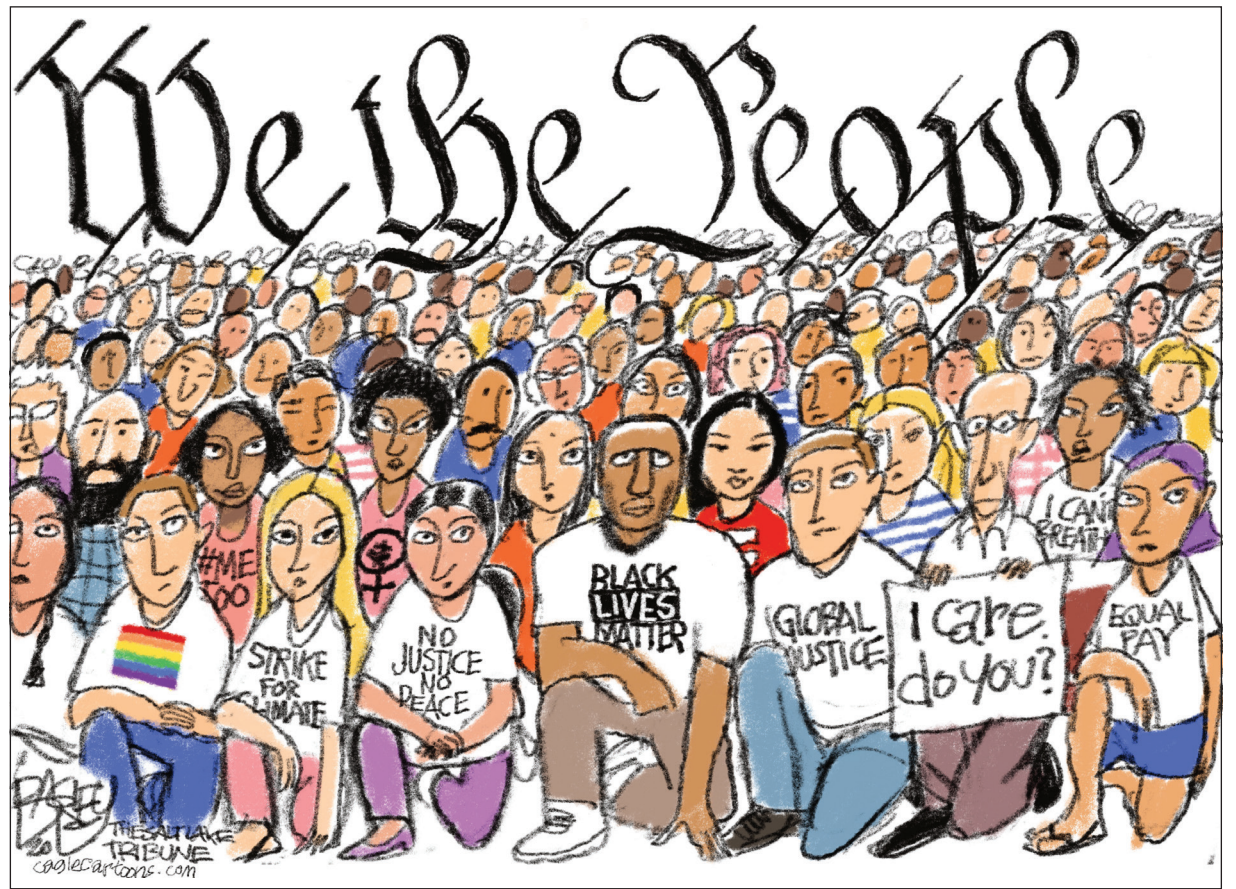
The writer's point of putting national news on the front page of The Observer — or any other local paper — raises this question: What local news stories do subscribers not want to read?

For a national story to make page 1A of The Observer, it has to carry serious weight and historic meaning. The impeachment and acquittal of Trump met that standard. But running national news more often on 1A means not reporting on local news, and that is what we are here for, that's the reason you subscribe. You can find national news any number of ways. You want to know what's happening with Union County seniors who depend on meal delivery or how your favorite restaurant is dealing with coronavirus requirements, then you read The Observer.

Putting national stories about Trump in the paper comes with another edge: Most national news we could run is critical of the president. I'm not sure our readers want another dose of that kind of coverage, even if it's accurate.

I'm left-leaning personally and about as nonreligious as you can get. But objectivity matters to me, even if we acknowledge no one can be totally objective. Political platforms and personal views do not figure in our coverage and reporting, whether that's a downtown protest for racial equity or what's happening with the local food bank. What matters to me as the editor of The Observer are the essentials of good journalism — accuracy above expediency, providing crucial details, compelling writing that draws readers into stories, minimizing harm when we report on sensitive topics.

While I disagree with arguments stating The Observer's news coverage is liberal or conservative, we'll run letters expressing those opinions and others, so keep them coming. But make sure we can contact you to verify them. And if your letter has some "facts" that seem sketchy or stretch into hyperbole, maybe consider getting a second source.



OUR VIEW

Oregon Legislature soon may act on police reforms

No justice, no peace. If you have been near any of the protests in Eastern Oregon or elsewhere, that is one of chants from the crowd.

The Oregon Legislature soon may actually act with genuine reform in the upcoming special session. A bipartisan group of lawmakers and police chiefs, sheriffs and the Oregon District Attorneys' Association all have committed to at least one change in the law. It would better ensure appropriate disciplinary actions taken against police officers don't get overturned.

Here's the problem summed up in an Oregonian story from 2012: "In the past three decades, Portland police chiefs have fired officers who were convicted of driving drunk off duty, leaving dead animals outside a black-owned business, and selling "Smoke 'Em, Don't Choke 'Em" T-shirts to officers after a man died in police custody from a neck hold."

It seems outrageous, but police chiefs had to rehire every one of those officers. An arbitrator overturned the firings.



123RF/EO Media Group
The Oregon Capitol building adorned with the Oregon Pioneer with downtown Salem in the background.

State Sen. Lew Frederick, D-Portland, has wanted that changed. He's proposed bills to change it. They failed. Police unions have opposed them.

His bills have said outside arbitrators could not undo disciplinary actions as long as the arbitrator agreed misconduct occurred and the department followed its own guidelines when carrying out discipline.

Another bill that may move in the special session would require the Oregon Department of Justice to take the lead on investigations of police shootings and when officers caused deaths. Local district attorneys work with local police every day. That can make it harder to be objec-

tive when investigating local police. State Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, has been working on a bill to make knee holds and choke holds illegal.

Those aren't the only changes that may be coming. On the national level, Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, is working to create a publicly searchable database to track law enforcement officers who engaged in misconduct.

We all know how efforts like these have turned out in the past: They failed. If they do move forward now, they won't solve every problem. They will, though, help restore respect and trust. They should also make it easier to hold officers accountable who don't deserve to wear the badge.

Your views

End the misguided attention given to Walter Pierce

In recent weeks, the community has mourned the passing of Doug Trice followed by widespread protests over systemic racism in our country. We live in Bend now but spent the 1960s and '70s growing up with the Trice family in La Grande.

To recognize Lucky Trice, Doug Trice and the rest of this gracious family's many contributions over the years and to partially atone for the racism they no doubt endured during those same years, we believe it would be appropriate to name a

local landmark in their honor. Two strong candidates in our view are Pierce Road and the Pierce Library at Eastern Oregon University.

Walter M. Pierce was elected Oregon's governor in 1922 with the active support of the Ku Klux Klan. While in office, according to oregonencyclopedia.org, Pierce revealed his lifelong racist, anti-immigrant views — tacitly supporting the Klan and backing the anti-Catholic Compulsory School Bill, a measure aimed directly at parochial schools. Pierce promoted a 1923 law directed at immigrant Japanese in Portland and the Hood

River Valley, prohibiting aliens from owning or leasing land. He also supported the incarceration of Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor, campaigning in 1944 and 1945 against the return of Japanese citizens and aliens to their homes.

We encourage the citizens of La Grande and Union County to find a way to honor the Trice family and end the misguided attention given to Walter Pierce.

For more about Pierce and the racism that pervades Oregon's history, check out www.vimeo.com/230854021.

David and Cindy Morman
Bend

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